

# **Bright Neighborhoods Initiative Report**

PROGRAM YEAR 2023-2024

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# Executive Summary

Since the Illinois Solar for All (ILSFA) program began serving income-eligible residents in 2017, the Residential Solar (Small) sub-program has historically struggled to reach participation to utilize its annual budget. Although there have been Residential Solar projects, many regions of the state remain underserved. Additionally, stakeholders have highlighted various barriers to participation that have led to low participation and underserved areas. To address this, the Illinois Power Agency's (the Agency) 2022 Long-Term Renewable Resources Procurement Plan (the 2022 Long-Term Plan) outlined a pilot initiative to adjust the roles of the Program Administrator to evaluate ways to increase participation. The Program Administrator and the Agency built on this outline to create the Residential Solar Pilot, drafting and releasing the full Pilot design for stakeholder feedback in February 2023. The final Pilot design, accounting for the stakeholder feedback, was released in March 2023.<sup>1</sup> The Residential Solar Pilot, marketed as the Bright Neighborhoods initiative, launched on August 1, 2023, running through ILSFA Program Year 6 (2023-2024). The Agency's Long-Term Plan acknowledges that this initiative will take place for two years, through Program Year 7 (2024-2025).

The Bright Neighborhoods Initiative shifted marketing, outreach, and customer acquisition from the Approved Vendors to the Program Administrator. To do this, the initiative identified three underserved areas and chose one Approved Vendor through a Request for Proposal process to serve Pilot customers in each geographic area. The initiative also tested streamlined customer experience and tactics for increasing participation in the Residential Solar sub-program.

The Program Administrator created one intake source for interested participants, providing a direct path for follow-ups during the customer journey. These methods helped connect prospective participants with their selected Approved Vendor. However, additional barriers were identified along the way that prevented many prospective participants from achieving an installation, such as drop-off during the income verification process or the need for completing roof and/or electrical repairs.

These key findings and new barriers support the recommendations to improve the initiative in its second year. The Program Administrator recommends several updates to the Pilot Design, including simplifying the customer journey process, remaining in the

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<sup>1</sup> View [Residential Solar Pilot Proposal and Response to Comments](#)

same three community areas, selecting an Approved Vendor(s) willing to work on the Home Repairs and Upgrades Pilot, and adjusting the goals of the initiative.

The first year of the Bright Neighborhoods initiative was unsuccessful in completing solar installations, despite 16 participant referrals to Approved Vendors due to deeper barriers than anticipated and unforeseen barriers to solar adoption. However, the initiative found success in bringing awareness to the program and discovered key findings that will inform updates to the program design. By incorporating these findings, the program will build on this foundation to broaden participation in the initiative and will aim to eventually improve residential participation in Illinois Solar for All.

## Pilot Overview

The Residential Solar Pilot was proposed in the Agency's 2022 Long-Term Renewable Resources Procurement Plan (the 2022 Long-Term Plan) to address the Illinois Solar for All: Residential Solar (Small) sub-program not yet reaching a level of participation that utilizes the full annual budget. Stakeholders have reported several barriers to participation in residential solar, impacting prospective participants and Approved Vendors. These barriers include a lack of knowledge of solar power, distrust in marketers, language barriers, and a complex administrative process. The Agency and the Program Administrator designed this Pilot program to learn best practices on how to reduce these barriers and how to facilitate more solar installations in 1-4-unit homes.

Through this initiative, the Program Administrator and the Agency wanted to answer the following question:

- Can a change in the delivery model of the Residential Solar (Small) sub-program increase successfully completed projects by consolidating customer acquisition with the Program Administrator?

Bright Neighborhoods was implemented during the 2023-2024 program year in three selected communities: the West Garfield Park neighborhood in Chicago, the City of Waukegan, and the Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan Area (including Jackson, Williamson, and Johnson counties). An Approved Vendor was selected for each community area in the initiative through a competitive Request for Proposals (RFP) process. The Program Administrator took on the tasks of most of the initial participant interactions and public outreach for the initiative, while the selected Approved Vendors' priority was to assess the home's suitability for solar, install the solar project when viable, and act as the sellers for the Renewable Energy Credit (REC) contracts. This initiative is limited to ILSFA Residential Solar (Small) projects generating RECs and follows the same income-eligibility and consumer protection requirements of the sub-program. The Agency adjusted the REC price to recognize the lower cost to Approved Vendors resulting from the Program Administrator taking on many of the upfront responsibilities. The ILSFA program REC Pricing Model includes a 100% increase in development costs and fees for the Residential Solar (Small) projects in ILSFA compared to the Adjustable Block Program. Following stakeholder feedback, the Program Administrator and the Agency adjusted the REC price for the Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan area to a 95% increase, and to an 80% increase for West Garfield Park and Waukegan.

## Pilot Implementation

### COMMUNITY SELECTION

The selected community areas were specified in the 2022 Long-Term Plan to represent “one of the 77 community areas of Chicago, a suburban community, and a down-state community.” Following stakeholder feedback on the proposed pilot in February 2023, the Program Administrator and the Agency ultimately defined these as one Chicago community area, a Cook County or Collar County suburban municipality, and a Metropolitan or Micropolitan Statistical area<sup>2</sup> outside of the ComEd utility territory.

To guide the community selection process, the Program Administrator provided some potential communities for stakeholder feedback and accepted recommendations for other communities, and proposed the below criteria for determining the pilot communities. Using these criteria, the Program Administrator and the Agency selected West Garfield Park-Chicago, Waukegan, and the Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan Area (including Jackson, Williamson, and Johnson counties).

When these communities were selected in 2022, the total number of households under 80% of the area median income (AMI) in West Garfield Park was 4,411, making up 82.4% of the homes. The total number of households in the community occupied by the owner was 1,460, making up 26.7% of the homes. In Waukegan, the total number of households under 80% AMI was 20,628 (60.7%) and the number of households occupied by the owner was 14,347 (48.1%). And in the Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan Area, the total number of households in the community under 80% AMI was 27,293 (49%), with 34,981 (63%) of households occupied by the owner.

Category	Category Description	Total Section Score
Housing Demographics	Percent of households in the community: under 80% AMI, occupied by owner, and 1–4-unit homes	35
Eligibility by Community Type	Percent of community’s census tracts designated: environmental justice, income eligible, or R3	20
Community Experience with and Visibility of Energy Projects	The number of dropped ILSFA projects, household participation in energy efficiency, energized or approved Adjustable Block Program residential projects, energized or approved ILSFA Residential Solar (Large) or Nonprofit and Public Facilities projects; The absence of completed ILSFA Residential Solar (Small) projects in the community	30

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, “[Illinois: 2020 Core Based Statistical Areas and Counties.](#)”

Total Possible Score		75
Unscored Category	Category Description	
Community, Resident, and/or Organization Support	Whether the community has: a Grassroots Educator focusing on the area, residents or local organizations who have advocated for renewable energy or efficiency initiatives, a Community Action Agency with the capacity to help promote the initiative, updated policies to further develop the local solar market, or an Approved Vendor already working in the area; proximity to a CEJA workforce hub; distance from a retired coal-fired power plant/mine	N/A

West Garfield Park in Chicago is an Illinois Solar for All-designated environmental justice community with a high percentage of income-eligible 1-4-unit households. Although the neighborhood has participated in energy efficiency programs and Illinois Shines, they remain underserved by ILSFA programming.

The City of Waukegan is mostly designated as an Illinois Solar for All-designated environmental justice community with high numbers of income-eligible 1-4-unit homes and homeownership. The community will be served by a CEJA workforce hub<sup>3</sup> and is the site of a retired coal-fired power plant. This community has also seen many projects through Illinois Shines but remains underserved by ILSFA.

The Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan Statistical Area also includes many income-eligible 1-4-unit homes and expects a CEJA workforce hub in the City of Carbondale. The area is also home to many retired coal-fired power plants and mines with previous work by the Illinois Shines program, but not with ILSFA.

For these reasons, each of these communities is eligible to participate in ILSFA but encounters barriers to participation that may be addressed through this initiative.

## **APPROVED VENDOR ROLE AND SELECTION**

This initiative consolidated participant interaction, public outreach, and income verification with the Program Administrator rather than with the Approved Vendor to reduce the Approved Vendor's soft costs and foster increased participant education and support. Even with this shift in program roles, the Approved Vendors were responsible for completing a full site assessment, designing the solar project, communicating the

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<sup>3</sup> The [Clean Jobs Workforce Network Program](#) ("CEJA Workforce Hubs") will offer training, certifications, and skill development for entry-level positions in the clean-energy industry.

disclosure form and contract with the customer, and completing the Part I and II applications.

An Approved Vendor was selected to support each of the community areas through a competitive RFP process. In addition to improving participation and capacity in the Residential Solar (Small) sub-program, this initiative had a goal of supporting and prioritizing small and emerging businesses in the selection process, following the 2022 Long-Term Plan (Section 8.2.3). To prioritize such businesses in the selection of Approved Vendors for Bright Neighborhoods, the Program Administrator and the Agency first scored proposals from entities that were eligible as “Small and Emerging.” The Agency uses the federal SBA definition of “small”, based on annual revenues within the appropriate NAICS category. The Agency defines “emerging business” as a business that has been authorized to do business in any US state for less than three years. The Agency and the Program Administrator used these definitions to prioritize “small and emerging” businesses in the RFP process.

These vendors needed a minimum score of 70 points to be selected. If there were no proposals submitted by a vendor eligible as “Small and Emerging” that met the minimum score, only then would the Program Administrator begin to score proposals that were not eligible under either definition.

The Agency also recognized the importance of Minority/Women-owned Business Enterprises (MWBE) participating as ILSFA Approved Vendors and continues to work with the Program Administrator to increase the number of MWBE Approved Vendors participating in ILSFA projects (Section 8.9). The RFP included opportunities for additional points for applicants with MWBE certifications.

The submitted Approved Vendor proposals were scored using the following selection criteria:

<b>Category</b>	<b>Total Section Score</b>
Offeror Background and Capacity	45
Community Commitment and Readiness	35
Company Offer	30
Plan to Employ Job Trainees	5
<b>Total Possible Points</b>	<b>115</b>

The Program Administrator first issued the RFP on April 4, 2023, including a question period and webinar during the proposal window to address Approved Vendor questions. An Approved Vendor was selected for West Garfield Park through this first proposal



process. The RFP was later re-issued on May 25, 2023, to gather proposals for the Waukegan and Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan Areas and extended until June 27, 2023.

The Program Administrator only received proposals from vendors who qualified as small and/or emerging businesses. Because of this, the Program Administrator believes this prioritization of the RFP was helpful in spurring higher interest and participation from small and emerging vendors. Through the RFP process, the Program Administrator and the Agency selected Selenium Energy to serve West Garfield Park, and UpSouth Energy to serve as the Approved Vendor Aggregator, with StraightUp Solar as the Designee, for both the Waukegan and the Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan areas.

## **CUSTOMER JOURNEY**

As mentioned, this initiative consolidated the customer acquisition, public outreach, and income verification with the Program Administrator rather than with the Approved Vendor. This change to a vertically integrated model aims to evaluate ways to address the complex administrative process and the mistrust in marketers with the goal of increasing participation in the Residential Solar (Small) sub-program. Through this process, prospective participants worked closely with the Program Administrator to begin and complete their customer journey to determine income eligibility before working with their community's selected Approved Vendor.

