

Request for Information: Supporting Successful Solar Plus Storage Deployment Serving Low-Income and Disadvantaged Communities

DATE: January 23, 2024

SUBJECT: Request for Information (RFI)

Description

Through this RFI, the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) Solar Energy Technologies Office (SETO) seeks insight into the resources and support needed, through its existing or expanded work, to ensure successful outcomes of solar and storage deployment serving low-income and disadvantaged communities.

The Inflation Reduction Act has dedicated historic levels of funding to catalyze the development of solar programs nationwide that direct benefits towards low-income and disadvantaged communities (LIDAC). The SETO Workforce and Equitable Access (WEA) team seeks input on what nationally coordinated and supported resources are needed to ensure this historic investment in distributed solar leads to equitable and successful delivery of benefits through low-income residential solar plus storage, community solar, and other distributed solar located in or serving low-income and disadvantaged communities.

Background

Despite decreases in system costs, many U.S. households still lack access to affordable solar electricity—especially renters, homeowners who can't access affordable financing, and those without suitable roof conditions or adequate sun exposure. As of 2022, [only 12%](#) of residential rooftop solar adopters had household incomes below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level, a common threshold used for low-income program eligibility. Furthermore, when compared to all households in their respective state, solar adopters were 14% more likely to live outside of a disadvantaged community, and 67% more likely to own a single-family home. These inequitable adoption rates could pose challenges to meeting the Administration's clean energy deployment goals and miss the opportunity to provide meaningful reductions in household energy costs and other meaningful benefits for energy-burdened households.

In early 2021, President Biden issued [Executive Order 14008](#), which, among other actions, created a government-wide Justice40 Initiative with the goal of delivering 40 percent of the overall benefits of climate and clean energy investments to disadvantaged communities. Through this Executive Order, federal agencies were directed to make achieving environmental justice part of their missions by developing programs, policies, and activities to address the disproportionately high and adverse human health, environmental, climate-related, and other

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cumulative impacts on disadvantaged communities, as well as the accompanying economic challenges of such impacts. Since that time, SETO has expanded the [National Community Solar Partnership](#) to ensure community solar can deliver the following meaningful benefits: low-income household access and consumer protections, household savings, resilience, community ownership, and equitable workforce development and entrepreneurship to low-income and disadvantaged communities. These efforts to identify and scale the delivery of these meaningful benefits across distributed solar business models are bolstered by new stakeholder engagement efforts, such as the [Equitable Solar Communities of Practice](#), and opportunities created through new tax credits and programs under the Inflation Reduction Act.

In August of 2022, President Biden signed the Inflation Reduction Act into law, marking the most significant action Congress has taken on clean energy and climate change in the nation's history. Among other programs, the Inflation Reduction Act created the \$7 billion [Solar for All competition](#), a part of the EPA Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund designed to spur the deployment of residential distributed solar energy to lower energy bills for millions of Americans and catalyze transformation in markets serving low-income and disadvantaged communities. The Inflation Reduction Act also established the [Low-Income Communities Bonus Credit Program](#) which will promote cost-saving clean energy investments in low-income communities, on Indian land, as part of affordable housing developments, and benefitting low-income households, among other programs across the whole of government such as those at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), the EPA and across the Department of Energy (DOE).

For these historic investments to result in the successful delivery of meaningful benefits to low-income and disadvantaged communities, stakeholders across the solar industry will require additional resources, tools, and support. SETO has driven greater delivery of meaningful benefits through programming such as [SolSmart](#) and the [National Community Solar Partnership](#), and tools such as the [Community Power Accelerator](#), the [Low-Income Clean Energy Connector](#), and [SolarAPP+](#). Through this RFI, SETO seeks to inform future efforts to support equitable access to solar benefits, including technical assistance, resources, tools, analysis, and potentially additional funding.

Purpose

The purpose of this RFI is to solicit feedback from industry; state, territory, Tribal, and local government agencies; utilities; nonprofit organizations; solar developers and installers; solar industry organizations; subscriber management organizations; community-based organizations; financial institutions; philanthropic organizations; academia; research laboratories; advocacy

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organizations; community action agencies; environmental justice organizations; consumer protection agencies; community members; and other stakeholders on issues related to successfully deploying distributed solar and related technologies through industry, government, and utility-led programs designed to serve low-income and disadvantaged communities (LIDAC).

