



Illinois Science & Energy
Innovation Foundation

Background

The 2011 legislation authorizing investments to upgrade Illinois' electric infrastructure to a smart grid included a fund for consumer education with a model unlike any other. Funded by the two regulated utilities in Illinois (Commonwealth Edison and Ameren Illinois), **The Illinois Science and Energy Innovation Foundation** invests in statewide nonprofit organizations that inform and engage the public to further energy literacy. The foundation operates independently of the utilities as a third-party education arm, with the mission of empowering consumers to understand and adopt smart grid technologies and related programs; to create positive changes in consumer behavior related to patterns of energy use; and to transform cultural norms regarding the relationship between the consumer, the utility and energy consumption.

Investing in grid modernization

In 2011, the Energy Infrastructure Modernization Act passed the Illinois General Assembly and set the stage for the state to make a significant investment in modernizing its outdated electric infrastructure. These investments aimed to create a statewide smart grid that is more reliable and efficient and that can deliver economic and environmental benefits to consumers in the form of more energy choices and new technology, including clean energy resources.

ISEIF began its operations in late 2013. In the ensuing years, ISEIF has fostered positive change for Illinois consumers through its education initiatives. By prioritizing community-based efforts and culturally appropriate messaging, ISEIF and the nonprofits that work with it are generating important insights into energy habits, needs and preferences that might not be gained through campaigns led directly by electricity providers.

Value of third party education arm

Educating people through community organizations and trusted channels allows ComEd and Ameren Illinois wide-reaching and consistent access to people, including populations that can be difficult to reach. By forgoing utility branding in favor of their own, organizations funded by ISEIF endorse calls-to-action such as program enrollment and technology adoption to manage energy. A call-to-action from a mission-oriented organization with longstanding community ties registers to the community as an action that serves their interest. Community organizations funded by ISEIF provide validation to utility programs and counter consumer skepticism around why a utility might want a customer to use less electricity. These organizations extend both their brand and their grassroots methods to reach a variety of niche communities in a highly interactive manner while maintaining authenticity.

Community organizations generate the context in which energy literacy education occurs. Many have inserted energy literacy modules covering energy efficiency, demand response programs and conservation into existing financial literacy or homeownership assistance programs. This strategy reinforces the message about the importance of saving energy in conversations about personal and family budgeting.

Others have designed outreach programs that are specifically targeted toward the rural consumer, who may respond to a different set of messages than a consumer in a more urban context. Outreach strategies are crafted to meet people where they already are, and to provide a clear benefit that justifies the time investment to participants.

Working with over 40 nonprofit organizations since 2014, the Illinois Science and Energy Innovation Foundation has built a unique model for consumer engagement.

WHO IS ISEIF?

Funded by the two regulated utilities in Illinois (ComEd and Ameren), The Illinois Science and Energy Innovation Foundation invests in statewide nonprofit organizations that inform and engage the public to further energy literacy.

PROGRAM RESULTS SO FAR

To date, ISEIF grantees have held over 4,000 statewide events, have reached over 1.2 million people through outreach and have educated over 22,000 school children and parents through an interactive Smart Grid for Schools curriculum.

For example, outreach organizations have provided lunch-and-learn opportunities at rural Walmarts, or through fraternal organizations (Moose, Elks) in small Illinois towns, where finding people assembled can be difficult.

Messaging can be translated into a myriad of languages, but by organizations with roots in these linguistic groups, so that they are accurate to both content and culture.

With an arm's length between ISEIF grantee organizations and the utilities, the use of humor is more available. Utilities have to create messages within a fairly narrow band. They are not the most nimble of organizations in responding to consumer preference. But with twenty organizations in the field, sharing information with one another, the ISEIF cohort can adjust messages more improvisationally.

A video made by Spanish-speaking teens in a Chicago suburb can play with the concept of a telenovela. A video made by a professional film company can portray a man who chooses to eschew clothing as a money-saving strategy until his loving and patient wife shows him that the smart grid can help him to save instead (to the considerable relief of his neighbors). These messages are reviewed for accuracy, but a wider latitude is granted for creative content. Grantees are encouraged to play freely. The latter video referred to above has received over 100,000 views on YouTube.

Relationship among grantees

ISEIF treats its grantees as a learning community—what sociologists would call a Community of Practice. Active grantees are convened in person two times per year in ComEd territory and once per year in Ameren territory. Utility staff are welcomed at these convenings as well. Grantees share what they have learned with one another, and if one grantee's approach is seeing notably better results than others, all are encouraged to adapt their practices to reflect what that grantee is doing so effectively.

