



Recommendations for Solar with Justice: Connecting States and Communities

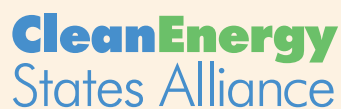
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For the past three years, the Solar with Justice Project, managed by the Clean Energy States Alliance (CESA), has helped state energy agencies (SEAs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) work collaboratively to advance the equitable development of solar to benefit underserved communities. The project has produced numerous reports, case studies, and video interviews, all of which are available on a dedicated [webpage](#) on the CESA website. This paper summarizes the project's main recommendations for SEAs and CBOs interested in expanding solar in low- and moderate-income (LMI) and disadvantaged communities.

Starting Premises

The Solar with Justice project started with three premises that shaped its research, analysis, and publications:

- 1. For solar energy to be an equitable technology that serves all Americans and retains strong public support, it is essential to overcome the considerable barriers that make it difficult for LMI and other disadvantaged households to share equally in the financial benefits of solar development.**



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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- 2. Solar programs for underserved communities should actively involve trusted community organizations in order to ensure that the programs meet communities' needs, empower community voices, and overcome some of the distrust that many residents feel towards utilities, solar companies, and the government.**
- 3. State governments—and SEAs in particular—play a crucial role in developing and implementing solar programs. To effectively reach underserved communities, collaboration between SEAs and CBOs is essential.**

The Impact of the Inflation Reduction Act and Justice40

A year after the Solar with Justice Project started in 2021, the enactment of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) significantly expanded the potential for solar development that benefits disadvantaged communities and created new programs for CBOs to receive federal funding. President Biden's Executive Order establishing the Justice40 Initiative signaled the importance of proactively working with CBOs to bring the benefits of clean energy development to disadvantaged communities. Together, the IRA and Justice40 increased the opportunities for SEA-CBO collaboration for clean energy expansion, even though the rapid pace of federal funding announcements has sometimes left SEAs with little time for planning and program development.

The recommendations below seek to embrace the current moment while also laying a foundation for long-term collaboration between SEAs and CBOs.

Recommendations

1. Recognize capacity constraints



CBOs can play an important role in solar development, but it is important to recognize that most are small organizations with limited funding and many demands on their time. SEAs (and other stakeholders in the solar arena) should develop their plans with those constraints in mind. They should take steps to make it easy for CBOs to participate in the solar development process and expand their internal capacity to do so.

In turn, CBOs should recognize that SEAs also face constraints that can include limited financial resources, staff with multiple responsibilities, and regulations that can prevent them from offering certain types of assistance or undertaking certain types of actions. Among other things, even while SEAs need to provide technical assistance to communities, SEAs themselves need technical assistance to understand new federal programs and how best to deliver them. The IRA's direct pay tax provisions are an example of a federal program that SEAs should encourage CBOs to take advantage of, but SEAs may not know what advice is needed by CBOs, or how to provide it.

To create a solid foundation for collaboration, CBOs and SEAs should make their specific constraints and limitations clearly known, because those challenges may not be obvious to others.

2. Understand the CBO landscape



CBOs vary greatly in their mission, size, resources, longevity, and geographic scope. It is useful to do research to understand which CBOs are active in a geographic area and what they are working on. SEAs can use that knowledge to inform their outreach strategies. CBOs can use it to shape coalition-building and group action.

- The Solar with Justice Project produced [a series of reports based on a nationwide survey of CBOs](#). The survey, which included dozens of questions, yielded rich, nuanced information about the landscape of CBOs, their attitudes, and their experiences. For an overview of the findings, see [Key Findings from Two Reports on US Community-Based Organizations and Solar Energy](#).
- A [national database of CBOs](#) developed for the Solar with Justice Project can help identify CBOs in a state or region.

3. Provide multiple forms of assistance to CBOs



Because of CBOs' capacity constraints and the importance of including them in advancing solar in LMI and other disadvantaged communities, SEAs should provide a range of assistance. This can include financial support, compensation to cover time spent engaging with the SEA, public education resources, direct technical assistance, and training.

