

Bronx & Brooklyn Energy Hub – Building a Bridge to the Clean Energy Economy for All New Yorkers

Pedro Barry, Association for Energy Affordability, Inc.
Tania Hidalgo, Association for Energy Affordability, Inc.
Phillip Opsasnick, Association for Energy Affordability, Inc.
Nick Young, Association for Energy Affordability, Inc.

ABSTRACT

For many families in disadvantaged communities, the promise of clean energy has felt out of reach. While energy improvements can lower bills, improve comfort, and create healthier living spaces, residents often face barriers to access clean energy whether from upfront costs, lack of information, or programs that don't fully reflect community needs. From this perspective, the clean energy transition is not only about technology but about fairness, opportunity, and empowerment.

The Bronx & Brooklyn Energy Hub (BBEH) is one of twelve Hubs under NYSERDA's statewide Clean Energy Hubs program and serves as the largest population of low-income New Yorkers of any Hub. Since 2022, we have been working to enable new energy technologies and programs to better serve all New Yorkers, particularly those historically left behind. We will demonstrate how efficiency upgrades and advanced equipment can ease the burden of high utility bills, how improved housing and weather resilience can bring greater security, and how job training and workforce development can open pathways to steady employment in the clean energy economy. Throughout our Hub's work, education, awareness, and inclusive engagement ensure that solutions are shaped by the voices of those who live with the greatest energy burdens. BBEH has utilized many novel approaches to community engagement, from arts festivals and comic books, as well as more technology-driven strategies like community solar and electrification of low-income housing. Our presentation will show that energy improvements are not just about reducing costs, but about creating equity, opportunity, and dignity for every household and community.

Introduction

New York City is often described through superlatives—density, diversity, scale, and ambition. From the air, it appears to be a marvel of electrification: miles of illuminated streets, towers, and neighborhoods operating in near-constant motion. Yet for those who grow up and live within the city, particularly in historically disadvantaged communities, this brightness can obscure as much as it reveals.

In our line of work, we've seen that many urban New Yorkers do not fully recognize that they have grown up in poverty until later in life. This delayed realization can be quite intrusive, as poverty in New York City does not always look like deprivation. Instead, the structures and experiences of poverty are often layered into otherwise vibrant neighborhoods, embedded within aging building stock, overcrowded housing, and systems that normalize high energy burdens as unavoidable. The city's extraordinary architectural diversity—pre-war multifamily buildings,

post-war public housing, small one- to four-family homes, and dense mixed-use corridors—creates equally diverse energy challenges that require creative solutions.

For NYC residents, daily life unfolds amid a volume of people, buildings, and infrastructure that can feel overwhelming. This intensity is compounded by persistent and interconnected social conditions: concentrated poverty, structural racism, public safety concerns, and widespread unmet mental health needs. These realities shape how residents experience and prioritize energy. While electrification and decarbonization are essential to climate change, they often compete with more immediate concerns such as rent stability, personal safety, food security, and housing quality. As a result, energy efficiency understandably takes a back seat.

This context matters. Programs with long, rigorous, and intrusive requirements make it difficult for residents to receive the assistance they need. While some organizations and agencies have begun a process to try and rectify the barriers of entry, there's still a lot more to do. In New York City, advancing energy efficiency requires trust, cultural competence, and an understanding of where communities are starting from.

This paper explores the challenges we encounter, the ways our strategies have evolved, and the insights we continue to gain as members of BBEH. It contends that equitable decarbonization in dense urban environments demands solutions that integrate social considerations with technical expertise. Achieving lasting impact requires sustained community partnerships and a willingness to adapt based on community needs and feedback.

NYSERDA Energy Hubs

The New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA) funded twelve hubs across the state of New York to focus on outreach, education, and engagement at a local level, so New Yorkers, especially those who have been historically disadvantaged, can benefit from awareness and access to energy programs and initiatives. Out of the twelve state hubs three are in New York City, the Manhattan Energy hub, The Queens and Staten Island hub and the hub we will be mostly referring to in this paper the Bronx and Brooklyn Energy Hub (BBEH).

Our organization, the Association for Energy Affordability (AEA), is a non-profit that specializes in decarbonization and weatherization for low to moderate income households in New York City. While AEA is the prime contractor for BBEH, we are partnered with two city-wide non-profit organizations, Solar One and The Center for NYC neighborhoods. Solar One works toward environmental equity and clean energy development with programs in environmental education, green workforce training, and accessible solar installation. The Center for NYC Neighborhoods focuses primarily on affordable housing and homeownership for low-to moderate-income families.

The responsibility of the BBEH is to serve the following audiences, multifamily property owners, 1-to-4-unit homeowners, renters in both of the aforementioned categories, small business/nonprofit, and jobseekers. To fulfill this responsibility, we needed to establish an intake process, a team of energy advisors (EA's) that could assist and guide city residents according to their needs, and an outreach team that would be able to create and participate in existing relevant energy programming.

