

# Bright Neighborhoods Initiative: Request for Comments

06.26.2024

The Illinois Solar for All (ILSFA) Program Administrator and the Illinois Power Agency (the Agency) are requesting stakeholder input on the Bright Neighborhoods Program Year 6 Report and the recommended updates to the design for Program Year 7.

**BACKGROUND:** The Residential Solar Pilot, or the Bright Neighborhoods initiative, was launched on August 1, 2023, to address several barriers previously reported by stakeholders. These barriers include a lack of knowledge of solar power, distrust in marketers, language barriers, and a complex administrative process. This initiative was designed to learn best practices on how to reduce these barriers and how to facilitate more solar installations in 1-4-unit homes.

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.

In the first year of the Bright Neighborhood initiative, the ILSFA team was not able to meet the initial goals of the initiative for increasing program participation in the Illinois Solar for All: Residential Solar (Small) sub-program. The Program Administrator published an evaluation report of the first year of the initiative analyzing the challenges to achieving increased program participation and new barriers discovered in the first year. Through these learnings, the Program Administrator and the Agency have devised recommendations to improve the functions of the initiative and to continue learning about best practices for reducing the identified barriers to increase participation in the program.

The IPA and Program Administrator are seeking feedback on the specific recommendations below. Commenters need not respond to every recommendation and may provide feedback on other elements of the Bright Neighborhoods initiative. However, comments should not address aspects of the ILSFA program that are unrelated to the Bright Neighborhoods initiative. Comments are welcome from both ILSFA stakeholders and other interested parties.

Please note that comments will be made public and published on the ILSFA website (IllinoisSFA.com). However, should a commenter seek to designate any portion of its response as confidential, that commenter should provide both public and redacted versions. Independent of that designation, if the Program Team determines that a response contains confidential information that should not be disclosed, it reserves the right to provide its own redactions.

Responses are due by **Wednesday, July 10, 2024**, and should be sent to the Program Administrator at [Bright@illinoisSFA.com](mailto:Bright@illinoisSFA.com).

# Recommendations for Stakeholder Feedback

1. The Program Administrator recommends maintaining the Waukegan and Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan Areas and expanding the West Garfield Park community.

The first year of the initiative saw interest largely in the Carbondale-Marion Micropolitan Area and Waukegan, making up 91% of the intake forms of interested participants. However, the barriers to securing an installation remain in these communities and prevented any projects from moving forward. The Program Administrator hopes to use the momentum from this first year to build on the goals of this initiative by reaching more prospective participants to lead them to an installation.

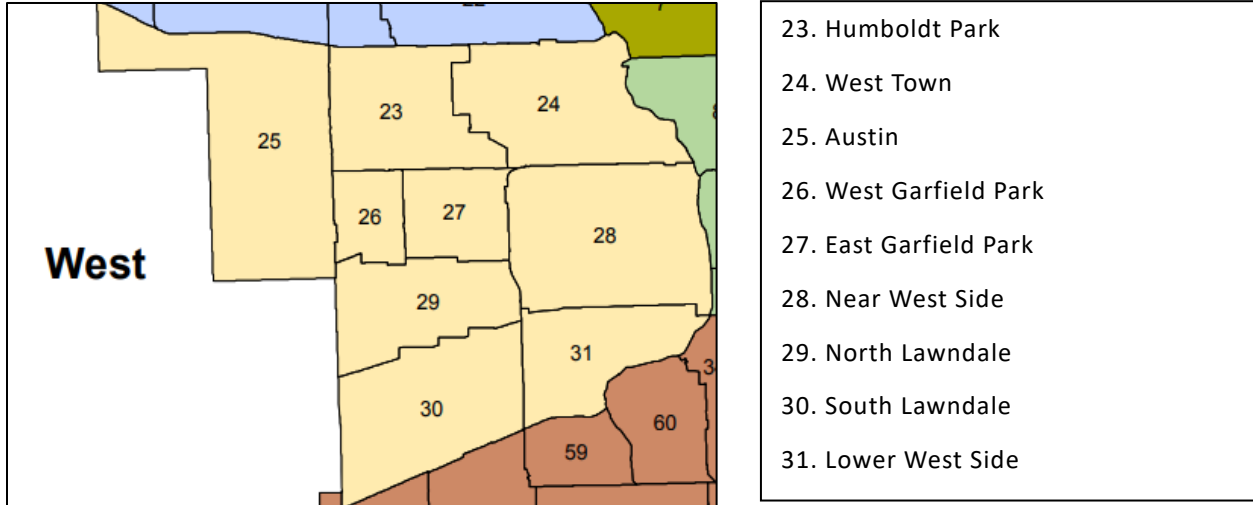
- *The Program Administrator recommends remaining in these two community areas during Program Year 7.*

Despite the effort to conduct outreach and increase awareness of the ILSFA program in the West Garfield Park neighborhood of Chicago during the first year of the initiative, interest and the number of partners remained low. This was the smallest of the pilot areas and the Program Administrator observed spillover interest from neighboring communities. The Program Administrator would like to learn more about the effectiveness of the outreach tactics used to increase awareness among income-eligible prospective participants to reach the outcome of increased participation in the program.

