

Unlocking Access: Barriers and Opportunities for Public Agencies in Energy Efficiency Retrofits

Sulma Hernandez and Shelley N. Osborn, Southern California Regional Energy Network

**Yuliana Ruiz Ibarra and Kimberly Jaeger Johnson, E Source
Jennifer Mitchell-Jackson, Grounded Research**

ABSTRACT

Public agencies—including school districts, water and wastewater districts, and municipal buildings—face persistent barriers to accessing energy efficiency retrofit services despite the availability of programs designed to support them. This paper presents findings from in-depth interviews with participating agencies in Southern California Regional Energy Network (SoCalREN) programs, revealing nuanced challenges that hinder uptake like alignment of project timing with multi-year capital improvement plans, co-occurrence of bond legislation or other funding to support facility retrofits¹, and political factors that influence the prioritization of energy efficiency upgrades.

We interviewed 10 of 51 SoCalREN agencies to better understand participant experiences, program benefits, and barriers to completing projects. Interviewees described political and procedural hurdles that often delay or derail access to public energy efficiency programs such as limited internal staffing and budget capacity, complex procurement processes, and the need for buy-in from elected officials such as city council members. The research also highlights non-energy benefits, such as improved indoor environments that contribute to more effective learning in classrooms following HVAC upgrades and reinvestment into the community, that can significantly influence stakeholder support.

This paper identifies patterns in access limitations and offers recommendations for program design and engagement improvements that better align with the realities of public sector decision-making. Additionally, this paper offers insights into how public sector energy efficiency programs can evolve to more effectively serve public agencies, with strategies for enabling broader participation, communicating non-energy benefits, and navigating governance structures.

Introduction

Across the country, state and local governments are working to reduce energy costs, cut greenhouse gas emissions, and strengthen community resilience. Energy efficiency plays a critical role in achieving these public sector goals and improving the quality of life in communities while supporting climate, equity, and sustainability objectives. Yet, despite the availability of energy efficiency programs designed to serve public agencies, many continue to face persistent barriers to participation, such as limited staff capacity, a lack of technical expertise, underfunding, and deferred maintenance due to disinvestment, that transcend state boundaries and reflect deep structural challenges common to governments at every level.

Regionally coordinated and cooperative delivery models offer a promising approach to addressing these challenges. By operating at the local or regional level, such programs can

¹ An agency's ability to pursue energy efficiency projects sometimes depends on bond measures under consideration, or recently approved, that would fund the projects they are considering.

reduce the economic, social, and environmental burdens public agencies face when adopting energy efficiency upgrades and pursuing decarbonization—while ensuring that program funds are used efficiently and equitably. The Southern California Regional Energy Network (SoCalREN) is one example of this regional model in action. Administered by the County of Los Angeles, SoCalREN partners with implementers to provide services spanning 13 counties in Southern California. Services, such as no-cost project management support, technical support, procurement and construction support, financing support, and funding analyses, are offered across to public agencies, and across the commercial, residential, workforce education and training, and agriculture sectors.

SoCalREN has over 10 years of feedback from public agencies and recently completed a process evaluation of its Public Sector programs to identify patterns in participation challenges and opportunities to expand access to energy efficiency services. Through in-depth interviews, the evaluation surfaced political, procedural, and organizational hurdles—from limited internal staffing and complex procurement requirements to long-range capital planning cycles—that often delay or derail participation. The research also highlighted the significance of non-energy benefits—benefits accruing to public agencies that go beyond energy savings—including community reinvestment, emergency preparedness, and improved educational outcomes, which often serve as critical drivers of stakeholder support.

While SoCalREN operates within California’s regulatory framework, the barriers and strategies described in this paper reflect challenges that are likely recognizable to program administrators throughout the U.S. This paper presents SoCalREN’s experience, offering insights and recommendations that can inform the design and operation of public sector energy efficiency programs in other states, recognizing that the applicability will vary based on local capacity, political support, and governance structures.

