



# Oberlin, Ohio

A White House Climate Action Champions Case Study

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## **Executive Summary**

With a rich history of social and civil rights leadership beginning with its founding, the Oberlin community's identity as a leader has re-emerged in the context of another generation-defining challenge: climate change. The City of Oberlin is committed to reducing community-wide greenhouse gas emissions below zero by 2050, while striving to balance the environmental, social, and economic interests of the Oberlin community.

One of the spotlights of Oberlin's leadership in balancing these three interests was the creation of the nonprofit Providing Oberlin with Efficiency Responsibly (POWER). POWER is a grassroots environmental justice organization founded in 2008 by local residents, civic leaders and municipal utility staff. POWER's mission is to increase the energy efficiency of homes, and particularly low income homes. This energy efficiency work results in many simultaneous positive outcomes for the community: combats climate change by directly reducing carbon emissions, makes homes more healthy and comfortable, reduces residents' vulnerability to fluctuating temperatures and rising energy costs, and creates local jobs. Energy efficiency is a dedicated section in the Oberlin Climate Action Plan and POWER's program in particular is helping meet those energy efficiency goals.

The City's aggressive climate goals and innovative work combining the resources and expertise of city and non-profit organizations to reach low income community members demonstrates Oberlin's commitment to addressing climate change.

## **Climate Action Champion**

The adoption of a Sustainability Resolution in 2001 paved the way for the City of Oberlin to develop a path toward sustainability in the community. An integral partner in reducing Oberlin's GHG emissions, Oberlin College signed the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment in 2006, which committed the college to become climate neutral by 2025. In 2007, the City became one of the first Ohio members of Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI), initiating a greenhouse gas inventory and developing a local climate action plan.

In 2010, the City and Oberlin College individually signed memoranda of understanding with the Clinton Foundation and the United States Green Building Council to participate in the Clinton Climate Positive Development Program. In doing so, Oberlin will become a community that will not just neutralize its emissions but improve the environment by offsetting emissions. This goal of "reducing the City of Oberlin's GHG emissions below zero through the implementation of economically viable innovations" committed the City and the College to becoming a climate positive community.

In accordance with membership in ICLEI and the Clinton Climate Positive Development Program agreement, the City developed and adopted a Climate Action Plan in 2011. This plan set systematic goals of reducing 2007 GHG inventory emissions by 50% in 2015, 75% by 2030 and below 100% by 2050.

The Climate Action Committee in 2012 developed a revised Climate Action Plan as a roadmap for transitioning to a climate positive community. Work by the City and the College through the use of the

recommended strategies and community outreach will create not only a climate positive community but a positive community for its residents to live, learn, and lead.

The following table portrays the accomplishments of Oberlin’s commitment and actions in reducing GHG

<b>Oberlin GHG emissions for 2012 - 2017</b>						
<b>Sector</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>% of total</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>% of total</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>% of total</b>
<b>Electricity</b>	62,424	54.84%	11,691	20.57%	8,492	15.87%
<b>Natural Gas</b>	23,211	20.39%	27,968	49.22%	27,868	52.07%
<b>Transportation</b>	15,371	13.50%	15,326	26.97%	15,326	28.63%
<b>OC coal</b>	10,778	9.47%		0.00%		0.00%
<b>Other (refrig, SF6)</b>	450	0.40%	450	0.79%	450	0.84%
<b>Waste</b>	1,395	1.23%	1,185	2.09%	1,185	2.21%
<b>Waste Water</b>	202	0.18%	202	0.36%	202	0.38%
<b>Total</b>	<b>113,832</b>		<b>56,866</b>		<b>53,567</b>	
<b>Reduction</b>	<b>100%</b>		<b>50.08%</b>		<b>52.98%</b>	

emissions from 2012 to 2015 and projections through 2017.

For more information on Oberlin’s goals and strategies as a Climate Action Champion see Oberlin’s Climate Action Plan at <http://www.cityofoberlin.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/2013-cap-online-pdf.pdf>.

### **Project Spotlight – POWER**

Providing Oberlin with Efficiency Responsibly (POWER) is a grassroots environmental justice organization founded in 2008 by local residents, civic leaders and municipal utility staff. POWER’s mission is to increase the energy efficiency of homes. POWER is now a 501(c)3 non-profit corporation governed by a Board of Trustees. POWER has formed partnerships with local organizations, utility programs and contractors to minimize duplication of efforts, maximize the efficient use of resources, secure credibility with applicants, and stimulate the local economy.

