



Mesa Fire Sprinkler Retrofit Grant Programs

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Executive Summary

Mesa, Arizona has taken an innovative approach to fire sprinkler advocacy by using federal grant allocations to finance two fire sprinkler retrofit programs. The Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP) Home Fire Sprinkler Initiative installs sprinklers in low- to moderate-income (LMI) housing. Sprinkler Cost Assistance Program (SCAP) is a city-run grant to encourage revitalization of underutilized commercial space downtown. Both programs are funded through the city's Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) entitlements.

Overview: Target audience and measureable program results

The NSP Home Fire Sprinkler Initiative targets low- to moderate-income households earning between 51- and 120-percent of the area median income. For rental units, Mesa's Affordable Rents policy required that no less than 20-percent of the properties be filled with very low-income persons/households at affordable rents. Mesa partnered with two non-profit organizations to provide rental housing to persons with developmental and physical disabilities. 32 single-family homes and seven multi-family properties with 27 affordable rental units have had home fire sprinklers installed. Program outcomes were measured in the number of homes retrofit with fire sprinklers.

SCAP grants are for businesses located within the downtown Pedestrian Overlay Area, with preference for those along Main Street. Program outcomes are being measured with respect to the number of occupancies retrofit with fire sprinklers and economic development objectives.

I. Formative Evaluation – Planning

To select a target area for the NSP, data was collected from the Maricopa County Assessor and various city departments, and spatial analysis was conducted using ArcGIS software. The 85204 zip code was chosen due to the high number of foreclosures, code violations, and crime problems, and contains some of the city's 2010 LMI census tracts. Fire data collected showed that house fire risk was highest in the 85204 zip code as well.

Decades of suburban growth trends have resulted in high vacancies and underused commercial space along Main Street in downtown. An inventory of downtown buildings revealed that only 11 of 49 structures on Main Street had fire sprinklers.

II. Process Evaluation – Implementation

Mesa received \$9.6 million from HUD to operate the original NSP program. Several homes receiving fire sprinkler installations were being restored to their original use following the guidelines of the Arizona State Historic Preservation Office. The City of Mesa and SHPO collaborated on a Programmatic Agreement whereby the city was allowed to automatically include all historic requirements in work write-ups, without having to submit them first to SHPO. This saved an estimated 4 to 6 weeks in delays in seeking State approvals, which might have been an impediment to adding fire sprinklers.

SCAP was seeded with \$100,000 from its CDBG allocation. To be eligible, applicants must be located within the downtown Pedestrian Overlay Area, with preference for businesses on Main Street. SCAP provides matching grants up to 50 percent of the actual costs of installing fire sprinklers, to a maximum of \$20,000 per project. To enable sprinkler installations downtown, the city installed a new 12-inch ductile iron pipe to meet water needs downtown with funding from utility revenue.

Through stakeholder meetings and surveys Mesa learned that it was difficult to comply with federal grant requirements. In an effort to overcome these obstacles, city staff worked closely with applicants to provide guidance, and a HUD consultant was brought on to develop a streamlined application and reporting process.

III. Impact Evaluation – Short Term Results

To date, the Mesa has installed fire sprinklers in 32 single-family homes and 7 multi-family properties with 27 affordable rental units. A post-installation review found that fire sprinklers installations cost less than \$5,000 in each single-family home, averaging between \$1.25 to 1.50 per square foot.

NSP fire sprinklers provided not only a safe living environment for residents, but much-needed jobs in the construction industry. Data collected from contractors indicates that there was an estimated 78 new hires for construction overall for NSP1.

The first two SCAP projects were completed in large public assemblies. Installation costs were \$25,000 and 28,000, respectively. Out of pocket costs to business were \$5,000 to 8,000. Combined, these businesses are expected to result in the creation of five full-time and 12 part-time jobs, as well as 12-15 hourly positions.

IV. Outcome Evaluation – Long Term Results

Success of fire protection programs is typically measured in terms of documentation that supports long-term reduction of economic losses. While these are important measures for Mesa's fire sprinkler retrofit programs, the MFD also believe fire protection can contribute positively to the financial health of the city.

Long-term goals will be measured in terms of realizing the city's economic development and downtown revitalization objectives. These will include the number of jobs created and maintained, and sales tax revenue generated for the city. The results of the impact evaluation demonstrate great promise for long-term success.

Recommendations for others:

Think of grant programs where sprinklers can be an integral part of the project. Mesa's NSP and SCAP sprinkler initiatives demonstrate innovative ways to use federal grant programs not specifically intended for the fire service to fund fire and life safety improvements. Other HUD affordable housing grants, such as the HOME Investment Partnership Program, offer similar possibilities.

Be an advocate for your constituencies. Simplify the federal grant process as much as possible by creating a simplified, standard Agreement; adding lots of checklists and examples; holding meetings and presentations for potential applicants, and meeting one-on-one when requested.