



Best Practices for Equitable Stakeholder Engagement in State Solar Programs

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As states plan and implement solar programs for communities, equitable stakeholder engagement is crucial to truly understanding and meeting communities' needs. This document seeks to help state government officials create and/or expand their processes for equitably engaging with communities when developing and deploying solar programs.

A state's stakeholder engagement process will depend upon existing levels of engagement with communities of interest, levels of community interest, available resources and capacity, and other factors. No two approaches to engagement will be identical.

It can, of course, be difficult to incorporate and involve a range of voices at the decision-making table. This document is intended as a *high-level overview* for states to begin their engagement processes or check in on their established processes to create a more equitable program foundation. This is critical, especially as states engage residents and community members in marginalized groups whose voices are often unheard or unconsidered.

The best practices highlighted below are not intended to establish what engagement must look like in every situation, nor do they attempt to outline every possible facet of a robust stakeholder engagement initiative in the context of state solar programs. Rather, these practices are intended to provide a base framework to spark internal discussion as you develop your plan for equitable solar stakeholder engagement.



ABOUT THIS PAPER

This paper, prepared by the Clean Energy States Alliance (CESA), presents recommendations to help state energy agencies design and implement equitable stakeholder engagement strategies for their solar programs. It was produced for the Solar with Justice project. To learn more about that project, see the CESA website at: www.cesa.org/projects/solar-with-justice.

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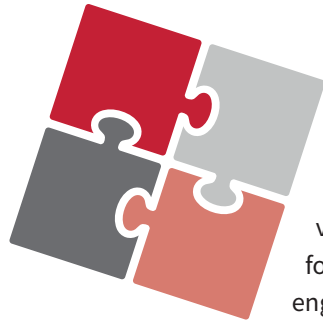
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Setting the Groundwork for Community Outreach



Setting the groundwork for community outreach is more likely to create a successful solar program by: identifying the stakeholders who will benefit from the program and what their specific needs are; understanding how historical harms and lack of engagement by government programs have affected communities' trust and participation; and ensuring the engagement uplifts voices to increase participation and community benefits moving forward. The following are suggested actions to take to set the groundwork for stakeholder engagement.

1. Identify which specific impacted communities you need to engage.

- It is important during this initial step to define who should be included in the particular solar program's definition of a "stakeholder." The communities, organizations, individuals, community leaders, etc., that are meant to be represented by the term "stakeholder" will vary based on the program.
- Educate yourself and your agency on the unique needs and aspirations of those communities. Doing so provides an opportunity to build cultural competency regarding the engaged community.

2. Outline prior engagement efforts.

- Track down information and input provided by the community during past engagement efforts by your state agency or by other agencies in your state on issues related to solar development.
 - Some state agencies may have already developed solutions based on community feedback that they would be willing to share with their colleagues at other agencies. Ask agencies if there was a stakeholder engagement strategy that didn't work out and which solutions weren't successful to avoid making the same errors. In the same vein, consider asking what worked and what the agency would have changed about their approach.
- Avoid asking stakeholders the same questions they have already answered during prior engagements with your agency or other agencies in your state.
 - Employing data and feedback from previous engagement efforts helps avoid engagement fatigue and burnout from frontline community representatives who are repeatedly sought out by different government departments or agencies.¹ It also helps communities feel that their previous participation was valued.

3. Coordinate internally within your agency and with other state agencies to determine where agencies are planning to or already engaging with stakeholders.

- Your agency can then collaborate to schedule one or a few meetings, rather than many, so community members will have more capacity to participate and express their needs.
- State agencies that are large and/or serve large communities should take care during this stage not to organize so few meetings that the meetings become too large in scope or number of participants, as this can drown out community voices.

1 "Residential Retrofits for Energy Equity Playbook," R2E2, Updated May 23, 2024, pp. 18, <https://r2e2playbook.org>.

