

Motivated energy savers in Stockton receive no-cost energy-efficient appliances



BACKGROUND

This case study illustrates how TCC funding for energy efficiency measures has helped Stockton residents upgrade to appliances that consume less electricity and gas, and protect them against rising utility costs. Specifically, the following stories highlight how Rising Sun used TCC funding to provide Rosalva Mendez and Franklin Caceres with energy-efficient appliances for their homes that were too expensive to purchase on their own accord. For more on Rising Sun's energy efficiency work in Stockton, see page 54.

Interviews for this story were conducted in February and March 2024.

Rising Sun's Appliance Upgrade Program Coordinator, Carolina Garcia Rios (left), helps a client fill out the Appliance Program's application inside the client's home.. Photo courtesy of Rising Sun

ROSALVA MENDEZ is a Stockton native and still lives there with her six children and husband. Like many, Mendez and her family were financially affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. She lost her job as a banker in 2020 right at the beginning of the pandemic and her husband became the sole provider for the family. Reducing their dual-income household to a single-income household posed serious financial challenges, especially when many of her home appliances became faulty.

Mendez found out about the TCC-funded energy efficiency upgrades through an email from her children's school. She was surprised to hear that she could get help replacing some of her appliances at no cost. All of Mendez's appliances were over 20 years old, inefficient, and costly to operate. Her dishwasher struggled to clean dishes on the first cycle, her toilet continuously ran, and her refrigerator wouldn't close fully. Without a properly functioning fridge, she struggled to keep perishable food fresh, running up her grocery bills. These challenges were exacerbated by the pandemic as she had to homeschool her six children and needed to upgrade her wi-fi with so many people being online at the same time.

Before her appliance upgrades, she was vigilant about tracking increases in her energy use by avoiding running the air conditioning all day. To reduce energy use and thereby financial pressure, she found creative ways to get the family

"I used to buy less — instead of buying a gallon of milk, I would buy a half gallon so I knew it would be finished in two days. Half of my gallon was going bad when I would get a full gallon of milk."

ROSALVA MENDEZ

out of the house on hot summer days such as taking the kids to the community pool or the shaded park. In the winter she reduced the family's electricity usage by staying in warm areas of the house, drinking hot coffee, and using blankets.

Mendez learned about Rising Sun through an email that was sent to her through her children's schools. With the help of Rising Sun's energy efficiency specialists, Mendez replaced her water faucets, dishwasher, refrigerator, and toilet for new ones. The changes to her lifestyle were significant: she was able to put more food on the table because her refrigerator kept perishables fresh which allowed her to spend less to replenish the fridge.

After her appliance upgrades, Mendez spends less time washing dishes and less money on groceries. In fact, Mendez saves about \$140 a month on her Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E) bill, which she can put towards new recreational activities for her family. For example, she was able to enroll her 9-year-old son in a youth soccer program and take the family to the movies.

“My electricity bill was roughly \$228 a month and it has gone down to \$145...It was a miracle to replace all of those appliances that I was in need of because I didn’t have the money [to do it on my own].”

ROSALVA MENDEZ

Mendez formed a connection with a Low-Cost Energy Program Manager, Valeria Salamanca, who has recommended other services her family needed. Some examples include access to community service hours with the program for her 17-year-old daughter to make her more competitive when she applies to a four-year college and job opportunities for her 19-year-old son, who needed work experience.

FRANKLIN CACERES, a former resident of South San Francisco, set out in search of more affordable housing to accommodate his growing family’s needs. Seeking a balance between affordability and a sense of community, Franklin aimed to find a home with quick access to a freeway in Stockton, where he eventually settled with his wife and their six-year-old daughter. However, he soon faced the financial strain of rising energy costs, prompting him to explore avenues for reducing household expenses.

In 2020, Caceres learned that he qualified for Rising Sun’s no-cost appliance replacements, which promotes energy and water conservation by providing residents with energy-efficient appliances at no cost. Caceres was excited, but cautious about participating in a program that comes at no-cost. While he welcomed the opportunity to replace outdated appliances with energy-efficient alternatives, he was skeptical the program could truly be cost free.

“To heat up my whole house can take 4-5 hours and the bill can go up to \$600. Energy is expensive, the more you use it, the more you pay.”

FRANKLIN CACERES

Despite his initial skepticism, Caceres was motivated by the desire to save energy and prevent financial burdens for his family caused by the rising costs of energy. The motivation was further fueled by witnessing his neighbors grappling with extremely high energy bills, prompting him to take proactive steps to manage his own household expenses more effectively.

Caceres started with simple changes like replacing light bulbs and shower heads in his home. Over time, Caceres began to trust the Rising Sun program as it provided these smaller upgrades at no cost. Having gained confidence in the program, he then felt comfortable upgrading additional items in his household, adding a smart thermostat, water-saving faucets, and a more efficient toilet.

In contrast to Mendez, Caceres did not see his PG&E bills go down after his energy efficiency upgrades. Electricity prices doubled for Caceres between 2021 and 2024, leading to high bills despite the new, energy-efficient appliances, and light bulbs. But the high prices likely would have led to even higher bills if Caceres’s family had stuck with their less efficient appliances. The upgraded appliances are expected to save the family about 7.5 therms of gas, 228 kilowatt hours of electricity, and 864 gallons of water per year. This translates to about \$125 in utility bill savings annually.

Caceres’s experience illustrates the invisible benefits of energy savings for many households: even with appliances that are more efficient, energy bills can go up if electricity or gas prices increase, but less dramatically so than without the efficiency upgrades. And some households might even use their appliances more once the upgrades are done, gaining benefits beyond lower bills (such as a cooler home from greater air conditioning use).

Despite not seeing the dramatic reduction in energy costs that he had hoped to see on his PG&E bill, Caceres remains determined to reduce the energy load of his home. With retirement on the horizon in four years, Caceres is particularly price-sensitive and wants to be sure he continues to protect himself against future energy cost increases. Doing so, however, is often impossible without upfront investment, which is a challenge for many households like Caceres. Thus, Caceres plans to leverage his newly built relationship with Rising Sun for all that it’s worth.

“If I qualify, I would like to continue working with Rising Sun because when you change out several appliances you can see a little bit more energy savings. Even saving \$40 is important — I can use that to buy solar lights outside instead of the regular lights we have.”

FRANKLIN CACERES