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# **Outreach and Engagement in Income-Qualified Communities**

## Introduction

Successfully engaging with potential customers and driving individuals toward participation in any program can be challenging. This challenge is magnified when you consider that there was little to no solar market in Illinois prior to the passage of the Future Energy Jobs Act (FEJA). In addition, because Illinois Solar for All (ILSFA) is intended for low-income individuals, there are the added structural inequalities that set up hurdles to participation. This guide is meant as a resource to help Approved Vendors, particularly those that have not worked in Illinois or in a low-income market in the past, develop meaningful relationships within the communities where projects will be located.

Marketing and customer acquisition for solar project development can be difficult because the technical concepts of solar are still very new to most consumers and, until recently, the cost of solar installation has been a barrier for all but a few market segments. Engaging low-income communities (also known as income-qualified communities) presents even greater challenges to accessing the desired audiences and providing relevant and useful messaging and technical understanding. These communities have historically been left out of the clean energy economy because of financial barriers. In addition, where incentive and grant programs have been implemented for energy and other programs, the requirements are often burdensome, and a general distrust of government programs has created additional barriers.

In Illinois and other states with deregulated energy markets, there has also been a history of Alternative Retail Energy Suppliers (ARES) marketing energy products in a way that has left households in these communities with a greater energy burden because of misleading or unscrupulous marketing practices and additional distrust of sales pitches about household energy supply.

This document presents high level best practices for outreach and engagement in low-income communities, specifically for energy related programs. While solar energy is still quite new nationally within these communities (and even newer in Illinois), energy efficiency and other energy programs have served residents in low-income communities for several decades. Looking towards these programs can offer some insight into overcoming knowledge-gap and trust barriers and may provide practical guidance that can simplify the marketing and customer acquisition process to be both meaningful and effective for both the seller and customer.

## Marketing Tactics

The technical details behind how energy is generated and consumed are not often top priorities for anyone, but this is especially the case for households in income-qualified communities. Attempting to reach individuals with “soft touches,” such as broad ad campaigns, tends to fall short of what is needed to educate and move individuals to action. Conversely, “hard touches,” where an individual is engaged directly or in small groups within their social network such as at community meetings or “house parties” (small gatherings in a home, based on the host’s neighborhood or other network), create a higher level of understanding and collective agreement within a community. This level of agreement within a community is more likely to move an individual to action. Further, these hard touch tactics are often particularly effective with hard-to-reach communities, including senior citizens, rural communities, and income-qualified communities, where a trusted messenger can open doors and allow for the deeper conversations that are often necessary. Hard touch tactics also allow for the time and opportunity to address potential concerns or misinformation in a controlled way, helping to defuse early skepticism.

While traditional marketing can be an effective way to reach large groups of people, it can be more expensive and ultimately less effective at reaching households in income-qualified communities as it relates to energy education and the subsequent choices individuals make around their energy consumption. However, low cost, soft touch tactics such as newsletter articles, write-ups in aldermanic or community email blasts, social media blogs, and other earned (free) media can be used as a supplement to direct, community outreach and is most effective when strategically paired with direct, hard touch tactics.

Successful models of outreach also include leveraging one-on-one meetings with key community leaders to further develop relationships and identify other community thought leaders, influencers and early adopters. An equally effective approach is to leverage existing opportunities to present at regular community meetings or events, as well as dedicated events like energy workshops. Successful community outreach can also transition from soft touch tactics to hard touch tactics, inviting early adopters and leaders to host house parties and leverage their connections to provide more comprehensive interactions across a wider audience.

## Some Guiding Principles for Direct Outreach in Income-Qualified Communities

Having a good understanding of the issues and barriers specific to low-income households and their energy use can help shape messaging in a way that is meaningful to your customers. In Illinois there are more than 1.7 million low-income households, or 36%<sup>1</sup>, earning less than \$30,000 annually. Nearly half of Illinois households are considered low- to moderate-income. Many of these households face a large energy burden. A household is considered energy burdened when energy costs exceed 6% of household income. Many low- to moderate-income households in Illinois actually face an energy burden of greater than 15%, with some as high as 25%.

Bill assistance programs, like federally-funded LIHEAP, are stopgaps that do not systemically address the root causes of energy burden. Moreover, LIHEAP only serves about 30% of eligible households<sup>2</sup> and is often the target of budget cuts.

Energy efficiency programs that provide direct incentives for income-qualified households can provide measurable reductions in energy burden, with energy efficiency measures commonly saving 15% to 30%<sup>3</sup> and rooftop solar having the potential to save even more. There are also the added benefits of household comfort and increased health and safety.