Methodology

To identify patterns in public agency participation and barriers to program engagement, SoCalREN conducted a process evaluation of its Public Sector Programs (Grounded Research and E Source forthcoming). The study was first grounded in a rich set of data compiled from participating and nonparticipating agencies over the sector’s 10-year history. The study then examined participant experiences, organizational barriers, and historical enrollment trends that, while rooted in SoCalREN’s context, illuminate challenges likely to be encountered by any jurisdiction designing or operating a public sector energy efficiency program. The study relied on two primary data sources: in-depth qualitative interviews and a review of program tracking and enrollment data from 2015 through 2024. Fifteen agencies were interviewed: 10 that had completed projects in 2023 or 2024 and 5 non-participant agencies with no active or completed projects between 2015 and 2024. The 15 interviewees represented cities, water/wastewater districts, and school districts. Interviews lasted 30 to 45 minutes and no incentive was provided.

Insights from discussions with agencies are described below. We first present the barriers agencies described that often delay or prevent them from implementing energy efficiency projects. We then discuss strategies that SoCalREN has or is implementing to try to overcome these barriers. We also present the non-energy benefits that public agencies described.

Program Context: SoCalREN as a Case Study

SoCalREN operates within a regulatory structure unique to California, but its organizational model—a government-led entity coordinating energy efficiency services across a multi-county region on behalf of public agencies—offers a transferable template. In 2012, the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) authorized the piloting of Regional Energy Networks (RENs) as Portfolio Administrators (PAs) for energy efficiency programs (CPUC 2012). PAs are entities that contract with organizations and agencies to deliver program services to residents, businesses, and public agencies. In 2019, the CPUC reaffirmed the importance of public agency leadership by recognizing RENs as permanent PAs, citing the unique value that local governments bring to delivering energy efficiency programs and services (CPUC 2019).

Administered by the County of Los Angeles Internal Services Department, SoCalREN offers project management and financial services to customers of Southern California Edison (SCE) and/or Southern California Gas Company (SoCalGas) throughout its 13-county service territory; these counties are shown in Figure 1. As a PA, SoCalREN:

- Provides services that complement and supplement Investor-Owned Utility (IOU) programs and fill gaps in the market to maximize opportunities for residents, businesses, and public agencies.
- Provides programs and services to hard-to-reach markets that IOUs are not adequately serving.
- Pilots new, innovative approaches to programs that can potentially scale and offer an avenue to greater energy savings.



Figure 1. SoCalREN covers 13 California counties

SoCalREN’s objective is to help public agencies, residents, and businesses conserve energy and reduce utility bills through strategies that drive deep, lasting savings—an objective that mirrors the goals of public sector energy efficiency programs across the country.

A Coordinated Ecosystem Built Around Agency Needs

SoCalREN’s public programs serve cities, counties, tribes, K–12 school districts, community colleges, water and wastewater agencies, state agencies, and other special districts. This breadth of eligible entities reflects the diversity of public agency types that any regional or statewide public sector energy efficiency program is likely to encounter. The Public Programs portfolio maintains a deliberate focus on underserved, disadvantaged, and/or hard-to-reach public agencies that often lack the staffing, technical expertise, and capital needed to pursue energy improvements. By recognizing the unique governance structures, budget cycles, and accountability requirements of public agencies, SoCalREN delivers long-term, relationship-based support that helps agencies plan, prioritize, and implement energy efficiency projects aligned with both local needs and policy goals.

SoCalREN’s service area has a high concentration of Disadvantaged Communities (DACs) and hard-to-reach customers who experience disproportionately high levels of energy burden (ACEEE 2024) due to climate change, pollution, and elevated energy costs (OEHHA n.d.; CPUC 2024). The challenge of underserved communities facing the greatest barriers to energy efficiency participation is not unique to Southern California. For example, using data from the American Housing Survey, researchers found that 25% of all low-income households in the U.S. have an energy burden above 15% (ACEEE, 2024). Public agencies in economically distressed areas frequently rely on aging systems and outdated infrastructure that, combined with local funding shortfalls, make it difficult to meet improvement demands and decarbonize at the same pace as more affluent communities. Programs designed to serve these agencies must account for these compounding disadvantages.

