

# Georgians Transforming the LIVES of Neighbors



an interview with **ERIC ARNOLD**

ILLUME

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ILLUME Founder and Co-Owner, **Sara Conzemius**, sat down with **Eric Arnold**, Residential Energy Efficiency Program Implementation Manager at Georgia Power, to learn how the utility is amplifying the goodwill of Georgians to transform the lives of their neighbors.

To reduce household energy burden, many utilities offer income-eligible weatherization and home improvement programs. This ensures customers don't have to make tradeoffs between paying their utility bill or paying for groceries, childcare, or transportation. But what happens when our resources run up against older housing stock or structural expenses that require more investment than what is available?

Enter Georgia Power with its Home Energy Efficiency Assistance Program (HEEAP).<sup>1</sup> HEEAP is an ambitious effort in the utility's toolkit that leverages the generosity of local donations to augment existing energy efficiency dollars and solve for some of the structural challenges that are beyond the scope of program dollars.

**Sara Conzemius:** *Eric, what is the origin story behind this unique donation program?*

**Eric Arnold:** In 2017, we launched the energy assessment and solutions program which had an income-qualified component. In addition to Georgia Power spending its dollars, we began to ask questions like: 'How do we get community involved? How do we get investment from folks that are invested in their communities? How do we build more equity among local communities?' These questions, coupled with all the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives and social unrest, and suddenly we knew the timing was there to introduce a program to involve the broader community and improve the homes of folks who live within those communities.

**What models inspired your approach? How did you come up with the framing for the program?**

**EA:** We started with the Purposity app model. Imagine there's a school that needs backpacks. You can go on the app, zero-in at the ZIP code level, and find out that a school needs 100 backpacks. You can then go to Amazon and send 20 backpacks to the school. It is a community effort for a cause. That's where the concept for this donation component started. We asked ourselves, 'How do we take this Purposity model to engage communities to get energy improvements to folks that they know in local communities?'

We also framed this campaign as, 'Help a neighbor in need,' which helped soften the message because we lead with what Georgia Power is willing to put on the table. If we were starting with zero dollars and asking the community to donate to the cause, that would be a different story.

That would mean we have no skin in the game and we're asking you to support 100% of the cause. It helps that we're coming to the table with dollars and asking for anything additional so that together we can improve somebody's life.

**How have donations allowed Georgia Power to maximize its impact at the household level?**

**EA:** As you start to look at homes, one of the biggest barriers that we find are structural challenges. And that's where the donation component comes in. It's designed to assist us with doing more measures beyond the dollars that we supplied and take care of some of those structural things. Our power dollars are focused on kilowatt reductions, and it needs to stay focused on that.

**What have been some of the program's challenges?**

**EA:** First, nobody had done it. There's that. Secondly, you're pulling the siloes together. We need to have an application portal, we need contractors, we need a way to receive donations and a way to distribute these donations. Not only do we have to market this thing to serve participants, but also market this donation portal to make all this come together at the geographic level. You have the macro program, but you also have the micro view of what you're trying to solve for.

COVID also delayed the program. We were supposed to launch this program in February 2020. We had delays even getting contractors on board. We had a budget that was allocated to serve our income qualified customers, so we used energy kits to serve that population in the interim, but we really wanted to get back to the core of the program.



## Georgia Power Taps into the Kindness of Neighbors to Fund Home Energy Improvements

HEEAP provides income-qualified Georgia Power customers with free home energy improvements to help lower their energy bills. Eligible customers receive up to \$3,750 in improvements from Georgia Power and may receive up to an additional \$3,750 from outside donations that can be used toward home energy improvements.

