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## **Group subsidizes solar: Nonprofit GRID helps low-income homeowners save on power bills**

Written by Banks Albach, Palo Alto Daily News, Calif.  
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Aug. 20--With one flick of a switch, East Palo Alto resident Annie Fuller started saving money Sunday.

The 12 solar panels on her roof had been soaking up sunlight for less than 20 minutes when her PG&E meter started to roll backward -- meaning she was generating more energy than she was using.

"I'm really anxious to see the difference," said Fuller, watching her meter.

Fifteen volunteers from San Francisco-based GRID Alternatives, a nonprofit that helps low-income homeowners install solar systems, worked on Fuller's roof Sunday to attach the ray-catching panels.

If Fuller were to bear the cost alone, the 1.7-kilowatt system would run nearly \$11,000. But with \$4,000 from GRID and a \$6,700 loan with 3 percent interest from San Mateo County, Fuller is on her way to a greener future. The state will eventually pay back the \$4,000 to GRID as a rebate. The nonprofit's \$600,000 annual budget relies on donations made by public and private parties, program director Tim Sears said.

Sears said that Fuller will save about \$49 per month on her PG&E bill.

But Fuller's decision to apply for the program wasn't motivated just by the prospect of saving money. A desire to make the world a better place also inspired her, she said.

"If people in East Palo Alto only knew how easy it is," she said, referring to the 2-month-long process from start to finish.

The nonprofit has plans for about 70 installations around the Bay Area this year, said project manager Bruce Leininger, one of GRID's eight full-time employees. That's up from the two the nonprofit had in 2004, its first year in operation.

Installing a solar system takes about two days. Leininger said he hooked up the wiring and

power inverters Friday. The team finished up at about 2 p.m. Sunday.

The work attracts a variety of volunteers, such as 28-year-old Cindi Choi, who works for an electric car conversion start-up, and 66-year-old Swamy Thangamuthu, a retired electrical engineer.

"This is my passion," said Thangamuthu as he stood on Fuller's roof, helping tighten down the last panel.

Volunteers sometimes wait weeks to join a team and are required to go through an hour of training. Fuller's roof wasn't too dangerous to walk on, but some houses in the past required workers to use safety harnesses, said Tracey Troxler, a volunteer on her ninth job.

"The first time they put me on the roof, I was sold," Troxler said. "This makes solar accessible."

The nonprofit is hoping to help more East Palo Alto residents go solar. Outreach coordinator Utuma Belfrey said she has contacted the city and hopes to present GRID's ambitions to the city council soon.

For more information on GRID Alternatives visit [www.gridalternatives.org](http://www.gridalternatives.org), or call 415-839-8437.

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