

Business & Technology Report

December 2023

Community Outreach and Marketing Guidance for LMI Community Solar Programs



Business & Technology Report

December 2023

Community Outreach and Marketing Guidance for LMI Community Solar Programs

Prepared By:

Daniel Pontón Aronoff

Policy & Program Manager, Community Solar
Program
GRID Alternatives
dponton@gridalternatives.org

Chloe Medina

Sr. Marketing and Communications Manager
GRID Alternatives
cmedina@gridalternatives.org

Contacts:

National Rural Electric Cooperative Association Research

Lisa M. Slaughter

ACCESS Principal Investigator
NRECA Research
Lisa.Slaughter@nreca.coop

Rajeena Shakya

Program Manager, Community Energy Programs
NRECA Research
Rajeena.Shakya@nreca.coop

Copyright © 2023 by the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association. All Rights Reserved.

Legal Notice

This work contains findings that are general in nature. Readers are reminded to perform due diligence in applying these findings to their specific needs, as it is not possible for NRECA to have sufficient understanding of any specific situation to ensure applicability of the findings in all cases. The information in this work is not a recommendation, model, or standard for all electric cooperatives. Electric cooperatives are: (1) independent entities; (2) governed by independent boards of directors; and (3) affected by different member, financial, legal, political, policy, operational, and other considerations. For these reasons, electric cooperatives make independent decisions and investments based upon their individual needs, desires, and constraints. Neither the authors nor NRECA assume liability for how readers may use, interpret, or apply the information, analysis, templates, and guidance herein or with respect to the use of, or damages resulting from the use of, any information, apparatus, method, or process contained herein. In addition, the authors and NRECA make no warranty or representation that the use of these contents does not infringe on privately held rights. This work product constitutes the intellectual property of NRECA and its suppliers, and as such, it must be used in accordance with the NRECA copyright policy.

Copyright © 2023 by the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association.



Table of Contents

- Executive Summary..... 1**
- Introduction..... 3**
- Overcoming LMI Outreach Challenges..... 5**
 - Partner with Trusted Community-Based Organizations 5
 - Important Considerations 5
 - Building and Maintaining Partnerships 6
 - Collaborate with State Offices..... 7
 - Pair Community Solar to Other Compatible Initiatives 7
 - Make Enrollment and Participation Easy and Accessible 8
 - Prohibit Subscription Fees, Early Termination Fees, and Credit Checks..... 9
 - Offer Meaningful Savings..... 10
 - Centralize Program Information 11
 - Communicate Time-to-Savings..... 11
 - Perform Outreach Through Multiple Media 12
 - Apply Cultural Considerations..... 13
 - Form a Low-Income Working Group..... 13
 - Throw a Kick-Off Event 13
- Conclusion 14**
 - Additional Resources 15

Executive Summary

This guide was created to help rural electric cooperatives design or improve their community solar programs to enable better outreach to low- and moderate-income (LMI) consumer-members.¹ Community solar refers to a photovoltaic installation that is associated with a program that allows members of the community to “rent” portions of the panels for their own use. These types of programs provide access to photovoltaic technology for members that would otherwise not be able to utilize it due to such factors as poor roofing conditions, inability to obtain up-front capital, and ownership of their property by a third-party. These factors tend to affect LMI persons more frequently than more affluent ones, yet uptake to new energy programs in these LMI communities tends to be lower than in communities with higher average incomes.

The main challenges for outreach to LMI consumers are:

- Capital and credit constraints that make it difficult for LMI households to pay for subscriptions,
- Administrative requirements for signing up and verifying consumers’ income, and
- Skepticism among LMI consumers of new energy initiatives.

This guide presents ways in which rural electric cooperatives can overcome these challenges in LMI outreach efforts. The suggested approaches are:

- Work with trusted community-based organizations to create a bridge to LMI consumers and establish a partnership in outreach and engagement with the community.
- Collaborate with the state energy offices to offer program information to potential subscribers and identify opportunities for combined initiatives.
- Pair programs with other related community initiatives being offered to potential subscribers.
- Streamline the low-income enrollment and verification process to reduce the administrative burden to the LMI consumers.
- Employ consumer protections by avoiding subscription fees, early termination fees, and credit checks for LMI consumers.
- Offer meaningful savings that make community solar subscriptions more attractive to LMI consumers.
- Centralize program information to avoid confusion between a co-op’s community solar program and other energy programs.
- Communicate program timelines to new subscribers, especially when savings will initiate.
- Perform outreach through multiple media formats to reach the widest audience.