Serving these two densely populated boroughs required us to collaborate with experienced and established community organizations. We subcontracted four additional organizations that fall into two categories of non-profit organizations: large community-based human services organizations and localized community development corporations. For the

former, we are working with CAMBA's Brooklyn team and in the Bronx with BronxWorks. Both are well-staffed, multi-service, government contracted organizations that were founded in the 1970s, remain strongly connected to community and local neighborhoods, and continue to provide a wide range of social services and wraparound resources to low-income and underserved residents of their respective boroughs. The other two community organizations belong to the Neighborhood Housing Services (NHS) network, NHS Brooklyn and NHS Bronx, both of which are localized Community Development Corporations (CDCs). A CDC is a particular type of non-profit organization that not only services families and individual community members but works to stabilize the wider socio-economic infrastructure that conditions the community environment and overall well-being of a specific geographic region, such as a neighborhood or borough. CDCs seek to change the material and economic conditions that define the wealth of a community and do so by working with families, community members, and small businesses to build physical assets through homeownership programs, affordable housing development, local economic investment, and general property improvement. They are often guided by a board of directors who are longstanding community residents, rather than government officials or professionals from outside of that community.

Before launching, NYSERDA required the Bronx and Brooklyn Energy Hub (BBEH) to conduct a Regional Assessment and Barriers Analysis (RABA) to identify challenges and opportunities related to clean energy adoption in disadvantaged communities. Through research, surveys, and focus groups, the RABA provided critical insights that informed the hub's outreach, education, and engagement strategies. In response, BBEH assembled a team of energy advisors, workforce specialists, and outreach professionals to serve homeowners, renters, small businesses, nonprofits, and jobseekers across both boroughs. NYSERDA also provided funding for community campaigns and pilot projects, allowing the hub to develop innovative solutions that addressed barriers identified in the RABA. The following sections highlight several of the most impactful initiatives and lessons learned from this work.

1. Barriers

The RABA identified several barriers to clean energy adoption, including aging housing stock, limited awareness of available programs, language-access challenges, and high energy burdens. For many Bronx and Brooklyn residents, energy concerns compete with more immediate needs such as housing, food security, health, and safety, making participation in even no-cost programs difficult.

Trust and information gaps further reduce engagement. Residents often report confusion caused by overlapping programs and technical language, while historical disinvestment has contributed to skepticism toward new initiatives. The findings suggest that awareness alone is insufficient; effective strategies must also build trust, provide support, and address broader inequities. A key challenge across both boroughs is the prevalence of older, energy-inefficient housing (see Figure 1). Pre-war multifamily buildings, small homes, and public housing developments frequently suffer from deferred maintenance and outdated systems. Renters also face barriers such as split incentives and concerns about displacement, further limiting participation in energy-efficiency programs.

1.1 Housing Stock and Building Complexity

The Bronx and Brooklyn contain some of the oldest and most heterogeneous housing stock in New York State.¹ Pre-war multifamily buildings, small one- to four-family homes, informal basement units, and large-scale public housing developments coexist within the same neighborhoods. The region’s aging and heterogeneous housing stock presents a foundational barrier. See Figure 1 for four charts graphing the age of 1–4-unit buildings in the Bronx and Brooklyn, as well as the average household annual energy costs. Many buildings suffer from deferred maintenance, poor insulation, outdated heating systems, and electrical infrastructure that is insufficient for electrification upgrades.² Renters—particularly in rent-stabilized or informal units—face split incentives and fear displacement, limiting participation in efficiency programs.

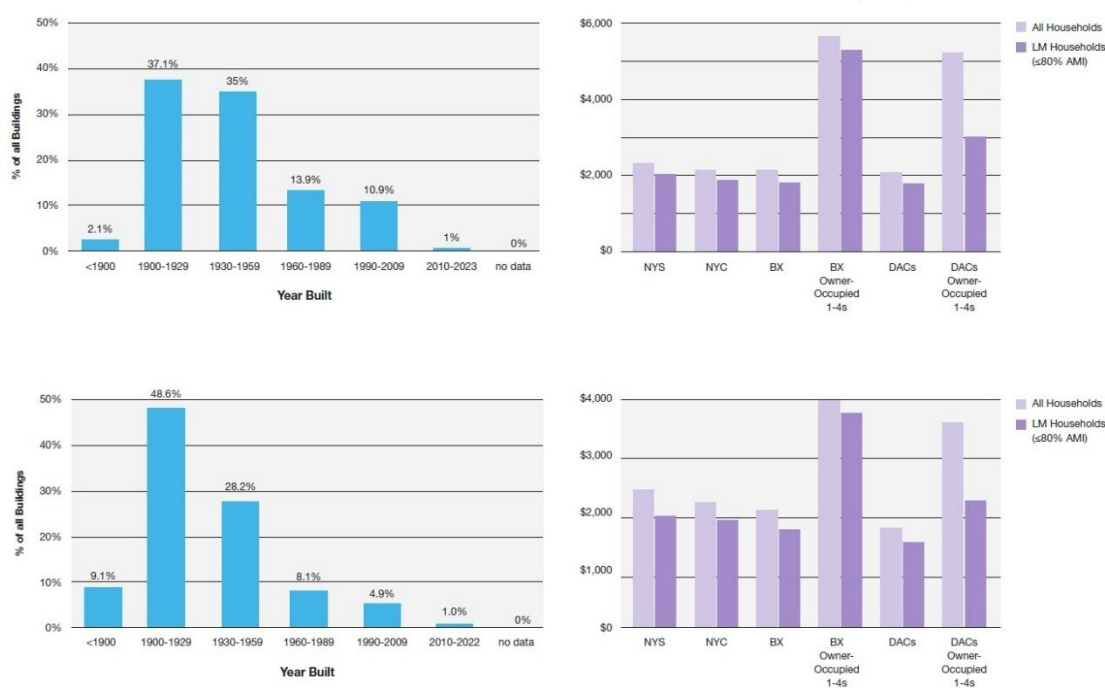


Figure 1. Charts graphing (1) the age of 1–4-unit buildings in the Bronx (2) the age of 1-4 unit buildings in Brooklyn (3) the average household annual energy cost in the Bronx (4) the average household annual energy cost in Brooklyn. *Source:* RABA, 2025.

