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North Carolina

# Volunteers Stretch Utility Dollars Through Waste Reduction Partners

Help governments and groups cut energy costs

by: Allen Norwood | from: [AARP Bulletin](#) | December 1, 2010



Retired engineer George Tregay, a volunteer energy assessor for Waste Reduction Partners, measures light input at the Madison County Agricultural Center in Marshall. — D.L. Anderson

George Tregay prefers volunteering over golf.

Tregay, 65, of Hendersonville, earned a doctorate in chemistry but spent much of his career as an aerospace engineer. He's one of 65 volunteer retirees who in the past decade have provided more than 158,000 hours of technical assistance to more than 1,300 small businesses, local governments and nonprofit organizations across the state through [Waste Reduction Partners](#).

Along the way, they've cut utility bills by \$23 million.

"I like the technical side. It's the puzzle part of working on a WRP project that I enjoy," said Tregay. He moved to the North Carolina mountains from Illinois in 2007 and has worked with towns and counties all the way to Tennessee. "It's really nice because you see results in a very short time ... in a day, a week or a month."

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The government managers and administrators he has worked with are doing good jobs, he said, but cutbacks mean their budgets and staffing are stretched thin. They wouldn't be able to complete in-depth energy studies on their own, no matter the potential savings. "Our organization can very much help with short-term projects."

Many of the counties and school systems are operating large, older buildings filled with overhead fluorescent lights that might stay on from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. "Those are very inefficient," Tregay said. Replacing those fixtures with up-to-date energy-saving components can provide the same light for two-thirds of the cost and pay for itself in three or four years.

Working alone or in teams, WRP's volunteer retirees might spend a half-day to a day touring a site. They analyze utility bills, suggest ways the client could cut its spending and even help write grant applications.

WRP volunteers have helped Benson and Burgaw, Snow Hill and Elizabethtown. Last year they completed a cost-saving study for one of the Boys and Girls Homes, which provides shelter for at-risk kids at Lake Waccamaw.

Earlier this year, WRP completed an energy assessment for the [Cameron Art Museum](#) in Wilmington. WRP not only made recommendations on how the museum could update its heating and air-conditioning systems for substantial savings, but also helped it apply for a grant to defray the cost. The assessment estimated the museum could save up to \$20,000 per year if all the suggestions were implemented. In the meantime, the museum switched from incandescent light bulbs to compact fluorescents, installed motion detectors to turn lights on and off, and reduced accent lights in the main corridor, said Johnnie McKoy, the museum's property manager.

Waste Reduction Partners was created in 1992 by the [Land-of-Sky Regional Council](#), a government planning organization in Asheville, to help businesses, governments and schools save money in environmentally friendly ways. It has reduced solid waste and water use. Increasingly, its focus is on cutting energy use.

Two years ago, it opened a second office at the [Triangle J Council of Governments](#) in the Research Triangle Park near Raleigh. Its energy assessments and other services are free. Projects are selected based on need and other factors. The program has an annual budget of about \$450,000, mostly in grants from federal, state and local sources.

WRP Director Terry Albrecht said most clients typically discover WRP through the state's energy office. Volunteers have helped small to medium businesses, governments, school systems, community colleges and even churches. "Typically, we're helping entities that don't have on-site expertise."

To save at home, Waste Reduction Partners volunteers recommend you:

- Switch to compact fluorescent lighting. Incandescent bulbs cost more to operate, don't last as long and add heat while you're cooling with the air conditioner.
- Install and use a programmable thermostat. Cut back at night or when you're away.
- Inspect your ductwork and seal any leaks with quality metallic tape — not old-fashioned duct tape — or duct mastic. That can cut your utility bill by 5 to 10 percent.
- Block sun from pouring in through large, uncovered windows. Plant a tree or install an awning.
- Start with improvements you can make for \$10 or \$20 that will pay for themselves in just a few years.

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*Allen Norwood is a freelance writer based in Sherrills Ford, N.C.*