The term ‘**LIDAC Solar Deployment**’ refers to the deployment of community solar, low-income rooftop solar, and other distributed solar plus storage solutions (excluding utility scale) located in or benefiting low-income and disadvantaged communities.

Disclaimer and Important Notes

This RFI is not a Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA); therefore, the Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy (EERE) is not accepting applications at this time. EERE may issue a FOA in the future based on or related to the content and responses to this RFI; however, EERE may also elect not to issue a FOA. There is no guarantee that a FOA will be issued as a result of this RFI. Responding to this RFI does not provide any advantage or disadvantage to potential applicants if EERE chooses to issue a FOA regarding the subject matter.

Any information obtained as a result of this RFI is intended to be used by the Government on a non-attribution basis for planning and strategy development; this RFI does not constitute a formal solicitation for proposals or abstracts. Your response to this notice will be treated as information only. EERE will review and consider all responses in its formulation of program strategies for the identified materials of interest that are the subject of this request. EERE will not provide reimbursement for costs incurred in responding to this RFI. Respondents are advised that EERE is under no obligation to acknowledge receipt of the information received or provide feedback to respondents with respect to any information submitted under this RFI. Responses to this RFI do not bind EERE to any further actions related to this topic.

Confidential Business Information

Pursuant to 10 CFR 1004.11, any person submitting information that he or she believes to be confidential and exempt by law from public disclosure should submit via email, postal mail, or hand delivery two well-marked copies: one copy of the document marked “confidential” including all the information believed to be confidential, and one copy of the document marked “non-confidential” with the information believed to be confidential deleted. Submit these documents via email or on a CD, if feasible. DOE will make its own determination about the confidential status of the information and treat it according to its determination.

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Evaluation and Administration by Federal and Non-Federal Personnel

Federal employees are subject to the non-disclosure requirements of a criminal statute, the Trade Secrets Act, 18 USC 1905. The Government may seek the advice of qualified non-Federal personnel. The Government may also use non-Federal personnel to conduct routine, nondiscretionary administrative activities. The respondents, by submitting their response, consent to EERE providing their response to non-Federal parties. Non-Federal parties given access to responses must be subject to an appropriate obligation of confidentiality prior to being given the access. Submissions may be reviewed by support contractors and private consultants.

Request for Information Categories and Questions

For each of the categories listed below, feedback is sought to determine what the greatest challenges are amongst a wide variety of stakeholders, including (but not limited to) entities that design, administer, implement, participate in and/or benefit from LIDAC solar deployment. This RFI also seeks feedback on what types of coordination, tools and resources will be needed for each of these stakeholders to meet department and administration priorities related to equitable access to solar and equitable distribution of its benefits. “Resources” in the context of this RFI is not meant to refer to additional funding for these programs; it refers to technical assistance, informational and other reference materials or tools to help with the implementation of programs at their currently appropriated levels.

SETO recognizes that overall LIDAC solar deployment success requires that many different stakeholder groups be engaged, supported, and receive meaningful and sustained benefits. Respondents should indicate what the greatest challenges are for the different stakeholder groups they may identify with, work with, or represent and what resources are needed to overcome them, especially noting where national coordination or federal administration of such resources will be most effective.

Category 1: Maximizing Impact

LIDAC solar deployment efforts can seek to maximize the number and diversity of customers served, solar and storage systems deployed, the household savings realized, the number of workers trained, the number of quality jobs created (including both near-term jobs such as installers or electricians, and long-term jobs such as customer relations or operations and maintenance), while ensuring that households and communities receive meaningful benefits.

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1. What are the greatest roadblocks to achieving maximum impact in LIDAC solar deployment efforts? What is standing in the way of achieving deployment and impact efforts listed above?
2. What are some potential solutions to these roadblocks that are supported by communities, solar industry, and utilities?
3. What types of tools or resources will be most helpful in addressing these roadblocks and implementing solutions? In addition, who should develop and own these tools and resources to ensure long-term availability and accuracy? Please consider and note where national coordination or administration of such resources (versus resources that would be applicable to one program only) would be most effective.