Since 2013, SoCalREN has prioritized affordability, equitable access to energy efficiency services, and strengthened workforce pathways across its service territory. Its Public Programs are intentionally structured to meet agencies where they are—whether they need foundational training, energy audits, procurement guidance, energy efficiency retrofit support, benchmarking, climate action planning, or ongoing project management. Participating agencies receive no-cost technical assistance, educational resources, and cash incentives and financing support for energy-saving projects.

At the center of this portfolio is the Energy Efficiency Project Delivery Program (PDP). Established in 2013, PDP is the primary entry point through which agencies access the full range of SoCalREN’s offerings. It provides customized, no-cost TA and project management support from concept through construction to help agencies identify opportunities, navigate available resources, connect to incentives and financing, and see projects through to completion. For many agencies, particularly smaller cities and special districts with lean staff, PDP functions less like a discrete program and more like a trusted advisor embedded in an otherwise complex and fragmented energy efficiency landscape.

Surrounding PDP is a portfolio of complementary programs organized around three functions: market support (helping agencies plan and prepare), equity (deepening access for underserved and hard-to-reach communities), and resource acquisition (delivering financial

incentives and measurable savings). The public sector programs available to public agencies are summarized in Table 1. Agencies frequently participate in multiple programs simultaneously, with PDP serving as the connective tissue that helps them navigate the broader portfolio.

Table 1. Summary of SoCalREN’s public sector programs and their primary functions

Program	Function	Primary Services
Project Delivery Program	Market Support	Serves as the primary entry point for all energy efficiency services offers no-cost technical assistance and project management from concept to construction and connects agencies to incentives, financing, and specialized programs
Energy Resiliency Action Plan	Market Support	Offers energy resilience planning, infrastructure assessment, customized climate action reports, identification of energy efficiency and distributed energy resource opportunities
Revolving Savings Fund	Market Support	Provides 0% interest, five-year bridge financing for energy efficiency projects to accelerate construction and connect agencies to utility on-bill financing
Pathway to Zero	Equity	Delivers holistic technical support for energy efficiency and decarbonization planning in disadvantaged and hard-to-reach communities along with education about electrification and distributed energy resource options
Rural Hard-to-Reach Direct Install	Equity	Addresses geographic and capacity barriers to participation by offering no-cost energy efficiency installations for historically underserved rural facilities
Streamlined Savings Program	Resource Acquisition	Gives direct financial incentives based on total system benefit or lifecycle energy savings paid upon verified installation
Metered Savings Program	Resource Acquisition	Through site-based metered savings measurement, offers incentives for projects achieving at least 10% reduction at the meter
Schools Strategic Energy Management	Resource Acquisition	Provides multi-year strategic energy management for K–12 schools and community colleges, campus-wide retrofits, and long-term energy goal setting
Water/Wastewater Strategic Energy Management	Resource Acquisition	Provides multi-year strategic energy management for water and wastewater agencies, peak demand reduction, and assists with energy roadmap development and incentives

Water Infrastructure Program	Resource Acquisition	Offers incentives for energy efficiency installations and project development support for water and wastewater agency systems
------------------------------	----------------------	---

This integrated structure reflects a key design principle: public agencies are best served by a coordinated ecosystem of support that can meet them wherever they are in their energy efficiency journey. An agency that first engages through PDP for a lighting retrofit may later access the Revolving Savings Fund for bridge financing, qualify for Streamlined Savings Program incentives upon project completion, and eventually develop a strategic energy management plan through Schools Strategic Energy Management. The sector-specific programs, such as those targeting schools, water agencies, and rural communities, are not standalone offerings but extensions of this same ecosystem with design features to reach agency types that the broader portfolio had historically underserved.