RABA findings consistently show that residents often experience chronic discomfort—drafts, uneven heating, moisture, and high utility bills yet lack clarity about whether their building is eligible for improvements or who is responsible for upgrades. In rental housing, particularly in rent-stabilized or informally occupied units, tenants are frequently reluctant to pursue energy improvements for fear of retaliation, rent increases, or eviction. This “split incentive” between landlords and tenants remains a central barrier in dense urban markets.

1.2 Energy Burden, Poverty, and Competing Priorities

¹ Tara Duvivier, Sydney Tiemann, Valeria Milesi, and Sylvia Morse, *Review of Regional Assessment & Barriers Analysis: Bronx & Brooklyn Regional Clean Energy Hub*, ed. Sydney Tiemann and Eleanor Lauderback (New York: Pratt Center, 2025), p.11.

² Duvivier et al., *Review of Regional Assessment & Barriers Analysis*, 4.

Bronx and Brooklyn residents experience some of the highest energy burdens in the state, with utility costs consuming a disproportionate share of household income.³ However, RABA data and field engagement reveal that energy costs are rarely viewed in isolation. Residents are simultaneously navigating housing instability, food insecurity, public safety concerns, childcare responsibilities, and health challenges.

According to the Bronx/Brooklyn Regional Assessment and Barriers Analysis (RABA), the average energy burden for all households in New York State is approximately 2% of household income, while low- and moderate-income (LMI) households average 6%. In contrast, the average energy burden for households in the Bronx is 4%—double the statewide average—and rises to 5% for owner-occupied 1–4 family homes, with low- and moderate-income owner households facing an energy burden of up to 12%, among the highest documented in the state. The challenge is even more pronounced in disadvantaged communities (DACs), where average energy burdens remain around 4% overall and 6% for LMI households. These figures illustrate that many Bronx residents devote a substantially larger share of their income to meeting basic energy needs than the average New Yorker.

A broader New York City analysis found that approximately 18% of all NYC families are energy burdened, defined as spending more than 6% of household income on utilities. The Bronx has the highest concentration of energy-burdened households in the city, with approximately 23% of Bronx families exceeding this threshold, compared with the citywide average of 18%. Among lower-income households, the burden is even more severe.

In this context, energy efficiency—despite its long-term benefits—often falls behind more immediate survival needs. Even no cost or low-cost programs can feel inaccessible when enrollment requires documentation, appointments, or time away from work. The promise of future savings does not always outweigh present-day uncertainty.

1.3 Trust Deficits and Information Gaps

A recurring theme in RABA and Hub engagement is the lack of trusted, consistent sources of information. Many residents report confusion stemming from overlapping programs, changing eligibility rules, and communications that rely heavily on technical or bureaucratic language. This confusion is exacerbated by negative past experiences with institutions, contractors, or programs that failed to deliver promised outcomes.

In communities that have experienced decades of disinvestment, skepticism toward new initiatives—particularly those branded as “clean energy” or “climate”—is both rational and widespread. Residents often ask, “Who is this really for? What is the catch? Will this affect my rent?” Without trusted intermediaries and culturally competent outreach, even well-designed programs struggle to gain traction.

1.4 Structural Racism and Urban Disinvestment

³ Mayor’s Office of Climate & Environmental Justice, accessed June 13, 2026, <https://www.nyc.gov/content/climate/pages/energy-infrastructure>.

The spatial distribution of energy inefficiency in New York City closely mirrors patterns of historic redlining, segregation, and public disinvestment.⁴ Communities of color in the Bronx and Brooklyn are more likely to live in inefficient buildings, face higher energy burdens, and experience environmental stressors such as poor air quality and urban heat islands.⁵

These structural conditions cannot be addressed solely through technology deployment. RABA findings underscore that awareness without agency does little to change outcomes. Programs that do not explicitly account for racial and economic inequities risk reinforcing them by privileging households with greater capacity to navigate complex systems. As a result, we actively endeavor to meet our constituents where they are at, in their current understanding, rather than employ inaccessible language and communications media around energy needs and technologies that can be received as irrelevant, bureaucratically tedious, or difficult to understand. We've found that the language and forms of communication that we use are critical in connecting and building trust with community, such that community members understand the resources that can support their needs and feel confident in accessing them. This often involves intentional and strategic communications and marketing design that is relevant and inclusive of varied age and cultural demographics. Without this more nuanced and intentional approach, publicly available resources are often granted to or accessed by the more privileged demographics of a community or identity group.⁶ Multilingual outreach: Providing materials in Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, Russian, and other commonly spoken languages significantly expands access for residents who may not be comfortable navigating English only-language resources.

