

WAP Corner: Training of the WAP Work Force

By Robert Adams

First, the DOE Regional office staff and the states in their respective regions should be congratulated for conducting a series of excellent training conferences during 2004. Between July and October of this year, more than 3,000 staff serving the Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP) attended the six regional meetings and the National WAP Managers meeting. There were scores of outstanding workshops conducted by some of the nation's best experts from the national, state, and local levels. This type of on-going training is the primary reason why Weatherization continues to exceed its goals and objectives and remains America's premier energy efficiency program for low-income housing.

At almost every Regional meeting, the subject of how to best deliver the WAP services was discussed. One of the major debates focused on whether it is better to use direct hire crews or subcontractors to perform the field services. There were experts from both sides of the argument defending their position and there was no clear winner in the debate. It continued to depend on the state and local agency's perspectives and availability of either labor or qualified private contractors to perform the WAP.

The same story seemed to surface around the country – highly qualified private contractors remain extremely hard to entice into the Program. The type of daily work and the extremely tight pricing schedule make it very difficult for these contractors to earn an adequate return on investment for their time and resources. Most contractors can earn more profits working as remodeling companies in the private sector or performing rehabilitation services for state and federal housing projects.

This is not to say that the contractors who work for the WAP are less qualified and not “good” at their work. In fact, those contractors who choose to work for the WAP are highly skilled and very dedicated to performing outstanding services for the low-income families we serve. Many of the current WAP contractors learned their skills by attending various training classes and skill enhancement courses sponsored by the WAP. These contractors learned how to use blower doors to find air leaks in the home and how to use several different materials and procedures for sealing these leaks. The contractors learned to measure and stop air duct leakage; conduct zone pressure and back draft testing; trace carbon monoxide leaks to their source and abate the problem; and install insulation materials under a multitude of conditions. And these contractors learned new skills because the WAP required them to use innovative techniques to maximize the cost effectiveness of material installation and improve the health and safety of the family.

Training is a very necessary component of the WAP. It is through the continual upgrading of our technologies and techniques that the Program can claim ever-increasing results for its investment. However, training is both expensive and time consuming. There are costs associated with hiring expert instruction and traveling to various training sites. There are also hidden costs in lost production while the crews are in training and while the new techniques are first practiced in the

field. Yet the benefits of training far outweigh the costs in increased proficiency, improved cost effectiveness, and customer satisfaction.

Because the WAP continues to evolve and its service delivery is more specialized than ever, the ongoing training of in-house crews and contractors is essential to keep up with the changes. When a local agency sends its in-house crews to a training center, a state or regional training conference, or a national training event, the costs associated with the time and travel for these staff is usually paid for through Training and Technical Assistance (T&TA) funds or a comparable budget category. When a private contractor is required to attend any of these trainings, the cost to send their staff is not covered by the local agency and is normally paid by the contractor. Lately, many local agencies using private contractors are beginning to ask whether they should pay for private contractor training just like they pay for in-house crew training. That is a very complicated question with a number of very complicated answers. Here are just a few of the arguments surrounding this controversial training proposal:

- In the beginning of each year, the local agency should inform the contractor of all scheduled training where attendance is required. This allows the contractor to account for the lost time and travel costs within the pricing of materials and labor. The contractor will collect a portion of the training costs on each home weatherized during the year. However, if any of these trainings does not occur, there is usually no way for the local agency to recover these “advance” payments and the contractor will keep these additional profits.
- When contractors pay for training themselves and recover their training costs within their billing to the local agency, the labor and material costs for services rendered in homes will be increased slightly to cover the expected costs. This cost increase elevates the cost per unit and is a direct reduction of the benefit amount to be used on the homes of low-income families.
- When the local agency is provided with T&TA funds and the agency uses private contractors that pay for training themselves, the local agency will likely have a surplus in the T&TA budget line item that can convert to more production. While this cannot reverse the cost per unit pricing effect, it will allow for more homes to be weatherized in a given year.
- Local agencies that pay for contractor training can easily require attendance at unscheduled training events during the year that may not have been accounted for in the contractor’s pricing.
- When local agencies pay for the training of specific private contractors, there can be a perception that these contractors are treated “favorably” and may have certain advantages in future procurement of WAP services. In fact, many private contractors have enjoyed a long working relationship with the local agencies because they are the “most qualified” in the area to perform Weatherization work – partly because of their exposure to WAP training.

As stated by Billy Weitzenfeld in his keynote address to the attendees at the Mid-Atlantic Regional Conference last month, *“How do we stay on top of our game? Training, training, and more training.”* This includes everyone in the WAP at the national, state, local, and private levels.

Our crews and contractors must have similar skills and delivery methods so their work is indistinguishable. More importantly, someone has to pay in-house staff and contractors to acquire these skills.

How are you paying for your training? Who is required to attend? How carefully is it planned? What does it cost? Could you train differently or better? These are just a few of the unanswered questions and may only be the beginning of the debate. Stay tuned.