

Financial & Energy Coaching Initiative
(a.k.a. GreenSavingSmart)
Final Report Summary
October 1, 2021 – December 31, 2024

The Financial & Energy Coaching Initiative was awarded \$1.5 million in one-time funding appropriated to the Department for Children and Families in SFY22 (Act 74) to grant to the Community Action Agencies (CAA) to support five Financial & Clean Energy Coaches, and one statewide coordinator based at a CAA, to provide low- and moderate-income Vermonters financial coaching, including budgeting, debt reduction, credit building, and asset development, with an emphasis on reducing their reliance on fossil fuels. This summary provides key points from quantitative and qualitative performance data and targets, including common client goals, barriers to engagement and/or reducing energy usage, and a small sample of success stories.

The program served 265 unique households between March 2022 and December 31, 2024. Coaches tailored their support to households' goals and needs, including (but not limited to) help with:

- Financial literacy and energy efficiency education,
- Establishing a budget,
- Pulling and reviewing credit score and history, and help with repair if relevant,
- Strategies for debt reduction and establishing savings,
- Applying for resources to reduce bills,
- Exploring and/or referrals to resources to help with getting a job, or a better-paying one,
- Navigating energy efficiency rebate programs and other energy efficiency related resources (low-interest loans, weatherization services, etc.), and
- Reviewing low- and no-cost actions that could reduce energy usage such as applying for energy saving kits, and modifying behaviors (e.g., turning off lights, adjusting the thermostat).

Coaches established relationships with local and statewide partners to stay informed about financial and energy-related information. This helped coaches facilitate clients' access to relevant resources, and provided opportunities to highlight their clients' needs, interests and challenges in stabilizing their finances and reducing their energy burden. While many households were interested in reducing their energy usage and switching to cleaner energy, the program suffered from a known issue – low-income households generally do not have the upfront capital for substantial purchases (e.g., HVAC systems, home appliances, etc.). They also do not have much of a tax burden, which blunts or negates the benefit of programs offering tax credits even when they have the funds for a purchase (or *must* make one when an appliance or vehicle fails). Aside from a lack of upfront capital, challenges included customers confusion about what services the program could provide, and the increasing cost of housing and most goods and services further reducing households' ability to do more than live paycheck to paycheck.

In spite of challenges, quite a few households made incremental improvements (e.g., starting a savings account; improving their credit history) and accomplished bigger goals (e.g., purchasing a more efficient vehicle; setting and meeting financial targets; obtaining Weatherization services and/or switching an old, fossil fuel appliance to a more efficient one and/or electric appliance). With the complicated, changing (and often clunky) energy efficiency incentive programs households must navigate to access resources, the support of coaches was essential to smooth the path for low and moderate-income households already struggling to make ends meet.

Beginning in July 2024, all five CAAs received GSS funds towards their Financial Coaching program – to further integrate energy and financial coaching efforts – and were expected to review clients' energy burdens and point them towards energy-saving resources. This helped another 84 clients.

Financial & Energy Coaches achieved the following:

From March 1, 2022 through September 30, 2022:

- 48 clients received 1-to-1 coaching,
- 33 clients took one or more actions to reduce their energy usage and/or switched to a cleaner fuel source (e.g., installing energy-saving products, weatherizing their home, purchasing an EV, etc.),

From October 1, 2022 through September 30, 2023:

- 85 clients received 1-to-1 coaching (63 were new to the program and 12 were New Americans),
- 83 clients (97.6%) received at least 1 ½ hours of coaching,
- Provided 10 workshops and had 92 attendees, and
- 29 clients (34.1%) took actions to reduce their energy usage and/or switched to cleaner energy.

From October 1, 2023 through December 31, 2024:

- 220¹ participants (154 were new to the program and 53 were New Americans),
- 166 participants received 1-to-1 coaching, and 96 of those had at least 2 coaching sessions,
- Provided 18 workshops and had 87² attendees (45 were New Americans), and
- 86 clients (51.8%) who received 1-1 coaching took actions to reduce their energy usage and/or switched to cleaner energy.

The following are just a handful of success stories made possible with this funding:

A client wanted to purchase a newer, more efficient vehicle, but worried a negative incident on their credit report would prevent that goal. The coach pulled and reviewed the report with them and discovered the incident had been cleared. The coach helped the client improve their credit rating, save for a downpayment, and secure a loan with VSECU, which allowed the client to buy a more efficient vehicle.

A coach helped a client who was at risk of having to move out of the home built by their deceased spouse due to having a low income, high utility bills, and few resources. While there had already been some weatherization work done on the home, the windows were not efficient. The client could not afford to replace them, but the coach found them help to install window insulation kits, reroute heating to areas of high use, and applied for inserts from

¹ Changes to performance measures in the final year allowed income-eligible workshop attendees to be counted as program participants.

² Workshops were open to anyone interested in attending. Attendees provided income information in the 3rd year: 61 out of 87 were income-eligible for the program.

Window Dressers. These steps made the home more comfortable and reduced their heating bills. The coach kept working with the client to identify other resources to reduce their bills (e.g., Federal Lifeline phone discount).

A coach supported a client as they made many changes to achieve future goals, such as: working towards getting their GED so they could take the next step towards college, setting a savings goal, getting their driver's license, and making many behavioral changes to lower their energy usage – from turning off the lights when they left a room, to unplugging appliances not in use, and putting on warmer clothes so they could lower the temperature and still stay comfortable while saving money on their heating bill.

A coach helped multiple households impacted by flooding apply for weatherization services and upgrade to efficient appliances. This included helping six clients get energy efficient appliances and hot water heaters installed in under 3 months.

A coach helped a client plan, over many months, to obtain a more efficient vehicle – helping them navigate the MileageSmart and Replace Your Ride programs until the client was able to purchase a 4-year-old electric vehicle for less than \$5,000! The client had only been able to buy older, high-mileage vehicles in the past that were often gas guzzlers and came with high repair costs. This EV purchase not only helps the client reduce their emissions and have more reliable transportation, but also bolsters their budget due to lower maintenance and repair costs.