Category 2: Customer Satisfaction

Successful LIDAC solar deployment efforts strive to ensure a positive customer experience throughout the lifetime of the project. The lifetime of the project includes initial awareness, outreach and education, the application and verification of eligibility processes, access to financing, equipment installation and interconnection, understanding utility bills, understanding contracts and/or subscription payments, long-term operation and maintenance, and robust and ongoing customer service and support. Likelihood of success in this area is increased through effective stakeholder engagement, formation of partnerships with community-based organizations, standardization of educational materials, appropriate consumer disclosures and contracts, development and delivery of tailored [Community Benefits Plans](#), strong customer feedback loops, and enforcement of consumer protections, among others.

Poor customer experiences can threaten the success of LIDAC solar deployment including poor installation quality, untimely interconnection, permitting, and inspection processes, consumer unfamiliarity with system operation, and unfamiliarity with or inability to contact the installers or owners of their system for any reason. Unfair or deceptive business practices like aggressive sales tactics, predatory lending practices, or harmful contract terms can be additional risks to building customer trust and adoption.

1. Building on or adding to the risks mentioned above, what are the current issues which are negatively impacting the customer experience in LIDAC solar deployment?

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2. How can LIDAC solar deployment efforts ensure that stakeholder engagement and Community Benefit Plans deliver on what they promise and result in a positive customer experience and positive impact?
3. What types of tools or resources will be most helpful for addressing these roadblocks and ensuring success in this area of customer satisfaction? In addition, who should develop and own these tools and resources to ensure long-term availability and accuracy? Please consider and note where national coordination or administration of such resources (versus resources that would be applicable to one program only) would be most effective.

Category 3: Workforce and Entrepreneurship Opportunities

LIDAC solar deployment efforts and programs require a robust workforce ecosystem, which can be supported through development of multi-sectoral partnerships, coordination with labor unions, recruitment and retention of workers from low-income and disadvantaged communities, effective training and apprenticeship programs, and support for businesses to enter into and succeed in the industry across all markets and geographies, all while maintaining compliance with applicable labor regulations such as Davis-Bacon and Related Acts.

1. What are the greatest challenges to achieving a robust industry ecosystem across all markets and geographies to support LIDAC solar deployment and why? This ecosystem includes both the individuals in the workforce and the businesses that support them.
2. What types of tools or resources will be most helpful for achieving success in this area? In addition, who should develop and own these tools and resources to ensure long-term availability and accuracy? Please consider and note where national coordination or administration of such resources (versus resources that would be applicable to one program only) would be most effective.

Category 4: Long-term Success & Sustainability

Well-designed and executed LIDAC solar deployment efforts have the potential to achieve true market transformation and deliver long-term customer satisfaction, create a robust solar industry across markets and geographies, and result in the installation of safe and reliable systems that will operate and provide continued benefits well beyond the expiration of any subsidies or tax credits.

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1. What are the greatest threats to the long-term success and sustainability of LIDAC solar programs and deployment efforts?
2. What types of tools or resources will be most helpful for mitigating these threats and ensuring long-term success and sustainability? Please consider and note where national coordination or administration of such resources (versus resources that would be applicable to one program only) would be most effective.

Category 5: Relation to Current Programs & Resources

1. How can existing programs and resources across DOE be disseminated more effectively so they can be leveraged for LIDAC solar deployment success?
2. How can existing programs and resources provided by SETO be improved to be more accessible or impactful to stakeholders in the LIDAC solar deployment space?

Request for Information Response Guidelines

Responses to this RFI must be submitted electronically to equitablesolar@ee.doe.gov no later than 5:00pm (ET) on February 23, 2024. Responses must be provided as attachments to an email. It is recommended that attachments with file sizes exceeding 25MB be compressed (i.e., zipped) to ensure message delivery. Responses must be provided as a Microsoft Word (.docx) attachment to the email, and no more than 7 pages in length, 12-point font, 1-inch margins. **Only electronic responses will be accepted.**

Please identify your answers by responding to a specific question or topic if applicable. Respondents may answer as many or as few questions as they wish.

EERE will not respond to individual submissions or publish publicly a compendium of responses. A response to this RFI will not be viewed as a binding commitment to develop or pursue the project or ideas discussed.

Respondents are requested to provide the following information at the start of their response to this RFI:

- Company / institution name.
- Company / institution contact.
- Contact's address, phone number, and e-mail address.

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