

# EXPANDING ACCESS TO COMMUNITY SOLAR FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING RESIDENTS

## THREE TIPS FOR RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT

**Community solar is any solar project or purchasing program, within a geographic area, in which the benefits flow to multiple customers. Community solar customers can either buy or lease a portion of the solar panels, and typically receive a bill credit for electricity generated by their share of the project. This guide provides tips for increasing the number of multifamily residents subscribing to programs that issue direct bill credits.**

Community solar provides affordable housing property owners and/or residents with a path to access the benefits of solar energy regardless of who owns the solar panels, the suitability of rooftop for solar, and location of the property. As community solar programs scale up, there is an opportunity for multifamily affordable housing providers to help connect more low-income households (earning 80% or less of the area median income) to the benefits of community solar programs. Members of the Department of Energy's National Community Solar Partnership, Multifamily Affordable Housing Collaborative, have installed solar projects and partnered with local subscription programs to provide benefits to both affordable housing providers and the residents they serve. This tip sheet highlights resident engagement and outreach strategies used by Collaborative members to build trust in community solar programs and increase the number of subscribers among affordable housing residents.

### #1: ASSEMBLE YOUR TEAM

#### Tip: Identify and empower community solar champions within your organization

Affordable housing providers can start by working with potential internal champions. To increase individual participation, housing providers will need to build resident trust. Property managers and resident service coordinators interface with residents on a range of issues and can be trusted sources of information for community solar programs. They can also work with third-party consultants to design and execute engagement strategies.

#### Tip: Identify potential external partners with dedicated community solar subscription experience

While a housing provider may own the community solar project and have some technical expertise, administering community solar subscriptions and conducting resident outreach is a separate skill set. Collaborative members have found success engaging with residents through partnerships with organizations that are deeply experienced in working with communities and/or community solar subscription management. You may be able to identify potential partners through a government program or if your budget and timeline allow, independently partner with a subscription manager. Outreach strategies and goals should be developed collaboratively with partners. Collaborative Examples:

**Boulder Housing Partners** (BHP), a housing authority in Colorado, relied on its property management team to subscribe residents living at its

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## NATIONAL COMMUNITY SOLAR PARTNERSHIP



### DELIVERING THE BENEFITS OF SOLAR

Affordable housing residents can benefit from community solar projects through:

- Direct utility bill savings or indirect financial benefits
- Secondary benefits: Improved air quality in the community, increased green workforce opportunities

However, they face persistent barriers to participation, including, but not limited to:

- Lack of community trust due to power dynamics between residents and authority
- Language barriers
- Administrative burdens

Steps outlined in this tip sheet can help housing providers increase community solar program participation.

properties. Significant staff time was dedicated to conducting outreach to residents who lived at BHP-managed units with good success. For households not living in BHP-managed housing, BHP partnered with Energy Outreach Colorado, a community-based organization specializing in energy efficiency upgrades, to raise awareness of their community solar programs. Energy Outreach Colorado has established relationships with low-income communities in the region and has the processes, funding and programs in place to reach communities that would benefit from BHP's free community solar subscriptions.

Through the District of Columbia's Solar for All program, **National Housing Trust** (NHT) partnered with Groundswell, a third-party community solar nonprofit that is funded by DC government agencies. Groundswell conducts onsite and virtual outreach and also manages resident subscriptions for DC Solar for All. This no-cost partnership reduced NHT's staff time and cost to subscribe residents.

## #2: BUILD A RESIDENT-CENTERED STRATEGY

### Tip: Use key benefits to your tenant population to develop a outreach plan

Community solar benefits to residents may vary by the way the building is metered, and the location of the property. Before engaging in outreach, identify the key benefits to your population. At individually-metered units, residents are typically responsible for paying their electricity bills and may directly benefit from reduced utility costs, as well as indirectly benefit from a resilient, environmentally-friendly power source.

At “master-metered” properties where a single utility meter is used for multiple residential units or the entire building and the housing provider is typically responsible for the utility bills, residents may not need to subscribe in order to implement a community solar project. Providers should still consider keeping residents informed about their plans to implement solar and other sustainability projects. This could lead into a broader conversation with residents around the organization’s sustainability initiatives and how solar and efficiency upgrades can contribute to quality-of-life benefits for residents. Cost savings from solar can also be used to create a dedicated fund that support resident services, building upgrades, or credits off monthly rent. Decisions on proposed uses of these funds can be made with input from residents or a tenant board.

### Tip: Use multiple (existing) channels of communications to promote the program to residents

The way affordable housing residents receive information about community solar programs can impact their interest in participation. Engagement strategies should take into consideration the age, race, ethnicity, gender, and other characteristics of residents. Residents may have different levels of comfort and trust with different forms of engagement. Information should be available in languages spoken at the property and operators should consider using a range of channels including flyers, in-person meetings, one-on-one engagement, text and email. Collaborative Examples:

**Fifth Avenue Committee** (FAC) operates over 1,000 affordable rental homes serving a racially- and ethnically-diverse population in New York. FAC’s corporate staff created utility bill guidance in multiple languages - English, Spanish, and Chinese - to alleviate any concerns residents may have about the community solar program, its impact on their bills, and the option to opt-out.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the **New York City Housing Authority** (NYCHA) prioritized different modes of communications to promote its community solar program to NYCHA residents and income-eligible non-NYCHA residents. In collaboration with NYCHA’s solar partners, the housing authority found success using text or email blasts, virtual workshops and flyers. They also co-developed targeted ads and messaging to include on popular platforms, such as the FreshEBT benefits platform, to reach more residents.



Boulder Housing Partners' 628-kW community solar garden that is 100% dedicated to serving low-income residents in Boulder, CO

## #3: ADDRESS THE BARRIERS UPFRONT

### Tip: Make the program qualification and verification process easy for residents

Community solar programs typically offer discounted or no-cost subscriptions for income-qualified customers. However, the income qualification process can deter low-income households from applying for community solar subscriptions if it is overly burdensome. Residents already invest significant time in verifying eligibility for subsidized housing. Affordable housing providers can simplify the subscription process by implementing automatic enrollment or opt-out programs for residents, identifying proxies such as utility energy affordability program qualifications, and using internal resident application and income verification records to establish whole building eligibility. Where these qualification pathways are unavailable, providers are encouraged to advocate for these approaches. Collaborative Example:

**FAC Solar**, a solar development subsidiary of FAC, developed a community solar program for FAC’s affordable housing residents. They automatically registered all residents for community solar and pursued an opt-out approach for residents who did not want to participate. The FAC team managed resident verification processes and utility billing in coordination with its local utility, Con Edison.

### Tip: Review your (and your partner’s) community solar contract for key consumer protections

A lack of consumer-friendly contract terms and conditions can discourage participation in community solar and energy assistance programs for which affordable housing residents may be eligible. Housing providers can prioritize consumer protection from the start to alleviate residents’ concerns. Collaborative Example:

To encourage participation in **NYCHA**'s 30-MW community solar program, the Capital Projects team reviewed the terms and conditions of its program and added key consumer protection items. Consumer protection was an important piece of NYCHA's outreach plan. Consumer protection items include *no added fees, guaranteed bill savings, and easy, short-notice cancellation options without penalty for LMI residents*. NYCHA is currently working to advance this best practice with its local utility, Con Edison.



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