Prospective participants were directed to the Bright Neighborhoods landing page when engaged by marketing and outreach tactics to complete their intake form. The intake form collected basic information from the resident to express their interest in participating in the initiative. This then added them to a list for the Program Administrator for follow-up. To encourage residents to continue in the program, the Program Administrator followed a six-step marketing engagement process. The Program Administrator followed the deployment strategy outlined in the graphic below to encourage prospective participants to move forward (see Figure 1).

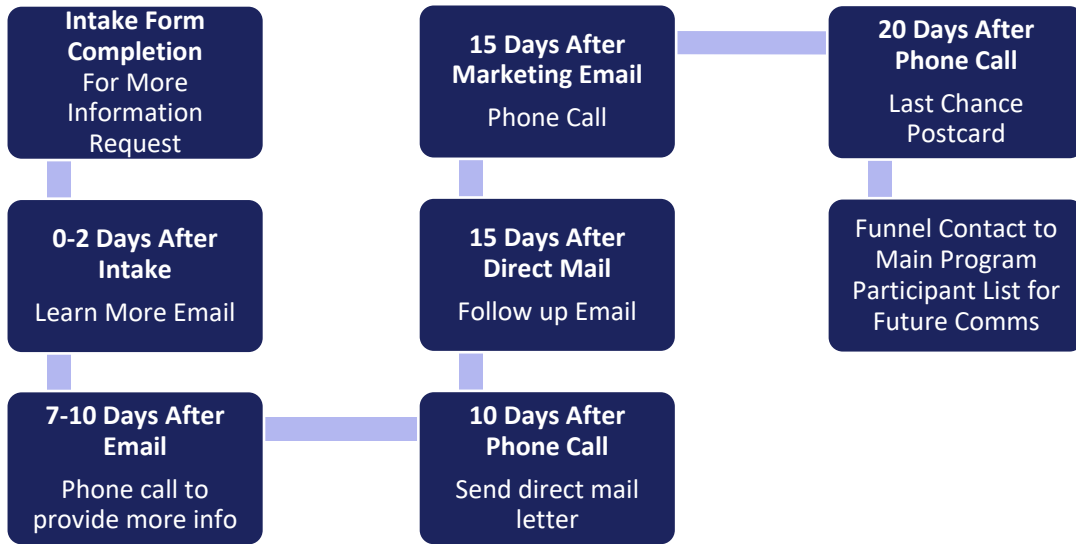


Figure 1: Customer follow-ups deploying different marketing tactics.

The follow-up process began with an initial processing email, providing the prospective participant with relevant information for the next steps to complete income verification or any upcoming events in their community. After this initial email, the Program Administrator followed up with each prospective participant, utilizing the marketing deployment strategy, with the goal of leading them to complete the income verification step of the enrollment process.

Once a prospective participant was verified income-eligible, their next step within the initiative was to complete an online Site Prescreening Survey and submission of supporting photos of the home to gather more details on their suitability for a solar installation. This prescreening survey was developed and implemented to evaluate ways to divert projects that may be ineligible for a solar project because of roof and electrical repair needs or too much shading. This was not the final home assessment, however, and was meant to identify egregious issues with the home.

Once the participant completed their prescreening survey, the Program Administrator reviewed the responses to determine whether the home was likely suitable to move forward. In this case, the Program Administrator shared the homeowner’s information with the Approved Vendor and notified the homeowner of this change and to expect correspondence from the Vendor. The Approved Vendor would then complete a thorough on-site assessment of the home to determine its suitability for solar.

The use of this survey was discontinued after a mid-year review of the initiative in February 2024 upon discovering it may act as an added barrier to participation for an income-eligible resident and was also not effective for diverting ineligible homes in need of roof repairs. In lieu of the survey, the Program Administrator instead used the site

suitability questions on the income eligibility intake form to notify the Approved Vendor of the participant's understanding of their home's suitability. More detail on this finding will be discussed in the "Key Findings and Considerations" section below.

Once their information was shared with the Approved Vendor, the participant's customer journey with the Program Administrator was complete, although in some cases the Program Administrator would provide further support. During the first year of the initiative, the Program Administrator mainly supported participants when their homes required electrical or roof repairs identified by the Vendor during their technical assessment. Upon notification by the Approved Vendor, the Program Administrator would connect with the participant to work on supporting them through the Home Repairs and Upgrades Pilot. This entailed providing the participants with a list of external funding opportunities in their area and, in some cases, contacting these programs on their behalf and communicating any updates from those conversations. The Program Administrator would regularly communicate with participants about any new external funding opportunities in their area. Additionally, the Program Administrator was available to answer any questions from participants throughout their customer journey, serving as a designated contact person for the ILSFA program under the Bright Neighborhoods Initiative.

## **OUTREACH PLAN**

This initiative consolidated the participant interaction, outreach, marketing, and income verification with the Program Administrator, rather than the Approved Vendor. This change in roles was meant to address the barriers of the lack of understanding solar, mistrust in marketers, and the complex administrative process by fostering increased participant education and support by one entity. The Program Administrator supported and guided all prospective participants through each step of their ILSFA journey, as noted above in the "Customer Journey" section.

The Program Administrator initially planned to conduct outreach and marketing activities from August through November of 2023. However, this period was extended through March 2024 to allow for more time to build relationships with community partners and to continue the momentum that was built during the initial outreach period among interested participants.

Similar income-eligible solar programs in other states have noted the importance of creating partnerships with trusted local organizations to successfully engage with

income-eligible residents and encourage their participation in the program.<sup>4</sup> Because of this, to address the lack of trust felt in each of these communities, identifying local community-based organizations (CBOs) to assist or support outreach was a large focus of the outreach plan. The incorporation of CBOs was done by approaching a public entity, house of worship, or organizations with similar missions around supporting environmental justice and equity and by gathering support from the cohort of ILSFA Grassroots Educators. Each cohort of educators includes organizations that are already established and trusted in their community to promote the program and educate their community residents. The educators supporting this initiative were Garfield Park Community Council (West Garfield Park), Community Action Partnership of Lake County (CAPOLC) (Waukegan), and Faith in Place (Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan Area). These organizations worked closely with the Program Administrator to plan outreach events, make connections with potential community partners, and market the initiative through their networks of residents and partners.

Outside of these Grassroots Educators, the Program Administrator identified and approached CBOs as potential partners in each community area throughout the outreach period that could serve as trustworthy ambassadors for connecting with residents through their social networks or by hosting events. These organizations included energy and environmental advocacy groups, houses of worship, chambers of commerce, and local community groups. The Program Administrator approached these organizations and groups through emails, phone calls, and virtual or in-person meetings to begin the conversation around their support in promoting the initiative. Despite numerous efforts to make contact, the Program Administrator only received positive responses of support from a few organizations in each community area (Table 1).

*Table 1: Number of community partners identified and actively supporting across communities.*

	<b>West Garfield Park</b>	<b>Waukegan</b>	<b>Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan Area</b>
Number of Community Partners Approached	10	22	11
Number of Partnerships with Active Support	1	8	5

Building new partnerships with CBOs that vary in size and experience working with energy and energy justice programs can take a long time. Because of this, the process of

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<sup>4</sup> Solar United Neighbors, [Pathway to Prosperity: Lessons learned from developing and implementing a low-income solar program in Washington, D.C.](#)

establishing a network of partners for this initiative was not linear or equal between community areas.

In the case of West Garfield Park, there were few advocacy groups or schools that only served that neighborhood. Because this Chicago neighborhood is a smaller area within the West Side region of the city, the other organizations identified serve the larger West Side and were unresponsive to the Program Administrator's efforts to discuss a partnership. The one partner who was supportive shared program and event information through their newsletter and social networks.

In Waukegan, the Program Administrator secured active support from a few environmental groups through an email and a phone call and networking at a Chamber of Commerce meeting. However, they achieved deeper partnerships with the support of the area's Grassroots Educator. The Educator's established ties to the community and various leaders and organizations in the area were able to open the door to new relationships with whom the Program Administrator had previously reached out to begin a partnership but was unable to elicit a response.

In the Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan area, the Program Administrator received active support from a few groups who shared news and announcements about the initiative or spread the word about upcoming events with their networks.

Each organization that actively supported the initiative did not participate on the same level. Some organizations were more hands-off, inviting the Program Administrator to table at an event or sharing events hosted by the Program Administrator through their social channels. The more active partners provided their space as an event venue and promoted the event in their public spaces or connected the Program Administrator with others in the community who would also be interested in partnering. Among these active partners, some of the more impactful were local elected officials or municipal employees. There was support from the offices of the Mayor of Murphysboro in the Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan Area, the Alderman for the ward that includes the West Garfield Park neighborhood, and staff members from the City of Waukegan.

During the outreach period, the Program Administrator, along with their community partners and Grassroots Educators, planned and held a variety of virtual and in-person informational sessions or educational workshops, tabled at local events hosted by community partners, and networked with potential partners at local events (see Figure 2 and Table 2). One difficulty in hosting and attending events in the Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan area was the geographic size of the area, which spans three counties. This required the Program Administrator to rely primarily on virtual events. In addition, there

was a small pause in outreach during December and January due to the holidays and partner availability. However, the Program Administrator and their community partners took advantage of this time to plan for opportunities to hold events in February and March.

Figure 2: Number of monthly outreach events held or attended in each community area.

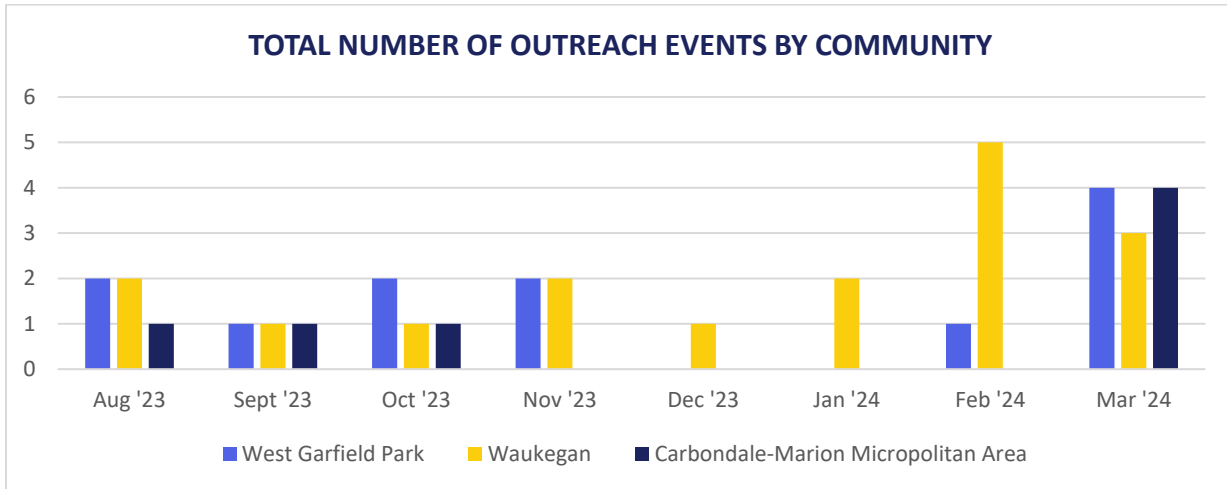


Table 21: Total outreach events by community area from August 2023 -March 2024

Number of Outreach Events by Community	Total
West Garfield Park	12
Waukegan	17
Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan Area	7

## Marketing Plan

### INTRODUCTION AND GOALS

The marketing plan designed for Bright Neighborhoods focused on consolidating marketing strategies and activities with the Program Administrator. This included promoting the initiative directly to participants and shifting from the main ILSFA program, which focuses on stakeholder engagement and communication. An integrated marketing plan was developed for Bright Neighborhoods to engage and build trust with residents of the three selected community areas, to drive those residents to enroll in the Residential Solar sub-program, and to create program awareness with clear and consistent communications and outreach.