¹ “An LMI person is defined by Section 102(a)(20) of the HCDA as a person in a family or an individual with annual income equal to or less than HUD’s Section 8 Low Income Limit, which is generally 80 percent of an area’s median family income adjusted for household size” <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/LMISD-AlternativeData.pdf>

Community Outreach and Marketing Guidance for LMI Community Solar Programs

- Consider any cultural nuances within LMI communities to further tailor outreach materials to potential subscribers' needs.
- Form a low-income working group to provide feedback that can help identify how the community solar program can best meet LMI consumers' needs.

Introduction

Community solar offers a great opportunity to expand the benefits of solar beyond rooftops, and particularly to low- to moderate-income (LMI) households that may rent or otherwise not be able to take advantage of traditional rooftop solar. Community solar provides financial advantage and flexibility to members through subscriptions that offset much of the risk and cost associated with rooftop solar. The National Renewable Energy Lab (NREL) estimates that of the 5,219 MW of community solar installed in the U.S. in 2019, only about 65 MW specifically served LMI members.² This means that only 1.25% of the community solar in the U.S. serves the members it could benefit most. This figure can be improved by developing additional community solar and by maximizing LMI subscriptions to existing community solar programs.

To improve outreach for LMI community solar programs, it is important to first understand the challenges and obstacles that could be encountered when reaching out to potential low-income subscribers. The top barriers that these subscribers face when attempting to participate in community solar programs are:

- *Capital and credit constraints*

Low-income members lack access to capital and can also have lower than average credit scores. Some community solar programs include subscription fees, up-front costs, or credit checks to qualify subscribers, which can become barriers to LMI consumers' ability to access community solar.

- *Informational and administrative requirements*

When a consumer wants to subscribe to a community solar project, they usually go through a number of administrative steps to sign up. This can include signing a contract with the project, reviewing a disclosure form, signing an income qualification document (which may include gathering the necessary documents that verify income and tax status), and sending these materials to the utility or the income-verifying organization. This paperwork alone can be a deterrent. This was evident when the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA) and National Grid interviewed consumers and stakeholders throughout the state of New York to determine barriers to participating in the state's community solar program. This research found that the process for establishing eligibility was complex and disproportionately burdensome on low-income consumers, which prevented participation.³

- *Skepticism toward new energy initiatives*

The Clean Energy States Alliance (CESA) reviewed the efforts of six U.S. state agencies in expanding access to solar for LMI communities and the unique challenges they faced in outreach and engagement for those consumers. They found that past interactions with predatory electricity

² NREL Learning. "Current Community Solar Market Trends and Pathways to Reach 5 Million Households." March 17, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jnJh-Ut_q6Q

³ "Joint Petition for Approval of an Expanded Solar for All Program for Providing Community Solar to Low-Income Customers," New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, National Grid (April 2021)

suppliers caused considerable distrust by LMI households toward new energy initiatives.⁴ This observation was shared by NYSERDA and National Grid in their review as well; they found that this lack of trust dissuaded LMI consumers in New York from enrolling in community solar.⁵

Addressing the barriers identified above can help outreach efforts maximize subscription rates to LMI community solar programs. These outreach barriers can be mitigated by 1) establishing meaningful partnerships, 2) improving the subscriber's experience of the program, and 3) tailoring outreach to community needs. Partnering with organizations that have established relationships within the LMI community can help with member education, enrollment, and delivery of solar benefits. Successful outreach also relies on a program that is designed to provide subscribers with meaningful benefits and clear information on how to enroll. To help ensure that the program and its outreach efforts remain effective over its lifetime, a working group can be established to provide regular feedback on opportunities for improvement.

This guide describes features and approaches that can be added to the outreach plan for a LMI community solar program to improve efforts in reaching potential LMI subscribers.

⁴ "Expanding Access to Solar for Low-to-Moderate Income Households and Communities: Lessons Learned for State Agencies," Abbe Ramanan, CESA (April 2021)

⁵ "Joint Petition for Approval of an Expanded Solar for All Program for Providing Community Solar to Low-Income Customers," New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, National Grid (April 2021)

Overcoming LMI Outreach Challenges

Rural electric cooperatives can employ numerous approaches to outreach in LMI communities that address the known barriers. This section lists a suite of options that can be applied to the design and outreach efforts for an LMI-focused community solar program. Applying these suggested approaches can help maximize subscription rates for the program.