At its inception POWER partnered with Zion Community Development Corporation (Zion CDC) to serve as POWER’s initial fiscal agent before receiving its own 501(c)3 status. This partnership also resulted in cooperation on projects that required minor home rehabilitation in addition to efficiency retrofits. Oberlin Community Services (OCS), a long-established and well-regarded community social-service organization, was an initial partner by providing income qualification guidelines and referring clients who had a hard time paying utility bills to POWER for help in reducing energy costs. Working closely with staff of the City’s electric utility department, Oberlin Municipal Light and Power System (OMLPS), POWER was able to expand on OMLPS’s local energy efficiency efforts and later secure grants through the OMLPS Sustainable Reserve Fund. POWER also works with OMLPS to promote and financially administer the City of Oberlin’s Super Rebate Program. This program, which was initiated by the Oberlin City Council, offers enhancements to the Efficiency Smart rebates already offered for efficient electrical appliances.

At its inception, POWER focused on meeting the needs of those that were not or could not be served by other weatherization programs in Oberlin. Initially POWER was funded through a variety of small local grants, donations and fundraising. Working with OMLPS to evaluate homes, provide homeowner guidance, and coordinate with contractors, POWER awarded weatherization grants to insulate and air seal 28 low-income homes in Oberlin in its first three years of operation (2008 – 2011). Due to its small

size and local focus, POWER has been able to adapt to the availability of grants, weatherization programs, contractors and residents' needs.

As the demand for POWER's services grew and other utility-sponsored efficiency programs came in to being, POWER focused on maximizing Oberlin residents' participation in these well-managed and well-funded programs. In 2013, POWER created an Energy Advocacy and Assessment Services (EAAS) program and hired a part-time Energy Advocate. Consistent with POWER's desire to not duplicate other services, POWER now promotes existing efficiency programs and works directly with residents and the efficiency programs offered by Columbia Gas of Ohio and Oberlin's Efficiency Smart Program to overcome barriers in utilizing the programs and maximize the available funding. The EAAS program increased POWER's influence in the Oberlin community as these programs are available to all Oberlin residents, not just the low-income community. POWER has further increased its impact by expanding its service market and leveraging considerable additional resources into the Oberlin community. Additionally, POWER continues to offer gap grants to low-income homeowners whose needs may not be completely met by utility energy efficiency programs.

POWER has promoted its services through its website, attending various public functions, distributing flyers and coordinating with the City of Oberlin and Columbia Gas in publications and marketing efforts. Its greatest success has been a neighborhood door to door campaign by the Energy Advocate. This campaign was preceded with a letter sent to each home in the target area a week before his canvass. The letter included the name of a resident in that neighborhood which had worked with and benefited from POWER's assistance. This letter provided great credibility in the neighborhood as residents are often suspicious when offered a free service.

Recognizing the need to provide more information on the utility-sponsored energy efficiency services available to small businesses, churches and other non-profits, POWER has expanded its mission to include these stakeholders. The Energy Advocacy program builds upon the stated commitment of OMLPS to help their customers utilize electricity in the most efficient manner and provide high quality affordable services to the community. OMLPS received a "Sustainability Initiative" award for its work with POWER from American Municipal Power (AMP) in 2009.

As POWER's credibility in Oberlin grew, it was able to obtain a grant from the OMLPS Sustainable Reserve Fund to cover the expenses of the EAAS program for five years. Additional grants were received from the student-supported and managed Green Edge Fund at Oberlin College and the local Bill Long Foundation to provide the previously mentioned gap grants for low and moderate income weatherization work and for small home repairs that would support the subsidized weatherization work.

In 2015 POWER strengthened its affiliation with Oberlin Community Services (OCS) by contracting with it to manage the day-to-day operations. The Energy Advocate office is now located in the OCS facility. This enables the Energy Advocate to work more closely with OCS staff who connects daily with community members with the greatest economic needs. The affiliation also provided this small nonprofit with access to an experienced executive director that was otherwise unaffordable. The executive director

provides mentoring, oversight, increased connections to other organizations and programs and expanded vision for POWER.

