Landmark Energy Efficiency Legislation Passes NY Senate; Energy Efficiency Equity and Jobs Act Now Primed for Assembly

Senate passage sets a course for policies that will ensure energy efficiency measures reach low-income communities and communities of color

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 4, 2021
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ALBANY, NY — In a 54-9 vote yesterday, lawmakers in the New York Senate overwhelmingly passed legislation aimed at addressing the high cost of energy bills in New York by weatherizing homes and creating jobs in the state’s most vulnerable communities. The “Energy Efficiency Equity and Jobs Act” will require utilities to ensure that low-income communities of color receive an equitable share of energy efficiency funding and jobs. This bill would require energy efficiency retrofits be deployed to low-income communities and communities of color. It will require the state to allocate worker training funds for energy efficiency in these communities statewide, and require the State energy agency to publicly track actual benefits of energy efficiency retrofit work.

The bill also addresses some important barriers to energy efficiency by opening up energy efficiency funding to remove lead, mold, and asbestos as part of an energy efficiency retrofit.

The bill was championed by WE ACT for Environmental Justice and supported by the New York Energy Democracy Alliance. The groups will now work to ensure passage of a companion bill in the Assembly.

“We thank the New York State Senate for passing this legislation and Senator Kevin Parker (D-Brooklyn) for his leadership in sponsoring it,” said Yuwa Vosper, Environmental Policy & Advocacy Coordinator at WE ACT for Environmental Justice. “Low-income communities and communities of color bear disproportionate impacts from climate change, so it is critical that any measures taken by the state to address the climate crisis, such as the energy efficiency measures outlined in this bill, put the needs of these communities front and center. We trust that the New York State Assembly will consider these factors, along with the harsh toll that the pandemic and resulting economic downturn have taken on these communities, and vote to put the bill in front of the Governor for his signature to help ensure that New York achieves its emissions-reduction goals.”

Since New Yorkers in communities of color and/or low income communities pay a disproportionately higher percentage of their income on energy, which is often their largest expense after housing costs such as rent or a mortgage, many must decide between paying their energy bill or purchasing necessities like food and medicine. In addition to the financial burden, living in a home that is energy inefficient or potentially riddled with mold and lead harms their health and well-being, especially as climate change exacerbates extreme weather conditions. The Energy Efficiency Equity and Jobs Act ensures that all New Yorkers have access to energy efficiency programs, regardless of race, income or zip code.
“PUSH Buffalo celebrates this important milestone victory with our allies at WE ACT and the NY Energy Democracy Alliance. Targeted energy efficiency investments that directly benefit poor and working class communities and communities of color across New York State are essential if the state plans to meet the emission reduction goals and equity mandates of the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act. Based on our work in Buffalo, PUSH knows first hand about the myriad co-benefits that can be achieved when old buildings are weatherized. This legislation will help ensure that our homes and communities are healthier, living wage green jobs are created for priority populations, and contracting opportunities scale up for Minority and Women-Owned Businesses,” said Clarke Gocker, Director of Policy and Strategy at PUSH Buffalo.

"Energy efficiency measures mean healthier homes, less economically stressed families, and the participation in a clean energy future that we demand. The passage of the Energy Efficiency Equity and Jobs Act directly impacts low-income communities of color and is the right step toward a resilient future for the people of the Lower East Side,” said Damaris Reyes, Executive Director of Good Old Lower East Side (GOLES).

“Citizens for Local Power advocates for energy equity and affordable access to clean energy sources across New York State, “said Susan Gillespie, President of the group’s Board. “The passage of this bill will benefit all New Yorkers with relief in energy bills, but also, and perhaps more importantly, specifically aid communities that have been disproportionately affected where healthy, affordable homes are unavailable. What this bill delivers is a basic human right.”

“We celebrate the passage of this bill in the Senate,” said Kim Fraczek, Director of Sane Energy Project. “The fossil fuel industry has held people hostage for too long as captive customers for polluting, wasteful, and climate disaster fuel. This bill opens the path to reducing the amount of energy we use in our buildings to ease our bills, protect our health, honor environmental and worker justice, and take action on climate.”

“More than 1 million households are behind on their energy bills, and these customers owe, on average, more than $1,000 to their utilities. Clearly, New Yorkers are facing an energy affordability crisis of epic proportions,” said Jessica Azulay, Executive Director of Alliance for a Green Economy. “One key solution is to help struggling customers use less energy through energy efficiency retrofits. These retrofits lower bills, improve living conditions and health, and reduce the use of fossil fuels. Until now, state and utility spending on energy efficiency has been totally inequitable, with those who need these retrofits the most facing insurmountable financial and structural barriers. With the passage of the Energy Efficiency Equity and Jobs Act, we hope to change this.”

“This bill is a welcome step toward correcting years of injustice in New York’s energy efficiency arena,” said the New York Energy Democracy Alliance. “Low income communities and communities of color should benefit most from the state’s energy efficiency funding, but instead, we have seen a statewide failure to connect these communities with the energy efficiency funding and jobs that they deserve. It’s now up to the Governor and the Assembly to finish the job and make sure the Energy Efficiency Equity and Jobs Act becomes law.”

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WE ACT for Environmental Justice is a Northern Manhattan membership-based organization whose mission is to build healthy communities by ensuring that people of color and/or low-income residents participate meaningfully in the creation of sound and fair environmental health and protection policies and practices. WE ACT has offices in New York City and Washington, D.C. Visit us at weact.org and follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

The New York Energy Democracy Alliance is a statewide alliance of 27 community-based organizations, grassroots groups, and policy experts working together to advance a just and participatory transition to an energy system for New York State that is renewable, equitable, accountable and local. Visit us at energydemocracy.org and follow us on Facebook and Twitter.