Partner with Trusted Community-Based Organizations

Cooperatives can mitigate many outreach barriers by partnering with community-based organizations (CBOs) that are already working with and in LMI communities. A great resource for outreach, CBOs can be a trusted link for the community to learn about the new energy initiative and can also provide feedback on opportunities for improving program outreach. In reflecting on the barrier of skepticism toward new initiatives for LMI communities, The Clean Energy States Alliance underscores the importance of working with CBOs and recognizes their role as a bridge for energy initiatives and LMI communities.⁶ Partnering with CBOs can help co-ops achieve contextually appropriate outreach efforts for a particular community and help alleviate skepticism in the community toward a new program. The following section describes important considerations in fostering strong relationships with CBOs to achieve the highest benefit from these key partnerships.

Important Considerations

Building meaningful relationships with CBOs requires early and frequent consultation. CBOs can offer significant assistance during the initial design of the community solar program. Consulting with CBOs on how to design a program can help identify a program structure that is fitting to community needs and can also highlight any local cultural considerations that should be taken into account. This early engagement establishes a foundation of trust with CBOs that can improve the overall success of the program throughout its lifetime. Co-ops may find it useful to have a centralized team oversee and manage CBO partnerships, so that there is a consistent touch point between both parties.

When considering which CBOs to partner with, it is helpful to identify those organizations with the highest amount of long-standing trust among the community. Candidate CBOs often offer services that focus on topics such as environmental and economic justice, disability/independent living services, cultural services, educational services, civic engagement, faith and religion, and family services. Regardless of their mission, partnering with the local organizations which serve the most people or that have the most traction in the service territory will lend additional credibility to new solar initiatives and increase the effectiveness of outreach and engagement. In addition, selecting a variety of potential CBO partners helps expand the reach of the program and the opportunity to address community needs.

It is important to consider that CBOs, while key partners, often have limited capacity and resources themselves. Many CBOs are non-profits or are volunteer-based, which makes it difficult for them to take on entirely new scopes of work without adequate support. Pairing CBOs with national non-profit

⁶ "Expanding Access to Solar for Low-to-Moderate Income Households and Communities: Lessons Learned for State Agencies," Abbe Ramanan, CESA (April 2021)

organizations that have experience in energy programs and administration can sometimes help to bridge this gap in resources. To help address this, the structure of partnerships with CBOs can also include some form of compensation for their time.

Building and Maintaining Partnerships

Given the considerations above, co-ops can do several things to build and maintain meaningful partnerships with CBOs that will improve programmatic outreach and engagement.

Hold Listening Sessions

A listening session is a formal space where the co-op can listen to concerns and ideas about the program and answer some questions in return. In a basic format, a one-hour listening session could include a brief overview of the program, sharing by the CBO partner, and about 40 minutes of facilitated discussion that clarifies how the CBO's work relates to the program, how the two parties want to be involved, the parties' relevant experience, and potential barriers to participation from the community. Utilizing listening sessions quarterly or semiannually can be a good way for co-ops to have regular touch points with CBOs, build trust, and improve the overall outreach efforts of the community solar program.

Offer Quick and Easy Enrollment Methods

Co-ops can support CBOs' contributions to outreach by ensuring they have access to a quick and easy way to enroll potential participants in the community solar program. One way to do this is to make the enrollment process accessible via electronic tablets or even mobile devices. The CBOs can enroll subscribers in-person when they are conducting outreach, instead of relying on potential subscribers to follow through with enrolling themselves.

In-Kind Benefits

Many CBOs are non-profit or volunteer-supported entities that operate on limited resources. As such, it is beneficial to the relationship's longevity to consider how they can be compensated in-kind for the benefits provided. There are many ways for co-ops to provide this reciprocation. One way is to provide best practices to CBOs on how to develop contracts with developers, outlining typical compensation fee ranges for services like member outreach and education, enrollment, and ongoing subscription management. These contracts can include fees for capacity building or ongoing training provided by the CBO. The co-op can recommend non-exclusivity for the CBO and a flat fee for training in community solar subscription if needed. To bolster fair conduct between CBOs and their partners, programs can develop a simple ethical code of conduct that developers and CBOs sign as part of their participation in the program. An example of this type of code is available from the Oregon Community Solar Program, which provides a Project Manager Code of Conduct in addition to other templates and guides relevant to community solar programs.⁷