Energy efficiency measures paired with the addition of solar energy have the potential to decrease energy burden significantly. Unfortunately, most households in Illinois cannot install solar directly on their roofs because of shading, obstructions, structural issues, or financial barriers associated with upfront installation costs. For example, the Cook County Community Solar project found that more than 75% of households in Cook County could not install solar. This suggests that community solar is a crucial component to providing the benefits of solar energy to those who would not otherwise have access.

The challenges that income-qualified communities face are many and they are intersectional, requiring well-facilitated, collaborative efforts. Approved Vendors and other stakeholders should strategically seek partnerships with community-based organizations, thought leaders,

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<sup>1</sup> 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level. For example, a household of two people would be included in our estimate if the income level was at or below \$31,020, per the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2013 Poverty Guidelines.

<sup>2</sup> For example, in 2013, Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program served approximately 323,000 households in Illinois. See the Campaign for Home Energy Assistance for more information: <https://www.liheap.org/>

<sup>3</sup> Savings range based on Elevate Energy retrofit program data.

influencers from within the community, and other community members to plan and facilitate events, and to shape and deliver the message. The hard touch tactics described above foster a more collaborative approach to engagement and can be more effective in reaching and penetrating the targeted audiences when they are informed by stakeholders.

It's recommended to use education and outreach approaches that focus on tactics that encourage a short turnaround between an individual's first interaction with energy concepts and engaging with specific program-related action. For example, although soft touch tactics, like ad campaigns or newsletters, may offer a direct path to action – like a toll-free number or email address for further follow up, only a small percentage of people who see these messages will go the extra steps beyond this initial interaction and utilize a direct path to action. Hard touch tactics, like community meetings, one-on-one meetings, or house parties (small gatherings in a home, based on the host's neighborhood or other network) provide opportunities for a direct call to action such as providing sign-up sheets for free energy assessments or free solar installation estimates, directly describing the benefits of these assessments and directly asking for participation. These types of tactics provide the shortest turnaround between initial interaction with the concepts and direct action.

## Outreach and Engagement Tactics

### FIRST TOUCH TACTICS

First touch tactics are primarily used to lay the groundwork for deeper organizing efforts. They are less likely to lead to direct action by stakeholders to engage programs, but they can build networks of trusted messengers and champions, which in turn provides direct connections with your target customers. Examples include:

- **One-on-one meetings:** community leaders, elected officials, community organizations, etc.
  - These meetings help to establish interest in solar generally, it's helpful to identify the individual's interests and the constituents they may support to share appropriate resources. It's helpful to explain the program and the timing of your project moving forward. Have your "ask" for participation ready – what do you want their help with? Hosting a meeting? Introductions?
- **Newsletters:** local governments, associations, community organizations, elected officials, etc.

- **Tabling/networking events:** farmers markets, school events, neighborhood festivals, etc.

## MID-LEVEL EDUCATION AND ENGAGEMENT TACTICS

Mid-level education and engagement tactics are used to more effectively interact with individuals and encourage direct action. While these events are not likely to be focused on solar energy or Illinois Solar for All specifically, these interactions lay the groundwork for deeper education and “hard-touch” opportunities and provide opportunities for direct action by participants.

Work with event organizers to understand the agenda and expectations. Ensure that any request you make of participants (sign-up, collect contact information, etc.) is understood, supported, and even endorsed by organizers. Examples include:

- **Community meetings:** neighborhood organizations, local environmental groups, senior groups, fraternal organizations such as Lions or Kiwanis Clubs, religious groups/communities, local elected officials, etc.
- **Workplace lunch-and-learns:** more detailed presentations to a diverse range of professions and business sectors helps reach individuals with a wide range of stakeholders, depending on the segment Approved Vendors are trying to reach.
- **Community challenge events:** working with local target communities, kick-off and mid-year rallies are held; these events provide several points of education for local residents and serve as a rallying point for volunteers and community leaders who hope to start educating residents in their own community
- **Community energy planning:** integrating program participation into local energy and sustainability plan goals by leveraging local outreach and leadership to affect greater program participation

## DEEP EDUCATION AND TACTICS FOR HARD-TO-REACH AUDIENCES

Hard touch tactics are designed to provide a deep level of interaction and education and build program involvement with stakeholders who will be vocal advocates in their communities. During the early stages of engagement, those participants who move to action will be early adopters, community stakeholders, and program champions. As

engagement efforts mature, the following types of events become a primary means for engagement and providing a pathway to participation for a spectrum of community members.

