

WAP Corner:

Reaching the Top – State Energy Programs Summit

by Robert Adams

For a mountain climber, each rocky terrain is different and the mental and physical preparation must be exact to ensure the climber reaches the summit safely. The mountain looms ahead, not as a foreboding obstacle but as a challenge to be met and overcome. From the time the climber leaves the base until he or she returns, skill, strength, determination, and grit are needed to make it up the face and back again. To scramble over the summit at the end of a long and exhausting climb and stand overlooking a horizon that can only be viewed from this vantage point is the ultimate joy for one who engages in this pastime.

This month, the three associations representing state energy programs met in Washington, DC and began their climb to view a new horizon. More than 100 representatives from the National Energy Assistance Director's Association (NEADA), the National Association for State Energy Officials (NASEO), and the National Association for State Community Services Programs (NASCSPP) attended the first **State Energy Programs Summit**. These association members joined together to discuss our common problems and challenges in an attempt to create a closer and more unified approach to the energy issues facing all Americans.

There was plenty of expertise in the room to help define the issues and to begin the search for answers. We learned from experts like Kris Sarri, staff member for the Senate Northeast Midwest Coalition, about the mood in the 109th Congress and what we might expect as challenges to our energy programs. Jeff Genzer, Legal Counsel for NASEO and NEADA, provided insight into the restructuring of the House and Senate Subcommittees. Both presenters related stories about past lobbying efforts and what strategies may be successful in 2005 and beyond. The excellent questions and comments from the audience furthered the debate and underscored the need to define the terrain and how we can successfully travel through it.

There was a discussion about our need to refocus efforts in conveying our story to the public and to those policy makers who make decisions about whether we receive the funding we so desperately need. We have a great story to tell. A story of setting imposing goals to be achieved by our networks and ourselves. A story of amassing hundreds of million of dollars in leverage assistance to complement the federal investments in our programs. A story of valuable service to our constituencies – whether they are low-income families, utility companies, schools, hospitals, governments, or corporations. A story of commitment to the idea that America can have a safer and more efficient economy where energy is available and affordable for all. And a story of confidence that our efforts make a difference in people's lives and the future of our country.

The audience heard from experts about energy supply and impacts of energy prices on those least able to afford escalating prices. Jeff Pillon from the Michigan Public Service Commission gave an excellent summary of the Energy Information Administration's energy outlook for home heating fuels and other energy sources. Supplies appear to be stable for the short term but rising costs will continue to outpace inflation and low-income families will see their energy burdens rise accordingly. Mark Wolfe, Executive Director of NEADA, gave an overview of past winter energy

shut-offs for low-income families and provided a look at what we might expect as prices rise and vulnerable families seek help that may not exist due to possible funding cuts.

The energy problems facing states appeared as treacherous as the mountainous landscape ahead. Fortunately, the audience was given an opportunity to hear from experienced state representatives who had already blazed the trail and created successful partnerships among the state energy programs. Sara Ward from Ohio, Steve Tryon from Wisconsin, and Matt Guglielmetti from Rhode Island told their stories of how these partnerships were forged and described the benefits created by using their resources in a strategic fashion to meet the needs of families and communities.

The Summit also focused on the need for these organizations to “circle the wagons.” This is not an expression of “cowboys and Indians” from the old Saturday morning television shows but a real need for us to protect ourselves against all possible opposition to our programs. For example, the Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP) received a request for level funding in the President’s budget this year while both the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) and the State Energy Programs (SEP) received reduced funding requests. This seems to be good news for the WAP except that other budget requests created serious impacts on the Program. WAP receives nearly 10 percent of the LIHEAP funding for use in energy conservation projects in states. Nearly 20 percent of the states operate their WAP through their state Energy Office. Cuts in these programs significantly impact both the administration of the WAP and the resources available. Nearly 75 percent of the WAP network is comprised of community action agencies. The Community Services Block Grant, the core funding to support the community action network members, was zeroed out in the President’s budget. The remaining 25 percent of the WAP network operates through other non-profits or units of local government – many of whom depend on the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) for operating and related program funds. CDBG was reduced by nearly 50 percent and moved to another department in the President’s budget. Level WAP funding cannot compensate for the negative impact expected from these massive cuts if they are allowed to prevail in Congress. Like a team of climbers scaling the mountain face together, we must all act in each other’s best interest to safely finish the climb and reach the mountain peak.

To emphasize this, Jeff Genzer, Mark Wolfe, and Bob Adams from NASCSP, led a discussion about issues and next steps related to:

- Federal funding for all programs;
- The role of the Energy Programs Consortium;
- Housing affordability and why these programs are so important to that cause;
- Support for network resources like CSBG, CDBG, HOME, Lead Paint Hazard Control, and other programs that create the infrastructure for many of the energy programs; and
- Other important DOE and EPA programs like Energy Star, Rebuild America, and new initiatives like the Clean Energy and Environment State Partnership.

The last part of that discussion focused on the creation of a tri-partite steering committee comprised of three members from each organization and supported by association staff. This committee will meet regularly and undertake the responsibility of crafting a plan that coalesces the

positions of each group into a cohesive strategy for meeting the future challenges. In short, the committee will draft the plan to scale the mountain and reach the Summit.

I would like to say that we completed our climb and scaled the Summit, but that's not the end of the story. We did reach our first base camp. We know some of the terrain that lies ahead and we are gathering our resolve. Congress will not be a friendly place to roam through this year. The Appropriations cycle will be fierce. The country faces an enormous shortfall between what we need and the resources available. The competition for these resources will be intense. We realize that there is strength in the collective voice of our three state associations and we intend to articulate our position on matters important to each group using one message.

Perhaps NASCSP's position on the Summit was best expressed by Connie Greer, NASCSP's Board Chair, who stated in her opening remarks that, "Our Association is very pleased to be part of this first annual Energy Summit. The potential synergy that can be created through the collaboration of these three state associations will strengthen our voice. Working together, we can focus our efforts and our resources to maximize our impact on the policy makers, elected officials, and those who have influence on our programs."

We are better for having engaged in this event and opened ourselves to new ideas and varying positions on matters related to our interests. It isn't often that we witness the dawning of a new idea and see it explode over the horizon, allowing us a different view of our role in the energy field we all serve. The view from the top of this mountain will be worth every bit of effort used to make the climb.