What Gets in the Way?

Both participant and non-participant agencies identified barriers that prevent or limit program engagement. Many barriers that SoCalREN's programs are specifically designed to address—such as financial constraints and staffing limitations—remain significant and universal challenges across both groups.

Location Can Inhibit Access

Program participation has historically concentrated in urban areas, with city and town agencies in Los Angeles County accounting for a disproportionate share of completed projects. Data from 2015 to 2024 show that 59% of all completed projects (n=524) were completed by city and town agencies, even though cities and towns represent just 25% of all potential agencies in SoCalREN's service area. Los Angeles County alone accounted for half (50%) of all completed projects. This is a significant concentration given that SoCalREN's territory spans 13 counties and roughly 50,000 square miles (Grounded Research and E Source forthcoming). This data suggests a substantial gap in reach among rural and geographically dispersed communities. These patterns reflect the real access challenges that distance and rural geography create because agencies outside urban centers often lack the in-person relationships, staff capacity, and program awareness needed to participate, making geographic proximity to program resources a de facto barrier to entry.

Structural Barriers Shape Unique Participation Challenges

Certain types of public agencies remain persistently underserved by SoCalREN's programs, despite being within its service territory. Special districts— which include water and wastewater agencies and other specialized public entities— represent 32% of all potential agencies but account for just 4% of completed projects, making them the most underrepresented agency type by a wide margin. School districts face similar challenges in that they represent a significant share of potential participants; however, they have historically completed far fewer projects relative to their numbers (Grounded Research and E Source forthcoming). These gaps reflect the distinct structural barriers these agency types face, including complex procurement requirements, lean staffing, limited in-house technical expertise, and budget cycles that are less

flexible than those of city agencies. Additionally, as noted, SoCalREN's territory has a high concentration of disadvantaged communities and hard-to-reach customers who experience disproportionately high energy burdens, yet public agencies in these communities often rely on aging infrastructure and face local funding shortfalls that make it difficult to pursue improvements at the same pace as more affluent communities. Taken together, the data suggests that the agencies with the greatest need for program support are often those least able to access it. SoCalREN has begun to address this service gap through newer equity-focused programs targeting schools and water/wastewater districts (see Table 1).

Capital Constraints Crowd Out Energy Efficiency Investments

Project funding limitations were the most significant barrier for both participant and non-participant agencies. Interviewees described how energy efficiency projects struggle to compete for limited capital improvement funding, even in agencies that are supportive of sustainability. Agencies often must address deferred maintenance needs in aging buildings—heating systems, failing roofs, outdated electrical infrastructure—before they can prioritize energy-efficient upgrades. New building construction also consumes capital that might otherwise fund retrofits in existing facilities.

The upfront costs that often accompany energy efficiency projects compound this challenge. Participating agencies emphasized that without incentives, expensive energy-efficient measures might have been replaced with cheaper, less efficient alternatives or not replaced at all. Several participants described scenarios where short-term budget considerations dictated project outcomes, even when long-term savings could offset initial costs. For example, a non-participant noted that financial incentives paired with clear information about energy savings, reduced maintenance costs, and staff time savings can serve as a decisive tipping point in gaining leadership support.

Lean Staffing Leads to De-prioritization of Energy Efficiency

Chronic understaffing and competing demands emerged as a universal challenge. Public agencies balance fiscal responsibility, operational efficiency, and consistent community service delivery with lean staffing structures and varying levels of in-house expertise. This limited bandwidth leaves little time to manage energy efficiency upgrades, even when staff are motivated. Participating agencies described difficulty convening project staff (e.g., program managers, engineers, and building inspectors) for meetings. Non-participant agencies described management transitions, retirements, and general staffing shortages that would have made it difficult to fulfill program requirements such as site audits, documentation gathering, and project coordination tasks.