- **Energy workshops:** more intensive sessions that include technical education, deep dive into program goals, benefits and opportunities, specific program areas (like household participation, job training, contractor engagement); done in partnership with local organizations and community leaders, typically leveraging existing networks
- **Multifamily building workshops:** a series of workshops for tenants and community members developed with affordable multifamily building owners and managers; similarly, engaging residents in more intensive sessions that include technical education, deep dive into program goals, benefits, and opportunities
- **House parties:** leverages the social network and credibility of the host (an early adopter or community leader) to offer a small group of consumers an in-depth look at program goals, benefits, and opportunities, as well as more intensive technical education; house parties will pyramid outreach efforts, allowing attendees the opportunity to host similar events with other social networks
- **Multifamily house parties:** similar to the house parties described above, these house parties will specifically target tenants of affordable rental units, a particularly hard-to-reach audience; partner with owners and managers, tenant associations, and multifamily workshop attendees to identify residents who would be willing to host
- **VIP house parties:** House parties that are hosted or attended by local leaders or elected officials are especially effective; local leaders lend their credibility and network to the local organizer when they participate in a house party

## Measuring Impact

The key to understanding the impact of these strategies and the effectiveness of the campaign is the ability to measure specific outcomes. Every Approved Vendor or educating organization should build a metrics strategy before outreach and engagement begins. Understanding what metrics are meaningful or impactful is critical. For example:

- How many people attended an event?

- How many signed up for a home assessment?
- How many that have signed up follow-up with an assessment?
- How many households who have an assessment move forward to contracting?
- Which type of event is more effective for each of these metrics?

Tracking and analyzing the impact of your efforts with metrics like these is critical to effective campaigns. Adjusting outreach methods and tactics based on analysis of metrics is even more important to ensuring successful future campaigns.

## Consumer Protections

Illinois Solar for All has developed a comprehensive set of consumer protection requirements. All outreach and engagement strategies and tactics must be governed by these requirements, as well as any local, state, and federal consumer protections requirements. The current ILSFA consumer protections requirements are distinct for Low-Income Distributed Generation and Low-Income Community Solar, and can be found at the links below:

[ILSFA Low-income Distributed Generation Consumer Protections Requirements](#)

[ILSFA Low-income Community Solar Consumer Protections Requirements](#)

This document will not attempt to integrate the details of these consumer protections requirements. However, please note that false and misleading information is strictly prohibited and will result in Approved Vendors no longer being able to participate in ILSFA. Please review the current consumer protections documents for the full list of requirements. While Illinois Solar for All consumer protections are comprehensive and govern all aspects of the program interactions with customers, they fall into several primary categories:

### **MARKETING MATERIALS**

All ILSFA Approved Vendors are required to use standard and approved program informational brochures. Each program participant must demonstrate that they have seen, read, and understand these brochures. They are currently available for each sub-program in English and Spanish. In addition to the standard brochures, specific language requirements are presented for some concepts, including participant savings, warranties, incentives, etc. Marketing materials that include ILSFA references or details must be approved by the Program Administrator.



## **MARKETING BEHAVIOR**

ILSFA marketing behavior requirements govern advertising, sales and marketing interactions, in-person solicitations, telemarketing, direct mail, online marketing, and the general interactions of Approved Vendors, their employees, agents, and subcontractors. See Section 7 of the Approved Vendor Manual for more information on marketing behavior requirements.

## **STANDARD DISCLOSURES**

Approved Vendors must complete standard disclosure forms and provide these to participants prior to contract execution. Standard disclosures include system equipment and components, warranty, financial terms, total costs and fees, projected energy production and savings, and other important information. Disclosures for Low-Income Distributed Generation projects must be presented to participants at least seven days prior to contract execution, and the participant has seven days after contract execution to cancel.

## **COSTS AND SAVINGS**

Approved Vendors are required to offer participants access to solar projects with no upfront cost, and any ongoing costs and fees are not to exceed 50% of the value of energy generated by the system, regardless of whether the system is owned, leased, or financed through a Power Purchase Agreement (PPA).

## **FINANCIAL REQUIREMENTS**

Financing amounts, terms, and conditions must be based on an assessment of the participant's ability to repay the debt, as defined by federal requirements. Any loans must not be secured by the participant's home or home equity. Contracts must include a forbearance option and cannot include penalties for pre-payment.

## **MARKETING REQUIREMENTS**

All Approved Vendors must adhere to comprehensive guidelines that govern the information used in marketing materials and the behavior of vendors in their interactions with participants. Marketing requirements include the use of standardized brochures that must be presented to all participants upon first contact.

## QUALITY WORKMANSHIP

Approved Vendors are fully vetted and must adhere to technical system requirements to ensure efficient system performance, as well as adhere to all local ordinances governing building codes, permitting, and zoning. In addition, there are requirements that Approved Vendors meet minimum [site suitability guidelines](#) and must allow all installations to undergo photo and onsite inspections by Program Administrator technicians.