To achieve these goals, the marketing strategy focused on community outreach using streamlined messaging and communication tools, providing ongoing support through enrollment, and employing a multi-channel approach leveraging a range of tactics to communicate the benefits of residential solar and ILSFA.

The development of a public-facing name and description, tagline, and key marketing messages outlining the top four features<sup>5</sup> of the initiative tied to audience motivations and aspirations laid the groundwork for the marketing tactics deployed.

## MARKETING DESCRIPTION

The Illinois Solar for All: Bright Neighborhoods initiative brings the benefits of solar energy to income-eligible households in selected communities. This state program provides access to affordable solar installations to create guaranteed, long-term savings on electric bills and reduce the impact of climate change.

## TAGLINE

Delivering energy savings and a brighter future for communities through Residential Solar.

## KEY MARKETING MESSAGES

- Eligible residents can **save money** on electric bills with affordable solar through Illinois Solar for All: Bright Neighborhoods. Bright Neighborhoods delivers **multiple benefits** to you and the community.
- Illinois Solar for All: Bright Neighborhoods helps **reduce the impact of climate change** in your community and across the state.
- Act fast! Bright Neighborhoods is a customized initiative available **for a limited time** in your community.
- Illinois Solar for All ensures **safe and fair business practices** and will guide you every step of the way.

## MARKETING TACTICS

The tactics deployed were structured into two phases: pre-launch and post-launch. This delineation ensured that components of the plan were developed in a timely fashion for deployment and execution.

## PRE - LAUNCH

A webpage on the ILSFA site dedicated to Bright Neighborhoods was created to serve as a landing page for interested residents to learn about residential solar, the process to participate, and access to get started immediately. The goal was to address some of the barriers in the main program. This included streamlining the content to have consistent messages and images, making the initiative accessible and approachable, reducing the

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<sup>5</sup> Identified within the *Key Marketing Messages* following in bold print below.

complicated process into easy steps, and providing a low-commitment way to connect with the Program Administrator to learn more through an embedded intake form. The webpage and associated intake form were made available in Spanish, addressing a significant barrier on the ILSFA website.

A public relations plan was developed to outline media coverage opportunities to promote the initiative's launch. Led by the Illinois Power Agency and supported by the Program Administrator, the plan helped leverage trusted hyperlocal media outlets in the targeted communities to generate awareness and enrollments. A press release kicked off media activities and proactive pitching to local and energy reporters. Supporting materials and activities included a curated media contact list, media factsheet, media training for team members, and customizable letters for community partner use.

Early in the initiative, this tactic was paused, as the Agency and the Program Administrator discovered the media activities were creating confusion between the initiative and the overall program when discussing it with the media. This tactic was partially revived in the last month of the promotion period by creating a local elected official share kit, which included a sample social media post and email template for officials to share with their constituents.

To support community outreach and build awareness, the Program Administrator created various assets for distribution within the selected communities, including social media share kits, community-specific flyers, brochures, door hangers, presentations, branded swag, a word-of-mouth incentive campaign, and custom yard signs.

## POST - LAUNCH

Organic social media (unpaid social media posts) was utilized to build awareness of Bright Neighborhoods. The Program Administrator and the Agency leveraged their existing networks across LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram to promote the initiative and events to followers. This tactic created additional access to targeted audience groups and partners who could spread the word about the initiative. A digital paid advertising plan was implemented and targeted within the three community areas. The plan aimed to reach the target audience by pushing beyond awareness through consideration into action and deploying curated advertisements for English and Spanish speakers. Ads were deployed through digital display ads (website banner ads), paid social media (Meta, Nextdoor, and Reddit), and search engine marketing (Google search). Outreach events were also promoted through digital display ads. The digital ads ran in two batches, the first from September through the end of November and then again from February through March. The first batch of ads utilized creative illustrations and key messages from the marketing plan, and the second batch displayed lifestyle



imagery and key messages. Ads were paused from December through the end of January to conserve spending during the holiday season when purchasing decisions are heavily focused on traditional consumer goods.

A series of targeted emails and direct mailers were deployed to support participant enrollment. Promotional emails were deployed with key messages, including information about the initiative, eligibility, and enrollment dates. In the last month of enrollment, the Program Administrator implemented event digest-style emails to promote upcoming events to increase promotion. These emails were distributed to residents who completed a Bright Neighborhoods interest form and were on the ILSFA newsletter list. Direct mail and emails were also deployed to individual residents who submitted the intake form to encourage them to complete the enrollment process.

## RESULTS

The deployment of an integrated marketing plan did not drive significant results in terms of intake forms but proved fruitful in building program awareness. The increase in promotion, consolidation of marketing and messages, and initiation of outreach resulted in greater awareness and consideration of the program.

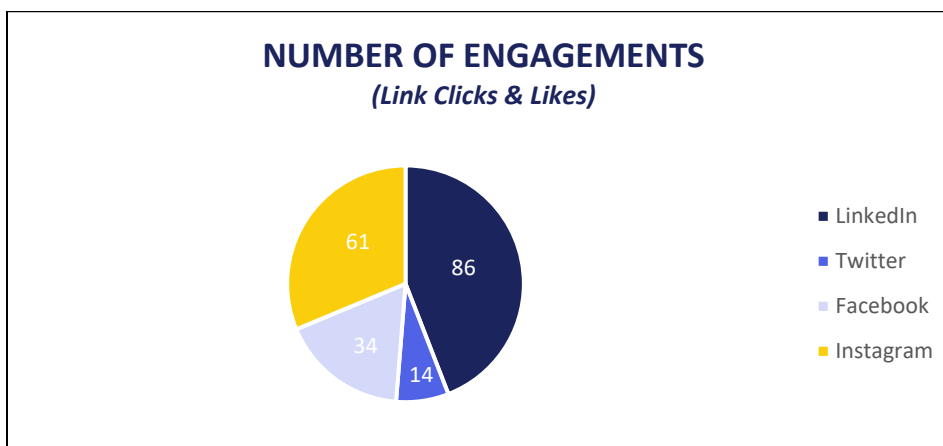
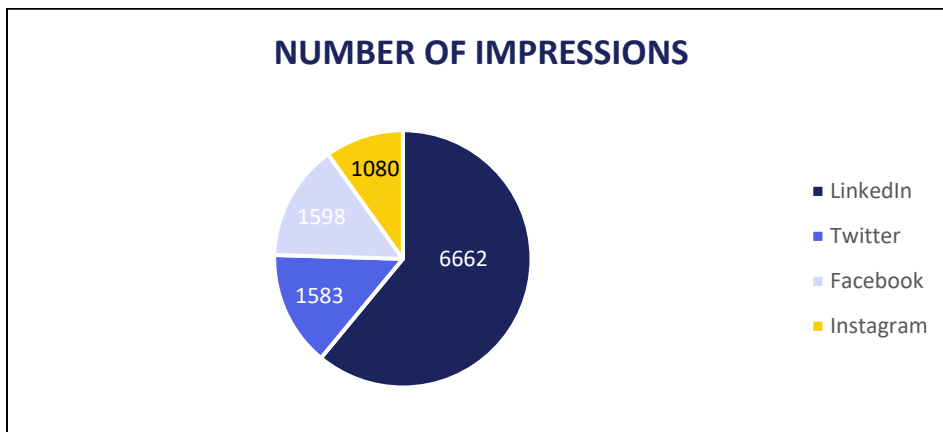
## WEBSITE

The Bright Neighborhoods webpage views provide insights into overall awareness of the initiative. Over the course of the marketing period, the tactics driving potential participants to the site resulted in the following:

Website Views		
Page Views (English)	Page Views (Spanish)	Total Page Views
32,724	4,239	36,963

## ORGANIC SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

From August 2023 to March 2024, the Program Administrator’s Facebook, LinkedIn, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram accounts published 89 organic social media posts promoting Bright Neighborhoods. These social posts received 12,024 overall impressions (the number of times posts were seen on social media channels) and 173 link clicks. This translates to about 135 impressions per social post. For comparison, social posts about the Program Administrator’s other programs typically receive about 100 impressions per social post.

**BREAKDOWN OF SOCIAL MEDIA PERFORMANCE BY PLATFORM:**

**EMAILS**

<b>Event Digest Emails – Sent to General Program Email Subscribers</b>			
Number of Emails	Number of Contacts	Average Open Rate	Average Click Rate (Number of times a link was clicked as compared to number of opens)
5	17,016	95.44%	5.98%

<b>Marketing Emails – Sent to Program Stakeholders</b>			
Number of Emails	Number of Contacts	Average Open Rate	Average Click Rate
3	9,186	34.13%	2.237%

Bright Neighborhoods emails sent to program stakeholders achieved a lower average click rate than other marketing emails sent to program stakeholders in Program Year 6, which achieved an average click rate of 4.74%. Bright Neighborhoods emails also achieved a lower average open rate than other marketing emails sent in Program Year 6, which achieved an average open rate of 46.4%.

## TARGETED PRINT MATERIALS

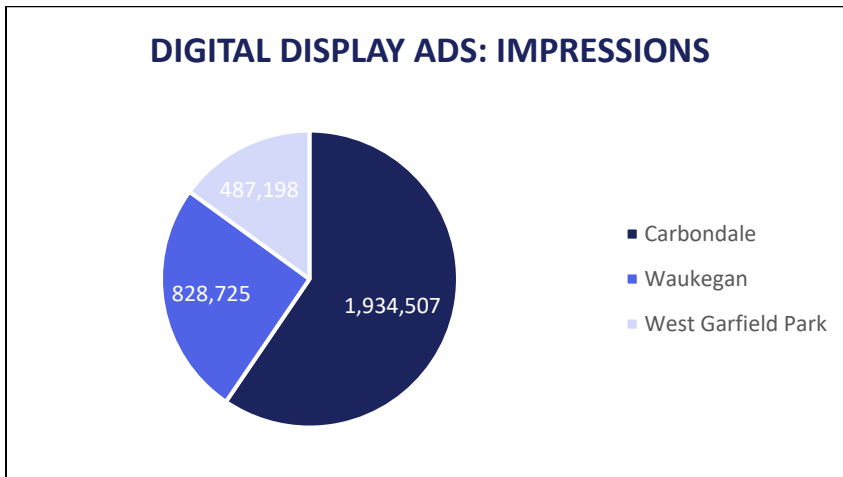
Printed materials were distributed to homes across the three community areas and at outreach events, increasing awareness of the program in targeted neighborhoods.

