



**TESTIMONY ON  
WHOLE HOME REPAIRS: LESSONS FROM YEAR ONE**

PRESENTED TO THE PA SENATE DEMOCRATIC POLICY COMMITTEE

BY  
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Indiana County is located approximately 60 miles northeast of Pittsburgh with a population of 83,000. Since the early 1990's, the Indiana County Commissioners through the Indiana County Office of Planning & Development (ICOPD), have supported providing various housing assistance programs. Through the ICOPD multiple types of housing projects have been developed and administered to provide safe, decent and affordable housing for its residents. The assistance has included housing rehabilitation for owner-occupied housing; housing accessibility modifications, first-time home-buyers assistance; new construction including permanent housing for homeless veterans; furnace and roof replacements for homeowners over the age of 55; conversion of student housing rentals to single family units to name a few. The County has often partnered with private and/or public agencies including non-profits when undertaking housing programs.

The roll out of the Whole Home Repairs Program (WHR), as released by the Pennsylvania Department of Community & Economic Development (DCED), provides a broad approach to the various ways housing issues can be tackled at the local level. The program provides the guiderails to keep the funds aimed at meeting the Commonwealth's goals and objectives while permitting the grantees the necessary flexibility for local program development. Instead of the grantees reacting to a "New" housing program and modifying the local programs to chase the funding dollars grantees have been able to incorporate the WHR to meet local needs.

At the present time, Indiana County administers owner-occupied rehabilitation assistance with the federal HOME program funds and a separate roof and furnace replacement program for homeowners over the age of 55 with PHARE funds. The owner-occupied housing rehabilitation program has been in place for approximately thirty-years. Fortunately, with staff and housing procedures already in place and operating our focus was on how to expand the number of homeowners assisted while addressing as many critical issues as possible for the homeowners.

Indiana County received an allocation of \$935,448.00 from the WHR program. With these funds, Indiana County, allocated monies to the three eligible activities the owner-occupied rehabilitation assistance, the rental rehabilitation assistance and workforce development. Funds were also budgeted for program implementation and administrative costs.

Indiana County allocated \$492,000.00 for the owner-occupied rehabilitation assistance activity. After much deliberation, the ICOPD staff, set the WHR program goal to target critical needs in lieu of expending the maximum allowable limit of \$50,000.00 for each case. The goal is to assist as many homeowners as possible by addressing critical needs to maintain safe and secure housing. However, if and when necessary, the maximum will be expended and other housing funds will be utilized should costs exceed the maximum WHR limit. We cannot and will not go into a home and fix a leaking roof and not address a dangerous electrical wiring situation.

The initial inspection of the house by our two housing technicians determines if any unlisted repair needs to be addressed. By setting up the program in this manner we anticipate we will be able to assist approximately 25 housing units. If the house assisted with WHR needs further rehabilitation assistance the homeowner will be placed on a waiting list for other County housing programs such as the HOME Program.

Another way we are attempting to stretch the WHR funds is by switching WHR applicants into other funded programs. For example, one of our communities has a set aside for housing activities. Applications received for the WHR program from residents in that geographical area are undertaken with the local funding source enabling assistance for another household. At the present time this has permitted us to assist seven additional households since September.

To date Indiana County has undertaken eight (8) cases funded with WHR funds. Six (6) cases are under construction and two (2) cases have been completed. Another six (6) households that applied for WHR funds were transferred to other program funds with one completed and five under construction.

Indiana County allocated \$50,000.00 for the rental rehabilitation assistance activity. Due to the various WHR regulations for the rental rehab assistance eligibility and the administrative oversight necessary after completion of the rehab our approach was to propose to undertake one pilot case. At this time, we are working with one small landlord and are in the application phase.

Over the last several years it was becoming evident that the number of contractors bidding on construction projects has been dwindling. This includes not only the smaller contractors that typically bid on the housing rehabilitation projects but larger contractors for the community and economic development projects. For example, in 2019, bids were advertised for a new \$2.5 million 18,000 square foot domestic violence shelter. The County Code for Indiana requires adherence to the Separations Act that involves the soliciting of bids separately for general construction, plumbing, electrical and HVAC contracts. The electrical and HVAC contract bids were not successful in attracting more than one bidder for the first scheduled bid opening. Local contractors that previously were regular bidders were not submitting bids. Follow up conversations revealed the contractors could not find employees with the training and experience necessary to undertake the contracted work.

