

Solar grant allows Summit Advocates to reallocate utility funds to legal assistance

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New solar panels installed at the Summit Advocates for Victims of Assault offices and shelter should provide the organization with more financial flexibility.

Photo from Claudia King

A recent grant awarded to Summit Advocates for Victims of Assault allowed the organization to install new solar panels on its facilities and will provide the group with more financial flexibility moving forward to better support victims of domestic violence and sexual assault in the community.

“We spend about \$4,000 a year on our energy bill because we’ve got the offices here, the shelter which is now 14 beds, as well as the transitional housing unit on-site,” said Lesley Mumford, executive director of Summit Advocates. “Our energy bill in the winter months can be pretty steep. And if we were to eliminate that expense or get close to that net-zero, we’re looking at putting 20% of our utility budget back into our general fund. Every dollar that we direct from our utility bill is a dollar we can direct toward people.”

Summit Advocates is a local organization that provides advocacy for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault through support groups, financial help with basic needs, transitional housing, legal assistance, safe sheltering and more.

Mumford said she’s been working to make the group’s facilities more energy efficient to reduce utility costs since she took over the role in July 2018. A number of improvements already had been made thanks to Northwest Colorado Council of Governments, which came in as part of its [Weatherization Assistance Program](#) to perform an energy audit, provide insulation and install new lighting. But the group decided more could be done to support the Summit nonprofit.

“They had a huge electric bill every month, so we wanted to do more,” said Doug Jones, director of the council’s energy program. “So we contacted the Colorado Energy Office, and we told them of this great project and proposed to put a nice solar array on their roof to help them with their monthly electric bill.”

The energy office supplied funding for the project, which ultimately included a 9.76 kilowatt system valued at more than \$22,000, according to Jones. Jones also lauded Active Energies Solar out of Vail, which he said offered an “unheard of” price to be a part of the project.

“It’s a wonderful story about entities coming together to help this great program in Advocates for Victims of Assault,” Jones said.

Mumford said Summit Advocates’ operating budget is slim and doesn’t allow for frills. The savings from energy costs will make an immediate impact and likely will go toward supporting the group’s legal assistance program, which helps clients pay for expenses related to divorce proceedings, protection orders and more. Mumford noted that it is one of the organization’s highest-demand programs but said there’s very little grant funding available for that type of work.

While the money will make a difference now, Mumford emphasized that the solar installations also would help provide financial stability for the organization into the future.

“This is something that will be on-site for this organization for many years to come,” Mumford said. “Long after I’m here, the following staff members won’t have to worry about how they’re going to fund that utility bill every year. This is a legacy project. It changes the way that we look at our general operating budget with a very significant expense line. I’m just thrilled to see this come together. It allows us to be more flexible with the money we have, be more efficient.”

Coping with COVID-19

Despite some changes at the height of the pandemic, Summit Advocates continues to offer its services to community members. While there was an initial surge in demand as some residents were forced to stay home in unsafe situations, things have started to plateau.

“It’s leveled off, but it hasn’t really declined at this point,” said Claudia King, development director for Summit Advocates. “We’re still seeing a dramatic need.”

King noted that capacity at the organization’s shelter continues to be limited given ongoing public health restrictions. The shelter has 14 beds but only five bedrooms, meaning only five households are able to use the shelter at once. King noted that there are community partners helping to provide hotel rooms when extra space is needed.

“We’re definitely still seeing that increased need,” King said. “It’s great that we’re here; it’s great that people are still reaching out to us. We finished up last year serving the equivalent of about one in 60 Summit County residents. When you think about it in that manner, it’s a pretty staggering number.”

The Northwest Colorado Council of Governments also has stepped up operations in light of the pandemic. The council provides free energy audits and energy-saving upgrades to low-income households across 13 counties in northwest Colorado, including Summit.

“We help them save energy and live in a safe home,” Jones said. “Right now, if you have been impacted by the pandemic, it only takes one month of low income to qualify for our program.”

For more information on the Weatherization Assistance Program, call 800-332-3669. Community members in need can contact the Summit Advocates 24/7 crisis line at 970-668-3906. Summit Advocates also can be reached at info@summitadvocates.org or SummitAdvocates.org.

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