Leadership Buy-In is Essential—and Often Elusive

Securing buy-in from decision-makers was described as an ongoing challenge. One agency noted that leadership support is essential because without it, there is little motivation to pursue grants, rebates, or incentives. Several interviewees described how decision-makers within their agencies do not prioritize environmental issues. Another agency described how, even with internal support, approval from external governing bodies—such as a city council—was time-consuming and not assured.

Agencies Lack Awareness of Existing Offerings

A notable finding was that participants and non-participants alike requested services that SoCalREN already provides, indicating that program outreach is not consistently reaching agencies with sufficient clarity or depth. For example, a non-participating agency suggested the program offer on-site audits or walkthroughs conducted by contractors to identify eligible equipment; this service is already available through PDP. Similarly, another agency expressed interest in a centralized equipment inventory system to help prioritize and plan energy efficiency projects; this is a service that SoCalREN has provided for several agencies through existing program offerings.

Putting Research into Practice: Strategies for Overcoming Barriers

SoCalREN has taken steps to address the barriers uncovered by the research study. This section describes these new or modified programs and services along with some early indicators of success and lessons learned through serving this sector. For example, SoCalREN has leveraged its Market Support, Equity, and Resource Acquisition programs to help agencies access a range of no-cost project management services, technical support, and financial assistance. In 2025, SoCalREN launched four new incentive programs—including Schools Strategic Energy Management and Water/Wastewater Strategic Energy Management (see Table 1) specifically designed to alleviate capacity, technical assistance, and funding barriers. These programs also address constraints on time and limited knowledge by forming energy teams that increase management and staff knowledge and improve their willingness to integrate strategic energy decisions into their workflow. In the sections that follow, we outline other strategies SoCalREN has or is pursuing to ameliorate the challenges described in the previous section.

Targeted Outreach to Agencies and Contractors Outside Urban Centers

SoCalREN has been addressing accessibility issues for rural agencies through targeted outreach, marketing campaigns, and strategic program enhancements. In 2025, SoCalREN dedicated resources to re-engaging agencies that had not recently completed projects, and prioritized outreach in rural and hard-to-reach communities outside of Los Angeles and Orange County. This re-engagement helped public agencies take advantage of expanded services such as no-cost pump testing that identified new energy efficiency opportunities and candidate facilities for heat pump water heater replacements with 100% cost coverage. In-person outreach and partnerships with non-profit organizations proved highly effective in connecting SoCalREN with agencies in geographically dispersed communities.

SoCalREN has also been expanding its Trade Ally Network. In 2025, 26 new trade allies joined 17 existing trade allies. Combined, these 43 trade allies have improved market coverage and increased agencies' access to qualified contractors.

Program Accessibility and Agency-Specific Messaging

SoCalREN has designed its programs to be easy to navigate, financially worthwhile, and aligned with agencies' sustainability goals—factors that research identified as the primary drivers of participation. Program offerings are structured to support agencies' current improvement plans and budgets, with flexibility to accommodate year-to-year shifts in timing,

budget cycles, and local priorities. Still, sometimes agencies don't "see themselves" in the way the programs or services are described. During the study, public agency representatives suggested that sector-specific materials illustrating sample projects and eligible measures for different agency types could help make the case to skeptical leadership. SoCalREN is working on these materials and case studies to increase the number of special districts (e.g., water and wastewater agencies and other specialized public entities) that participate in the program.

Increased Financial Assistance

SoCalREN has supported agencies in identifying and applying for grants and incentives for equipment upgrades to supplement their capital improvement budgets and lower the overall cost of projects. This financial assistance helps agencies meet their own sustainability goals while reducing barriers to participation. Several agencies noted that their lack of internal resources to manage energy efficiency projects made SoCalREN's no-cost project management an essential service. Agencies were particularly complimentary of SoCalREN's ability to provide expert contractors and financing with minimal burden on agency staff. These aspects of the program have become a key strategy for addressing price sensitivity and installation barriers among public agencies.