The same was true for the smaller general construction contractors that typically bid on the housing rehabilitation projects. The local housing rehabilitation programs have historically struggled in the rural areas in particular to have a sufficient number of contractors to bid projects and provide the rehabilitation. The housing rehab contractors were also having difficulty finding applicants to fill positions.

Utilizing the existence of a working partnership between seven county school districts, the Indiana County Technology Center (ICTC), the ARIN Intermediate Unit-28, and the Indiana County Commissioners, enabled us to identify unmet needs to improve the educational/career ready programs. The question we asked was what unfunded items do you need to build a strong pathway for students to exit the educational system with the skills and training needed by the construction trade employers. From this one question the starting point for workforce development component quickly came into focus. Indiana County invested approximately a third of the WHR funds for workforce development with a \$264,000.00 allocation.

The ICTC wanted to provide more opportunities for the construction trade students to obtain hands on experience. The lack of transportation to and from construction sites was the biggest obstacle along with the availability of tools on-site. Without transportation vehicles for their use, the ICTC had to arrange with the district's school bus transportation to reserve a bus and driver. Not only was scheduling

specific days and times an issue but conflicts with other driving regulations further complicate the process. As a result, the ability to arrange transportation is limited so hand-on training opportunities are limited.

To overcome this barrier, it was determined that two 10 – 12 passenger vans were needed. This size of van also eliminated the need for the driver to have a commercial driver's license (CDL) allowing the instructors too drive the vans. In order to get the tools on-site, a cargo transport trailer was obtained for each passenger van along with tools for the on-site work experience. Each construction program area received an allotment for tools, carpentry, HVAC, electrical and masonry. These tools are designated specifically for the hands-on job training sites.

The ICTC initiated an electrical training path starting with the 2023-2024 school year. The WHR funds purchased the necessary textbooks and materials for the students and instructors. The ICTC wanted to re-establish this training due to the documented workforce need and student interest.

The ARIN Intermediate Unit-28 (ARIN) requested WHR funds to provide a Curriculum Coordinator Specialist for 20-hours per week for two school calendar years. ARIN provides educational support to learners of all ages in Indiana and Armstrong Counties. ARIN is a partner with two technical schools, the ICTC in Indiana County and the Lenape Technical School in Armstrong County. The mission of ARIN is to provide innovative educational programs, training and support services through partnerships and visionary leadership in Indiana and Armstrong Counties. Students that attend the Apollo Ridge School District are from both Indiana and Armstrong Counties. These students all attend the Lenape Technical School.

The focus of this position is to assist school counselors in coordination, career exploration, career awareness, and work-based learning opportunities for students and K – 12 teachers and administrators. This is to provide awareness to the youth, their parents, schools and community members of local and regional High Priority Occupations. This position is responsible for creating a repository of available work-based learning experience for all and implementing STEM (Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics) initiatives related to career education.

As a result of the Commonwealth's funding of the workforce development component of the WHR Program positive outcomes are underway. Due to the ICTC's identified need for hands-on training and with the ability to get to and from job sites with tools, the Indiana County Commissioners worked with ICTC on a project for a hands-on training opportunity. The County owns a vacant former farmhouse at the Indiana County Airport property. The County Commissioners need the building remodeled to house one of the County offices, the Penn State Cooperative Office. The Commissioners allocated \$90,000.00 of local general funds to be utilized for materials at the property. The remodel is to be undertaken by the instructors and students.

ARIN is working with other Indiana County educational and government partners on the development of "Career Clusters Pathways to College & Career Readiness". This work group includes ARIN, ICTC, WCCC (Westmoreland Community College), Indiana University of Pennsylvania, all Indiana County School Districts and the Indiana County Office of Planning & Development. As a result of the WHR funding for

ARIN's Curriculum Coordinator Specialist, the workgroup decided to develop the Construction Trades Career and Education Pathway first and it will be utilized as the pilot for the other disciplines.

Not to be overlooked are the positive outcomes that have and will happen due to the infusion of the rehabilitation assistance funding. The stress of a leaking roof or dilapidated porch weighs heavy on many of the homeowners. This hand up eliminates the stress from their hearts and minds. Our staff sees the physical and mental changes in the program participants. This is especially true for many senior citizens that are already on very limited budgets without the additional financial resources needed to replace an inoperable furnace or a leaking roof.

Positive economic impacts are a direct result of dollars invested into housing. Not only is the physical asset maintained but the small local contractors and businesses benefit. The Commonwealth's investment in its citizens and housing is a win-win for all.