POWER is now serving more of Oberlin -- both residential and commercial stakeholders -- than ever before. For more information see the POWER website at: <http://www.poweroberlin.org/>.

### **Energy Advocacy and Assessment Services**

POWER's Energy Advocate, bundles the knowledge of existing energy efficiency resources into a user-friendly, personalized service designed to help homeowners overcome common barriers to energy efficiency. The program is designed to leverage existing outside resources into our community without duplicating services. The service is available to the whole community, regardless of income. The Energy Advocacy services include:

- Walk through energy assessments.
- Help with identifying and navigating available programs.
- Assistance with locating and communication with reliable contractors.
- Serving as a liaison or advocate with program administrators and contractors.
- Education about energy, efficiency, and conservation in the home presented in an accessible way.

In nearly three years, the Energy Advocate has conducted 256 walk-through assessments. This resulted in 116 full audits conducted by Columbia Gas. Each audit has a market value of approximately \$500; the cost to Oberlin homeowners was between \$0 and \$50. Of these 116 homes, 31 have had weatherization work completed or are in the process of getting work completed through the Home Performance Solutions program. Home Performance Solutions rebate savings are between 35 – 40%. On average, energy efficiency investments of \$1,500/home are leveraged into our community through Home Performance Solutions for a total of \$46,500 in 33 months. Sixteen low-income homeowners benefited from the Warm Choice program and received on average \$2,800 of services at no cost, for a total \$44,800 leveraged into the low-income community. In sum, Oberlin residents received nearly \$150,000 in energy efficiency funding over a 33-month period through Columbia Gas' efficiency programs. In addition, these homes will save approximately \$200/year in energy costs, accumulating energy savings of approximately \$188,000 over the next 20 years (assuming current energy prices).

While Oberlin residents can take advantage of these programs directly without the assistance of the Energy Advocate, the number of people who actually did so before the Energy Advocacy program was quite low. Since the Energy Advocate began, the number of homes per year taking advantage of Warm Choice has doubled over the rate of the previous 10 years. The number of homes per year taking advantage of Home Performance Solutions has tripled. Based on these increases, we estimate the direct added value of resources leveraged into the community by the Energy Advocate to be \$150,000 over a 33-month period. Residents' increased use of the Columbia Gas programs is by large due to the Energy Advocate's assistance in initiating, explaining, advocating and following up during the entire interaction between Columbia Gas, contractors, and the homeowner. The Energy Advocate helps with paperwork, makes follow up phone calls if an application gets delayed, and helps homeowners handle simple repairs

that are necessary for efficiency work to be completed. The increase can also be attributed to the enormous marketing effort made by the Energy Advocate and POWER board members. These marketing efforts include:

- Street-by street and house-by-house canvass conducted by Energy Advocate, preceded by a personalized letter to each homeowner
- POWER staff and board participation in Juneteenth Celebration, Oberlin Family Fun Fair, and other community events (distribution of printed information and CFL bulbs, and registering requests for walkthrough assessments)
- POWER's website, Facebook page
- POWER yard signs placed in high traffic locations
- Presentations by Energy Advocate and Board Member to community organizations
- Airing of a 30 second PSA film on cable channel

As a result of these efforts, POWER has successfully increased its energy efficiency presence in the community. In 2010, a door-to-door survey of 100 Oberlin residents revealed that only 37% of the sample was familiar with POWER. In a 2014 community survey of 170 people, 73% of the sample indicated at least some familiarity with POWER.

In addition to promoting Columbia Gas' programs, the Energy Advocate has effectively promoted OMLPS's Efficiency Smart program by distributing efficient light bulbs and promoting the Super Rebate program. During walkthroughs, the Energy Advocate has distributed over 1280 CFL light bulbs. POWER has also processed 162 Super Rebates for a total of \$11,890.

In sum, POWER's Energy Advocacy service is leveraging significant funding and bringing multiple benefits to the community of Oberlin.

POWER has set ambitious but achievable annual goals for changing Oberlin's energy culture and increasing efficiency upgrades:

1. Expose virtually every Oberlin resident to the idea of energy efficiency (through PSAs, posters, bill inserts, newspaper).
2. Face to face or voice contact with 360 homeowners yearly.
3. Walk through inspections/meetings with 100 homeowners yearly.
4. Efficiency work completed on 50 homes yearly.