Establish a Compensation Plan



Asking individual community members, community leaders, and other stakeholders to contribute to developing a solar program usually requires that they contribute more of their time and resources outside of their regular obligations. Many community organizations, leaders, and individuals, especially in marginalized communities, are already strapped for time and resources, and contributing to an additional program will undoubtedly add to these burdens. Consider the following:

- 1. Compensate community members and representatives for their expertise and participation starting from the moment of initial engagement.** Financial assistance can ease the burden of time and costs.
- 2. Compensating community representatives respects individuals' and organizations' time and efforts.** It also builds trust and rapport, and it sustains engagement with solar programs. This is particularly true for climate-burdened communities that have been historically left behind and have developed mistrust in governmental agencies.
- 3. Compensation yields better results.** More robust effort and participation tends to follow from people being paid for their time, as a “willingness” to participate tends to result when compensation is offered.
- 4. Designate existing funds or procure new funds** toward compensating communities.
- 5. In addition to paying stipends, consider other types of non-monetary forms of compensation and support to relieve community burden and increase participation.** Setting up this support and executing it well requires time and advance planning, and that should be allowed for in the compensation plan. Non-monetary compensation can include the following:
 - Combining meetings with other agencies seeking community input (for clean energy-related work or otherwise)
 - Paying for travel and childcare (or providing convenient childcare)
 - Providing refreshments and meals during meetings that take place during mealtimes
 - People should be able to participate outside of the 9am-5pm work hours to make participation easier.
 - Providing translation and interpretation services²

2 *Id.*

Establish an Advisory Committee to Create a Stakeholder Engagement Plan



Building an advisory committee that includes community members to start/continue initial outreach conversations can help create a space for collaborative brainstorming and sharing experiences. Several recommendations for establishing an effective advisory committee are provided below.

- 1. The advisory committee** should meet on an ongoing basis to develop and review the execution of a Stakeholder Engagement Plan for your solar program (see more below on such a Plan).
 - Even if staff independently discover areas of need without community assistance, community representatives should be consulted to clarify needs and challenges. Including this step gives state staff deploying their solar program *social license to operate*.³
- 2. Designate existing funds or procure new funds** to compensate the committee members from the community for their time and for future stakeholder engagement activities.
 - Ensure the plan includes the processes to be followed to compensate community members for their time and efforts (see section above for more guidance on compensation).
- 3. Leverage existing relationships** with community partners and organizations to ensure diverse perspectives are represented.
- 4. Ensure the committee includes people that community members can trust**, e.g., pastors, social workers, affordable housing managers, etc.⁴
- 5. Consider whether there is need for a compensated facilitator** who has deep ties with the community to provide support with difficult conversations or strained community relationships.
 - The *State Funding Readiness Project* (SRP) is a resource for states in the context of stakeholder engagement, providing states with stakeholder mapping, engagement processes, and tracking how input is used.

3 “Social license to operate” is defined as “the informal ‘license’ granted to an organization by various stakeholders who may be affected by the company’s activities.” See: “Ethics Explainer: Social License to Operate,” *Ethics Explainer*, January 23, 2018, <https://ethics.org.au/ethics-explainer-social-license-to-operate>. By bringing the community into your state’s solar program early and often, your state builds better trust and backing of the community as the program progresses.

4 Matt Ohloff, “Implementing Washington, DC’s Solar for All Program,” *Clean Energy States Alliance*, June 2024, pp. 10, <https://www.cesa.org/wp-content/uploads/Implementing-Washington-DCs-Solar-for-All-Program.pdf>.

An Advisory Committee Example for Stakeholder Engagement

The Illinois Solar for All (ILSFA) Advisory Committee, run by the Illinois Power Agency (IPA) and Elevate (IPA's ILSFA program administrator),⁵ implemented the following activities to increase public awareness of the Solar for All program, increase program participation, and foster conversations between stakeholders and agencies. The ILSFA program's mission is to “make solar energy more affordable for income-eligible residents and the organizations that serve them.”

- The ILSFA Advisory Committee recruited its members through a voluntary submission window by releasing the requirements for participation through the ILSFA website.
- The Committee has a stakeholder email list that casts a wide net to stakeholders interested in the program, helping the program achieve a balance of voices on the Committee, and compensates community participants with stipends.
- To break up various topics within the ILSFA program, Committee members are broken into five subcommittees, creating more focused groups that hold expertise or interest in a specific topic.
- The program administrator, Elevate, first brings matters of interest to the Committee members to discuss in a meeting, and then writes meeting summaries with recommendations for the Committee to review before submitting them to IPA for consideration.