Home energy improvements include:

- insulating attics
- sealing air gaps
- repairing cracks and leaks
- sealing ducts
- servicing heating and air systems
- installing LED light bulbs and smart thermostats
- conducting a home energy assessment
- receiving education on how to reduce energy usage

Customers who wish to participate must be Georgia Power customers and must have a household income that is 200% or below the current U.S. federal poverty guidelines. Donors who want to support the program can make either a one-time or recurring donation and have the option of choosing a preferred geographic location to target their gift. The HEEAP program is powered by Gridmates, a donation cloud platform that helps utilities empower communities to create custom fundraising campaigns.<sup>2</sup> Georgia Power is not a nonprofit organization and contributions are not tax deductible.

We started this program in May-June of this year, so we were halfway through the cycle when we launched, and we had the challenge of trying to stand up a program that's never been done. The application portal is open, and while we wish it was as simple as, *'if you build it, they will come,'* it is not that simple.

**How was the program received? How do you keep the momentum going?**

**EA:** Within 20 minutes of our first campaign people just started popping in donations from the \$5 level, to \$200, to \$1,500 overnight. To get donations from individual contributors, residents, and small businesses we need to stay focused on the message of improving the community. They're on board with that. But just like any other marketing, you must keep the message out there. We found out people really care and want to see improvements in their neighborhood.

We have also been really focused on the grassroots effort of getting the word out. Do people really believe that 'Big Utility' is going to spend money on my home? It's not a scam; this is real. But we also have the challenge of market penetration. We've been tapping into food banks, Meals on Wheels programs; every touch point that we can come from on the grassroots level. We just had a conversation with the software company Propel<sup>©</sup>, whose app targets income qualified folks receiving assistance, and that could be another a great way of reaching customers.

**What level of interest are you seeing from the private sector?**

**EA:** We have a few large corporations that have shown an interest in participating and possibly exploring a model of engaging their customers through a dollar-for-dollar match. Which is also a scary because we must be able to match these dollars and applications in a manner that is effective. You want the perfect storm of a full application portal, spending all the dollars we have as a resource, and matching those dollars to the homes that need repairs (plus all the advanced measures). We're trying to figure out how to perfectly match these things. We don't want any donations left on the table, but also want to balance how far we push that lever. If one company sees another company's philanthropic efforts and thinks, *'we want a piece of that action!'* we want to manage that demand so that we are not over-donated.



***What type of stories and data are you sharing with your donors and program partners?***

**EA:** We must share stories that show the difference the program is having. We've been working with the one of the local housing authorities—I think we are finishing up 118 or so units—and we must leverage that success not only with the city, but we have to go back to the residents and host an energy fair so we can tell them what we have done and show them how to change their behavior to maximize energy usage to the point that it's putting dollars in their pockets.

Cities are telling us, *'We'll create this campaign and you'll put the money in it. But how can you guarantee this money is going to come back to us?'* These are the things that we have to work out because folks want to see their dollars going towards things they are most passionate about, like their local community. We want to get this model down to the ZIP code level so that this connection is made. We're going to keep looking at the model to see how we can better refine it. People will donate if they are seeing improvement in their communities. Defining 'communities' is a piece we're going to keep working on.

***What type of contractor network do you need to support this program?***

**EA:** Our entire industry was hit hard because of COVID. I want to be able to build a contractor network that is reflecting the communities that we are serving, and the support from

ILLUME to help us understand workforce development has been invaluable. As part of our DEI efforts, we learned that if we want to build sustainability, we need to start employing folks who are in these communities so that we are not only making these homes energy efficient, but also investing in job creation and economic development. We want to ensure customers don't have to make the choice of putting food on the table or paying their utility bills. We need to bring more income into these communities.

Another effort generated by this program has been deliberately searching and finding minority contractors and women-owned businesses in our community. And if they're not in our communities, finding out how we get them trained in this business so they can be part of the program. This has been a personal effort of mine. As a company, Georgia Power is committed to spend over \$75 million over the next five years on DEI initiatives. I hope those dollars will be available to support something like that.

***How is Georgia Power communicating that the trades are part of a sustainable career path that can create a generational change for families?***

**EA:** Most minority contractors fly under the radar. They know how to do the work, but they don't have the resources to get the formal certification or the formal education. If I were to pull someone who looks like me and ask, *'who does your heating and air work?'* They're going to say, *'it's my cousin, it's my uncle.'* They know what they're doing but they're under the radar.