Co-ops can also allocate funds to build capacity for the CBOs with whom they partner on outreach and engagement. If the community solar program is more developer-focused, then co-ops can

⁷ <https://www.oregoncsp.org/pm-resources/>

require that CBOs be compensated as part of their collaboration with the developers. This capacity funding ensures that CBOs can remain stable and continue to meet the demand of the co-op program. Capacity funding also helps CBOs grow in new directions and take on more outreach and engagement opportunities in the future, which can yield new opportunities for the co-op through their partnership. Compensation for capacity building can also include the development of marketing materials for the program, education for the CBO on the community solar program, and the development of an outreach plan.

Collaborate with State Offices

State offices, namely state energy offices, can be important additions to an outreach plan for community solar projects. State energy offices serve as waypoints for consumers looking for more information on energy initiatives and often host websites that house useful information on local energy initiatives. Energy offices also conduct energy initiatives that can bolster a co-op's efforts to provide solar energy to their consumer-members. Connecting with the state energy office can be a helpful move for co-ops looking to increase their outreach and potentially improve their community solar offering.

An Example of A Co-op Working with a State Energy Office

In 2015, the Colorado Energy Office (CEO) started the Low-Income Community Solar Demonstration Initiative, whereby they dedicated Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP) funding – already committed to improving energy affordability for LMI members – to community solar projects that would reduce electricity costs for low-income households.¹ The CEO partnered with eight utility partners, including Holy Cross Energy (HCE), a rural electric cooperative. As part of the initiative, HCE received support from CEO and developer GRID Alternatives (GRID) to install a community solar array and perform outreach for the project. GRID helped HCE to develop program brochures, radio ads, and website promotions, and also helped direct outreach to their consumer-members. The initial partnership with CEO and the resulting connection to GRID helped HCE accomplish the development of its 145 kW community solar array and reach a subscribership of 45 low-income households.

Co-ops can find and connect with their state energy office and organization websites through the Federal Energy Management Program database of State Energy Offices and Organizations.⁸

Pair Community Solar to Other Compatible Initiatives

Community solar can be a great complement to efforts in reducing energy burden in rural areas, which is over a third greater than in urban households. This makes community solar a natural fit for marketing and outreach alongside other efforts to reduce energy burden like LIHEAP or WAP. Consumers who are

⁸ <https://www.energy.gov/femp/state-energy-offices-and-organizations>

enrolled in LIHEAP or WAP will have already gone through the income verification process and will, therefore, be known candidates for low-income community solar projects. Marketing community solar alongside complementary energy programming will help cooperatives identify eligible member subscribers and reduce the amount of time and resources required for subscriber acquisition.

The U.S. Department of Energy National Community Solar Partnership (NCSP) has partnered with the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL), the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the National Association of State Energy Officials (NASEO), and the National Energy Assistance Directors Association (NEADA)⁹ to develop a tool called the Low-Income Clean Energy Connector.¹⁰ This tool links households participating in government-run, low-income support programs to community solar projects available in their area. Rural electric cooperatives will be able to submit their community solar project to the Connector, and local LIHEAP administrators will provide educational materials to LIHEAP households. If interested, those households will be able to subscribe to the community solar project. As of late 2023, the Connector is still in the pilot phase. Once available, it will be a helpful tool for cooperatives interested in subscribing income-qualified members to their community solar projects.

Integrating solar with complementary energy efforts like LIHEAP can also yield more benefits for consumers. In the Colorado Energy Office's (CEO) Low-Income Community Solar Demonstration Project, CEO was able to use WAP funding to increase the savings that cooperative consumer-members received in their subscriptions. This can make community solar more appealing to potential customers who may be on the fence about subscribing.

Read more about using LIHEAP and WAP funding for community solar projects in NRECA's ACCESS Advisory Update, [*Research on Using Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program \(LIHEAP\) Funds to Achieve Solar Affordability for Co-op Communities in Need*](#).¹¹

Make Enrollment and Participation Easy and Accessible

One of the most prominent barriers to participation for LMI members is a high administrative burden to the subscriber. This includes the amount of paperwork that any subscriber might be asked to fill out, but of specific note is the paperwork that LMI members complete to verify their eligibility as income-qualified. For this reason, it is recommended that community solar programs consider options such as pre-qualification, consolidated billing, and onsite income qualification.