SEAs can also provide information that helps CBOs understand solar development opportunities and the ways that CBOs can engage not just state government, but other levels of government, including the federal government and municipalities. To help CBOs navigate state government bureaucracies, it is good to provide them with a single point of contact within the SEA.

- A Solar with Justice Project case study from Energy Trust of Oregon focuses on [Investing in Relationships: Strategies for State Agencies to Equitably Partner with Communities](#).

4. Treat community outreach and engagement as an ongoing process



SEAs should start to engage communities early in the process of developing a solar program. Especially given the potential for the EPA Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund Solar for All (SFA) program to transform and expand the market for LMI solar, it is important for CBOs to be brought into the program planning process during the early stages of program development. But outreach and engagement are not one-time tasks for states—both need to be ongoing, with additional CBOs included over time as they are identified.

There will inevitably be cases where outreach does not start early in the process or where engagement does not proceed as easily as planned. This can happen due to the press of immediate funding opportunity deadlines that SEAs may be trying to meet, or because CBOs may have difficulty carving out time for engagement activities because of the many competing requests for their time, for example. All participants should anticipate that the engagement process will be complicated and will involve challenges. True collaboration can take time to develop. Success should be judged on whether there has been progress over time, not whether everything works perfectly from the beginning.

- For advice on engagement, see a Solar with Justice Project paper on [Best Practices for Equitable Stakeholder Engagement in State Solar Programs](#).

5. Think beyond income levels to advance solar with justice



Federal and state solar programs are rightly giving significant attention to ways to bring solar to LMI communities. But there are other dimensions beyond communities' income levels that should be considered when determining which communities deserve special attention and solar assistance. African American and other minority communities have often been targeted for siting of the most polluting fossil-fuel infrastructure. Tribal Nations and rural areas have often been left out from clean energy benefits. Understanding the challenges that different communities face can help SEAs target their efforts.

- A Solar with Justice Project [video interview with Tony Reames](#) highlights reasons to address the energy burdens faced by environmental justice communities.
- The special issues involved in collaboration between SEAs and Tribal Nations are covered in a Solar with Justice Project case study on [Tribal-State Collaboration on Sustainability and Solar Development A Case Study of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe](#).

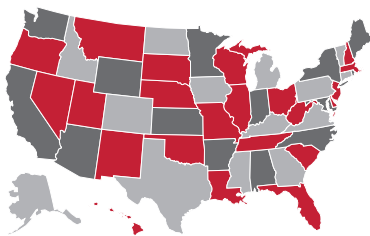
6. Make CBOs allies for protecting solar consumers



Residents of LMI and other disadvantaged communities have often been targeted by unscrupulous businesses. As solar development has become a real possibility for those communities, deceptive advertising and consumer scams have begun to appear.

SEAs and CBOs should work collaboratively to protect consumers from harm. As boots-on-the-ground stakeholders, CBOs can identify and report on any deceptive practices going on in their community. They can also identify the consumer education that residents need, and they can help effectively deliver that education because of the trust they've built in the community.

7. Remember that one size does not fit all



There are significant differences across states and regions in terms of electricity markets, solar programs, and energy policies. The landscape of CBOs is also unique in different locations. Strategies for collaboration therefore need to vary by location. It is important to learn what is taking place in other states, but the strategies used there will likely need to be modified to succeed in your state.

Additional Resources

The Solar with Justice project has produced reports, case studies, videos, webinars, and other informational resources. These resources include the following:

- **US Community-Based Organizations and Solar: A Series of Reports** ([link](#))
- **Solar with Justice Video Interview Series** ([link](#))
- **Five case studies highlighting examples of collaboration between SEAs and CBOs, and one case study highlighting collaboration between a State and Tribal nation** ([link](#))
- **National Database of Community and Renewable Energy Organizations** ([link](#))
- **Additional resources for SEAs** ([link](#))
- **Additional resources for CBOs** ([link](#))
- **The original Solar with Justice report, published in 2019** ([link](#))

Learn more at www.cesa.org/projects/solar-with-justice/resources-overview.



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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