

Home weatherization for winter can be costly or free

By Dan McDonald/Daily News staff

GHS

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FRAMINGHAM — Like a set of rotting teeth, full of cavities in need of filling, Ming Fong's 1890s-era two-story colonial needed some attention.

This month, it received a root canal of renovations. With winter's bitter chill approaching, a work crew insulated, painted, sprayed, and tightened the 1,600-square-foot house, making it a warmer and more affordable residence.

All told, about \$5,000 worth of weatherization was performed on the 135 North Main St. home. Fong, a 37-year-old father of two who waits tables at the Lotus Flower in Framingham, didn't pay a cent.

That's because he falls within 200 percent of the federal poverty level, qualifying him for the service under a heating assistance program. For a family of four, the federal poverty level for 2008 is \$22,200.

The federal Department of Energy, in conjunction with utility companies like NStar Gas, provide funding for such work.

The DOE filters the funding for the program through the state's Department of Housing and Development. The South Middlesex Opportunity Council will oversee about 105 weatherization jobs this season under the auspices of that department.

Steve Antonini, SMOC's technical manager for the program, estimated that Fong would save between 30 and 40 percent on this winter's heating bill.

In some cases, that can be the difference between paying the mortgage and facing foreclosure, Antonini indicated.

"When we do this to somebody's house it changes their lives," said Antonini. "They have more money. They're happier. You have less wear and tear on a building."

The aim, said Antonini, is to balance the warmth throughout the house "so that you're not opening windows in winter because one floor is cold and the other one is hot."

Said Mike Fitzgerald, manager for the Peabody-based A&M General Contracting that worked on the house, workers must "reduce the air flow first. Then you insulate."

In order to achieve that end, Fitzgerald's crew toiled to modernize the house's insulation and maximize its warmth.

Workers bored a honeycomb of holes into the side of the house, snaked hoses through the exterior walls, then pumped a mashed-up mix of shredded newspaper tinged with boric acid into the wall, filling the cavity. That mix will hold heat considerably better than the pink fluff of standard fiberglass insulation, said Antonini.

In the basement, sheets of plastic were laid on the dirt part of the floor to act as a vapor barrier. Urethane foam was sprayed onto the stone walls, hardening into a rigid film within seconds, forming an air seal. A chemical tang filled the air.

Latex paint laced with fiberglass covered some of the kinks in duct work that zig-zagged the cellar's ceiling.

Improving the basement and attic were crucial to the job. A wet, moldy cellar will affect the air quality of the upstairs living space, said Antonini.

"I'm always looking for water," said Antonini. "Without a tighter basement some of that air will end up in the living space."

If attic insulation is insufficient, heat will rise right out of the house, making Fong's heating system work harder and drive up his bill.

While the heating assistance program is a fail-safe for those most in need, it is a safety net that could be expanded, according to John Wells, vice president for energy services for Action for Boston Community Development.

Wells said his group was trying to change the qualifying parameters to include more people.

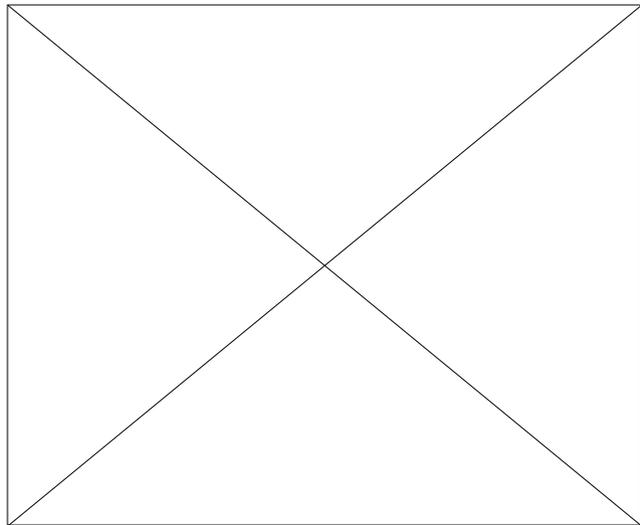
He acknowledged that some people who wouldn't fall under the 200 percent poverty threshold would still feel the money crunch this winter, and can't afford thousands in weatherization work.

In light of that reality, Wells said his organization is trying to change the income guidelines for such a program to include more people.

Despite oil prices dipping, energy worries still prevail.

"It's on people's mind," said Wells. "Let's face it: the economy is not what it was."

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