

Media Releases



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Power to the people: helping older Australians rethink energy efficiency

A Study of energy use among low-income older people has revealed they are being thrifty in their energy use, but with potential health and wellbeing costs.

A team of researchers from the UOW and Macquarie University surveyed close to 1000 low-income residents aged 60 and over in the Illawarra, Southern Highlands and Shoalhaven regions of New South Wales to find out their knowledge, attitudes and practices toward energy efficient living.

The team also conducted focus group research in the community that found older Australians were equipped with a wealth of thrifty behaviours to save energy.

The research is being conducted to inform the [Energy+Illawarra](#) program that features social marketing efforts, community workshops, newsletters, web-resources, retrofits to people's houses, and energy use support packages among other activities to open up conversations of what is energy efficiency, and to help older Australians improve energy efficiency without compromising their comfort and wellbeing.

Energy+Illawarra social marketing project lead, Dr Ross Gordon, from Macquarie University, said the research revealed that dominant understanding around energy efficiency amongst low-income older household is thrift, which is not being wasteful of money.



"The cost of energy is very important in being able to maintain the comfort the you need to live." - Peter McLeod, Kanahooka.

"In most instances, turning on heaters for long periods of time and turning lights on during the night were understood as wasteful," he said. "Other people told us how they wrap themselves up in a blanket in winter because they thought this was the sensible thing to do to stay warm and thrifty."

Dr Gordon said many older low-income participants spoke of growing up in an age of austerity, and understood being thrifty with money, and energy, was integral to how they thought of themselves as different from younger generations.

"They pointed out how younger people were often wasteful of money and energy by not turning off lights, heaters or unplugging television sets and microwave ovens," he said. "The conundrum is that many low-income older households are already saving energy because of practices of thrift learnt during their lifetime."

However, some of these thrifty practices may pose health and safety risks to low-income older households.



"We're energy conscious because we were brought up that way ... cost is a factor whenever we do anything because we are on a fixed income." - Alan Bell, Huskisson.

"We found one couple who reported that when the gentlemen got up in the night he had a bad fall in the toilet, all because he didn't want to switch on a light," Dr Gordon said. "Other participants spoke of balancing precariously on stools to try to unplug their microwave from the wall socket to save energy."

"We also found people who spoke of only turning on heating and cooling just for when friends and family visited – masking what temperatures they usually live in from those closest to them."

Dr Gordon said it was time to rethink how energy efficiency was understood.

"There needs to be a recognition that energy efficiency is using energy wisely and economically to sustain everyday life and promote wellbeing, rather than just a focus on saving costs by being thrifty," he said.



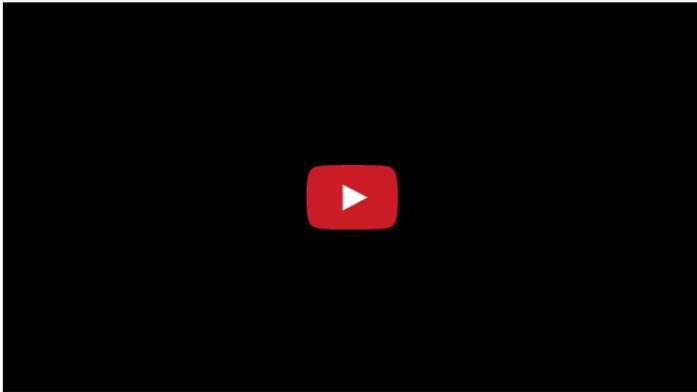
"What do I think of the rising cost of energy? I don't think it's very funny. If the whole country tried to save energy we'd be a lot better off." - Jeanette and Gerry de Langen, Albion Park Rail.

Regional Development Australia Illawarra (RDAI) was awarded a \$2.3 million grant from the Australian Government Department of Industry and Science; and consortium organisations have contributed \$1.2 million of in-kind work on the Energy+Illawarra project.

The consortium involves a range of organisations including the University of Wollongong and Macquarie University, the Illawarra Forum, the WEA Illawarra, Warrigal, Royal Freemasons' Benevolent Institution (RFB), IRT Group, and Southern Councils Group.

For more information on the Energy+Illawarra program go to energyplusillawarra.com.au.

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