Trusted community messengers: We partner with neighborhood-based organizations, faith-based institutions, tenant associations, libraries, schools, and organizations such as YMCA increases credibility and improves participation because residents are more likely to trust information delivered by familiar local organizations.

We also reinforce messages through multiple media channels. Combining printed flyers, regional media outlets, community newspapers, local radio, text messaging, social media ads, and word-of-mouth outreach reaches populations that may not rely on a single source of information.

1.5 Mental Health, Instability, and Program Engagement

Finally, on-the-ground practice reveals a barrier that is rarely named in program design: the prevalence of acute stress, trauma, and untreated mental illness in urban communities. For many residents, sustained engagement with multi-step energy programs is difficult amid instability. Missed appointments, incomplete applications, or disengagement are often misinterpreted as a lack of interest, rather than reflections of lived reality. Effective clean energy engagement in New York City must therefore recognize that participation is shaped not only by incentives and awareness, but by broader conditions of stability, trust, and support.

2. Initial Approach

⁴ NYSERDA Interactive Map of Disadvantaged Communities, accessed June 13, 2026, <https://www.nyserda.ny.gov/ny/Disadvantaged-Communities>.

⁵ Duvivier et al., *Review of Regional Assessment & Barriers Analysis*, 57.

⁶ Olúfẹ̀mí O. Táíwò, *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took over Identity Politics (and Everything Else)* (London: Pluto Press, 2022).

The Bronx and Brooklyn Energy Hub (BBEH)'s initial strategy for addressing barriers focused on covering the most immediate and visible challenges. We began by subcontracting trusted local community organizations to build credibility and establish a foundation of trust with residents. As established earlier, our subcontractors are trusted institutions in their respective boroughs. We collaborated by joining their already established community events and tabling to spread the word about clean energy, such as resource festivals, public education events with local elected officials, career fairs, and virtual webinars for rebate programs and renewable energy incentives.

We also invested in creating an appealing and recognizable brand identity, ensuring all outreach materials were translated into multiple languages that reflect the diverse communities we serve. As we transitioned into our responsibilities outlined in the NYSERDA contract, we expected these measures to provide a solid starting point. Our Hub's marketing team, along with a graphic design consultant, worked for months to create a vibrant brand that appealed to our audience. They created a website, flyers, templates, giveaways, and other branded outreach materials.

The branding featured vibrant colors to capture the energy and diversity of New York City while attracting attention. The logo incorporates intersecting lines inspired by the NYC subway system, symbolizing both connectivity and the Bronx and Brooklyn Energy Hub's role in linking communities to energy resources and opportunities.



Figure 2. (1) Brooklyn Energy Hub Logo (2) Sample imagery for digital marketing. *Source:* Kudos, Brand Guide

While the initial materials were successful in generating interest, community feedback indicated a need for clearer, more concise messaging and imagery that felt more relatable and reflective of the audiences we serve.

Our staff began training to become energy advisors and learn about NYSERDA and other relevant clean energy programs. Energy advisors began to address the opportunities captured in the program's data collection platform. Opportunities that were initiated by community members who attended events or completed our digital intake form. The workforce segment began having job fair events in the identified disadvantaged communities.

We organized and held energy literacy workshops. These presentations informed the public about NYSERDA programs and clean energy technology but also gave tools to make small home upgrades by providing free energy savings kits. The kits include 2 LED light bulbs, a door sweep, outlet foam gaskets, power strip, window insulation kit, foam tape and weatherstripping, the only requirements for participants were to sit through the entirety of the

workshop and fill out an energy action plan. We also provided dinner or snacks depending on the time of day of workshop.

Through our initial approach, we were able to introduce the Bronx and Brooklyn Energy Hub and build awareness within the communities we serve. Our subcontracted local community organizations played a critical role in these efforts. Their established relationships and trusted presence within the community enabled us to connect with residents more quickly and effectively. The feedback we received from these organizations was instrumental in refining our communications strategy and improving our outreach materials to better resonate with our audience.

The Energy Literacy Workshops were engaging and informative for participants, and the free energy kits were a significant draw. Equally valuable was the opportunity to connect with an energy advisor, a trusted, knowledgeable person who could provide personalized guidance and address questions about energy burdens and available resources.

3. Improvements Over Time

NYSERDA provided each hub with dedicated funding for community campaigns and local pilot projects. These resources allowed the Bronx and Brooklyn Energy Hub to develop targeted, innovative strategies designed to address the barriers identified through the RABA. Building on our existing outreach and engagement efforts, we launched the following community campaigns and pilot projects.

3.1 Information Overload: Community Solar Campaign

Our outreach, engagement, and enrollment efforts focus on New York City residents, particularly those in Brooklyn and the Bronx who participate in SNAP, Medicaid, the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program, Con Edison's Energy Assistance Program, and/or live in NYCHA properties while paying their own electric utility bills. To effectively reach these populations, we utilize targeted advertising through mobile applications used by SNAP and EBT recipients. In addition, we have incorporated community solar education into our energy literacy workshops, allowing participants to gain a deeper understanding of the program and receive hands-on assistance with the enrollment process.

