

Retrofit Baltimore director wants to help Baltimore residents green their homes

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Eli Allen wants to make being environmentally friendly as affordable as possible for homeowners.

That's why he started Retrofit Baltimore, which aims to help residents green their homes—without spending a lot of green.

“A lot of people weren't taking advantage of the opportunities that are out there,” said Allen, who began working for the Baltimore nonprofit Civic Works in 2009. “Talking to homeowners, they'd want to learn more about energy efficiency, but they wouldn't know where to get started.”

Retrofit links homeowners in the Baltimore area with energy retrofit companies and building analysts, which review their houses and make recommendations. Analysts look at air leakage, insulation problems, carbon monoxide, moisture infiltration and other problems common to older homes, and then devise a plan.

“Our goal is to make sure everyone makes a smart decision,” Allen said.

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Retrofit Baltimore also helps residents interested in using solar energy join a co-op that allows them to do so at a significantly cheaper cost.

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The co-op is formed when a group of neighbors work with community partners to install solar systems together.

The group purchases the solar systems together, and then selects a contractor to install the systems. Each member signs his or her own contract.

Working as a group gives neighbors more negotiating power with installers, meaning they can get a better price, Allen said. Those in the co-op generally get about a 25 percent discount on their solar systems.

The solar systems come with tax credits, too. Though homeowners still have to pay upfront for the system, they'll receive a 30 percent credit from the federal government.

Retrofit Baltimore works with Maryland Solar United Neighborhoods to bring the co-ops to fruition. Maryland Solar is part of the Community Power Network, which promotes renewable energy projects. Co-op opportunities are available to anyone in the city, as well as Baltimore, Anne Arundel and Howard counties.

Civic Works provides job training and skills for Baltimore residents, and Allen estimates Retrofit has hired around 36 people per year since 2011, giving them the training and certifications they need for future employment.

Allen said he would like Retrofit to help homeowners out with their stormwater management practices next. Ten of the state's largest jurisdictions have enacted a stormwater management fee, commonly referred to as the rain tax by opponents.

The fees vary widely by jurisdiction. But there are things residents can do to reduce stormwater runoff on their properties, Allen said, such as using rain barrels and replacing paved surfaces with permeable ones.

"We see that as another opportunity," Allen said.

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