In the philanthropic community, grantees can hesitate to share their outcomes with one another, as they feel competitive for limited funding resources. ISEIF works to assure grantees that the sharing of information is without penalty. Groups making good efforts are encouraged to learn, adapt and grow together, and will not be cut off from funding because another approach proved more effective than theirs. Deploying many carrots and relatively few sticks, ISEIF incents collaboration and attempts as much as possible to remove risks for engaging collegially.

Relationship and coordination with utilities

ISEIF staff interact regularly with ComEd and Ameren Illinois customer operations, energy efficiency, smart/connected devices and marketing departments. Coordination with these departments has resulted in strategic outreach based on smart meter deployment. It has also provided opportunities for grantee organizations to pilot new technology and has resulted in in-depth knowledge of utility program offerings among the community organizations. Finally, it assures that while each ISEIF-funded organization has freedom to adjust messaging for its own community, all are well-informed on the content of utility offerings and that messages are consistent across the grantee cohort.

ISEIF's grant approval involves stages of review by staff, peer committees and the board of directors. ISEIF's board of directors include one seat for ComEd and Ameren Illinois, to be filled on a rotating basis by each utility.

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHTS

Chinese American Service League

The Chinese American Service League (CASL) is a multi-year ISEIF grantee with deep relationships in Chicago's Chinatown neighborhood. The organization worked with their community members to create awareness campaigns linking culturally significant ideas like luck, prosperity and generational wealth to energy savings. Messages tested positively with community members and were incorporated into one-on-one financial counseling, workshops and festivals related to the traditional Chinese New Year.



Centers for New Horizon

Centers for New Horizon, a community-based nonprofit social service agency serving a predominantly African-American neighborhood developed a campaign centered on Sustainable Living for the 21st Century African-American Family. The campaign asked community members what the sustainable African-American family of the future looks like, and offered energy conservation as one piece of a sustainable lifestyle, along with highlighting the history of contributions by African-Americans in the fields of STEM and energy innovation. The campaign was developed on the idea that sustainability is an essential part of the African-American community and part of a positive view of its future.

Elevate Energy

In low-density rural areas with less social hubs, Elevate Energy has had a keen eye for the places where people can be reached. In many parts of America, that hub happens to be Walmart. The organization has hosted lunch-and-learns for employees in far-reaching parts of the state, discussing energy savings, program opportunities and benefits to consumers.



Faith in Place

Faith in Place has garnered the highest level of interest in enrolling in utility pricing programs, and the faith context has proven essential to their high sign-up rates. Many people feel most welcomed, loved and motivated when surrounded by their faith communities. Someone from your faith community telling you that they've done something and that it will benefit you to do it too is perhaps the most immediately credible messenger.

iSMART

Currently HUD spends over \$7 billion in annual energy and water costs in government-supported multifamily properties. The Illinois Smart Meter Awareness, Research and Technology (iSMART) pilot program by the University of Illinois aims to demonstrate savings that can be achieved through tenant and staff engagement and smart technology adoption in public housing buildings in urban and rural areas. The pilot addresses the challenge of behavior change in low-income households who are not responsible for paying their electric bills. The program has already recorded energy savings through changes in building management and changes in tenant behavior.

Measuring consumer outreach success

Since the organization's first round of funding in 2014, ISEIF has issued over 80 grants totaling over \$20 million to a range of organizations, most of them to highlight benefits of smart meters and some for research and evaluation.

The organization is mandated to grant 30 percent of its \$50 million fund to senior and low-income populations, and so far, it has applied nearly 62 percent of funds to these populations. To date, ISEIF grantees have held over 4,000 state-wide events, have reached over 1.2 million people through outreach and have educated over 22,000 schoolchildren and parents through an interactive Smart Grid for Schools curriculum. Approximately 78 percent of outreach has occurred in urban areas, and 22 percent in rural areas, representing the utility territory of ComEd and Ameren, respectively.

There are early indications of successful engagement. Exit tickets collected by select grantees have demonstrated that 88 percent of outreach attendees correctly identify energy-saving actions and behaviors. Outreach grantees have tracked enrollment in demand response programs, and utilities have indicated higher than expected interest and enrollment in programs such as Peak Time Savings (ComEd) and Peak Time Rewards (Ameren).