

Slow start to solar program

Not all who apply for grants to help on water heaters qualify.

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It seems like a good deal: San Antonians can apply for a grant that covers much of the cost of installing a solar water heater that could save them money every month.

But response to the program, now six months old, has been disappointing, because it's still so new and not everyone who applies qualifies.

The WellMed Charitable Foundation, which is funding the program, still hopes to install 200 solar water systems by mid-2012 and plans to spend \$1 million doing so.

By late August, 21 solar installations had been completed out of 184 applications, said Carol Zernial, executive director of the WellMed Charitable Foundation. The solar water heater's retail cost is \$4,800, including installation, most of which is covered by the WellMed grant. Homeowners who receive a solar water heater must pay \$25 a month for five years. Also, a homeowner may receive a federal tax credit of \$450 for installing the solar water heater.

The grant money for the project comes from the WellMed Charitable Foundation in partnership with the Blake, Kymberly and George Rapier Charitable Trust, while the nonprofit American Sunrise is administering the grant program.

The biggest problem is that many people who applied for the grant can't qualify.

"There's a whole screening process that whittles the numbers down," Zernial said.

And there are barriers to



This is what the solar water heating system looks like inside the Below house.

getting a grant; for example, an applicant now must have an electric water heater.

"Most of the people who call us don't realize" that's a key requirement, Zernial said.

Also, an applicant must be a homeowner and must have a garage or shed that can house a water heater unit that's bigger than conventional ones.

See SOLAR/2C

"In some neighborhoods, you can't just put a tank outside your house," she said. "There are restrictions."

In addition, the homeowner's roof must be in good enough condition to handle a solar installation and the site for the solar panels can't be in heavy shade.

One San Antonio resident

whose house did meet all the requirements is Chris Below, whose solar water heater was installed about 60 days ago.

"It was perfect for me," Below said, "because I had the right type of house with the right sun exposure. With the incentives, how can you turn this down?"

Fitting in an 80-gallon tank was a bit trickier, but he said the installation company, Estrella Solar, was able to handle it.

The 80-gallon tank "is a big tank, but you can do certain things to retrofit it," Below said.

George "Skeets" Rapier, operations manager at Estrella Solar, said the 80-gallon tank isn't difficult to retrofit, even though it's replacing water heaters that hold 40 to 50 gallons.

"It's a little taller than a conventional unit and it's 24 inches in diameter," Rapier said. "Regular tanks are usually 18 to 21 inches in diameter."

Below said he's pleased with the system and is saving about \$30 a month.

Francisco Martinez and his wife, Laura, got the first solar water heater installed in August at their house in the Prospect Hill neighborhood on the near West Side.

"The installation went very smoothly," Martinez said but he was concerned that his family would run out of hot water during a spate of rainy weather. But the system draws electricity when needed, and there were no problems, he said.

WellMed now is working



to reach more people by going to community fairs and school events, Zernial said, as well as talking to groups interested in renewable energy.

And there's no hard-and-fast deadline to install 200 solar systems.

"The original funding was for a two-year period," she said. But now, "we don't have any hard dates" for ending it.

Scoring a solar water heater

Solar water heater grants are available to CPS Energy customers who own a house meeting these requirements:

- **ELECTRIC** water heater
- **SPACE** to install a slightly larger water heater
- **ROOF** in good condition
- **GOOD SUN** exposure

Source: [WellMed](#), Charitable Foundation and American Sunrise

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PHOTOS BY JERRY LARA/glara@express-news.net

Chris Below, with and his 6-year-old son Wesley, says of his solar system, "It was perfect for me because I had the right type of house with the right sun exposure."