Achieving these goals will annually result in substantial economic and carbon benefits (as outlined below).

## **Co benefits**

POWER has learned that people are motivated through different motives. An obvious benefit of the program is energy cost savings. Additionally, POWER has found that homeowners who have had their homes weatherized talk about the increased comfort of their home. This weatherized home is heated and cooled more evenly which makes it more comfortable during extreme temperature swings. Others have an interest in reducing their carbon footprint. This program has also illustrated the type of partnerships that can be created. The partnerships with Oberlin Municipal Light & POWER, Columbia Gas of Ohio and Oberlin Community Services has opened the doors for funding, joint marketing efforts and reduced administrative costs.

## **Ongoing Challenges/Lessons Learned**

While the benefits are cast this project still faces challenges. One of the largest challenges is still reaching Oberlin constituents and motivating them to participate in the program. In the first three years of the POWER program Columbia Gas saw a 480% increase in audits and a 320% increase in homeowners having weatherization work done. Even with this increase, only about ten percent of the homes in Oberlin have participated. It is estimated that about half of the homes in Oberlin would benefit from additional weatherization so potentially POWER has reached about twenty percent of the market need. Outreach continues through the energy advocate who canvasses door to door, meets with customers on an individual basis, attends various public events and is a direct advocate with Columbia Gas and OMLPS. The POWER volunteer board works to provide a presence at public events, provides presentations at local churches, civic organizations and local groups and other marketing efforts including signage and recognition of homes who have had work completed.

Another challenge has been in gaining the cooperation of landlords and renters in Oberlin's large residential rental market. For landlords, it is in obtaining their interest and cooperation needed to weatherize their properties when they do not pay the utility bills. For renters, it is a distrust with bureaucracy and allowing someone they don't know in their home to inspect it, even if it is at no cost. Working with Oberlin Community Services in 2015 has provided a beneficial tie-in to the low income community opening the doors in some of these homes.

Project Outcomes	Estimated Impact per Upgraded Home	Estimated Total Impact
Yearly energy savings	\$200/year/home	\$10,000/year
Hours of labor generated	80 hours/home	4,000 hours/year
Yearly carbon reduction	1 short ton/year	50 short tons/year
External program money leveraged into community	\$450- \$500 per audit plus \$1500 - \$2500 work completed	\$111,100/year

#### Partners

OMLPS	City of Oberlin
Zion CDC	Oberlin Community Services
Oberlin Project	Oberlin College
Columbia Gas	Efficiency Smart

#### Project Facts

##### Project Duration

- 2008 to present

##### Project Cost

- \$57,737 for 2015

##### Project Staff Required

- Ten very involved volunteer board members
- Energy advocate – 20 hours per week
- Administrative staff – 10 hours per week

##### Population Served

- 8,390 (5,390 Full-time Residents and 3,000 College Students)

##### Community Type

- City

##### Partners

OMLPS	City of Oberlin
Zion CDC	Oberlin Community Services
Oberlin Project	Oberlin College
Columbia Gas	Efficiency Smart

#### Resources/Learning More

- <http://www.cityofoberlin.com/>
- <http://www.cityofoberlin.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/2013-cap-online-pdf.pdf>
- <http://www.poweroberlin.org/>

#### Author/Contact

Doug McMillan, OMLPS  
 Energy Services & Sustainability Initiatives Manager  
[dmcmillan@omlps.org](mailto:dmcmillan@omlps.org)  
 440 775-7286



## Project Costs and Funding

### 2015 POWER Income and Expenses

#### INCOME

Grants	Sustainable Reserve Fund	\$35,000.00
	Green Edge Fund	10,000.00
In-kind donations		
	Rent	4,200.00
	Phone	1,037.00
Fundraising		2,500.00
Contributions		<u>5,000.00</u>
<b>TOTAL INCOME</b>		<b>\$57,737.00</b>

#### EXPENSES

Salaries		
	Program Director	\$12,870.00
	Energy Advocate	24,960.00
Professional development		300.00
Gap Grants		10,000.00
Rent		4,200.00
Phone		1,037.00
Insurance		984.00
Professional fees		615.00
Website fee		240.00
Marketing		800.00
Bank Fee		56.00
Other Fees		175.00
Office equipment & supplies		<u>1,500.00</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>\$57,737.00</b>