

How many volunteers does it take to change a city's worth of light bulbs?

Posted By Sue Yanagisawa

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Many Kingston households will be offered a freebie in the coming weeks to introduce residents to a new generation of cost-efficient compact fluorescent light bulbs.

The provincial government has pledged to ban the current generation of incandescent bulbs by 2012.

One Change, a two-year-old Ottawa-based organization with \$3.65 million in funding from Ontario Power Authority, the Ontario government and the Trillium Foundation, has initiated Project Porchlight to introduce people, household by household, to the preferred lighting alternative.

In coming weeks, they'll knock on doors, handing out free 13-watt compact fluorescent bulbs, which are about the equivalent in lighting strength to a 60-watt incandescent bulb.

Because they have 13,000 bulbs to distribute - one per household - they'll need volunteers.

Megan Puff, the project's newly minted regional co-ordinator, said project workers were in Kingston during Queen's University's Homecoming weekend with three information booths set up on campus.

They were able to sign up 45 volunteers and two of what she called "community champions" to help promote the work locally. But more are needed to get the bulbs distributed. Project Porchlight will have a booth set up again today at Giant Tiger, 1412 Bath Rd., to sign up more volunteers.

One Change and Project Porchlight say that for every incandescent light bulb a family replaces with a compact fluorescent one, they realize a saving of about \$50 over five years, the low end of the bulb's anticipated life.

With 13,000 compact fluorescents in use during that same period, they calculate Kingston's reduced draw on electrical power would result in 6,500 fewer tonnes of carbon dioxide being pumped into the atmosphere by coal-burning plants.

One Change public relations officer Becca Atkinson said the energy savings are based on the estimate that over half a decade, a single light fixture equipped with an incandescent bulb draws enough power to create a half-tonne of carbon dioxide.

Project Porchlight pays about \$10 for a package of three bulbs.

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The one drawback to the compact fluorescents, the technology's backers admit, is that they contain what Atkinson characterized as "a minute amount of mercury ... less than what's in a filling in someone's mouth."

Because it is there, however, people who use the bulbs have to remember that when they eventually burn out, they can't simply be thrown out with the regular garbage.

"You have to dispose of them through your city's hazardous waste programs," Atkinson says.

Puff, Atkinson and the organization's director of communications Suzy Fraser all describe One Change as "a non-partisan, non-profit" with a focus on energy conservation.

Project Porchlight hopes to hand out 500,000 free compact fluorescent light bulbs in 90 communities across Ontario, exclusive of Toronto, this year.

"That's the major cost of our program," Fraser said.

The organization also has an office in Calgary and a similar project has been undertaken in Alberta. But Fraser said the real opportunities lie in engaging people in a dialogue on energy consumption and conservation.

"Being energy efficient, being conscious of the planet, it's just something we should all do."

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