Type of Material	Number Distributed
Door Hangers	300
Brochures (English)	200
Brochures (Spanish)	100

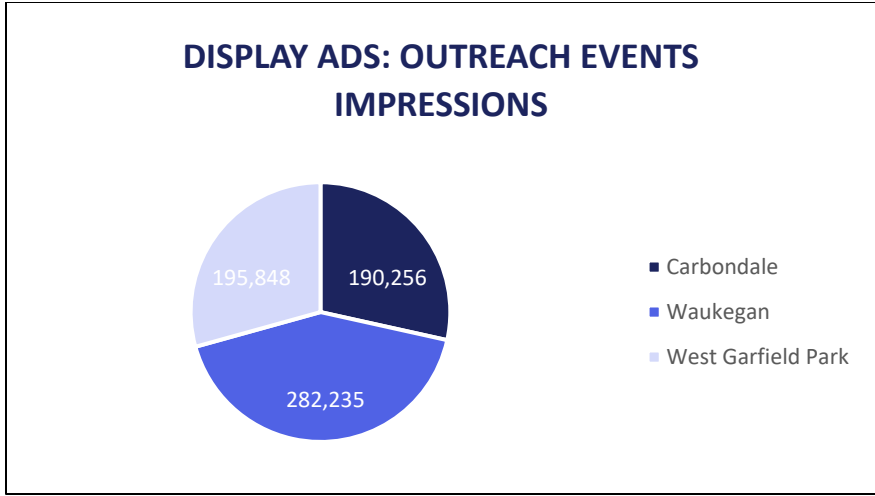
In total, 200 door hangers were distributed in West Garfield Park, while 100 were distributed in Waukegan, completed by Grassroots Educators in both instances. The Program Administrator was unable to distribute door hangers to Carbondale due to the size of that community area.

## PAID ADS

### DIGITAL DISPLAY ADS

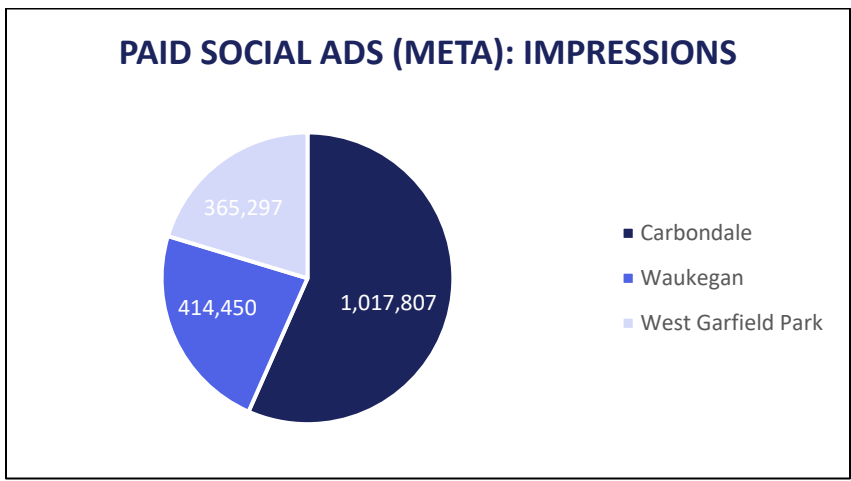


- Digital display ads delivered a **0.97%** click-through rate (CTR), which is 0.87% higher than the standard benchmark (0.10%) goal for display banners.
  - The average cost per click (CPC) for digital display ads was \$0.54
  - Carbondale’s overall CTR was **1.17%**, Waukegan’s was **0.91%**, and West Garfield Park’s was **0.61%**.
- The spring campaign, featuring refreshed lifestyle creatives (images of participants and their families), resonated better with the audience, resulting in a dramatic increase in CTR, which shows the importance of creative versioning.



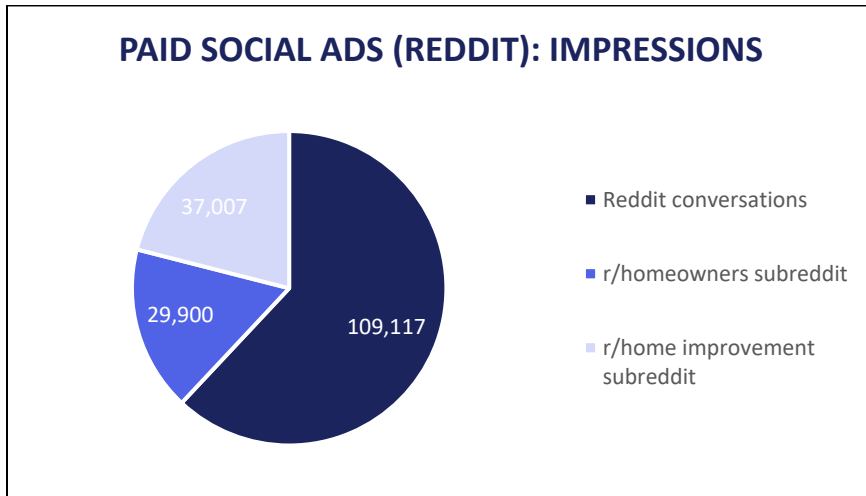
- Display ads promoting outreach events originating from social media delivered **668,399** impressions across all locations with a **0.14%** CTR.
  - The average CPC for digital ads promoting outreach events was \$3.89
  - Carbondale’s overall CTR was **0.16%**, Waukegan’s overall CTR was **0.13%**, and West Garfield Park’s overall CTR was **0.14%**.
- According to the ad unit data, this audience has a **66%** higher tendency to click the ad and go to the landing page. However, it is important to note **that 34% of the individuals preferred** to discover more information related to the ad via social media.

**SOCIAL MEDIA ADS**

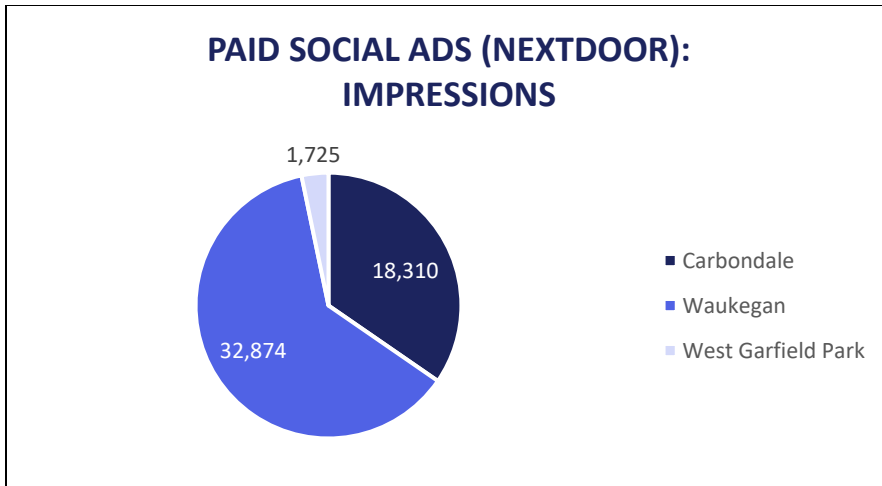


- Carbondale’s overall CTR was **0.42%**, Waukegan’s overall CTR was **0.58%**, and West Garfield Park’s overall CTR was **0.65%**.
- The average CPC for paid social ads on Meta was \$4.20

- The spring campaign featuring refreshed lifestyle creatives resonated better with the audience, with a large jump in CTRs during that phase. The difference in timing of year in which ads were shown may have also contributed to the increase in CTR during the spring campaign.
- Data shows that we need to have a strong social media page that provides educational content, as a large portion of the audience is looking to ILSFA’s social media page for discovery.

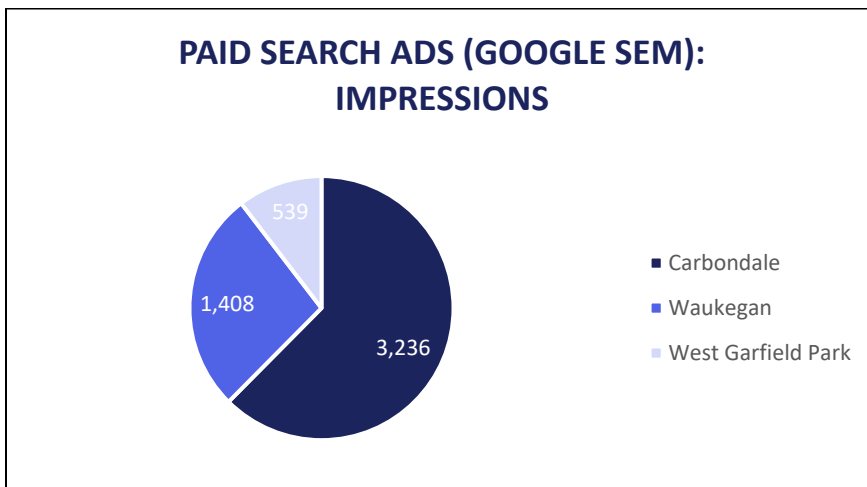


- The industry benchmark CTR for Reddit ads is **0.15%**.
- Reddit conversation ads garnered an average **0.34%** CTR.
  - The average CPC for Reddit conversation ads was \$2.15
  - r/homeowners subreddit ads garnered an average **0.44%** CTR
  - r/home improvement subreddit ads garnered an average **0.36%** CTR
- It is important to note that to reach the Reddit audience, the Program Administrator had to leverage all our targeted zip codes within one campaign, as the overall population size was too small to run individual campaigns across the designated locations. These campaigns also may have reached a wider audience than just income-eligible residents, as a variety of people utilize Reddit.
- Reddit replaced Nextdoor ads during the spring campaign due to the saturation of the target audience. Reddit ads targeted specific topic areas related to people exploring solar energy, weatherization, or ways to save money on electric bills.



- The industry benchmark CTR for Nextdoor ads is **0.25%**.
  - Carbondale ads garnered an average of **0.28% CTR**, Waukegan ads garnered an average of **0.28% CTR**, and West Garfield Park ads garnered an average of **0.29% CTR**.
  - The average CPC for Nextdoor ads was \$3.70.

**PAID SEARCH**



- Paid search delivered a CTR of **12%**, which is 10.39% above the industry benchmark (1.61%) goal.
  - The average CPC for paid search was \$16.10
  - Carbondale ads delivered an overall **11.87% CTR**, Waukegan ads delivered an overall **11.29% CTR**, and West Garfield Park ads delivered an overall **14.66% CTR**.

## HIGH-LEVEL PAID AD RESULTS

- In total, paid ads delivered **5,923,455 impressions** (ad views) producing **41,176 ad clicks** (clicks per person) across all platforms at a cost of \$70,000 over the course of 6 months.
- **139 completed intake forms** can be attributed to paid ads.
- The spring campaigns resulted in higher impressions and conversions due to the incorporation of lifestyle imagery. The increase may also be attributed to seasonality and mindset heading into warmer months.
- General marketing research shows that it takes individuals about 15-20 marketing touches to convert on a “purchase” like a solar installation.
- Paid ads create an opportunity for the initiative (and program) to reach thousands of residents regularly about the benefits of the program. That type of density of awareness and reach cannot be replicated with outreach alone.