If we want to generate diverse participation in this program, we need to also reach the Asian and Hispanic communities; we have no contractor infrastructure there. It's probably there, but when we talk about how we target participants and getting them to respond, we're probably not going to be very successful in getting those communities to respond because we can't send just anybody into those homes that they can trust (or relate to) and have confidence in this program. We must create the infrastructure to be able to tie the trust and communication with our customers.

***For utilities in other parts of the country reading this article and thinking about replicating your efforts, what partnerships have been most helpful to get you in front of customers?***

**EA:** We've been working with the city of Savannah. They have a department of sustainability that has been pre-identifying energy-burdened ZIP codes. They found out about this program through word-of-mouth and were excited to find a utility partner. There are a lot of exciting conversations up front and then it comes down to executing: 'How soon can you start providing us with these homes?' 'How soon can we identify folks at the right income level?' 'Once we verify income, how long does that process take and then you move from there?' We're looking to cut some layers if partners can bring us identified areas where we don't have to worry so much about income screening because we know that if we hit a particular [Census] tract, we're going to hit 90 to 95% or better of the customers that we need to reach.

We initially thought that if we put this program out there—whoosh!—all these people are going to come. It didn't quite happen that way. We've had some successful leads from community action agencies because they are out there doing this type of work. We're also exploring partnerships with housing authorities and sponsoring meetings so we're engaging and identifying multifamily properties within their reach. A lot of these grassroots activities are happening. You got all these irons in the fire and you're waiting for this explosion to get things going.

***What keeps you up at night as you think about this program's moving parts?***

**EA:** Making all this work and getting this model to run like the machine that it can. I'm constantly looking at what barriers we can eliminate in terms of trying to target a customer, sign them up, get them qualified, build the infrastructure so that

we can serve someone within a week of them applying. We are targeting the scale, but we must make sure all these components work well. I need to be able to quickly send someone to change an HVAC unit and spend those donation dollars so we can go back to our donors and say, 'Here's how your dollars were spent—this program is experiencing the success that it was designed to.'

Also because of COVID you're trying to prove something. You think three years is a long time, but it's not a long time. When you don't get started until halfway through that, we have a short window to make this beautiful model work. It's hard to move fast enough to make sure that we can eliminate those barriers. Plus, we're still in this sort of COVID environment where you are limited in the things that you can do.

***Do you have any success stories you want to share with us?***

**EA:** We had a customer the other day who sent us a picture of her home, it had this big hole in the ceiling. The donation funding opened opportunities to partner with folks in the community with a hammer to help with structural issues so that we, as a utility, could focus on advanced energy saving measures. We had sufficient donations available that we were able to fix the hole, air seal it, and take that home a lot further than we would have based on the old program model. In the old days we would have simply said, 'Stop. That's as far as we can go.' ■

*Eric Arnold is the Residential Energy Efficiency Program Implementation Manager at Georgia Power. Eric has served Georgia Power and its utility customers for more than 34 years. He leads the utility's strategic objective of implementing energy efficiency programs in the residential class as certified by the Georgia Public Service Commission as demand-side management resources. Eric began his career at Georgia Power in 1987 as a Utilityman in Power Generation and then served as Residential Segment Manager, responsible for managing and developing the sales strategy of end-use products in the single-family and multifamily markets. Eric has also served in other marketing, field service, and energy audit roles at Georgia Power.*

*Eric Arnold served in the U.S. Navy and holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Business from Mercer University. He is a member of ASHRAE, AEE and served as Atlanta Chapter President and Southeast Regional Director of the American Association of Blacks in Energy (AABE). Eric is a Certified Energy Manager (CEM) and Certified Energy Auditor (CEA). He currently serves as the Vice President of Habitat for Humanity of Georgia.*

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