In 2023, ILSFA was named a grand prize winner of the U.S. Department of Energy's American-Made Sunny Awards. The award recognized the program for serving as a blueprint for community solar programs that increase low-to-moderate-income households' access to community solar subscriptions while providing electricity bill savings.



⁵ Many thanks to Alexandria Cedergren, Senior Associate III of Community Engagement at Elevate, for her presentation on this topic at the 2024 CESA Members Meeting and subsequent notes/guidance.

Create a Stakeholder Engagement Plan with Your Advisory Committee



Developing a “Stakeholder Engagement Plan” with the involvement of your advisory committee and other stakeholders can help you determine how you will identify and prioritize knowledge gaps, community-specific concerns, aspirations, shared goals, and engagement processes with community members.⁶ Below are several recommendations for the creation of a Stakeholder Engagement Plan:

- 1. Ensure the plan specifies when and how stakeholder engagement will occur** throughout the solar program’s implementation. Such a plan should consider the following:
 - The benefits and drawbacks the local community will receive regarding the state solar program
 - Stakeholder engagement goals, e.g., number of events, attendance, feedback targets, etc.
 - Community concerns: outline concerns and goals based on past engagement efforts and the expertise of the advisory committee, in addition to providing space to offer feedback on whether those concerns resonate with community members and what other concerns to add or remove.
- 2. Establish decision making criteria.** Determine how programmatic decisions will be made, who will review the plan, and which entities/individuals will have final authority to approve and implement the plan.
- 3. Establish progress reporting mechanisms.**
 - Establish the timeline for plan implementation and the criteria for reporting.
 - Establish metrics and data collection systems.
 - There are a variety of different metrics that a solar program could seek to measure and achieve. It is important to be transparent with stakeholders about which metrics will be used for a specific program, and to get input from stakeholders about which to use. Such metrics could include, for example, individual household savings, achieving community ownership of a solar project, reducing energy burden, etc.
- 4. Create a set of standard operating procedures** on communication norms with your community members, committee, and other interested parties.
 - Support an honest and transparent two-way conversation by explaining limitations in your authority and program scope.
 - Be clear about the objectives of the event and what level of decision-making authority the community attendees have.⁷

6 For examples of Community Benefits Plans (CBPs) that the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) requires for applicants to Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) funding opportunities, see: “Overview of the ARCHES Community Benefits Plan,” ARCHES, 2023, <https://archesh2.org/community-benefits-2> and “Project Cypress: Community Benefits Commitments Summary,” U.S. Department of Energy Office of Clean Energy Demonstrations, March 2024, <https://www.energy.gov/sites/default/files/2024-03/Project%20Cypress%20Community%20Benefits%20V2.pdf>. For more guidance on creating a Community Engagement Plan, see DOE’s guide: “Creating a Community and Stakeholder Engagement Plan,” U.S. Department of Energy Office of Fossil Energy and Carbon Management, August 2022, https://www.energy.gov/sites/default/files/2022-08/Creating%20a%20Community%20and%20Stakeholder%20Engagement%20Plan_8.2.22.pdf.

7 Sahar Shirazi, Elizabeth Baca, Michael McCormick, and Seth Litchney, “2017 General Plan Guidelines - Chapter 3: Community Engagement and Outreach,” State of California Governor’s Office of Planning and Research, 2017, pp. 3, https://opr.ca.gov/docs/OPR_C3_final.pdf (accessed August 20, 2024).

