

## New rebates boost home energy upgrades

By Steve Scauzillo, Staff Writer San Gabriel Valley Tribune

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With 100-degree temperatures blasting the San Gabriel Valley recently, homeowner Nancy Kelley of La Verne said she has been running her central air conditioner and pool pump nearly nonstop.

But when she opened her latest electric bill, she breathed a sigh of relief. It had fallen by nearly \$100, from \$314 in July to \$221 for August.

That's because she is one of a handful of Valley homeowners participating in a new \$1.2 billion "energy upgrade" program that turns houses that leak energy into drum-tight, super-efficiency homes. Her 1,761-square-foot home received more than \$10,000 in upgrades a couple months ago - everything from better attic insulation and new ducting, to a new, energy-efficient heating and air conditioning system and new pool pump.

Kelley won the improvements through a contest sponsored by local utilities and a consortium of agencies, including Southern California Edison, Southern California Gas, the California Energy Commission, the Employment Development Department and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act - collectively known as the Energy Upgrade program.

Although Kelley was told to expect her bills to drop, she was still surprised. "I could not believe it. I was just floored," she said. She's hoping to shave about \$1,200 a year from her power bills.

Her contractors, part of those affiliated with the Energy Upgrade program, said she should realize 25 percent in energy savings.

Kelley has become a poster child for the program and will be hosting an open house from 10a.m. to noon on Saturday, Sept. 24, at her home, 1578 Loma Ave.

She calls it a "win-win" but admits that she could not afford the repairs without a large rebate or in this case, a total rebate. And that is what often prevents homeowners from doing what energy experts say are the most economical improvements to reduce an older home's carbon footprint.

To kickstart the languishing Energy Upgrade program launched in March, Edison and The Gas Co. together are offering homeowners rebates of \$1,000 on a basic package that cuts energy use by 10 percent, and up to \$4,000 on a package that will reduce energy by 40 percent. And Los Angeles County recently announced it will match the utility rebates dollar for dollar, bringing rebate totals from \$2,000 to \$8,000 per home, said Marisa Creter, who is in charge of promoting the program at the San Gabriel Valley Council of Governments. Residents who live in Pasadena or Azusa can still receive The Gas Co. and county rebates, but not Edison's, since these cities produce their own power, Creter said.

Some cities are doing even more to help residents get over the hurdle of steep capital outlays for efficiency improvements, even when they're guaranteed some of the money back in rebates, said Vivian Castro, Covina's environmental services manager.

Covina is offering \$500 to cover the cost of an energy assessment, plus up to \$2,000 more toward home repairs. The city will also waive all permit fees for air conditioner or window installations, a \$1,200 savings. Someone in Covina receiving a "whole house energy upgrade" can earn a total of \$11,700 in rebates and waivers, Castro said, often covering the entire cost of repairs.

When Covina launched the program, many were interested until they inquired about the price of repairs.

"Quite a few people wanted to do it but couldn't afford the upfront costs," she said.

So, Covina set aside \$70,000 to help homeowners defray costs. In some cases, homeowners may end up paying zero.

Most homeowners who benefit from the energy assessment and repairs fall into two categories: older homes built in the '60s and '70s, or larger homes built in the '90s and early 2000s, Creter said.

"They found a lot of homes built from 2000-2002 and in the '90s of 3,000 square feet or more were wasting a lot of energy. They have \$400 a month electric bills, and that should not be the case," Creter said.

Colleen Kienzle, a homeowner in the Mar Vista Heights section of Whittier, also won \$10,000 in repairs through the Energy Upgrade program.

This included new heating/air conditioning systems, ducts and insulation, and a new pool pump. She was happy to see last month's electric bill of \$249, a big drop from the \$569.51 she paid during the same period in 2010.

"It has definitely reduced our electric bills and also made it more comfortable in the house," Kienzle said.