Technical and Project Management Support

SoCalREN has provided multiple services that agencies have found highly valuable. These include dependable project management support, identification of energy savings opportunities, technical assistance with energy audits and benchmarking, and incentive application support. One representative from a city agency noted that smaller organizations lack in-house technical and project management expertise, and that the no-cost, turn-key nature of PDP made it easy to participate without placing undue burden on agency staff. A school district representative similarly highlighted how the program helps redirect operational savings toward the classroom amid rising energy bills and tighter budgets.

Communicating Non-Energy Benefits

While non-energy benefits are not the primary motivator for participation, agencies recognize and value these benefits for their community impact. Agencies described value generated by energy efficiency upgrade projects beyond energy and cost savings, including community reinvestment, emergency preparedness, increased use of public resources, and progress toward community-level sustainability goals. Table 2 summarizes the characteristics of these benefits as described by participating agencies.

Table 2. Summary of non-energy benefits described by public agencies

Benefit	Characteristics Described by Public Agencies	Number of Agencies Mentioning Benefit
Supporting Sustainability Goals	Attainment of, or progress toward, local health and environmental sustainability goals, including improved air quality, reduced greenhouse gas	7

	emissions, and safer, healthier environments for communities.	
Community Reinvestment	Investment of public dollars saved through lower energy costs into other agency priorities. Increased constituent trust that the agency is a responsible steward of public funds.	5
Increased Use of Public Resources	Increased use of public spaces resulting from upgraded equipment such as brighter lighting or improved HVAC systems that maintain a more comfortable environment.	3
Emergency Preparedness	Increased community preparedness because of upgraded, efficient building systems that enable public buildings to serve as emergency shelters, cooling centers, or staging areas during power outages.	1

SoCalREN is working on a method to quantify non-energy benefits that program participants, program partners (e.g. the contractors and organizations that help deliver services), and communities realize through its programs. The ten benefit types it plans to track span financial, health, environment, and community dimensions and include cost savings, rebates and incentives, education and training, health improvements, improved building and housing conditions, and natural resource conservation (SoCalREN 2026). As this work continues, we plan to highlight these benefits in outreach and engagement materials for prospective program participants—tailoring the benefits based on agency type.

Marketing Campaigns

SoCalREN works with a marketing team to develop outreach and marketing materials that respond directly to the participation barriers identified earlier. For example, one way that SoCalREN increased its number of trade allies was by developing trade-ally-specific outreach materials and launching a new project vetting form that enabled trade allies to submit prospective energy efficiency projects for review by the SoCalREN project management team. This simplified process reduced administrative burden on both agencies and trade allies, helping accelerate project identification and enrollment. Additionally, the four new incentive programs were prominently featured in a "Top Recommended Projects" campaign, which packaged high-value, low-barrier measures in plain language to drive early interest and enrollment. By highlighting ready-to-implement projects for SoCalREN enrolled agencies, the webinar, email, and newsletter campaign, sent to enrolled and not enrolled public agencies in our list serve, gave agencies something actionable to bring to their leadership to advance energy savings in their region. Together, these strategies illustrate the value of pairing marketing with operational simplification that speak to the constraints agencies face and highlight ways agencies can gain early wins.

SoCalREN as a Model for Regional Public Sector Energy Efficiency Delivery

Across the country, public agencies face a common set of challenges that limit their ability to pursue energy efficiency upgrades: constrained budgets, lean staffing, complex

procurement processes, and difficulty securing leadership buy-in. These barriers are not unique to California—they are structural features of local government that an energy efficiency program must grapple with. SoCalREN's experience underscores the importance of regionally coordinated delivery models that can respond to local needs, meet agencies where they are, and expand equitable access to energy efficiency resources.

SoCalREN's model—a government-led entity with deep knowledge of local governance, empowered to fill gaps in utility program delivery and serve underrepresented agency types—offers a useful template for program designers in other states. Its regional perspective allows it to complement existing utility programs, identify participation gaps, and develop targeted interventions that, in 2025, broadened participation across its service area and delivered measurable energy, emissions, and community benefits.