3.2 Housing Stock: Barrio Solar Mini-Grant for Brooklyn Residents

The Bronx Brooklyn Energy Hub (BBEH) successfully implemented the Barrio Solar Mini-Grant Program to expand access to rooftop solar for low- and moderate-income homeowners residing in one- to four-family homes in Brooklyn. The initiative was designed to address one of the most significant barriers to residential solar adoption, upfront cost, by providing financial assistance, education, and individualized technical support throughout the decision-making process.

BBEH connected eligible homeowners with reputable solar providers and helped participants understand the financial, technical, and environmental benefits of rooftop solar. Residents received guidance on available incentives, financing options, and the differences between purchasing and leasing solar systems, enabling them to make informed decisions based on their individual circumstances.

3.3 Housing Stock: Full Electrification – Multi-Family Portfolio in the South Bronx

BBEH is providing funding to support the electrification of a portfolio of three affordable housing buildings in the Hunts Point neighborhood of the Bronx. These properties meet the income-eligibility requirements of the Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP), with at least 66% of residents earning 60% or less of the State Median Income.

The community campaign will help close a critical funding gap, enabling the project to fully electrify the heating systems. Additional improvements will include energy efficiency upgrades, electrification of the domestic hot water systems, and the installation of energy-efficient appliances.

To maximize the project's impact and promote broader adoption of building electrification, the property owner has agreed to host BBEH-led open houses for building owners, contractors, and operations staff. These events will provide participants with an opportunity to view the installed equipment, learn best practices for operation and maintenance, and better understand the benefits and real-world impacts of electrification and energy-efficiency upgrades.

3.4 Language Barrier: Youth Outreach (La Borinqueña)

The RABA report identified language and cultural barriers that prevent more than half of the residents in the Bronx and Brooklyn from accessing information and resources that can help make their homes more energy efficient. To address these challenges, BBEH is partnering with graphic novelist Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez, creator of *La Borinqueña*, a superhero and Columbia University student studying Earth and Environmental Sciences who lives with her family in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Drawing her powers from the history, culture, and mysticism of Puerto Rico, *La Borinqueña* promotes themes of environmental stewardship, community resilience, and social responsibility. Building on these themes, BBEH and Miranda-Rodriguez are collaborating to develop a bilingual coloring and activity book for young readers that integrates energy-efficiency and sustainability messaging into an engaging and culturally relevant format.

To better reflect the diverse communities of Brooklyn and the Bronx, the book incorporated Spanish, French, Haitian Creole, and Russian words and phrases, helping to make energy education more accessible to families from the Caribbean, West African, Haitian, and Eastern European backgrounds.

BBEH launched the book through community events in both boroughs and distributed copies at family- and youth-focused gatherings, including back-to-school fairs, environmental education events, and neighborhood festivals. By engaging children and families through a trusted cultural figure, the initiative aims to increase awareness of energy efficiency and encourage conversations about sustainability in the home.

Outreach tools like this have proven effective in engaging younger audiences while enabling parents to participate more actively in energy literacy programming. By using familiar language and relatable characters, the book helps children see themselves represented, creating a more meaningful and lasting connection to the material.

The coloring book has been an effective outreach tool for engaging children and, in turn, their parents and guardians. By providing a fun, age-appropriate activity, the book helps capture

children's attention and creates a welcoming environment for families at events. As children interact with the content, parents and guardians often become more interested in learning about the BBEH and the resources available to them.



Figure 3. (1) Cover of La Borinqueña coloring book (2) Children coloring in oversized prints of coloring book at community event. *Source: Somos Arte, Redhaven Media*

3.5 Information Overload: Tenant Advocacy in the Bronx and Brooklyn

The Tenant Power local pilot project engages with renters in disadvantaged communities (DAC)s to address the inequitable distribution of educational information regarding clean energy technologies and programs, participation in clean energy upgrades, and attendance of educational events. The Tenant Power local pilot project aims to address these disparities by partnering with local community-based organizations (CBOs), tenant unions and associations, and tenant rights groups. The strategy involves conducting surveys and focus groups to understand the status of tenant's campaigns, the severity of the need for energy upgrades, and to identify effective communication methods tenants can use with landlords.

Based on the results of the surveys BBEH began to create a tool kit for renters. These materials will include sample language for communicating with landlords and information for landlords about engaging with NYSERDA programs and BBEH. The pilot project will experiment with several communication strategies to determine the most effective approach based on tenant feedback. The idea is to have tenants utilize the toolkit and let us know what has worked most effectively for them. This approach aims to bridge the gap between tenants' immediate needs (e.g., home repairs) and the long-term goal of decarbonizing buildings, thus fostering deeper engagement with clean energy initiatives. It will also serve as a tool for BBEH energy advisors to use as an offering to tenants or as a guide to make more referrals to various programs.

Feedback collected through surveys and focus groups has been incorporated into the Tenant Power Toolkit, which is currently in production.

3.6 Trust Deficits: NYC Climate Champions Program

The program was designed to increase climate literacy, strengthen leadership skills, and raise awareness of energy-efficiency programs among young adults. Through a partnership with the Castle Hill YMCA in the Bronx, BBEH provided high school students with specialized training to become Energy Efficiency Ambassadors.

Upon completing a month-long training program, participants gained the knowledge, communication skills, and confidence needed to lead multilingual energy-efficiency workshops and represent BBEH at community events throughout the Bronx. In these roles, ambassadors will help educate residents about energy-saving practices, available incentive programs, and opportunities to reduce household energy costs.