## COST OF IMPLEMENTATION

The Program Administrator took on the cost of outreach and marketing to implement the initiative between August 2023 and March 2024. The outreach expenses included the labor costs for the outreach team to work in each community, travel expenses, and collaboration with community partners. The marketing expenses included costs to implement paid advertising and the development of outreach materials.

The total outreach cost was \$160,146, and the total agency cost was \$205,600, leading to a total cost of implementing the initiative of \$365,746. With 151 intake forms received from prospective participants across the state, the cost per intake form was \$2,422.16. With 16 referrals to Approved Vendors, the cost per referral was \$22,859.13, with only 1 participant progressing towards a project with an Approved Vendor.

Because of the shift in outreach and marketing from the Approved Vendor over to the Program Administrator, the REC prices were reduced. The Bright Neighborhoods REC values for projects in Program Year 6 are shown in the table below.

	Bright Neighborhoods		Residential Solar (Small) Sub-Program	
	Ameren Territory	ComEd Territory	Ameren Territory	ComEd Territory
0 - 10 kW	\$ 175.63	\$ 166.98	\$179.30	\$179.37
10 - 25 kW	\$ 146.17	\$ 142.60	\$148.92	\$152.23
25 - 100 kW	\$ 121.78	\$ 118.83	\$123.60	\$125.48

Using the average system size for a small residential project of 7.25 kW (AC), a project in ComEd territory would have received incentives valued at \$23,878.14 and in Ameren territory at \$25,115.09. Comparing these REC incentive values to a small residential project of the same size outside of Bright Neighborhoods, the REC price would be \$1,771.77 lower for a ComEd project and \$524.81 lower for an Ameren project in the initiative. Using this difference in REC incentives, we can estimate the amount saved in total incentives for 50-100 projects for each utility territory in Bright Neighborhoods. The REC savings for one of the Bright Neighborhoods areas in ComEd territory would have ranged from \$88,588.50 to \$177,177.00 for 50-100 projects, and in Ameren, REC savings would have ranged from \$26,240.50 to \$52,481.00. Taking these savings to represent the three communities in Bright Neighborhoods, if each had 50 projects, the REC savings would have been \$203,417.50, and if each had 100 projects, the REC savings would have been \$406,835.00.

## Key Findings and Considerations

### **CONSOLIDATING SUPPORT FOR PARTICIPANT INTAKE AND INCOME VERIFICATION CREATED AN ACCESSIBLE SIGN-UP PERIOD AND A CLEAR AVENUE FOR FOLLOW-UPS BY THE PROGRAM ADMINISTRATOR.**

In total, 113 prospective participants filled out a Bright Neighborhoods intake form during Program Year 6. During the outreach and marketing period for the initiative, most interest came from the Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan Area, with 72% of the total intake forms (see Figure 3). The other two communities held a flat trend of low interest for much of the initiative until February 2024, when a spike began in intake forms from all three communities until March, as seen in Figure 4.

Figure 3: Intake Forms by Bright Neighborhoods Community Areas

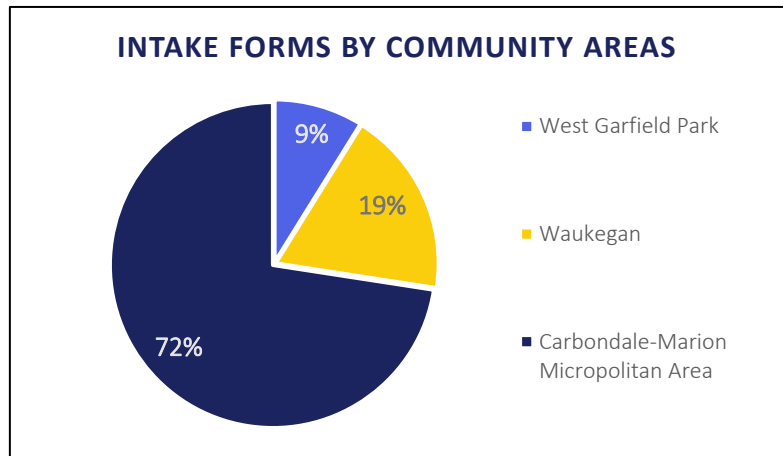




Figure 4: Intake Forms by Bright Neighborhoods Community Areas over Marketing and Outreach Period

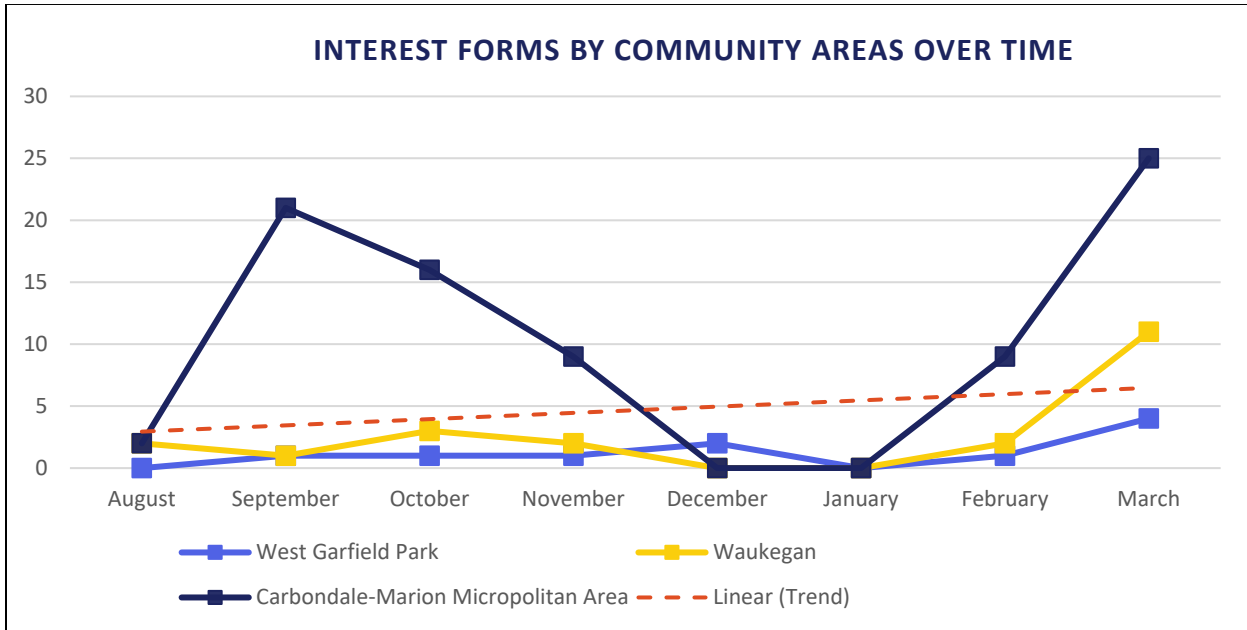


Table 3: Submitted intake forms by Bright Neighborhoods community from August 2023-March 2024

Intake Forms by Community	Aug '23	Sept '23	Oct '23	Nov '23	Dec '23	Jan '24	Feb '24	Mar '24	Total
West Garfield Park	0	1	1	1	2	0	1	4	10
Waukegan	2	1	3	2	0	0	2	11	21
Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan Area	2	21	16	9	0	0	9	25	82

The consolidation of intake and income verification through a single source created an accessible list for the Program Administrator to maintain contact with prospective participants to track their progress and serve as a main point of contact. Through follow-up calls by the Program Administrator to gather feedback on the initiative, two residents who have completed their customer journey felt this sign-up process was easy and appreciated the follow-ups and communications supporting their needs.

The consolidation also allowed the Program Administrator to identify new barriers preventing the participant from moving forward at different stages.

**THE OUTREACH AND MARKETING PERIOD BROUGHT IN INTAKE FORMS AT A HIGHER RATE AND AT A SIMILAR TREND BETWEEN JANUARY AND MARCH, AND IN A SHORTER TIMEFRAME THAN AUGUST-DECEMBER.**

Intake forms increased at similar rates across the three community areas during the January to March window of outreach and marketing. There were 61 intake forms from eligible initiative communities between August and December 2023 compared to 52 forms received from January and March 2024. From January to March, there was a large increase in events held by the Program Administrator across the community areas. Support from local partners also increased during this time to hold events and promote the initiative through their channels. This suggests the rapid uptake of interest in each community was driven by the increased presence of the Program Administrator and the increased support by local organizations.

Some marketing efforts, including the paid advertising campaign, were halted November-January due to the holidays. This was recommended based on product consumption behavior. As a result, the second phase of the ad campaign, which ran February-March, generated higher engagement and helped to deliver a greater number of intake forms. Ads generated 139 intake forms out of 151 total forms submitted, including within and outside of the Bright Neighborhoods community boundaries. Targeted media advertising across social media, digital display, and Google SEM increased program awareness, reached more of our target audience, and converted more participants in a shorter period than outreach.

**A MIX OF ADVERTISEMENTS, SUPPORT FROM TRUSTED COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS, AND IN-PERSON EDUCATIONAL WORKSHOPS HELPED DRIVE INTEREST ACROSS THE COMMUNITIES.**

The outreach and marketing period saw success in building awareness in all three communities by using a variety of deployed tactics. The most successful tactics varied by region. Two of the three regions, the Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan area, and Waukegan, led the largest number of intake forms through the social media and advertisement campaign. West Garfield Park intake forms were primarily led by attending an event.

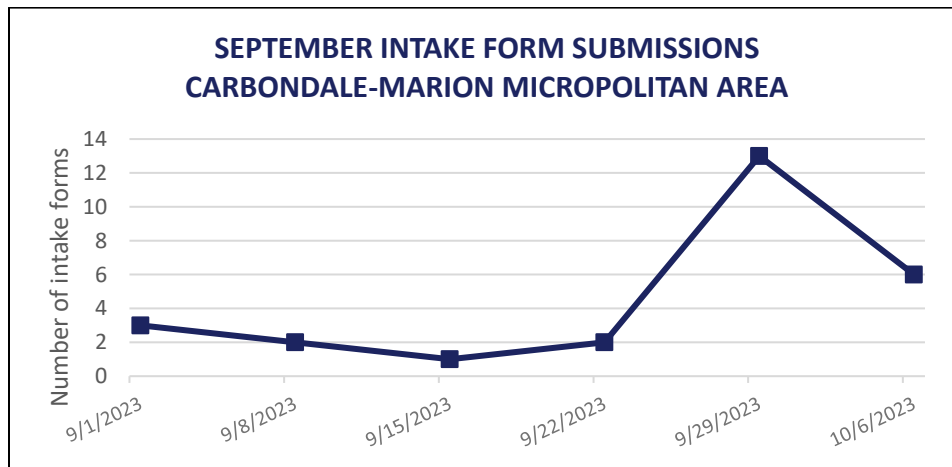
Interest was also sparked when a social media platform was paired with the support of a local elected official or partner organization. Local officials and CBOs became key ambassadors for identifying ways of reaching residents. Although support from CBOs varied by community and despite the smaller number of active partnerships, the eight partners in Waukegan and the five partners in the Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan

areas proved useful in spreading information among new organizations and community residents, creating increased awareness.

