

BETTER BUILDINGS RESIDENTIAL NETWORK

Better Buildings Residential Network case studies feature members to fulfill our mission to share best practices and learn from one another to increase the number of homes that are energy efficient. GTECH (Growth Through Energy and Community Health) Strategies is a nonprofit member that kicked off its first year implementing an innovative new initiative called the Healthy Homes Incentive Program (HHIP), which promotes home energy upgrades to Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, residents as a way to increase a home's indoor air quality while saving energy and money.

GTECH Strategies developed and maintains strong strategic partnerships with trusted local companies and organizations—rather than only hiring a staff of specialists—as part of HHIP's goal to complete 100 home energy upgrade projects. GTECH Strategies Project Coordinator Nicole Miller, who is Building Performance Institute-certified, shares how her organization developed these partnerships and provides tips other residential energy efficiency program administrators can use to successfully form and maintain partnerships.

Can you describe GTECH Strategies' partnerships?

We are a program administrator, not a service provider, so our partnerships have been crucial in providing the resources and skills necessary to bring home energy upgrades to Allegheny County homeowners. Our HHIP partners include the Allegheny County Health Department; a nonprofit that provides access to the program for low-income homeowners; local contractors that implement the home energy upgrades; and other nonprofit organizations that help us reach homeowners through local utility programs.

A unique element of HHIP is the funding source—a health agency, rather than an environmental or energy agency. HHIP is funded by the Allegheny County Health Department's (ACHD's) Clean Air Fund, which distributes up to \$300,000 to efforts that can reduce regional air pollution. GTECH approached ACHD with a proposal linking home energy interventions and community as well as individual health (e.g., respiratory ailments).

What are the most important characteristics you look for in a partner?

We look for partners that offer services we can't provide ourselves. For HHIP, we needed funding to administer the program, a workforce to perform the upgrades, and a way for our program to reach low-income residents. After we identified the partners that would fill these gaps for us, we assessed their willingness to participate in a partnership and openness to making changes as needed throughout the partnership to address challenges if and when they arise. It was important to have a continuing dialogue with all of our partners so we could outline an ideal partnership and address how we would handle unexpected challenges.

How did you initiate relationships with your partners?

We previously talked with our partner that provides services to low-income residents about the large gap in the industry for people who need energy efficiency improvements in their home but first need to complete necessary structural improvements. When we first launched HHIP, it was clear we should partner with this organization to include such homeowners, so we set up a memorandum of understanding (MOU).

We also decided to partner with another nonprofit organization that administers a residential energy efficiency program that is offered through the local electricity utility. The goal of this partnership is to pair our program with theirs so homeowners can benefit from both. We work with this organization in other capacities, so this program gave us an opportunity to expand our relationship.

What was the most successful way you found to communicate and collaborate with partners?

Setting up an MOU was really helpful for our partnerships because it helped us lay out our plan on paper. For us, an MOU was preferable to a contract. If we need to make changes, the MOU allows us the flexibility to make them more easily.

It is also extremely important to identify the correct point-of-contact for that partnership and make sure that you are continually checking in with them. You also want to be certain that contact person is able to make decisions. Being able to meet in person or on the phone regularly helps to make sure that everyone is on the same page. In addition, it's okay to be flexible and meet more regularly during certain stages of the project and less frequently (e.g., a monthly or quarterly basis) after processes have been established. Because of our existing relationships, many of our partners are willing to receive status updates in emails or to discuss them over the phone, so that allows us to communicate easily and effectively, and also allows us to be able to handle several partnerships at the same time.

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– Nicole Miller,
GTECH Strategies

How did you deal with challenges that arose with your partners?

One challenge was how to ensure quality assurance among our various contractor partners. We recognized that there were inconsistencies, since we had a pool of contracting partners that each works a little differently, and we had not highlighted the standard of work we were looking for as thoroughly as we could have. Ideally, we would have established our expectations more clearly in the MOU so we could have referred to it when issues arose, but since we hadn't done that in the beginning, we needed to address them mid-stream. To address these issues, we held in-person meetings with the contractors, which allowed us to describe the issues as we saw them, hear our contractors' point of view, and collaboratively come up with a solution that was fair to our program and also provided our contractors time to make the necessary changes to resolve the problem. Working with our contractors to problem-solve allowed them the courtesy of professionalism and the ability to show that they could make the necessary improvements and continue with a successful partnership.

A second challenge involved contractor invoices. Initially, we let contractors submit invoices in their own template. This caused an administrative challenge for us, since we had several invoice types to interpret and process in a short amount of time, and customer incentives relied on us processing the invoices. We were trying to be flexible with each contractor's business process, but it would have been better for our program to have developed standardized forms and explain to the contractors how they should complete them. We are planning to create standardized forms moving forward, which will save a lot of time on our end, mitigate some confusion from the contractors, and help them see value from our partnership.

What is one piece of advice you would give to an energy efficiency program administrator who is looking to form partnerships?

Thinking everything out beforehand goes a really long way. We spent significant time planning how the program was going to work and how our contractors were going to be included. We wrote individual agreements with the contractors, which was extremely helpful because talking through the contracts with them gave us the opportunity to guide them through the potentially confusing program startup.

Having expectations for your partners very well thought-out, written in an agreement, and signed by both parties is important. Also, be sure to allow for flexibility to make changes as the program progresses. Knowing that you're not going to get everything perfect right away and allowing room to problem-solve in the moment will help your partnerships, and your programs, be successful.

Explore more tools for creating and maintaining successful partnerships by visiting the [Better Buildings Residential Program Solution Center](#). You can also find MOU templates and additional program examples in the [Better Buildings Residential Network Partnerships Toolkit](#).