



LEADING WITH EQUITY

Recommendations for Utilities and Regulators to Advance Energy Equity

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ACEEE's Leading with Equity Initiative

Too many Americans, who already face rising costs for transportation and other necessities, are struggling to pay their energy bills because they live in inefficient buildings. Utilities and regulators can use this document to address this problem and advance an equitable energy future by making comprehensive energy-saving programs and services accessible to communities of color and low-income communities. The actions we describe here will also help utilities and regulators better include historically disinvested communities in energy planning and decision making.

The following recommendations were informed by ACEEE’s [Leading with Equity](#) initiative. This initiative convenes community-based organizations (CBOs) and advocates to [ensure that the communities most negatively impacted by the energy system](#) are helping to drive development of improved equity-related metrics in ACEEE’s scorecards, as well as to drive proposed changes in our other research. Here, these experts share ways that decision makers, including utilities and regulators, can take action and make necessary changes to build an equitable energy future (figure 1).

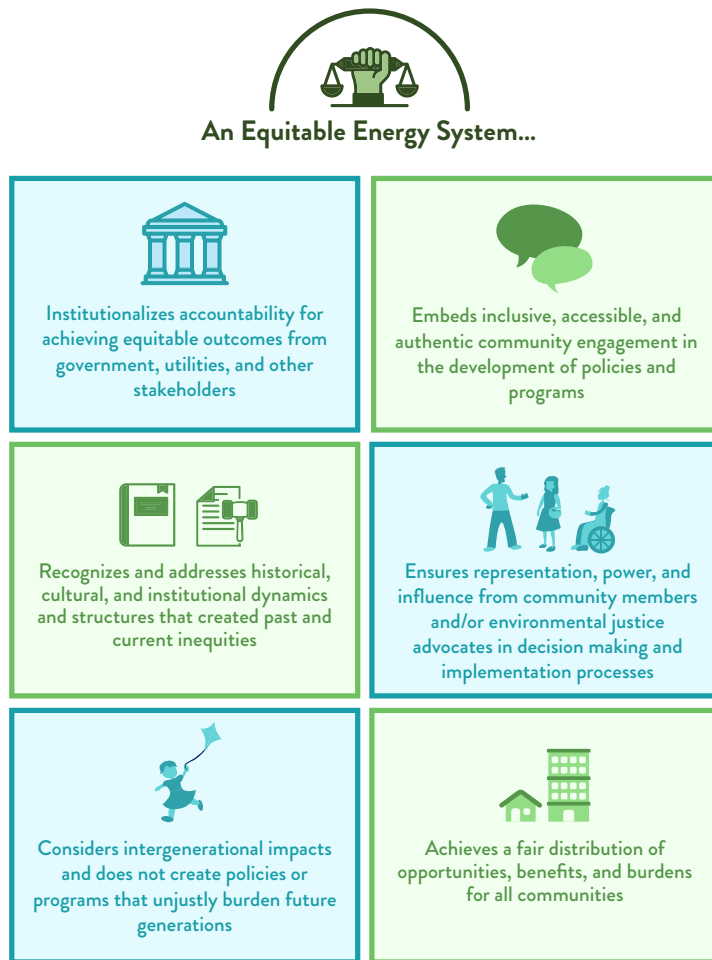


Figure 1. Identifying an equitable energy system

Findings: Recommendations for Utilities

Utilities will play a critical role in addressing the inequities that have left too many communities—especially low-income communities and communities of color—with high energy burdens, inconsistent energy access, and high exposure to polluting energy infrastructure. CBO participants recommend that utilities and regulators take the following actions to advance a more equitable energy future:



Prioritize robust community engagement and allow disinvested communities to drive decisions. To do this successfully, utilities should consider details such as the mechanisms, times, locations, and fair compensation for engagement; ensure that residents are being reached in a culturally competent way; and proactively reach out to community members to ensure that there are no significant barriers that prevent vulnerable communities from finding information and receiving utility services.



Set and use clear definitions for goals and targeted customers—and make the goals ambitious. When setting program goals or targeting efforts to particular customer groups, clearly state the definitions your organization is using and base them on community input. For example, avoid setting a goal to reach “marginalized” households without clearly stating which households fall under that designation. Use [environmental justice screening tools](#) to align your work with best practices.



Make decisions based on local context. For example, base your language accessibility efforts on the languages spoken in the target area. Use community engagement as a tool to gather this information.



Track and clearly state the non-energy benefits of your initiatives. Instead of aiming to generate unspecified co-benefits, define the benefits (such as reduced asthma rates or more high-quality jobs) in coordination with community members and use metrics to monitor progress (or partner with other entities to do so).



Monitor the distribution of your programs' costs and benefits across groups. This should include tracking how much of your spending goes directly to serving and benefiting residents, and the distribution of energy savings for disinvested communities.



Embed accountability, including benchmarks, metrics, and evaluations, into your processes. Make clear and concrete commitments, using metrics that community members understand. For example, set a specific goal for energy affordability or program participation (such as reducing energy burden by a particular amount or achieving a defined participation rate in an efficiency program); clearly state how it will be measured; monitor changes; and adjust your approach based on the results. Also, share results publicly and transparently, even if you are not on track to meet your goals. Such sharing builds trust with customers and helps accurately track your progress.



To streamline program accessibility, **attempt to auto-enroll vulnerable customers into energy efficiency programs and favorable rate plans using thresholds for other means-tested services, or allow enrollment services by other agencies.** For example, utilities can allow people enrolled in federal programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), to automatically enroll in their energy efficiency programs. Engaging with community members and organizations can help to develop a process that best reduces barriers.



Include program measures to reduce health and safety deferrals from the start. This will help ensure that the program includes—rather than excludes—the households that could most benefit from energy efficiency programs.



Make an explicit effort to target the particular needs of multifamily properties. This effort might include offering program carve-outs for multifamily properties.



Work with policymakers to reduce the possibility of neighborhood displacement due to energy efficiency upgrades. Such upgrades can lead to increased housing costs and rents; to avoid this, utilities can support [policies](#) and [approaches](#) that address gentrification and preserve residents' ability to stay in their homes and communities. These policies and approaches can be developed in coordination with community members.



When including households with moderate incomes in a program's goals, **acknowledge the differences in resources between moderate- and low-income households and set program structures and budgets accordingly.**