Pre-Qualification

Pre-qualification is a mechanism whereby consumers are automatically considered eligible for income-qualified community solar because they are already enrolled in a federal income-qualified

⁹ More information about the Low-Income Clean Energy Connector tool can be found from the Department of Energy website at <https://www.energy.gov/communitysolar/low-income-clean-energy-connector>

¹⁰ <https://www.energy.gov/communitysolar/low-income-clean-energy-connector>

¹¹ <https://www.cooperative.com/programs-services/bts/access/Documents/Advisory-ACCESS-Project-Research-of-LIHEAP-Update-Dec-2023.pdf>

program such as the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program,¹² Medicaid,¹³ the Head Start Program,¹⁴ or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program,¹⁵ to name a few. By allowing pre-qualification for income-qualified households, the amount of paperwork required to enroll in a community solar program is reduced. Relying exclusively on these pre-qualified programs to identify income qualified households, however, may lead co-ops to miss otherwise eligible consumers, because these programs have qualification standards of their own that may have already deterred some eligible households from enrolling.

Simplified Billing

Providing community solar subscribers with one consolidated electricity bill is yet another way to improve the member experience and reduce potential confusion after signing up for community solar. In a request for feedback from the U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE's) Low-Income Community Solar Subscription Tool – a tool to make community solar more accessible to low-income households – respondents from across the country were emphatic that consolidated billing and utility collaboration would reduce the amount of monthly paperwork for subscribers and improve their ease-of-use. This in turn makes the community solar program more attractive for low-income participants.¹⁶ Presenting bills in a consolidated format also provides an opportunity to clearly communicate to the subscriber the benefits being provided by the program by showing their total electric bill with the community solar credits already included. A popular practice is to show the total energy consumed minus community solar credits and the cost of the discounted solar credits based on the power generated by the community solar project on subscribers' bills.

Onsite Income-Qualification

To improve the ease of outreach as well as make program enrollment more accessible, co-ops can enable onsite income-qualification at the locations of outreach partners such as CBOs. In this approach, the partner verifies household income qualifications when they are engaging with potential subscribers in person. It is important for the onsite enrollment approach to contain measures that protect subscribers' sensitive household information. Qualification requirements can be carefully defined to alleviate the need for partners to gather sensitive information, or they can utilize an alternative method such as pre-qualification.

Prohibit Subscription Fees, Early Termination Fees, and Credit Checks

In order to maintain the positive reputation of the community solar project and build community momentum for subscriptions, cooperatives can incorporate language into contracts that protect their consumer-members from hidden fees, fines, and/or penalties for overdue payments, early termination, etc. Cooperatives can also prohibit using credit checks to qualify or disqualify consumer-members from

¹² <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ocs/programs/liheap>

¹³ <https://www.medicaid.gov/>

¹⁴ <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ohs/about/head-start>

¹⁵ <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program>

¹⁶ "Summary: Low-Income Community Solar Subscription Tool Request for Information," Department of Energy Solar Energy Technologies Office (July 2022)

the community solar project. Applying this method can help reduce the financial barrier to entry for consumers who lack the upfront capital to pay additional fees or who may have below average credit.

Sometimes, developers are allowed to charge subscription fees for their community solar projects, which they justify with the savings that participants receive in exchange. While this may seem like a net positive for subscribers, the fee is still an extra cost for enrollment, and many low-income households do not have the extra cash to pay up-front, even if joining the program is financially viable in the long run. As part of recommendations to the New Mexico Public Regulation Commission, the Energy Outreach of Colorado (EOC) office described their solution to the problem of subscription fees: they encourage low-income community solar project developers in Colorado to donate their subscriptions, eliminating this cost for low-income subscribers.¹⁷

As its name suggests, an *early termination fee* is a fee that subscribers would pay if, for whatever reason, they end their subscription to the community solar project before a stipulated minimum subscription duration has passed. While this feature can work as an incentive that keeps subscribers signed up to the community solar project for as long as possible, the net effect on lower-income households is disproportionately burdensome due to its inflexibility. Prohibiting early termination fees makes community solar subscriptions less risky for low-income members, and in turn, more appealing.