### CARBONDALE - MARION MICROPOLITAN AREA

An example of the strength of social media when paired with local support was seen in September in the Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan Area, when intake forms spiked (see Figure 5).

*Figure 5: Number of intake forms submitted in the Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan Area, September 2023*



In September, interested residents mainly heard about the program through advertisements or social media (see Table 4). But in late September, the Mayor of Murphysboro openly promoted the initiative by posting a flyer and additional information on his Facebook page. Within three days of this post, 7 new interest forms were submitted by residents in the Murphysboro area.

*Table 4: Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan Area How Heard: September 2023*

<b>“How Heard” September 2023:</b>	
Social media	12
Advertisement	2
Illinois Solar for All Website	2
Community Organizations (Non-Grassroots Educators)	1
Other	1
Refer-A-Neighbor	1

From February to March 2024, the Southern region saw another increase in intake forms (see Figure 6), again dominated by advertisements and social media (see Table 5).

Figure 6: Number of intake forms submitted in Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan Area, February-March 2024

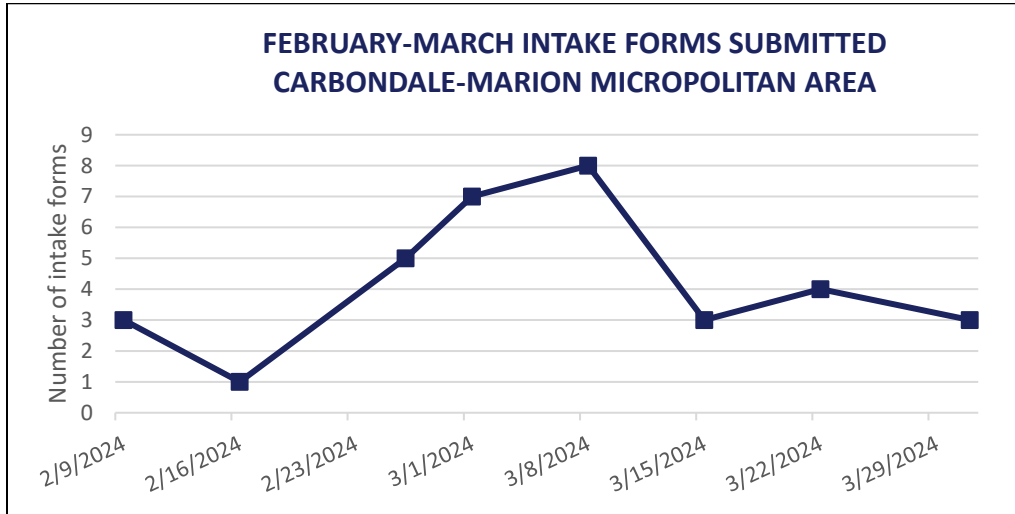


Table 52: Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan Area How Heard: February-March 2024

<b>“How Heard” February-March 2024:</b>	
Social media	13
Illinois Solar for All Website	9
Advertisement	6
Community Organizations (Not Grassroots Educators)	2
Refer-A-Neighbor	2
Attending a virtual event	1
News media	1

Although there were four virtual events held for this region in March, there were few attendees, so these events were not a large driving force for intake. This evidence suggests that digital media was the main driving factor for interest in the Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan Area, but also illustrates the strength of incorporating support from trusted local officials to foster interest.

### WAUKEGAN

Another useful tactic for addressing the barriers to solar education and trust was the inclusion of educational workshops. This approach first built awareness around solar energy and other resources for reading utility bills before the promotion of the ILSFA program and the Bright Neighborhoods Initiative. This approach was successful in increasing awareness in Waukegan.

Waukegan saw a similar increase in intake forms from February to March 2024 (see Figure 7), mainly demonstrating interest through social media and in-person events (see Table 6).

Figure 7: Number of intake forms submitted in Waukegan, February-March 2024

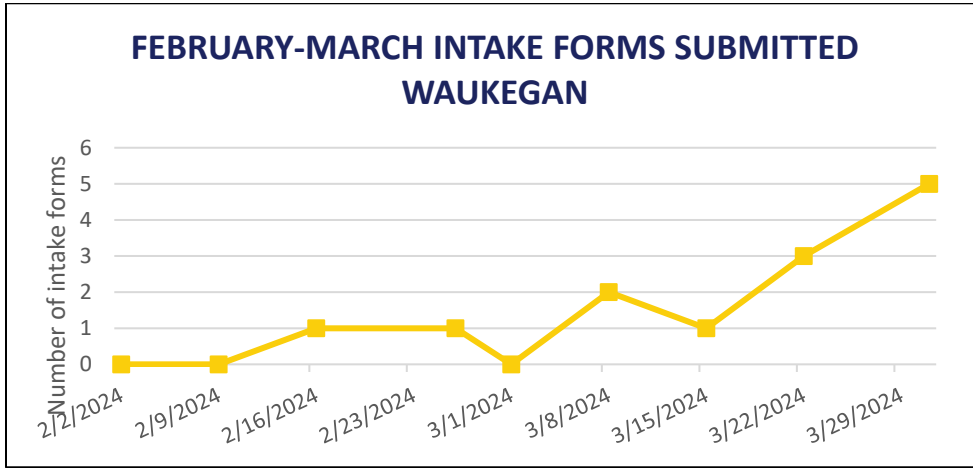


Table 6: Waukegan How Heard February-March 2024

<b>“How Heard” February-March 2024: Waukegan</b>	
Social media	7
Attending an in-person event	2
Advertisement	1
News media	1
Other	1
Speaking with a Grassroots Educator	1

An example of this tactic occurred on February 27 when the Program Administrator and CAP of Lake County partnered with the Waukegan Township to host an educational workshop. This event not only promoted the Bright Neighborhoods initiative as a resource for income-eligible Waukegan residents but began with a “Basics of Solar” presentation, followed by “Home Energy Savings” presented by a guest speaker from the Citizens Utility Board to explain how to read utility bills. There were eighteen attendees, of which eleven were residents of Waukegan, and the others from North Chicago, Zion, or Gurnee.

Following the event, many of the residents expressed their appreciation for the event and wanted to continue learning about solar, whether residential or community solar. Our main contact at the Township who supported the event also expressed her delight and desire to collaborate on many future events. Through follow-up calls to attendees, one Waukegan resident signed up for Bright Neighborhoods and became income verified, one resident was directed toward Illinois Shines, another was directed to community solar, and an alderperson in attendance expressed interest in a future partnership.

Although this one event did not bring many potential projects for Bright Neighborhoods, it increased awareness not only for Waukegan residents but also to close neighboring communities and potential partners in the area. It also built trust and a basic understanding of solar energy and the resources available to achieve those benefits.

### WEST GARFIELD PARK

West Garfield Park’s increase in intake forms from February to March was driven by in-person workshops (see Table 7). One of the in-person educational workshops in March included time for residents to sign up immediately with the help of an ILSFA representative or the Grassroots Educator. The Approved Vendor for the community, Selenium Energy, was also in attendance to answer technical questions from the attendees, provide background on their solar company, and help advocate for the benefits of solar. The presence of an Approved Vendor at workshops can enhance trust among participants as the vendor can demonstrate their expertise and commitment, build credibility, and reassure prospective participants. The selected Vendor attended one other virtual event with several attendees, but that event did not drive intake forms. This is presumably because the virtual nature of the event did not provide a space for ILSFA representatives to work with residents to complete their intake forms following the educational portion of the event. In the case of West Garfield Park, the in-person events with accessible representatives and the presence of the Approved Vendor encouraged the most interest among community residents.

*Table 7: West Garfield Park How Heard February-March 2024*

<b>“How Heard” February-March 2024: West Garfield Park</b>	
Attending an in-person event	4
Social media	1

### **VIRTUAL AND IN-PERSON EVENT ATTENDANCE WAS OFTEN LOW WITHOUT SUPPORT FROM LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS.**

Many of the events hosted only by the Program Administrator had lower attendance without support from a local partner. Events held, virtually or in-person, with local organizations received an average of 6 attendees with one event reaching 20 attendees, whereas events hosted only by the Program Administrator, all virtually, averaged 2 attendees per event. When a local organization co-hosted, they often promoted the events by placing flyers in public spaces highly visited by prospective participants. These organizations also have established networks of residents from years of their work to whom they could promote events through text or email blasts. As shown in the previous example from Waukegan and West Garfield Park, the events hosted by a local trusted

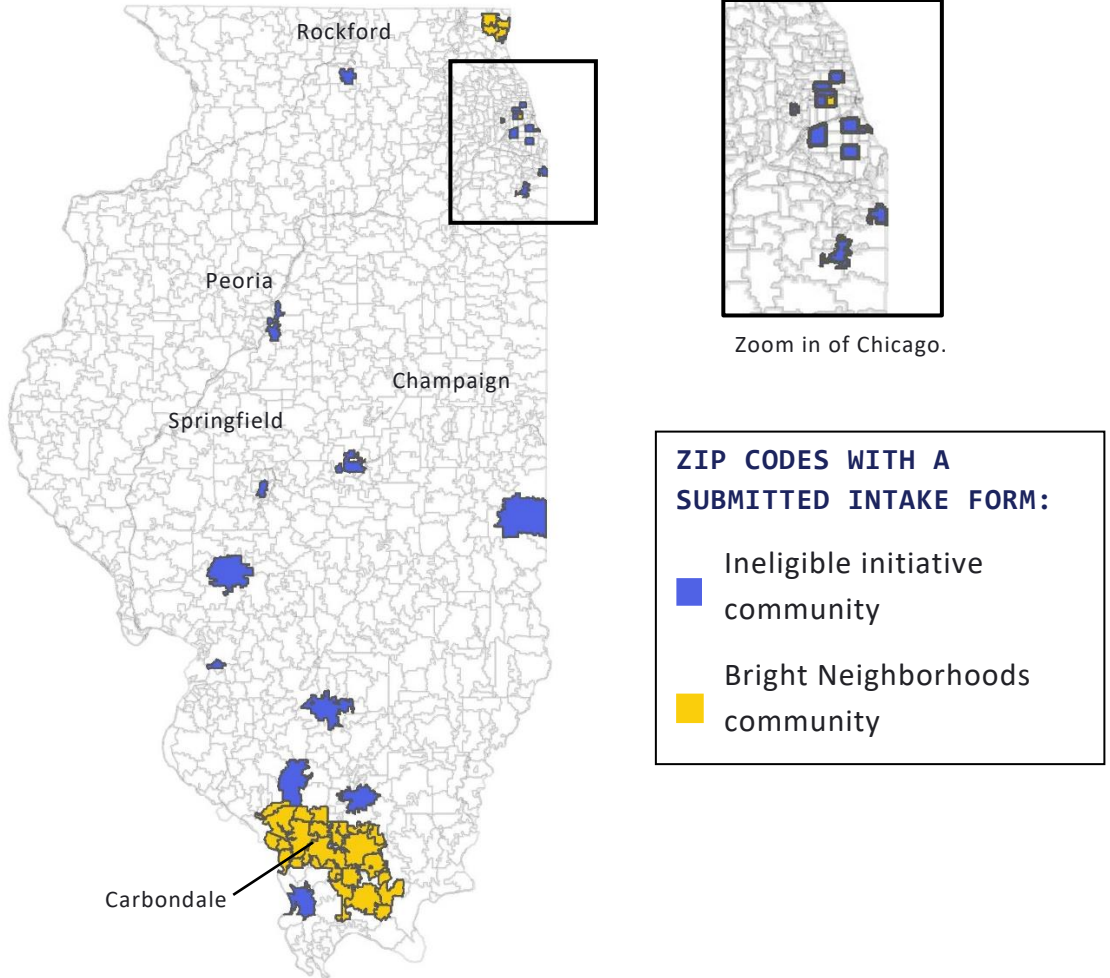
organization not only brought more sign-ups but were also effective in increasing attendance. This further proves that support from local organizations can help our events become more successful because of their established trust.

