



# Weathering THE storm



Photos by STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

Bill Kraus teaches a class on weatherization at Clark College recently. Top: Travis Top, center, learns about weatherization at Clark College during a recent class.

Programs,  
grants help  
low-income  
residents  
stay warm  
while giving  
people  
training  
to keep them  
employed

By STEPHANIE RICE  
*Columbian staff writer*

In 2008, Travis Top was victim to the downsizing trend.

Laid off from his job making environmentally friendly soap, the 29-year-old married father of four began collecting unemployment.

Now he's part of a favorable trend: weatherization.

Top recently completed Clark College's energy auditor and weatherization professional training program. Before he started classes in February, he was hired by Richart Family Inc. The Vancouver-based residential construction company has been making up for what it lost in the construction slowdown by getting government weatherization contracts.

## WEATHERIZATION PROGRAM

If you live in Clark County and your annual family income does not exceed 200 percent of the poverty level (\$44,100 for a family of four), you might qualify to have your home weatherized. Call Clark County Community Services, 360-397-2130, and ask for the weatherization program.

"I've been in the business 30-some years, and you tend to build trends that don't readily go away," said Mike Richart.

"People are not wanting to buy homes that cost too much to run," he said.

The U.S. Department of Energy's Weatherization Assistance

Program received \$5 billion last year under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The idea was that having newly retrained workers help low-income families make their homes more energy-efficient would create jobs and ease stress on family budgets and the environment.

Last month, the Associated Press reported that some states, including Indiana, Alaska and Wyoming, have been off to either a sluggish start, with poorly trained workers screwing up jobs, or no start at all.

Washington, however, has been a leader. On April 12, Gov. Chris Gregoire said the state, which received nearly \$30 million in July, had met the require-



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ments for an additional \$30 million.

Clark County's share each round has been \$974,646.

Clark County ranks third statewide in number of residences weatherized, behind Snohomish County and Seattle.

It costs an average of \$4,266 to weatherize a home, Richart said.

Tif Rock, housing preservation program manager for Clark County Community Services, said last week that 210 residences have been weatherized and the county will be able to do another 210.

"This is an example of a program that is working," said Geoff Knapp, community services communications director. "We are hiring people, we are training people ... there have been critics (of other programs) but here we are exceeding expectations."

The county also has two Americorp volunteers who will deliver a starter kit, which includes items such as a low-flow shower head and an LED night light, to homeowners who want to learn how to reduce their bills.

In a separate weatherization program, the county has joined Vancouver and Clark Public Utilities to provide a total of \$500,000 to match \$500,000 in federal funds. That program will first target homes in Rose Village, Fourth Plain Village and southeast Hazel Dell. It began in December with workers conducting energy audits, said Lori Rhodig, the program's manager. She said the contract to weatherize the homes was awarded April 27 to Richart Family Inc.

In addition to weatherizing homes in Clark County, Richart's employees have also either started or plan on weatherizing residences in Longview, Yaki-

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**Geoff Knapp**

Clark County Community Services  
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ma, Portland and Bend, Ore.

Richart's employees work 40-hour weeks, at \$22 to \$35 an hour, and receive paid vacation and health benefits.

He has hired 25 workers to go through weatherization training. He transferred 20 construction workers to weatherization work; they will go through professional training, too.

"(Weatherization) literally has saved those jobs," Richart said.

Top said he learned about the program at a WorkSource center. He was reading about training that's available for a number of occupations including dental assistant and mechanic. Energy auditing caught his eye.

One of his classmates, Alex Frimpong, 30, wanted to be in a progressive industry and through word-of-mouth heard about Richart.

Is Frimpong making better money than he did at his previous jobs, which were all in sales?

"Definitely," Frimpong said.

Bob Patterson, a county weatherization specialist, said the work isn't for everyone. After testing a home's efficiency, workers may install insulation, weather-stripping or ventilation fans, or make minor repairs. Workers are on the roof, in the attic and in the crawl space.

"You can't be claustrophobic. You can't hate spiders. You can't be afraid of getting dirty," Patterson said.

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