SoCalREN's public program expansions and improvements in 2025 produced measurable results that illustrate what is possible when program design responds directly to agency feedback. Most new projects and enrollments were outside of Los Angeles and Orange County—reflecting progress on the geographic concentration challenge identified through the evaluation—with a strong focus on underserved and hard-to-reach communities. SoCalREN's portfolio achieved 53% of its statewide energy savings reporting goal and delivered nearly double the prior year's total system benefit (\$6 million versus \$3.2 million), with a positive benefit-cost ratio (SoCalREN 2025). Collectively, SoCalREN's Public Programs achieved 51.9 million lifetime kWh, 958 kW of peak demand reduction, and 4.7 million lifetime therms in savings in 2025—yielding \$22.9 million in lifetime energy bill savings (SoCalREN forthcoming).

Every year, SoCalREN's implementers conduct a satisfaction survey.² Agency satisfaction remained high, with respondents identifying incentives, benchmarking services, audit and engineering support, and project management as the most beneficial services. Representative agency feedback from the 2025 annual satisfaction survey included the following:

- "SoCalREN streamlines the process and makes it easy on City staff that might not have the bandwidth to support smaller efficiency projects like this. Our city team is 2 full-time and 1 part-time person, so the SoCalREN team is very helpful." — Enrolled Agency
- "SoCalREN provided funding for heat pump water heater installations at facilities where funding was not otherwise available. They also referred us to a contractor familiar with the incentive programs, which streamlined the process significantly." — Enrolled Agency

SoCalREN's experience demonstrates that locally informed research, paired with regionally coordinated implementation, can reduce barriers, strengthen community resilience, and ease the burden of rising energy costs on public agencies and the communities they serve. For program administrators in any state, the core lesson is the same: effective public sector energy efficiency programs must be designed around the operational realities of government—providing turn-key support, flexible financing, sector-specific outreach, and sustained engagement with the agencies that are hardest to reach and have the greatest potential for community impact.

Despite its successes, SoCalREN still struggles in areas that present challenges to programs everywhere. For example, even when it engages public agencies in rural areas, it is

² SoCalREN implementers conduct this survey (i.e., sending invitations and reminders) since they have built relationships with program participants throughout the year.

sometimes difficult to find qualified local contractors or contractors outside the area willing to drive to distant locations; rural communities in less populated states are even more disconnected from cities. To help address these and other persistent challenges, SoCalREN has proposed two new public agency programs (SoCalREN 2026). Our Underserved Communities Strategic Energy Management Program will help underserved and hard-to-reach public agencies implement energy efficiency and load management strategies through a six-year engagement. By integrating educational modules and site-specific activities with ongoing technical support and project management, the program hopes to empower under-resourced public agency staff to lower energy use and peak demand charges through behavioral conservation, operational improvements, smart controls, equipment upgrades, and distributed energy resource strategies. Our Public Sector Load Flexibility Program will provide public agencies with comprehensive technical assistance to identify, evaluate, and implement permanent load shifting strategies that reduce daily peak energy use and improve grid resilience. The program will also help agencies identify and connect with suitable financing options to enable the timely adoption of the identified load-flexible technologies.

Recommendations

Based on our research findings, we offer the following recommendations for public sector energy efficiency program administrators seeking to design a new program or improve an existing one to improve access and participation for public agencies. While we believe many of these are applicable beyond our 13-county area to other parts of California and other states, we recognize the appropriateness of our strategies will vary based on local capacity, political support, governance structures, and other factors.

