



Vermont Council on Rural Development

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[Home](#) > Dan Hoxworth: Fighting poverty and climate change through transportation efficiency

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## Dan Hoxworth: Fighting poverty and climate change through transportation efficiency

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As seen in the [vtdigger.org](https://vtdigger.org): <https://vtdigger.org/2017/04/18/dan-hoxworth-fighting-poverty-climate-ch...> [1]

*Editor's note: This commentary is by Dan Hoxworth, the executive director of Capstone Community Action and a member of the Vermont Climate Economy Action Team.*

Over the past three decades, Vermont has made a major commitment towards reducing the energy burden on low-income households through the Weatherization Assistance Program and the incentives and tools provided through Efficiency Vermont and Burlington Electric Department. Now it is time to apply this same focus on reducing the energy and financial burden of transportation on economically vulnerable Vermonters. Making transportation more efficient is a way to put more money in the pockets of Vermonters who need it most.

The report, "Mapping Total Energy Burden in Vermont" recently issued by Efficiency Vermont lays bare an unfortunate truth about Vermont: While we lead the nation in energy innovation, we're doing no better than the rest of the country in helping low-income households lighten their disproportionate energy burden. Residents of our poorest communities are paying more than a quarter of their total income on energy, while residents in our richest communities are paying less than 5 percent. We can do better.

The study's conclusions are sobering, but not surprising: low-income Vermonters are spending a much higher percentage of their incomes on energy for transportation than middle- and upper-class Vermonters. Transportation energy expenses alone may account for over 25 percent of low-income household expenses. Coupled with heating and electric costs, many Vermonters are living in energy poverty. In contrast, affluent households and communities, often with higher energy demands, may be spending as little as 5 percent of their income on energy.

In addition, these figures do not capture the total cost of transportation to economically vulnerable Vermonters. When you add in the cost and maintenance of a vehicle, (few alternative transportation options exist in our rural state), total transportation costs nearly exceed housing costs and account for more than a third of income in some Vermont communities

So what can we do about this inequality?

The rural poor are highly reliant on cars to get to and from work, and yet there are few services to support transportation efficiency in the form of transit, carpool services or electric vehicles, which are cheaper to operate than gas-powered engines.

First, Vermont needs to do a better job of accounting for transportation costs when considering assistance to low-income families. The rural poor are highly reliant on cars to get to and from work, and yet there are few services to support transportation efficiency in the form of transit, carpool services or electric vehicles, which are cheaper to operate than gas-powered engines. The state's receipt of \$4.2 million in VW settlement funds could be used, for example, to pilot efforts to achieve transportation efficiency for low-income Vermonters. The larger \$17.8 million settlement that Vermont received through a federally managed environmental trust fund could also be used by the state to experiment with ways to improve the efficiency and reduce carbon dependence in the state's transportation fleet.

Second, we need to take the same approach with transportation as the state has done with energy efficiency in residences and businesses. The Legislature needs to invest in reducing the energy burden of transportation on low-income Vermonters. In addition, Vermont now must have a state-appointed entity to drive the effort to create a more efficient transportation system in Vermont to reduce costs and carbon emissions.

Third, Vermont should focus on the hot spots ? locations in the state that use disproportionate amounts of energy. Specifically, there are neighborhoods in St. Albans, Barre and Rutland where transportation energy burdens are well above the state average. We can better target and integrate the resources from the Vermont Department of Transportation, the Reach Up program, Efficiency Vermont, utilities and others to serve these areas.

Now is the time for innovation, to extend energy efficiency services to transportation, to bring more partners to the table, and to focus efforts on Vermonters most in need. By making our state more affordable through focusing on the climate economy and specifically on our transportation system we can help our most vulnerable populations and reduce inequality.

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[1] <https://vtdigger.org/2017/04/18/dan-hoxworth-fighting-poverty-climate-change-transportation-efficiency/>