The National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) provides examples of other consumer protection features that can be added to an LMI community solar program in a primer available on their website.¹⁸

Offer Meaningful Savings

The savings that can be expected from enrolling in a community solar program rank among the most attractive features for LMI members.¹⁹ The ability for community solar to provide meaningful savings strengthens word-of-mouth outreach efforts, because subscribers experiencing positive benefits from the program will share that information among their friends and neighbors.

Rural households already spend a much larger portion of their income on energy than their urban or suburban counterparts. Low-income households in rural areas spend even more of their income on energy – almost a third higher than other rural households.²⁰ This compounded energy burden makes saving on energy bills a top priority for low-income, rural households. Community solar programs that can reduce this energy burden are extremely attractive to LMI members. Co-ops can facilitate these savings by designing community solar projects that target a 20-30% discount for income-qualified households. Additionally, co-ops can provide special discounts depending on whether they receive federal tax credits or grants for their project from such programs as LIHEAP.

¹⁷ “Strategies for Low-Income Participation in New Mexico’s Community Solar Program: Best Practices and Recommendations,” Prosperity Works, Coalition of Sustainable Communities New Mexico, Partnership for Community Action, GRID Alternatives (June 2022)

¹⁸ <https://www.nrel.gov/state-local-tribal/solar-consumer-protection.html>

¹⁹ “Joint Petition for Approval of an Expanded Solar for All Program for Providing Community Solar to Low-Income Customers,” New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, National Grid (April 2021)

²⁰ “The High Cost of Energy in Rural America: Household Energy Burdens and Opportunities for Energy Efficiency,” Lauren Ross, Ariel Drehobl, and Brian Stickles, ACEE (July 2018)

These expected cost savings should be clear and easy to understand for interested consumers. Any program fees should be clearly outlined, and savings should be presented to subscribers in a relatable way. Depending on the program's method of defining savings, a subscribers' bill reductions might fluctuate or the method of calculating the savings might be unclear to the subscribers. Because of this and many other reasons, actual savings may not match subscriber expectations, which can discourage them from resubscribing and can make the project less appealing to other potential subscribers. This can be mitigated by providing consumer-members with a fact sheet, such as that offered by The Oregon Community Solar Program, that lays out what subscribers can expect for their subscription sizing and expected savings.²¹

Centralize Program Information

Centralizing information for the community solar program makes it more accessible to all consumer-members and allows the co-op to communicate clearly with subscribers and program partners. If feasible, the co-op can also host a dedicated webpage for the community solar program, through which co-ops can provide information for subscribers, updates about the program, educational materials on community solar, information for CBOs and other outreach partners, information for interested developers, and, if applicable, details on how the co-op coordinates the registration of outreach partners, developers, and projects for subscribers to view. However, the website may not answer all questions, nor can it manage relationships with program partners. For this reason, another way to centralize program information is to designate a point of contact to whom rural electric cooperatives can refer interested members, developers, and community partners. This person could hold such responsibilities as liaising with the community solar developer, coordinating with community outreach partners, and responding to consumer-member questions about the program.

Primarily, centralizing the program information simplifies outreach efforts. Doing so also addresses one of the main barriers to participation from LMI subscribers: skepticism toward new energy initiatives. This risk-averse stance is common towards new energy initiatives because of unfortunate predatory interactions with salespeople who inflate product benefits or sell energy solutions that actually end up costing consumers more money. It is also common for developers to try and get ahead of the competition in a new market and reach out directly to a co-op's membership, which can be confusing and can cause that offering to be conflated with the utility-offered program. Some of this confusion can be mitigated by a centralized website where subscribers can learn about the community solar program.

Communicate Time-to-Savings

Like all construction projects, community solar projects can encounter complications and delays. The duration of the construction process depends on the size and complexity of the project, how complex the permitting process is, and the availability of financing. Regulatory and environmental requirements can also delay the process. When present, these factors can delay the allocation of bill credits to program subscribers, which may be discouraging to members who expect the benefits of community solar to come immediately. For LMI households, it can be especially important for savings to come quickly, since needed purchases may have been delayed due to lack of funds. To mitigate this, cooperatives can

²¹ <https://www.oregoncsp.org/resource/solar-savings-li-pge/>

provide a realistic project and/or program development timeline to newly subscribed members. This information can be focused on communicating when the member should expect to see benefits on their bill based on the time that they signed up. Managing the expectations of existing and potential subscribers helps the cooperative maintain a positive reputation for the community solar program by being transparent, and also provides subscribers with the opportunity to plan around the initiation of savings.