Table 3. Recommendations to address public agency barriers

Barrier Addressed	Recommendation
Geographic Concentration	Prioritize outreach and enrollment in rural, hard-to-reach, and non-LA County communities in SoCalREN’s 13-county territory, including through sub-regionally tailored strategies and partnerships with local stakeholders familiar with agency needs.
Underserved Agency Types	Expand specialized programs targeting special districts, school districts, and water/wastewater agencies, which are currently underrepresented relative to their share of eligible agencies.
Funding Limitations	Offer tiered financial support with both upfront incentives and bridge financing to accommodate agencies at different stages of capital planning. Provide clear, customized cost-benefit analyses and information on non-energy benefits that help agencies make the case to leadership and governing bodies.
Staffing Constraints	Maintain and promote turn-key project management services that minimize the burden on agency staff. Streamline documentation requirements and offer flexible scheduling for site visits and project meetings.
Leadership Buy-In	Develop sector-specific materials—including sample projects, eligible measures, cost-benefit data, and non-energy benefits tailored to cities, school districts, water agencies, and special districts—to

	help agency staff make the case to elected officials and senior leadership.
Awareness Gaps	Audit outreach communications to ensure all available services are clearly and consistently described. Consider targeted re-engagement campaigns for agencies with prior contact but no completed projects. Use in-person outreach and trusted intermediaries (e.g., non-profits, peer agencies) to engage hard-to-reach communities.

References

- American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy. (2024, September 11). *Data update: City energy burdens* [Policy brief]. <https://www.aceee.org/policy-brief/2024/09/data-update-city-energy-burdens>
- CPUC (California Public Utilities Commission). 2012. *Decision Approving 2013–2014 Energy Efficiency Programs and Budgets (Decision 12-11-015)*. San Francisco: CPUC. docs.cpuc.ca.gov/PublishedDocs/Published/G000/M034/K299/34299795.PDF
- . 2019. *Decision Regarding Frameworks for Energy Efficiency Regional Energy Networks and Market Transformation (Decision 19-12-021)*. San Francisco: CPUC. docs.cpuc.ca.gov/PublishedDocs/Published/G000/M321/K507/321507615.PDF
- . 2024. *2024 Senate Bill 695 Report: Report to the Governor and Legislature on Actions to Limit Utility Cost and Rate Increases Pursuant to Public Utilities Code Section 913.1*. San Francisco: CPUC. www.cpuc.ca.gov/-/media/cpuc-website/divisions/office-of-governmental-affairs-division/reports/2024/2024-sb-695-report.pdf
- Grounded Research and Consulting LLC, and E Source. Forthcoming. *2025 Public Sector Process Evaluation*. Los Angeles: Southern California Regional Energy Network.
- OEHHA (Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment). n.d. *CalEnviroScreen 5.0 (Draft): The California Environmental Health Screening Tool*. Accessed March 13, 2026. experience.arcgis.com/experience/8c5c5c91ebb8481a8a3d92c897faf8ed/page/Overall-Results
- SoCalREN (Southern California Regional Energy Network). 2025. "Q4 Portfolio Update." Presentation at SoCalREN All Hands Meeting, Q4 2025, Santa Barbara, CA, December 18.
- . Forthcoming. *2026 SoCalREN 2025 Annual Report*. Los Angeles: SoCalREN.
- . 2026. *Southern California Regional Energy Network Energy Efficiency 2028-2035 Strategic Business Plan and 2028-2031 Portfolio Plan*. Los Angeles: SoCalREN. https://socalren.org/sites/default/files/SoCalREN_2028-2035_BP_Exhibit_1.pdf?_gl=1*1kl40l6*_up*MQ..*_ga*MTY0NTY5OTg5My4xNzg5

[MDI3MzYw*_ga_XDZJ615GJ2*czE3ODEwMjczNTkkbzEkZzEkdDE3ODEwMjczODkkajMwJGwwJGgw](#)

AI Disclosure

AI-assisted tools used: Claude.ai

Used for: Reorienting some sections towards a national audience.

Extent: light editing.

Human engagement: The authors wrote and reviewed a full draft of this paper before using AI.

AI was used for light editing to help orient the content towards a national audience