

RADON AS AN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE ISSUE

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Abstract

To date radon awareness and risk reduction has occurred mainly in densely populated, non-economically challenged areas.

The United States also has a sizeable population that lives in sparsely populated, economically challenged areas of the country. Due to limited resources, efforts to educate this group of the population have been very limited. This portion of the population generally is not aware of the health risk associated with elevated radon levels. If they become aware of the risk, the financial means of reducing the risk is oftentimes a challenge.

This paper will look at the experience and strategies of a long-time mitigator that relocated his business to this type of environment. It will also discuss the importance of developing partnerships in order to achieve maximum returns on outreach, education, and obtaining funding to accomplish risk reduction goals.

Background

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the experiences of Allied Radon Services, Inc. when relocating its business from an environment where radon testing and mitigation were widely practiced as part of a real estate transaction to an environment where the population generally had no understanding of the health risk of living with elevated radon levels. It is believed that this may often be the case in less populated areas of the country.

The owner of Allied Radon Services, Inc has been a radon mitigator in the State of Illinois since 1988. Initial mitigation services were performed in the western Chicago suburban counties of DuPage, Will, Kane, Kendall, and York. These are generally middle to upper class areas with a high corporate population subject to frequent relocation. As a result of being frequently relocated, the population of the area was aware of the health risk of and that radon testing generally occurred as part of a real estate transaction. Mitigation systems were installed as part of the closing process.

The Illinois Radon Awareness Act was effective January 1, 2008. The act requires the seller to provide the buyer of real property information about radon including the fact that the buyer is entitled and that Illinois Emergency Management Agency strongly recommends that every house be tested as part of a real estate transaction. The seller, buyer, and agents all sign off on a document verifying this exchange of information. At the point of enactment of the law, there

were no mitigation companies South of I-64 in Illinois. As a result, the mitigation business in the Chicago area was sold and a new mitigation business was established in southern Illinois with the first mitigation system being installed in December 2007.

What is Environmental Justice?

US EPA defines Environmental Justice as “the **fair treatment** and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or **income** with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and **policies**. EPA has this goal for all communities and persons across this nation. It will be achieved when everyone enjoys the same **degree of protection from environmental and health hazards** and equal access to the decision-making process to have a healthy environment in which to live, learn, and work.”

Radon is an environmental justice issue in southern Illinois because EPA policy is that all homes should be tested for radon and homes with radon levels at, or above 4.0 pCi/L, should be mitigated. Due to limited resources at the federal and state levels, education of the public regarding the health risk of living with elevated radon levels has occurred predominantly in the highly populated urban areas of the state. Much of southern Illinois population resides in rural small town areas and a large portion of the population is economically challenged. Prior to implementation of the Illinois Radon Awareness Act, much of the population of Southern Illinois was unaware of the hazards of living with elevated radon levels. It is still a common occurrence to find someone that does not know that elevated radon levels are a major health risk. When someone has limited financial resources, it is difficult to become involved in the process of being sure that your home does not have elevated radon levels by performing a test and taking corrective action if needed.

From an Environmental Justice perspective, there is still much to be accomplished in southern Illinois. In lieu of mandates that might require testing of all homes, citizens and both private industry and the public sector can engage in actions to aid Environmental Justice for these populations.

The Approach

Partnerships

The creation of partnerships has proven to be very effective in creating awareness in southern Illinois. Partnerships have been created with news organizations, hospitals, health departments, legislative liaisons, and other health related organizations. These partnerships allow for participation in health fairs and other outreach events oftentimes at very little or no cost. In addition to reaching the public, these partnerships also allow for the opportunity to educate personnel associated with the organization.

Tax Exempt Organizations

A 501 c 3 tax exempt organization – SIL Radon Awareness Task Force, Inc - dedicated to educating the public about the health risk of living with elevated radon levels allows for seeking grants to provide financing of memberships, activities and outreach projects.

The establishment of a tax exempt organization or simply a coalition is a great means to establishing partnership. An awareness organization or coalition serves one purpose – providing information. Hospitals and public health organizations are generally very open to partnering with other organizations that are also providing information.

Memberships

The task force is a member of local chambers of commerce the Southern Illinois Home Builders Association. These memberships allow for the participation in events such as home and garden shows which allows for the distribution of information to the public. The task force also is a member of the Illinois Comprehensive Cancer Control Program. This is the program which is updating the Illinois Comprehensive Cancer Control plan. Serving on the prevention committee, the task force has been successful in getting radon awareness activities included in the Illinois updated cancer control plan.

Conclusion

The task force has obtained financing for a couple of initiatives which resulted in a large number of houses being tested and the houses with the highest levels receiving a free mitigation system. These projects have been effective in getting the recipients of the free systems to educate their friends and family about the risk of living with elevated radon levels. As with any other worthwhile project, it is necessary to be determined. Education is an ongoing process. It is necessary to keep radon information in front of the public any time an opportunity presents itself. One sign of success is when people begin to report back at outreach events that they have conducted a radon test and share the results of the test.