Perform Outreach Through Multiple Media

Providing information through a co-op hosted website is a great way to reach a large number of potential subscribers at relatively small cost. However, using digital-only communication approaches may exclude certain subsets of people, such as members who have limited internet access. About 1 in 4 rural households lack access to broadband internet connection, so digital outreach efforts may be missing almost a quarter of potential subscribers. Using multiple modes of communication helps increase the reach of a community solar program's outreach efforts. Multiple dissemination formats can also support a centralized approach to program information by including the program website and the designated point of contact, where applicable.

Potential modes of communications include:

- Cooperative utility mailers
- Phone calls
- E-mail
- Mail
- Billboards
- Radio advertisements
- In-person workshops
- Door-to-door outreach
- Tabling at community events and venues

As part of outreach for a Southern California Edison (SCE) community solar project, GRID Alternatives developed a flyer that the utility sent along with their customers' bills.²² This flyer was accompanied by a simultaneous radio advertisement.²³ This combination proved to be an effective mode of communication among the group of potential subscribers to whom SCE was marketing the program.

²² <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1vBMFCrh0rCoDwhqHNkbOrtmW6pubclhc/view>

²³ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1OHNKkBah6kPse2vJ43rwrP8H8GLUcYA/view>

Apply Cultural Considerations

A 2022 U.S. Census Report identified that at least 1 in 5 people aged 5 years and over spoke languages other than English.²⁴ Language diversity is a significant feature of many co-ops' service areas. It is, therefore, important for co-ops to cater their outreach collateral to their membership by becoming familiar with how to communicate energy concepts in the languages spoken among their members. By translating community solar outreach materials into a set of different languages that reflect a co-op's membership, the information more broadly reaches the community. Providing these materials in appropriate languages also shows that the co-op understands their consumer-members' needs and is working to identify and satisfy them. Cooperatives can also consult with relevant cultural community organizations for their review of marketing materials and to solicit suggestions for other culturally appropriate outreach approaches.

Form a Low-Income Working Group

Changing conditions can yield any program ineffective at no fault to the initial design. To continue improving the community solar program and the associated outreach efforts to LMI households, co-ops can develop a low-income working group that meets periodically to review the program and recommend improvements. This group could be composed of members from program partners such as CBOs involved in outreach, and regular meetings can be structured as the listening sessions previously outlined in this text.

Throw a Kick-Off Event

Celebrating the beginning of a community solar project can be a great way to increase visibility, build momentum, boost community involvement, and educate members about the benefits of community solar. Successful kick-off events include an overview of the project, introductions to the program's partners, an explanation of how community solar works in general, and a review of how the project is expected to specifically benefit subscribers. It can also be an opportunity to gather the community for some fun. Co-ops can capture the excitement by offering handouts with instructions for sign up, or by featuring an onsite registration option. Hosting multiple kickoff events allows for word-of-mouth to spread from kick-off to kick-off, making these events a high-value way for co-ops to attract potential subscribers, build trust, and form new relationships among the community.

²⁴ <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/12/languages-we-speak-in-united-states.html>

Conclusion

When reaching out to potential low- and moderate-income subscribers about community solar programs, it is important to understand the obstacles that could be encountered and tailor program outreach, as well as the program design, to meet those challenges. The most prominent barriers that subscribers face when attempting to participate in community solar programs are:

- capital and credit constraints,
- administrative hurdles and fees, and
- skepticism toward new energy initiatives.

Rural electric cooperatives conducting community solar program outreach in LMI communities will need to consider these barriers in order to conduct effective member outreach that reaches the highest number of potential subscribers. These outreach barriers can be mitigated by:

- partnering with trusted community-based organizations,
- collaborating with state offices,
- pairing community solar programs to other community support initiatives in the area,
- making low-income enrollment and verification easy and accessible,
- prohibiting subscription fees, early termination fees, and credit checks,
- offering meaningful savings,
- centralizing program information,
- communicating program and savings timelines,
- communicating about the program through a variety of media outlets,
- considering cultural nuances of LMI communities,
- supporting a low-income working group, and
- hosting community outreach events.

Additional Resources

More community solar program design tools are available at the ACCESS project website:

<https://www.cooperative.com/programs-services/bts/access/Pages/default.aspx>