HARRISBURG PA – Publicly owned affordable housing facilities in Pennsylvania, like those available in Pottstown and Royersford, could reap huge benefits from the installation of or upgrades to energy-efficient devices and hardware, according to studies released last month (May 2015) by a coalition of agencies that include the National Housing Trust and the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Affordable Housing Benefits from Energy Efficiency Housing Trust Executive Director Michael Bodaken says basic measures such as the use of compact fluorescent bulbs, or installation of features like low-flow faucets, multiple-pane windows and better insulation would yield big results in existing affordable apartments. In Pennsylvania alone, he claims, the return on such investments is more than three times the cost.

Tripling the worth of an investment “in something that actually helps make people more energy-efficient, healthier and more comfortable seems like a good thing to consider,” says Bodaken. Moreover, Bodaken claims, agencies involved in the coalition estimate Pennsylvania is among eight states positioned to earn $21 billion in energy savings with the right property upgrades during the next 20 years.

In western Montgomery County, affordable housing takes many forms. Among the most recognizable are its publicly owned facilities, which include:

- 179 town homes in Bright Hope Community, 467 W. King St., Pottstown;
- 80 apartments in the Robert P. Smith Towers, 501 E. High St., Pottstown;
- 102 apartments in Sidney Pollock House, 450 E. High St., Pottstown; and
- 85 apartments at Golden Age Manor, 400 Walnut St., Royersford.

The county Housing Authority has indicated it foresees the value for investments like those for which the coalition is calling. During 2014 it announced initiatives to spend about $29 million over several years on upgrades to and expansion of facilities it owns in Upper Dublin and Abington townships.

Coalition studies found families in Pennsylvania’s affordable-housing apartments could cut 13 percent from their natural gas consumption and even more from their electricity use. Deron Lovaas, with the resources defense council, touts this as big low-hanging fruit that he believes means savings for utilities and apartment owners alike. With better information, incentives and financing, Lovaas says, utilities and property owners in other states already see lower energy use and better bottom lines. “If owners and managers have a pathway to energy-efficiency programs and a pathway to financing, they’ll take advantage of that,” says Lovaas. “We’ll see savings accrue to tenants, owners and managers alike.”

For owners of affordable housing, such as the housing trust, Bodaken says upgrades mean keeping units on the market longer and keeping rents down. For utilities they mean fewer unpaid bills and lower collection costs. He says improvements represent “literally billions of dollars of energy-efficiency potential. We could reduce annual electric usage just in Pennsylvania by 25 percent,” he speculates.