

CONSUMER FEDERATION OF AMERICA'S RADON FIX-IT PROGRAM:
A REPORT ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF
TENDER LOVING CARE (TLC) IN ENCOURAGING HIGH TESTERS
TO MITIGATE THEIR HOMES AND REDUCE RADON LEVELS

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ABSTRACT

The Consumer Federation of America's (CFA) Radon Fix-It Program, begun in January, 1994, is designed to provide consumers who receive radon test results of 4 pCi/L or higher with information and encouragement to fix their homes. Consumers who call the toll-free Radon Fix-It Line speak to operators who offer non-technical information and assistance about radon and options for fixing homes. Over 6300 individuals contacted the program in its first 18 months. The rate of contact has been steadily increasing. The majority of callers are in the pre-mitigation phase at the time of their first contact. The Program's procedure is to initiate at least one callback to all callers. 1,888 first callbacks were completed. More than half of those contacted (984 or 52%) were someplace along the road toward mitigation, or had actually completed mitigation.

INTRODUCTION

Consumer Federation of America (CFA) began the Radon Fix-It Program in January, 1994. This Program is designed to provide consumers who receive radon test results of 4 pCi/L or higher with information and encouragement to fix their homes.

As part of this Program, participating radon testing companies include a CFA postcard in their test results mailings to clients with radon test results of 4 pCi/L or higher. This postcard encourages high testers to either write or call CFA's Radon Fix-It Program. To date, about 50 testing companies participate in the Program. CFA's goal is to have all radon companies participate in the Program.

Consumers who return the postcard to the Radon Fix-It Program are sent, free of charge, EPA's "Consumer Guide to Radon Reduction" and/or a list of EPA-approved Radon Reduction Contractors. They also receive the phone number of their State Radon Office.

Consumers who call the toll-free Radon Fix-It Line speak to operators who offer non-technical information and assistance about radon and options for fixing homes. Consumers are encouraged to fix their homes. A variety of publications are made available free of charge. Callers with region-specific or technical questions are referred to their State Radon Offices.

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As part of the effort to be a continuing source of encouragement and assistance, Fix-It Line operators make up to two follow-up calls to consumers who have contacted the Program. During the first callback, operators ask consumers about the progress they have made towards fixing their home. Operators talk with consumers about their individual situations and respond to requests for further assistance. Callers are asked whether they would like to receive a second follow-up call. All those who say "yes" receive a second call at an appropriate time. The follow-up calls help fulfill the Program's mission of de-mystifying the mitigation process and encouraging consumers to act.

RESULTS

Over 6300 individuals contacted the program in its first 18 months of operation. The rate of contact has been steadily increasing, as shown in Table 1. Between January and June, 1995, the monthly average contacts was 443, a significantly higher contact rate than for the comparable period in 1994 which averaged 309 contacts per month. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that the number of cooperating laboratories has been steadily increasing, from an original group of about 15 to the current 50. Table 2 indicates the distribution of these contacts by state. Table 3 shows the radon levels reported by our clients.

In addition, as shown in Table 1, an increasing number of initial contacts to the Fix-It Program are by telephone. When the program began, telephone contact lagged behind contacts via the mail. However, since January, 1995, 1,684 (63%) of the 2,661 initial contacts have been via telephone. This is probably due to the fact that a number of testing companies include the CFA Fix-It Program toll-free number in the body of their test results letter (as recommended by EPA), thereby further encouraging telephone contact.

Table 4 indicates the reasons callers contacted the Fix-It Line. The majority of callers are in the pre-mitigation phase at the time of their initial contact with the line.

Because the purpose is to encourage high testers to go on and mitigate their radon problem, the Fix-It Program procedure is to initiate at least one callback to all individuals who contact the Program. Callbacks are attempted no sooner than three months after the initial contact to give the consumer time to consider his or her situation, decide what to do, and initiate action. Callbacks are not attempted to individuals who initially contacted the program by telephone, and indicated they were uninterested in further CFA-initiated contacts. These were individuals who asked not to be called again, or who indicated they had already decided not to proceed with further testing or mitigation. Efforts to complete a CFA first callback are made in every case where an individual has accessed the program by mail, and provided a telephone number. Up to three attempts are made to make contact.

As shown in Table 5, 1,888 first callbacks have been completed. More than half of those contacted (984, or 52%) were someplace along the road toward mitigation, or had actually completed mitigation. Three hundred seventy-four (20% of the total) were about to, or had commenced a second verification test; 207 (11%) were planning or at least considering mitigation. Four hundred three (21%) reported that they had completed mitigation. Of those who had completed mitigations, 175 (43%) had hired a mitigator; 212 (53%) had done the work themselves.