- Provide clear explanations for how community input will be/has been incorporated into the program.
 - Help communities get connected with the right departments or agencies for other or related concerns that may not fall under the scope of the solar program, e.g., your state’s housing development department for a community’s persistent flooding issues, LIHEAP for weatherization needs, etc. Building interdepartmental and intergovernmental collaborations will help you address multiple issues through this work⁸ and continue to establish community trust and benefits.
- 5. Ensure that outreach materials and activities provide sufficient background information** about the solar program so individuals from the community can productively engage in the engagement process.
- 6. Ensure accessibility and inclusivity for engagement activities.**
- Provide materials in the languages spoken in the community.
 - Ensure physical locations are accessible for those with disabilities.
 - Have translators at in-person events or consider having a Spanish-language-centered event (or other languages relevant to the community).
 - Consider offering childcare at in-person events for attendees that need to bring children.
- 7. Offer multiple means of engagement** during different times and on varying platforms (e.g. survey, virtual meeting, in-person).
- Ask your potential guest list for their preference of how and when they’d like to participate. Design the event(s) and other engagement mechanisms based on their feedback.
 - Host in-person meetings in existing community centers where people already congregate.
 - Use auto-captioning when using teleconferencing platforms.
 - Use an audio system for in-person events and have visuals and handouts.
 - Provide a translator for in-person meetings as needed.
 - Slide decks and handouts should be in plain language, avoiding technical jargon except where explained and necessary.
- 8. Ensure your engagement plan has a process for stakeholders** to provide ongoing feedback for the solar program, especially from community members who have “on-the-ground” experience with how the program is proceeding.
- The plan should include a process to allow for the committee to obtain ongoing feedback about the program, such that stakeholders who have practical experience with how the program is playing out in practice are hearing about consumers’ experiences with it.
 - Incorporating feedback from these stakeholders plays an essential role in identifying solar consumer protection issues, marketing scams, etc.

⁸ “Residential Retrofits for Energy Equity Playbook,” R2E2, Updated May 23, 2024, pp. 18, <https://r2e2playbook.org> (accessed August 15, 2024).

9. **With the help of the advisory committee and partners, host consultations** with the community to provide their feedback on the final draft Stakeholder Engagement Plan. Ensure community members have the opportunity to give feedback before finalizing.
10. **Consult additional resources and best practices** from other agencies and other states that have developed similar engagement plans.

Check in at Set Intervals to Welcome Stakeholder Feedback



Gathering consistent feedback from stakeholders can help you evaluate the effectiveness of the Stakeholder Engagement Plan, including identifying obstacles to greater public participation and engagement.

1. **Empower your community by accepting feedback** often, offering multiple ways to submit comments, both written and oral, and providing milestone updates.
 - Open channels of communication can include “large and small group meetings, public comment periods, newsletter dissemination, coffee chats, and online or paper feedback.”⁹
2. **Identify areas of improvement for future projects and lessons learned.**
3. **Inform community members of future projects** and collaboration opportunities beyond the solar program.¹⁰

9 “Capacity Building Through Effective Meaningful Engagement: A Tool for Local and State Governments,” *U.S. Environmental Protection Agency*, September 2023, pp. 8, https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2023-09/epa-capacity-building-through-effective-meaningful-engagement-booklet_0.pdf (Accessed August 19, 2024).

10 We would like to thank those who contributed invaluable ideas and editing to this Best Practices document. Many thanks to CESA and CEG staff Matt Ohloff, Warren Leon, and Marriele Mango, and *Solar with Justice* project team members Betsy Kauffman, Lidia Garcia, Bayoan Ware, and Leah Taylor.

Additional Resources

For further ideas on this topic, the following reports are available from CESA's Solar with Justice project:

- ***Investing in Relationships: Strategies State Agencies Can Use to Equitably Partner with Community Representatives.*** Available [here](#).
 - Co-authored by CESA and Bayoán Ware and Lidia Garcia at the Energy Trust of Oregon
- ***Community Outreach and Solar Equity: A Guide for States on Collaborating with Community-Based Organizations.*** Available [here](#).
 - Co-authored by Abbe Ramanan, Clean Energy Group; Shauna Beland, Rhode Island Office of Energy Resources; Yasmin Yacoby, formerly Rhode Island Office of Energy Resources and presently the U.S. Department of Energy; and Nicole Hernandez Hammer, formerly Clean Energy States Alliance



ABOUT CESA

The Clean Energy States Alliance (CESA) is a national, nonprofit coalition of public agencies and organizations working together to advance clean energy. CESA members—mostly state agencies—include many of the most innovative, successful, and influential public funders of clean energy initiatives in the country. CESA works with state leaders, federal agencies, and other stakeholders to develop and promote clean energy programs and markets, with an emphasis on renewable energy, energy equity, financing strategies, and economic development. CESA facilitates information sharing, provides technical assistance, coordinates multi-state collaborative projects, and communicates the views and achievements of its members.



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