

# Conference Christens Home Performance Industry

The Affordable Comfort West conference came to California for the second time on October 11–13, 1995. Participants represented heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) and other contractors; consulting firms; utilities; and nonprofit organizations. Presenters spoke about the responsibility to understand the interactions among energy, safety, and comfort in a home, and described many successful contractors who are expanding their services and taking a comprehensive view of how the house functions as a system. This approach has come to be known as home performance, and we are sure to hear more about it.

The day before regular sessions began, seasoned trainers and field practitioners offered hands-on short courses, both in the field and in the classroom. They gave participants practical experience with energy- and safety-related topics: inspecting gas heating systems; measuring heat pump performance and duct leakage; sizing, selecting, and air-balancing HVAC systems; understanding indoor air quality and mechanical ventilation; determining house boundaries with pressure diagnostics; and educating customers.

A construction site tour (led by Gary Klein of the California Energy Commission, Gary Nelson of the Energy Conservatory, and Lance Pustin, a weatherization field trainer from Minneapolis) gave participants a look at where problems occur in tract homes and showed them how to diagnose these problems with equipment such as the blower door, infrared scanner, pressure pan, Duct Blaster, flow hood, and digital pressure gauge. The group performed diagnostic tests on a completed new home and then visited a house being constructed to the same plan to see what it looked like behind the gypsum board. In a particularly enlightening demonstration, the trainers sealed off the registers and blew smoke into the duct system, which was entirely visible at the second site.

The participants (and the duct installation crew, who were working nearby) saw the smoke pour out of leaky connections, plenums, and even the air handler.

At the opening plenary, Affordable Comfort Incorporated's president, Gregory Thomas, dropped the big news: the birth of the Affordable Comfort Housing Performance Association. The goal of this new organization is to create a long-term, consumer-driven market for high-quality home performance ser-



Especially popular at this year's Affordable Comfort West conference, hands-on "short courses" both in the field and in classrooms offered participants a variety of learning opportunities.

vices. Thomas defines these as services that increase the comfort, health and safety, efficiency, and durability of housing by treating the house as a whole system. The main focus of the organization will be to educate the general public and policymakers on housing performance issues and to provide housing performance contractors with marketing information and support.

Dominic Guarino, editor-in-chief of *Contracting Business* magazine, also announced the formation of a new nonprofit organization, the National Comfort Foundation, which will focus on teaching homeowners; builders; and HVAC contractors, distributors, and manufacturers what to look for in an HVAC system. Guarino hopes to create a willingness among customers to pay for quality because they understand what's involved, and to provide contractors with the resources they need to

compete on quality instead of price.

The conference continued at a furious pace for the next two days, with 54 workshops in nine tracks. Presenters covered topics ranging from the technical aspects of energy conservation (like sizing cooling systems, advances in duct-sealing techniques, and designing lighting systems) to issues of liability, customer education, sales, and program financing.

An evening panel provided a lively discussion of carbon monoxide issues. While panelists differed sharply on the extent to which CO poses a health problem, by the end all parties agreed on a few points. The main unresolved issues include what level of carbon monoxide is dangerous; over what length of time a flue gas reversal (backdraft) is unacceptable; what method should be used to measure CO from kitchen ranges; and under what operating condition houses should be tested for backdrafting potential (for instance, the worst-case condition or a condition that is likely to occur under normal operation of the house). The panel reached a consensus that standard testing protocols need to be developed and that, in the meantime, testing should be done in a

consistent manner for each house in a given program.

One of the goals of Affordable Comfort is to "expand the traditional boundaries of the various building trades, in order to create a housing industry capable of providing quality improvements to whole house systems." Although each participant got something different out of the conference, it certainly served to expand boundaries and expose attendees to new ways of looking at house performance.

We can expect an even larger contingent of participants and trainers at the continental Affordable Comfort conference, to be held March 17–22 in Chicago. For more information about the upcoming conference, contact Helen Perrine at ACI. Tel: (412) 299-1136; Fax: (412) 299-1137.

—Jeanne Byrne