The Fix-It Program protocol calls for a second callback to all those persons who (a) have not completed mitigation, but are in the process of performing a second test, or are planning for a mitigation, and (b) agree to a second callback at an appropriate time to discuss their experiences or to seek further assistance. Most second callbacks have not yet taken place, since they are usually scheduled for a point in time when long term testing has been completed. To date, as seen in Table 5, 138 households have been reached for a second callback.

The results are interesting. Seventy-two (52%) reported that no further action was being taken, either because the high level was not confirmed by a second test, or because they had lost interest. The other 66 (48%)

remain on the road to mitigation. Of the total number of consumers reached in a second callback, 27 (20%) were still involved with confirmation testing; 13 (9%) had moved on to the point of planning mitigation; and 26 (19%) had completed mitigation. Of these, 10 (38%) had hired a mitigator; 14 (54%) had done the work themselves.

Most individuals who contact the Fix-It Program do so immediately after receiving test results from a testing company -- very often a short term test. Thus, it was to be expected that many would choose to take the time to have a second long term test conducted to verify the high reading from the initial test.

In order to determine how persons who tested a year or so earlier would respond to the Fix-It Program, arrangements were made with a large testing company for a special mailing to be sent to a sample of individuals who had tested above 10 pCi/L in 1993. Each individual was informed about the Radon Fix-It Program and encouraged to call the toll-free number. The actions of this group were compared with the actions of those who contact this program immediately upon receiving their test results.

As a result of this special mailing, 288 individuals contacted the Fix-It Line. Table 2 shows the geographical distribution of this sample in the last column. Their actions are described in Table 5. A significantly smaller number of these individuals (86, 30%) were on the road to mitigation than in the mainstream group.

DISCUSSION

In its first 18 months, the Fix-It Program has shown encouraging results. More than half the individuals who have been in touch with this program have stayed on the road toward mitigation. If most of them continue on that road and go on to mitigate, then they will do better as a group than the population at large is estimated to have done. In a March, 1993 study conducted by the Conference of Radiation Control Program Directors (CRCPD), sponsored by EPA's Office of Radiation and Indoor Air, it was estimated that nationwide only 23% of those who tested above 4 pCi/L went on to mitigate.

It will be at least another year (after we complete our second callbacks for 1994 testers) before we know how many of the 51% of our initial contacts who now are still on the road to mitigation will go all the way and get the mitigation accomplished, if their high readings are verified by a second test.

When we established the program, we asked ourselves to what extent can tender loving care replace legislative mandates or financial incentives as a stimulant to mitigate. To date, the answer seems to be: It can help.

While it is too early to know with certainty the number of mitigations stimulated or encouraged by the Radon Fix-It Program, it is apparent that the public is appreciative of a credible, private sector, non-commercial program that is user friendly, has a good system of referrals, and tries to de-mystify radon mitigation. The overwhelming majority of individuals who contact the Fix-It Line are appreciative of the program. This is what we had hoped for, since there are no governmental requirements that force people to mitigate, or assist them financially if they do mitigate. "If the problem is so bad, why doesn't the government make people mitigate, or at least encourage them to mitigate with some sort of financial incentive or assistance?" That is a theme we've heard on many occasions.

Operating a non-technical program such as CFA's Radon Fix-It Program brings with it many challenges. To assure that the lay operators give correct, consistent answers, we prepared a set of protocols and trained the operators to keep their responses in line with established EPA policy and guidelines. On a few occasions, test callers reported that they had received incorrect answers or answers that were not consistent with EPA policy. That has led us to add additional training units, and to upgrade monitoring of the telephone calls. The American Association of Radon Scientists and Technologists (AARST) has been particularly helpful with training the operators and monitoring the Program's operations.

FUTURE

Beginning in the fall of 1995, CFA plans to expand access to the Radon Fix-It Program. In the past, access has been primarily by word-of-mouth and by information sent to high testers by the 50 cooperating testing laboratories. While we intend to make every effort to increase the number of participating testing companies, we also plan to promote the program directly with the real estate industry -- agents, brokers, and home inspectors. Until now the program has not been promoted aggressively among buyers and sellers who are engaged in a current real estate transaction. We will be interested to see how, if at all, the results differ.