**BRIGHT NEIGHBORHOODS INCREASED THE VISIBILITY AND AWARENESS OF ILLINOIS SOLAR FOR ALL IN THE SELECTED COMMUNITY AREAS AND NEIGHBORING COMMUNITIES.**

Bright Neighborhoods selected communities that had never had a residential solar project through ILSFA. The number of intake forms was used as an indicator of awareness in communities. During the outreach period, a total of 113 intake forms were received from within the three communities. Although this initiative focused on specific communities, the marketing tactics generated interest in neighboring communities, building on overall awareness of the program. Outside of the intake forms within the three Bright Neighborhoods communities, there were 38 intake submissions from ineligible communities or households, with the majority coming from Central and Southern Illinois, as shown in the map below.<sup>6</sup> More than half of these individuals heard about the program through digital media, according to their intake forms.

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<sup>6</sup> This map highlights the zip codes where the Program Administrator received at least one intake form from a prospective participant. Some of the zip codes cross the county borders and do not depict the exact borders of the Bright Neighborhoods community areas.



**HIGH PERCENTAGES OF PARTICIPANT DROP-OFFS WERE FOUND DURING THE INCOME VERIFICATION AND SITE PRE-SCREENING SURVEY STAGES.**

There was a significant drop-off in interested participants during the income verification process when asked in a follow-up email to submit further documentation or missing information. Figure 8 below depicts the movement and drop-off of prospective Bright Neighborhoods participants through the customer journey. The figure outlines the stages in the customer journey and the percentage and number of all prospective participants, out of 113, who completed each stage.



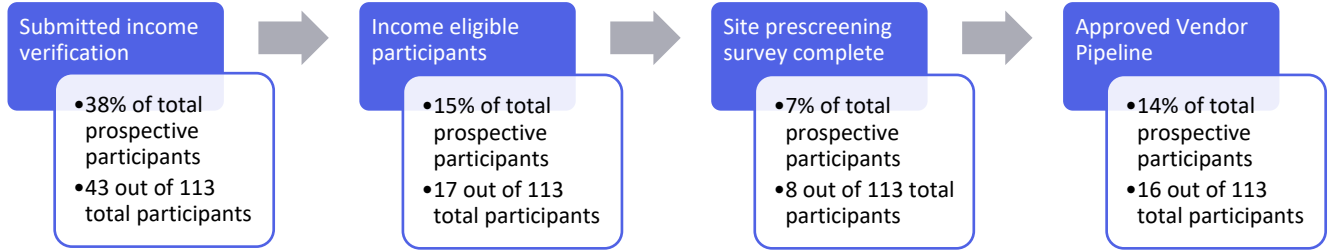


Figure 8: Participant movement across stages of the customer journey.

There was a total of 43 income verification forms submitted by prospective participants, but only 17 completed their verification process. All 17 participants who completed their verification were eligible for ILSFA. In this process, they can select between three methods for verification: through a credit reporting agency, household proof of enrollment in an income-eligible program, and, in limited circumstances, an income affidavit.

Out of the 43 Bright Neighborhoods participants who submitted an income verification form, 39% selected the credit reporting agency option, while 37% chose proof of enrollment in another income-eligible program. The remaining 24% had incomplete forms and were required to follow up with the missing information.

Of the participants who chose the credit reporting agency, 47% became unresponsive to follow-ups, and 56% of those who selected the household proof of enrollment in an income-eligible program became unresponsive. The credit reporting agency requires a follow-up call from the Program Administrator to gather information over the phone to prevent any breaches of sensitive information. The household proof of enrollment in another income-eligible program requires either a photo upload or mailing of a physical copy of the proof. This additional step to submit information may be burdensome to income-eligible residents, preventing them from accessing the benefits of solar.

There was also a drop-off when asking an income-eligible participant for the online site prescreening survey. Because of this drop-off and as mentioned earlier, the use of the prescreening survey was discontinued after February 2024 to reduce any added burdens this requirement may have added. After February, the Program Administrator instead sent all income-eligible participants to the vendor without a completed survey, demonstrated by the total number of 16 participants sent to the Approved Vendor, where only 8 had completed the survey. This was meant to continue moving eligible participants through the process and closer to a solar installation.

Similarly to further information requests during income verification, this survey added another task for the participants to complete, potentially adding more burden onto them. Additionally, the survey did not serve its intended purpose of helping divert homes unsuitable for solar, with only 1 homeowner diverted with the need for an electrical upgrade.

**MOST ELIGIBLE PROJECTS THAT WORKED WITH THEIR APPROVED VENDOR COULD NOT MOVE FORWARD DUE TO SITE SUITABILITY ISSUES .**

A total of 16 eligible homeowners were sent to the selected Approved Vendors, but 15 were dropped for various reasons (see Table 8). In most cases, they were dropped because of the need for roof and/or electrical repairs or due to insufficient production from shading. The five homes that require home repairs and/or upgrades were referred to the Home Repairs and Upgrades initiative also working under ILSFA during this program year. However, the vendors selected for Bright Neighborhoods by the Program Administrator were unable to participate in the Home Repairs and Upgrades initiative to take on those repairs themselves. As small and/or emerging businesses, these vendors were unable to take on the additional upfront costs to complete home repairs and the additional administrative cost to manage the contractors that would complete the work. Because of this, the Program Administrator team worked closely with these homeowners to connect them to identified external funding opportunities available in their community.

Table 3: Number of eligible homeowners sent to the Approved Vendor by the community and reasons for dropped projects.

<b>Participant Referrals to the Approved Vendor</b>	<b>Total</b>
West Garfield Park	1
Waukegan	2
Carbondale-Marion	13
<b>Dropped Participant Referrals by Approved Vendor</b>	<b>Total</b>
West Garfield Park	1
Waukegan	2
Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan Area	12
<b>Reasons for Dropped Participant Referrals</b>	<b>Total</b>
Site unsuitable (referred to Illinois Solar for All: Community Solar)	6
Site unsuitable (referred to the Home Repairs Pilot)	5
Unresponsive to Approved Vendor follow-ups	3
No longer interested <sup>7</sup>	1

### **A MIX OF FOLLOW-UP TACTICS GARNERED INCREASED RESPONSE RATES FROM INTERESTED RESIDENTS .**

During the customer journey, phone calls were used twice to follow up with prospective participants as part of the six-step follow-up process (see Figure 1). These follow-up calls alone were seemingly unsuccessful, leaving voicemails after 73% of follow-up calls and receiving a very low callback rate. However, when looking at these phone calls in coordination with emails and direct mailers, the tactic proved to be a strong reminder to participants. There were six homeowners who submitted their income verification after one of the marketing follow-ups: two after receiving the direct mailer, two after the marketing email, one after the first phone call, and one after the second phone call. Although the phone calls in themselves did not lead to immediate enrollment, the deployment of a mix of tactics as a follow-up proved to be most effective for reaching our targeted audience.

### **SMALL AND EMERGING BUSINESSES REQUIRE CLOSER SUPPORT AND RESOURCES TO PARTICIPATE .**

Through the Approved Vendor RFP process, the team prioritized the selection of Small and Emerging businesses to complete the installations in each community area. This process brought unique challenges with a lack of qualified responses, leading to an extension of the RFP to fill two of the three communities. Additionally, one of the

<sup>7</sup> This income eligible homeowner opted not to move forward with the Approved Vendor because they intend to move in the near future.

respondents rescinded their application because of the reduced REC incentives for this initiative compared to the general program.

The RFP process selected a vendor qualifying as a small and/or emerging business for each community area. During the implementation of the initiative, the team learned this collaboration required closer support in the form of consistent bi-weekly or weekly check-ins to provide support. The team also compiled a list of external resources to support these businesses as they build their presence in the ILSFA program. These resources include help with writing contracts, finding funding, and hiring a workforce. As mentioned above, these small and/or emerging vendors were unable to take on the upfront costs and added administrative costs required to participate in the Home Repairs and Upgrades initiative, preventing them from working with several homes.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations draw upon the “Key Findings and Considerations” section and are open to stakeholder feedback.

### **INTEGRATE THE SITE PRESCREENING SURVEY INTO THE INCOME ELIGIBILITY INTAKE FORM.**

As discussed, there was a significant drop-off of income-eligible prospective participants when asked to complete the survey, with only 47% of income-eligible participants completing it despite two emails and two phone calls. Because under-resourced communities often face a disproportionate amount of burden, this additional form following an already arduous process could have added more burden onto the income-eligible residents, discouraging their participation.<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, the virtual survey and photos cannot adequately assess a roof's health. This survey was not intended to replace the full site assessment done by the Approved Vendor but to evaluate ways to streamline referrals to the vendor. The Program Administrator could identify potential shading and electrical box issues through the submitted photos but could not visually determine if the roof needed a full replacement.

Because site suitability is also a barrier to projects moving forward, the Program Administrator recommends shifting the site pre-screening to focus on the questions already included on the income eligibility intake form to assess the homeowner's understanding of their electrical and roof health. When a participant has flagged suitability issues on their income eligibility intake form, the Program Administrator

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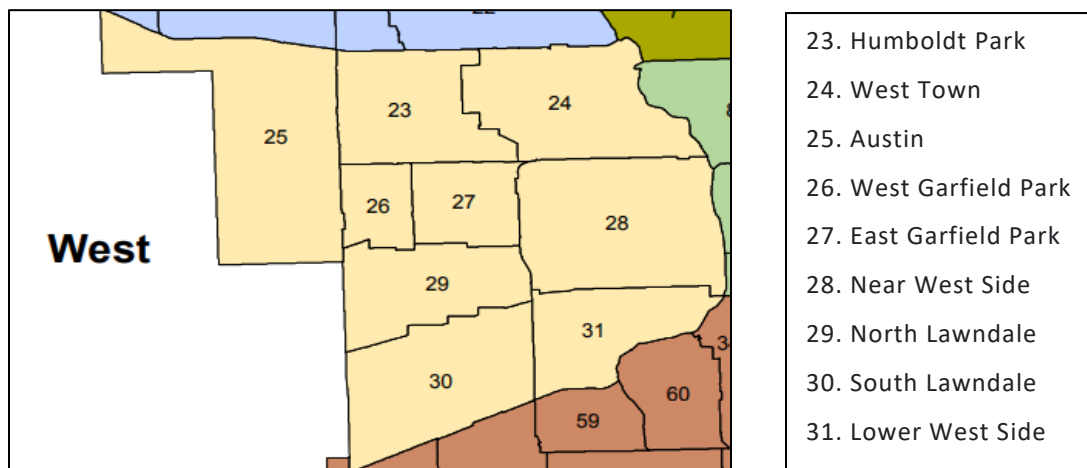
<sup>8</sup>Clean Energy States Alliance, [“Solar with Justice: Strategies for Powering Up Under-Resourced Communities and Growing an Inclusive Solar Market”](#)

recommends referring them either to external funding programs serving their area (identified through the Home Repairs and Upgrades initiative), notifying the Bright Neighborhoods selected Approved Vendor of the issues (if they are willing to support home repairs), or referring the participant to an Approved Vendor who is participating in the Home Repairs and Upgrades initiative, pending stakeholder feedback on updates to the Request for Proposals. Because of this significant drop-off during the customer journey, the Program Administrator would like to learn more from residents about why they do not continue in the process.