BBEH funded all aspects of the program, including training, transportation, and stipends for participating students. Ambassadors will also play an active role in shaping community outreach efforts by identifying and recommending locations for energy literacy workshops, ensuring that programming is delivered where it can have the greatest impact. Through this initiative, young people serve as trusted community leaders while gaining valuable workforce development and public engagement experience.

The results of this pilot project have far exceeded our expectations. Whenever the Champions present, there is a palpable level of energy and engagement in the room. Audience members are genuinely invested in their success, listening attentively, asking thoughtful questions, and actively participating in the discussion. The Champions bring a unique authenticity to the presentations that resonates with participants and creates a more meaningful learning experience.

Perhaps the most rewarding outcome has been the growth and enthusiasm demonstrated by the Champions themselves. They have taken tremendous pride in learning the material and developing the skills needed to share it with others. Many have dedicated significant time to studying the content, practicing their presentations, and building their confidence as public speakers. Their commitment is evident in the way they engage with audiences, welcoming questions, sharing their knowledge, and demonstrating a genuine eagerness to educate and inspire others.

Watching them evolve from participants into knowledgeable ambassadors has been one of the clearest indicators of the program's success. Their enthusiasm is contagious, and their ability to connect with community members has helped create a more relatable and impactful educational experience for everyone involved.

3.7 Trust Deficits: BX/BK Arts Festival

In response to the RABA finding that language and cultural barriers prevent many New Yorkers from accessing critical information, we organized an environmental justice arts festival in each borough. These events used creative expressions to spotlight environmental challenges while offering practical, community-based solutions for healthier, more comfortable, and energy-efficient homes. Each festival featured a dynamic mix of art forms, including spoken word, fashion, painting, sculpture, and more. Every participating artist presented work that explored themes of environmental justice and energy efficiency, transforming complex issues into accessible, engaging, and culturally relevant experiences for all attendees.

Together, we gathered over 250 community members across both events, demonstrating strong community interest and participation. Artists were deeply committed to incorporating the theme of environmental justice, often creating new pieces for the festival or thoughtfully curating

works from their collections that best conveyed its message. The excitement and dedication displayed by the artists, food vendors, and community members created an extraordinary sense of energy and connection. The two festivals also served as an opportunity to build new relationships with residents and community organizations, provide social service and household energy resources, and gather community in a fashion that not only expands our geographic and demographic reach, but is generative of future collaborations for public programming and events.

4. What We Are Learning on the Ground

As we began to interact more with the public through community campaigns, local pilot projects, events and various workshops, we saw the need to expand. We needed to cover more area, so collaborating with more community organizations would allow us to extend our reach. We also realized that in the Bronx, a large population of Spanish speakers were engaged and ready to learn about clean energy and we needed to be more prepared to address them. See Figure 2 for graphs that illustrate race and ethnicity demographics for the Bronx, Brooklyn, and the respective DACs in each borough. We also saw the need to discuss new technology within the context of everyday life. Can mom still cook dinner the same way in the induction stove than she did in a gas stove? And if not, what will she have to adapt to? How can we make it easier?

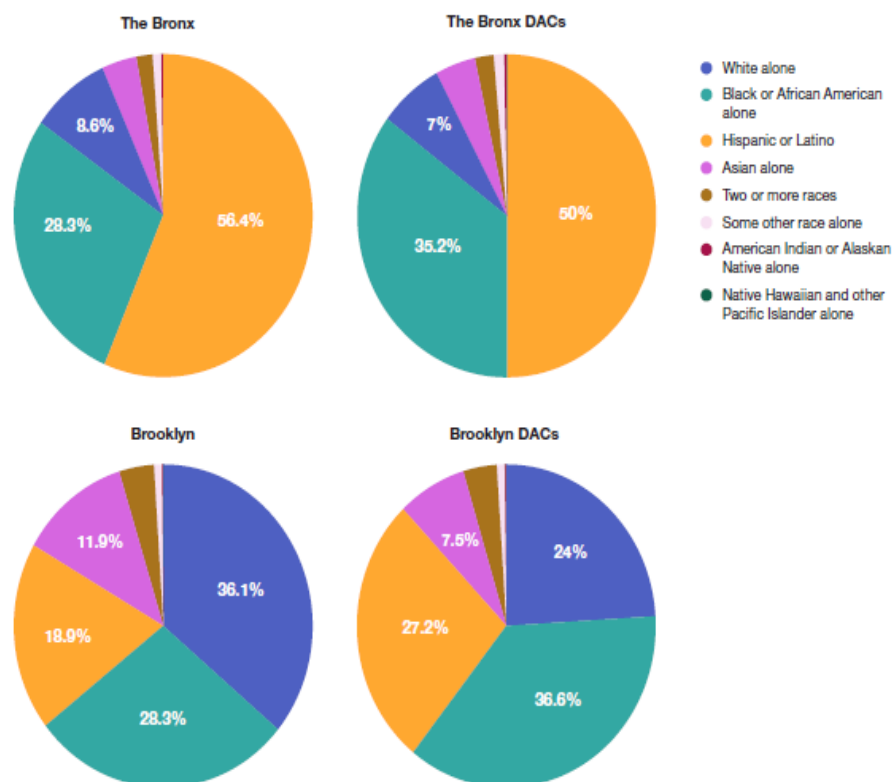


Figure 4. Charts graphing the race and ethnicity for (1) Bronx (2) Bronx DACs (3) Brooklyn (4) Brooklyn DACs. Source: RABA, 2025.