We also plan to enhance the services available to the public from the Fix-It Line operators. For example, we plan to work with AARST to see if we can develop a viable program for referring technical questions to qualified mitigators, on a pro-bono basis, to supplement our existing policy of referring all technical inquiries to State Radon Offices. Another enhancement will provide the capability to fax to the caller a list of mitigators within 24 hours.

TABLE 1**RADON FIX IT PROGRAM
INITIAL CONTACTS**

	Total Response	Phone Calls	Postcards
1994			
January	220	84	136
February	428	132	296
March	375	95	280
April	327	123	204
May	270	95	175
June	237	80	157
July	169	63	106
August	198	72	126
September	195	99	96
October	311	153	158
November	440	232	208
December	471	217	254
1995			
January	415	228	187
February	379	218	161
March	482	348	134
April	547	338	209
May	422	307	115
June	416	245	171
Total	6302	3129	3173
Percentage of Total	100%	50%	50%

TABLE 2

RADON FIX-IT PROGRAM
Responses by State

STATE	INITIAL CONTACTS	FIRST CALLBACKS	SECOND CALLBACKS	SPECIAL MAILING
Alabama	29	14		1
Alaska	7	1		
Arizona	5			
Arkansas	4			
British Columbia	1			
California	60	22	1	
Colorado	294	84	10	10
Connecticut	185	42	6	9
Delaware	20	7		
District of Columbia	6	1	1	
Florida	62	11	1	5
Georgia	47	14	1	
Idaho	80	31		6
Illinois	337	93	3	6
Indiana	112	25	2	4
Iowa	172	62	6	6
Kansas	92	23	1	5
Kentucky	362	110	7	26
Louisiana	4			
Maine	52	11		2
Maryland	169	37	6	5
Massachusetts	158	36	4	4
Michigan	212	34	1	6
Minnesota	439	125	5	
Mississippi	2			
Missouri	38	8		1
Montana	229	89	9	7
Nebraska	108	24	1	11
New Hampshire	174	47	4	25
New Jersey	113	28	1	3
New Mexico	29	8		
New York	198	29	1	6
Nevada	28	10	2	1
North Carolina	68	24	4	3
North Dakota	28	5		3
Ohio	305	75	6	19
Oklahoma	7	1		
Oregon	66	22	2	1
Pennsylvania	476	111	9	46
Rhode Island	29	7		
South Carolina	27	4		
South Dakota	101	30		1
Tennessee	220	67	6	12
Texas	15	3	1	
Utah	68	22	2	
Vermont	56	20	2	1
Virginia	198	55	3	13
Washington	322	157	16	17
West Virginia	43	14		3
Wisconsin	307	82	7	10
Wyoming	84	41	2	10
Unspecified	54	122	5	2
Total	6302	1888	138	290

TABLE 3
REPORTED TEST RESULTS

Below 4 pCi/L	177
Between 4.0 pCi/L and 9.9 pCi/L	3,657
Between 10.0 pCi/L and 19.9 pCi/L	1,474
Between 20 pCi/L and 99.9 pCi/L	640
Over 100 pCi/L	42
Do not know	305
Would not tell	7
 Total	 6,302

TABLE 4
RADON FIX-IT LINE
REASON FOR CALLING

Reason for Calling	Total
General Inquiry	2,023
Risk Information	816
Mitigation Information	1,414
How to Select a Mitigator	521
Cost of Mitigation	282
"Do-it-yourself" Advice	386
Legal Questions	172
Information on Test Validity/Need to Retest	1,317
Consumer Complaints about Contractors	59
Post-mitigation Test	47
Buying Home	307
Selling Home	133
Other	245

TABLE 5**ANALYSIS OF ACTION TAKEN****First Callbacks**

	Total	Percentage
Households Reached	1,888	
Have Taken No Action	904	48%
Retesting	374	20%
Considering Mitigation	207	11%
Mitigation Completed	403	21%
Self Mitigation	212	53%
Professional Mitigation	175	43%
Unknown	16	4%

Second Callbacks

	Total	Percentage
Households Reached	138	
Have Taken No Action	72	52%
Retesting	27	20%
Considering Mitigation	13	9%
Mitigation Completed	26	19%
Self Mitigation	14	54%
Professional Mitigation	10	38%
Unknown	2	8%

Special Mailing

	Total	Percentage
Households Reached	290	
Have Taken No Action	204	70%
Retesting	20	7%
Considering Mitigation	17	6%
Mitigation Completed	49	17%