**MAINTAIN AND EXPAND THE COMMUNITY AREAS .**

The Program Administrator recommends foregoing a new community selection process and keeping the Waukegan and the Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan areas while expanding the West Garfield Park area to encompass the City of Chicago-West Side. This recommendation will allow the Program Administrator to build on the outreach and trust built during the first initiative year since it takes significant time to build trust, especially when overcoming the identified barriers. It also allows the team to implement updated outreach and marketing tactics specific to each community area based on what they learned from the first year.

Expanding the West Garfield Park area will allow the Program Administrator to involve new organizations as partners in their outreach to better evaluate the efficacy of tactics employed in this initiative. The Program Administrator recommends broadening the West Garfield Park pilot area to a larger area that covers more of the West Side of Chicago, including Humboldt Park, Austin, West and East Garfield Park, North and South Lawndale, and Lower West Side neighborhoods<sup>9</sup>.



Picture 1: The neighborhoods included in the City of Chicago West Region.

<sup>9</sup> City of Chicago: [Chicago Regions Map](#).

This expansion does not include the West Town, Near West Side, and Lower West Side neighborhoods as those communities have median incomes higher than the income requirements under ILSFA for single-person homes in Cook County. According to ILSFA income requirements, a single-family household’s income in Cook County should be at or below \$58,350. Based on this table, in most cases, at least 50% of households are income-eligible among the listed neighborhoods. To evaluate this recommendation, below is a table aggregating the median income and the approximate number of income-eligible households, and what *percentage* of the total number of households they make up for each neighborhood from CMAP Community Data<sup>10</sup>:

Neighborhood	Number of submitted intake forms	Median Income	Approximate Number of Households within ILSFA Income Requirements	Proposed to Be Included in Future Pilot Design
23. Humboldt Park	1	\$46,786	9,920 (53.5%)	Yes
24. West Town	--	\$118,293	7,387 (18.5%)	No
25. Austin	4	\$38,407	20,741 (59.9%)	Yes
26. West Garfield Park	--	\$35,233	3,909 (67.2%)	Yes
27. East Garfield Park	4	\$25,692	4,922 (68.5%)	Yes
28. Near West Side	--	\$98,569	9,133 (29.5%)	No
29. North Lawndale	--	\$31,332	7,793 (66.9%)	Yes
30. South Lawndale	--	\$38,953	12,073 (62.2%)	Yes
31. Lower West Side	--	\$61,295	5,412 (40.4%)	No

This expansion would extend to the neighboring communities where we have received 9 additional interested participants through the intake form during the first initiative year, identified in the above table. Additionally, the Program Administrator learned many residents move across these communities for events and are not confined to their respective communities, so future events can more easily serve attendees through the initiative with the expansion. This would also add more zip codes for use within an advertising campaign to extend the reach to a larger pool of income-eligible residents within each community area. An expansion of this community area will broaden the pool of prospective participants and include new potential partners. The Program Administrator intends to learn more about best practices for engaging with income-eligible residents through this community area expansion.

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<sup>10</sup> CMAP Community Data.

## **UPDATE THE INITIATIVE GOALS AND STRIVE TO ACHIEVE A SUBSTANTIAL DATA SET OF PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANTS TO EVALUATE TACTICS.**

The goal of the Bright Neighborhoods initiative is to learn how the barriers to participation in the Residential Solar (Small) sub-program can be overcome with the Program Administrator assuming the roles of customer acquisition, marketing, and outreach. The pilot design set an ambitious initial goal of achieving 50-100 projects in each Bright Neighborhoods community, but it has only successfully referred a handful of projects to the Approved Vendor.

The lack in achieving our installation goal is not from lack of effort, but rather an indication of persistent challenges to overcoming the barriers that have been voiced by Approved Vendors and other stakeholders since the outset of ILSFA. These barriers include mistrust in marketers, skepticism of the benefits available through ILSFA participation, and deferred maintenance and shading challenges. ILSFA Grassroots Educators have noted that it can take more than a year to build the community familiarity and trust in ILSFA before residents are comfortable exploring an on-site system for their home through ILSFA.

Because of these challenges, the Program Administrator recommends redefining our definition of success to engaging a number of potential participants that would provide a data set substantial enough to evaluate the effectiveness of the customer engagement tactics being tested in this pilot. The Program Administrator recommends defining this data set by setting goals for the number of intake forms, the number of participant referrals, and the number of projects installed.

Setting a goal for the number of intake forms received reflects the community's awareness of the program. Awareness is an important stage of solar adoption that should be tracked to evaluate the effectiveness of tactics used to increase participation in the program. Those metrics include tracking website visits, event attendees, and impressions from digital media efforts in the second year of the initiative. This goal will assess our effectiveness in increasing overall trust and interest in solar and the opportunities for savings available through ILSFA.

The Program Administrator also recommends pairing this goal with a new goal for the number of participant referrals to the Approved Vendor in each community. The first year of the initiative saw 16 referrals but was unable to complete the installation largely due to site suitability issues. Adding a goal for the number of referrals across communities will help us evaluate outreach and marketing acquisition tactics used to

achieve the purpose of this initiative in assessing best practices for community engagement to reach increased program participation.

Because of the barriers experienced in the first year, adjusting the goal for a total number of installations in each community will help set expectations for what we hope to achieve this year while also considering the importance of gathering information about participants facing barriers at all stages of participation.

With these points in mind, the Program Administrator recommends adding a goal of reaching 100-200 submitted intake forms in each community with 30-50 customer referrals to the selected Approved Vendor, resulting in at least 20-25 installations in each community. The Program Administrator expects to reach these new goals using the updated outreach tactics detailed below, which include applying the learnings from the first year on how each community responds to different outreach strategies.

Additionally, the Program Administrator will also track new subscriptions to ILSFA Community Solar projects from residents within the communities to gauge the success of generating community education and interest that results in increased participation in ILSFA beyond the Residential Solar (Small) sub-program. To track these subscriptions from potential spillover effects of Bright Neighborhoods marketing and outreach tactics, the Program Administrator recommends tracking subscriptions in neighboring communities that share a border with the initiative communities and that have a high percentage of income-eligible residents. These proposed communities are listed below:

<b>West Garfield Park (WGP) without expansion</b>	<b>*With the proposed update of WGP to the West Side of Chicago</b>	<b>Waukegan</b>	<b>Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan Area</b>
East Garfield Park	Cicero	North Chicago	Randolph County
Austin	Garfield Ridge-Chicago	Park City	Perry County
North Lawndale	Archer Heights-Chicago	Beach Park	Franklin County
Humboldt Park	Brighton Park-Chicago	Zion	Saline County
	McKinley Park-Chicago		Pope County
	Bridgeport-Chicago		Massac County
	New City-Chicago		Pulaski County
	Belmont Cragin-Chicago		Union County
	Hermosa-Chicago		



## **ADJUST THE APPROVED VENDOR RFP TO ADDRESS THE LACK OF PARTICIPATION IN THE HOME REPAIRS AND UPGRADES INITIATIVE.**

Site suitability of the home's roof and electrical are essential to completing a solar installation. Of the 16 income-eligible homes that were sent to the Approved Vendor, 31% were unable to move forward due to an unsuitable roof or needing electrical upgrades. This was one of the largest challenges to moving forward with an installation in this first year. As small and/or emerging businesses, the selected Approved Vendors faced financial constraints that prevented them from supporting the identified repair projects.

To address this barrier, the Program Administrator recommends exploring options for addressing both the issue of deferred maintenance for many Bright Neighborhoods participants and the difficulties in completing home repairs presented by our small and/or emerging businesses. The Program Administrator is seeking feedback on the following options:

1. Adding a preference on the RFP would give additional points to a vendor who is willing to work on the Home Repairs and Upgrades initiative. The preference for small and emerging businesses would remain on the RFP, but the selected vendor would not be required to meet both preferences.
2. Explore the opportunity for mentorship where a Designee qualifies as the small and emerging business and an affiliated Approved Vendor can financially support the Designee's participation in the Home Repairs and Upgrades initiative while achieving the small and emerging business prioritization via its Designee.

The Program Administrator is open to other proposals that could help address the lack of participation in the Home Repairs and Upgrades initiative while still supporting the participation of small and emerging businesses.

## **INCOME VERIFICATION METHOD UPDATE**

The Program Administrator would like to recognize the addition of self-attestation as an income verification method for Bright Neighborhoods residents residing in HUD Qualified Census Tracts as stated in the 2024 Long-Term Plan and the ICC Final Order. This change will be added to the Bright Neighborhoods updated design document for the 2024-25 program year and the Agency will provide recommendations on whether to incorporate self-attestation in its next Long-Term Plan.

## OUTREACH STRATEGY UPDATES

In this first year of the initiative, the Program Administrator learned how each community responds differently to outreach. Through these learnings, they have identified areas for growth to address in the second year to continue evaluating best practices for engaging the target audience.

What has proved to bring success already is working with key partners in each community to help promote the initiative and host events. A key focus for the Program Administrator in preparation for the re-launch of the initiative in the 2024-2025 Program Year will be to continue identifying and establishing these partnerships in the West Garfield Park community, and working with the established partners in Waukegan and the Carbondale-Marion area to create unique outreach plans and event calendars. These prospective partners include houses of worship, school districts, Community Action Agencies, and strengthening relationships with local elected officials. To address language barriers in Waukegan, the Program Administrator will work to establish relationships with local Hispanic groups. These partnerships will create the foundation for outreach and support for building awareness in the program.

Once community partners are established, the Program Administrator will work with them to create unique outreach plans that may include house parties (a small gathering at a community resident's home, or a local nonprofit, with an installed residential solar project), tabling at community-hosted events, hosting coffee chats or focus groups to learn directly from residents and community stakeholders and hosting educational workshops. This mix of events will increase the presence of ILSFA representatives and partners promoting the initiative to spread the Bright Neighborhoods and Illinois Solar for All names.

Finally, the Program Administrator acknowledges the significance of providing the "concierge" service to prospective participants to support them through their customer journey. They will evaluate the follow-up process to identify any changes that can be made to better engage and encourage enrollment after the intake form, such as hosting a monthly virtual Q&A to engage with prospective participants who hear about the program through a social platform but are interested in talking with a representative "face-to-face".