4.1 Importance of long-term and short-term planning

Meaningful and impactful community engagement is not something that can be rushed or forced. One initial goal in outreach is to develop local and community-wide recognition, trust, and a respectable reputation. This takes time, intentional planning, mutually beneficial relationship building, and consistent effort to develop. Community outreach is not only a series of educational events or resources workshops, but a long-term process that needs to be multifaceted and collaborative. While some relations can maintain the same core dynamic over time, most relations to community organizations need to progress to be impactful in reaching our goals of responsive and corrective Environmental Justice. One thing we've found is the need to strategize long-term goals with short-term strategies that we often revise and improve. In doing so, it is critical to maintain enough flexibility to work with the shifting needs and collaborative potential of local community partners.

4.2 Need for localized programs

Effective outreach requires us to work and collaborate with local community groups, not simply show up and impose a one-time program. Community groups may not be interested or have the capacity to work toward social, structural, or legislative change on a larger scale. However, they often do initiate important changes in their local communities, in a manner that is progressively impactful and expansive over time. We've found that the Hub can serve as a useful bridge between local community work and larger institutions, such as governmental agencies, NYSERDA, and legislative campaigns at the city and state level. Trust is a relational dynamic that is most stable and impactful when developed through personal relationships of collaboration and mutual support. By working with trusted, often longstanding local community organizations – such as our subcontracted non-profits, more localized CBOs, neighborhood and grassroots organizations – to develop collaborative programs, we can most effectively address local needs, connect residents with other forms of resources and paths of corrective justice, and work toward meaningful impact at a local level. This often requires more time and effort up front that leads to a stronger, more consistent working foundation and efficacy over time.

4.3 Frustration

By doing regular outreach work, we often meet residents who are frustrated with the socio-economic climate and who are struggling to maintain a healthy and comfortable material life. It is important to respect and address peoples' frustrations – with utility bill costs, lack of state-sponsored resources, the intersecting forms of vulnerability and material struggle that people are dealing with. Some of these issues (e.g., unemployment, affordability) are areas that we can assist with through our subcontracted CBOs. Our CBO's are an integral part of our outreach team. They join us at our sponsored events and we attend theirs. We aim to treat such encounters as opportunities to co-develop an appropriate response that builds trust while providing an opening to assess a client's energy burden and needs.

At the same time, we are dealing with certain clear limitations of social change that are embedded into our day-to-day life, such as the restricted capacity of the state, the historical conditions of structural oppression, and the limited responsive capacity from us as individuals and as organizations. These include social challenges such as rising rates of unemployment, increased vulnerability for migrant communities, unsustainably long working hours,

unmanageable debt, ascending housing costs, and the increasingly unaffordable cost of living in New York City. We've found that it is important to be mindful of these limiting factors and recurring frustrations from our clients, while actively trying to improve in these areas with the capacity that we do have. One consistent area of frustration is the delay of bureaucratic protocols that govern the process of providing our clients with resources from the state. We've found it important to exercise flexibility when we can and experiment with alternative forms of support and communication, such as following up with a client a second or third time when it is not required to do so. The bureaucratic processes upheld by state agencies are often felt and experienced as a mechanism of oppression. We have the ability to work with those processes and our clients to improve the rate of efficacy – and the more we can, the more likely we are to reach people who haven't been able to follow through due to the strict nature of bureaucratic demands and processes.

4.4 Gratitude and Excitement

On the other side, it is not uncommon for people to meet us with appreciation and excitement. The challenge then becomes how to maintain that relationship and optimism and build on it in a substantive and impactful manner. By foregrounding principles of environmental dignity, we are able to enact a realistic framework of impactful change for our clients and their communities that involves work at different scales. This requires patience and collaboration, an awareness that finding the impactful corrective path sometimes requires experimentation and failure, and trust in each other to continue working through these barriers for a greater change at the end of the process.

5. Conclusion

Finally, we are finding that we are still evolving. We have identified key indicators of growth and improvement, all of which are interconnected.

First, everything that we've laid out in this final section, about how we've been developing appropriate responses to what we're finding on the ground, is still in its early stages of progress and development. We are identifying challenges and recurring trends in the field, have begun to design and enact the appropriate response, but we have not fully enacted these responses to the extent that we can see their long-term impact and efficacy.

Second, it is clear that the solutions we need cannot be predetermined, or singular solutions. We have found that it is especially important to be responsive to the contextual specificity of the communities we work with and the obstacles that arise for them and our work together. Across both boroughs, we are dealing with vastly different demographics, neighborhoods, and specific histories of environmental racism, such as the decades of fracked gas pipelines that have targeted people of color in Brownsville, Brooklyn or the continuously worsening conditions of dangerously unhealthy air quality in the South Bronx. Once again, that means that solutions must incorporate input from various stakeholders in a manner that is not rushed.

