

CASE STUDY

More affordable energy bills help this Virginia family save money for what counts



BETTY ARNEZ & DAUGHTER, ASHLEY

MEET BETTY ARNEZ. She lives in Falls Church, Virginia, just miles outside of Washington, D.C. at the Grandview Apartments—a multifamily housing community made up of 19 buildings and 266 units.

The apartment community serves mainly low-income families and has some of the most affordable rent in the area, thanks to the Low Income Housing Tax Credit program, the largest affordable production and preservation program in the United States. Many residents who live at Grandview work in local restaurants or in the construction industry. Originally from Bolivia, Betty is 39 and lives in her two-bedroom apartment with her two kids, Joel, 19, and Ashley, 9.

MODERN UPGRADES FOR OLDER HOMES

The Grandview Apartments were built in 1962, and by the 2000s were in need of major upgrades to meet modern energy efficiency standards. Here, tenants pay their own utility bills, and some were paying bills as high as \$300 per month. Starting in 2015,

through a partnership between Dominion Energy, the Washington Gas Care Program and Community Housing Partners, the buildings underwent major efficiency upgrades. This included return vents, ducts, A/C units, insulation, and LED light bulbs in bathrooms and dining room chandeliers. Property manager Ana Echeandia says the motivation for the upgrades was to generate a “benefit for the tenants, who are paying the utility bills, to provide something good for them, to help them pay less.”

WHEN ENERGY BILLS WERE A MONTHLY HARDSHIP

Betty remembers how difficult it was to get by with high energy bills before the efficiency upgrades. She says her energy bills could be anywhere from \$180 to \$200 some months. She tried to conserve as much as she could. “Before, we didn’t turn the lights on as much because I would say we’re going to have to pay too much. I would turn a light there and not here,” she says, pointing to a nearby lamp. She also remembers how confused she was by her high energy bills. Her sister, who lives in her own house, would pay just \$180 for three full months, whereas Betty was paying that much each month. She couldn’t understand why she was paying so much

more when she was using so much less and living in such a smaller space.

Now, she says she has more money to spend on her kids and on things that matter. “I use it to buy food, more fruits, milk or Cheerios. Before I had to limit more to cover the energy bill.” She also is using the extra income to save money. The kids are growing up and need more space and their own rooms. She’s saving to buy her own home in the next year or so.

MORE MONEY FOR WHAT MATTERS

For Betty, energy efficiency provides the means for her to live more comfortably, save money, and provide more for her family. Now she doesn’t have to choose between paying her energy bill or buying groceries. Energy efficiency is not just about fixing up outdated buildings—it’s about giving families, especially low-income families, everyday comfort and the ability to live healthier lives.

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