

Energy Star® Level Building: A Not-so-new Best Practice in the Standards of Excellence

By Jennifer Langton

An emerging trend is occurring among Habitat affiliates that helps homeowners save more money over the long-term. It results from building documented energy-efficient houses that are 20 to 30 percent more efficient than houses built to average national standards. With the help of local energy raters that test houses, Energy Star® is becoming this new level of building. Building to Energy Star® or an equivalent program level is now considered Best Practice in HFH's new Standards of Excellence in Construction. Of course, this is not a new practice to many Habitat affiliates both large and small. Affiliates nationwide, from HFH of Baldwin County (Ala.) to Greene County HFH (Penn.), Kaw Valley HFH (Kan.) to HFH of Metro Denver, all build to national Energy Star® standards.

Energy Star® programs may be tailored differently from state to state however. In New York, Chautauqua Area HFH, HFH of Greater Newburgh and HFH of Livingston County all follow extra requirements that address proper ventilation strategies in the home. Some affiliates like Tucson HFH (Ariz.) work with a local program equivalent to Energy Star® through their local utility company.

In certain states, specific programs may provide money for energy-efficient low-income housing providers. In North Carolina, many affiliates have benefited from two different programs that both guarantee low utility bills and pay for any extra costs to upgrade to houses that are both Energy Star® certified and address proper ventilation strategies.

A number of affiliates build at higher levels of efficiency, such as HFH of North Idaho, which builds from only high performance house plans that are prescriptive and have been field-tested (for more information visit www.nahn.com). These houses are 40 to 50 percent more efficient than the national standard, heating and cooling for under \$250 per year (less than \$20 per month). That results in even greater monthly



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Structurally insulated panels, or SIPs, are used in the construction of some Energy Star® homes.

savings for Habitat homeowners. The payback from slightly greater initial costs for such houses, as with Energy Star®, is quick. Savings from monthly

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utility bills exceed a slightly higher monthly mortgage, making this a winning economic situation for homeowners with a tight budget. Copper Country HFH (Mich.) builds similar super-efficient Habitat houses with help from Michigan's Five Star Home Grant Program. Both techniques incorporate easy passive solar strategies to further energy savings and comfort.

Another growing trend among Habitat affiliates is the participation in green builder programs. Seattle HFH and South Puget Sound HFH (Wash.), Ventura County HFH (Calif.) and

Atlanta HFH are some examples. Such programs address critical environmental issues such as erosion control, tree conservation, landscaping, recycling and building products selection, in addition to energy efficiency, moisture and healthy ventilation strategies. Other affiliates are implementing independent "green" practices, such as Lee County HFH and Indian River HFH (Fla.), Monroe County HFH (Ind.) and St. Joseph HFH (Mo.). Affiliates pursuing these great programs and endeavors may still want to confirm that they meet Energy Star® standards so that they are considered Best Practice affiliates.

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