Third, we've found it necessary to adjust expectations for timeliness, scale, impact, and growth. The organizations that comprise the Bronx Brooklyn Energy Hub are taking on direct, localized work on behalf of NYSERDA that they have not done before. The efficiency of our work and training in these early stages is vital to our ongoing success and is certainly a point of

continued improvement for the near future. Additionally, while we are proud of our early success rate in leading all hubs across the state, the depth of challenges in the Bronx and Brooklyn are comparatively more severe. We are also dealing with a significantly larger number of residents, as the combined population of both boroughs exceeds 4 million people. It often feels like we're a great team, but we need an army.

Fourth, it has become emphatically clear that our relationality is the utmost critical factor for our success as a hub. The hub is not a standalone entity and it cannot exist in its own right. If the hub is to be successful, it cannot fall into the same pattern of other state agencies that impose a top-down relation of functionality. The hub can only reach the desired stages of success if it is intrinsically relational, connective, and expansive. It can only work when connected to and working with other organizations and collectives in their specific contexts of environmental injustice – a task which often involves creating new relationships that progress over time.⁷ Additionally, we feel strongly that we need to facilitate a widespread convergence that brings together varied parties to work together in ways that they haven't yet – such as state agencies, municipal agencies, non-profits, community-based organizations, grassroots collectives, youth-based advocacy groups, community organizers, schools, service organizations.

Ultimately the goal is environmental dignity: every individual and community has the right to live in a safe, clean, healthy environment. Environmental quality is essential to human well-being. Environmental dignity is often invoked in discussions surrounding environmental policy, sustainability initiatives, and efforts to combat climate change, and that we are all entitled to this concept unconditionally.

⁷ There are two collaborators that serve as good examples of this type of progressive relationship development: the YMCA and The Point. We have worked closely with all three YMCA branches in the Bronx over the past four years to develop a progressively impactful relationship for community engagement. We began by collaborating with their staff and leadership to provide public education and resource events in English and Spanish for energy literacy. Recently, we have launched a youth leadership program, Energy Champions, in which we have trained high school students to provide Energy Literacy Workshops and lead public education programming efforts. We are now working with youth programmers and other leadership across the Bronx YMCA branches to lead citywide events in the upcoming year.

Our relationship with The Point is a more depthful example of relationship building over time. The Point is a CDC located in Hunt's Point, Bronx that focuses on community development, youth arts and educational programming, and local campaigns that concern the health conditions and overall well-being of the neighborhood, anti-displacement organizing, and fighting legislative and infrastructural changes that impact local climate and energy conditions for their residents. We had preexisting relations with some of their staff due to shared areas of interest and social justice work, continued to see them at tabling and outreach events once we began our community engagement work as the hub, and from there developed a more substantive collaborative relationship. We now regularly invite each other to be featured in our public events, organize local residents to prepare and deliver testimony at public hearings together, and are now actively collaborating on a large, borough-wide environmental justice arts festival. Additionally, we are in the early stages of planning and discussion for them to join the hub as a subcontracted organization for community outreach and impact in the Bronx for our next four-year cycle of funding.

References

- “About Us.” CAMBA, Inc., June 1, 2026. <https://camba.org/about-us/>.
- “About.” BronxNHS.org. Accessed June 13, 2026. <https://www.bronxnhs.org/about-1>.
- Blanksteen, Jan. “Park Slope Group Withdraws \$865000 from a Bank It Says ...” The New York Times. Accessed June 13, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/1977/07/17/archives/brooklyn-pages-park-slope-group-withdraws-865000-from-a-bank-it.html>.
- Duvivier, Tara, Sydney Tiemann, Valeria Milesi, and Sylvia Morse. 2025. Review of *Regional Assessment & Barriers Analysis: Bronx & Brooklyn Regional Clean Energy Hub*. Edited by Sydney Tiemann and Eleanor Lauderback. Pratt Center. https://prattcenter.net/uploads/0225/60801880d285daf9cef3d511d3e1e877fbce563c6b96c084bcb661cb9ab72e43/RABA_Bronx__Brooklyn_2025.pdf.
- Holtzman, Benjamin. “The Burning of the Bronx: Reconstructing a Decade of Abandonment, Arson, and Reform.” Metropolitics, May 29, 2026. <https://metropolitics.org/The-Burning-of-the-Bronx-Reconstructing-a-Decade-of-Abandonment-Arson-and.html>.
- Mayor’s Office of Climate & Environmental Justice. Accessed June 13, 2026. <https://www.nyc.gov/content/climate/pages/energy-infrastructure>.
- “Neighborhood Housing Services of NYC.” NHSNYC. Accessed June 13, 2026. <https://nhsnyc.org/>.
- NYSERDA Interactive Map of Disadvantaged Communities. Accessed June 13, 2026. <https://www.nyscrda.ny.gov/ny/Disadvantaged-Communities>.
- “Social Justice Statement.” CAMBA, Inc., September 11, 2025. <https://camba.org/about-us/black-lives-matter/>.
- Táíwò, Olúfẹ̀mí O. *Elite capture: How the powerful took over identity politics (and everything else)*. London: Pluto Press, 2022.
- “Who we are,” www.bronxworks.org. Accessed June 10, 2026. https://bronxworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/about_v3.92-CC-Edits.pdf.
- “Who We Are.” NHS Brooklyn. Accessed June 13, 2026. <https://www.nhsbrooklyn.org/about>.
- Zipp, Samuel. “The Uncertain History of the Bronx Fires.” The Nation, November 6, 2025. <https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/born-flames-bronx-arson/>.