- *The Program Administrator recommends expanding the West Garfield Park Chicago community area to include more of the West Side of Chicago. This includes the Humboldt Park, Austin, West and East Garfield Park, North and South Lawndale neighborhoods. West Town, the Near West Side, and the Lower West Side are not included (due to lower numbers of income-eligible residents).<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> [Chicago Regions Map.](#)



The above map shows the proposed expanded pilot community area of the West Garfield Park neighborhood (number 26 on the map) to include more of the West Side of Chicago for Program Year 7, in yellow on the map (excluding 24, 28, and 31).

The West Town, Near West Side, and Lower West Side neighborhoods are not being included because they have median incomes much higher than the income requirements under ILSFA. According to ILSFA income requirements, a single-person 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>2</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

<sup>2</sup> CMAP Community Data.

This expansion would increase the pool of prospective participants, reaching areas of those who submitted intake forms from ineligible communities during the first year of the initiative. The Program Administrator learned many residents move across boundaries and are not confined to their respective neighborhoods for events. An expansion of the area would address these movements of prospective participants. It would also broaden access to potential local partners who work predominantly in other West Side communities or throughout the region, which are essential to the outreach plan. Finally, this expansion would allow for more visibility of the program through targeted advertisements by including more zip codes and a larger pool of participants.

2. The Program Administrator proposes updating the initiative goals and striving to achieve a substantial data set of prospective participants to evaluate tactics.

During the Bright Neighborhoods Program Year 6, there were 113 prospective participants across the community areas who expressed interest in participating in the Bright Neighborhoods initiative Program Year 6. Of those, 16 became income-eligible after income verification and were referred to the selected Approved Vendors. Of these 16, 5 were dropped for needed home repairs, 6 were referred to community solar, 3 were unresponsive to the Approved Vendor follow-ups, 1 was no longer interested, and 1 is with their Approved Vendor to develop a potential project. The remaining 97 who expressed interest either did not begin the income verification process, did not complete their income verification, or were sent to the Home Repairs and Upgrades initiative.

The initiative design set an ambitious goal of achieving 50-100 projects in each Bright Neighborhoods community. The lack in achieving our installation goal is not from lack of effort, but rather an indication of persistent challenges to overcoming the identified barriers. 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.

The process for prospective participants in ILSFA first requires awareness of the program and its benefits to reach an outcome of an installation. Awareness is an important stage of solar adoption that should be tracked to evaluate the effectiveness of tactics used to increase interest and participation in the program. Awareness will continue to be tracked and evaluated through 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 expects to reach this new goal using updated outreach tactics, outlined in number 5 below, which include an application of the learnings from the first year on how each community responds to different outreach strategies.

- *The Program Administrator recommends setting a goal for the number of intake forms in each community of 100-200 interested residents to assess how these tactics increase awareness in each community.*

The Program Administrator also recommends pairing this awareness 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.

- *The Program Administrator recommends setting a goal for the number of participant referrals to the selected Approved Vendors at 30-50 in each community.*

Although there was success in awareness in the first year of the initiative, there were challenges to reaching the installation goal. The barriers this initiative is meant to address, such as mistrust in marketers, lack of solar education, or deferred maintenance for home repairs, have proved to be deep and more difficult to overcome than expected. Because of this, 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 the awareness goal and recognizing the barriers to reaching an installation even after a participant referral.

- *The Program Administrator recommends a new goal of 20-25 installations in each community.*

Additionally, the Program Administrator will track new subscriptions to ILSFA Community Solar projects from residents within neighboring 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.

- *The Program Administrator recommends tracking these community solar subscriptions in neighboring communities that share a border with the selected initiative communities and the community has a high percentage of income-eligible residents<sup>3</sup>. Those communities are listed in the table below.*

West Garfield Park (WGP)	*With the proposed update of WGP to the West Side of Chicago	Waukegan	Carbondale-Marion Metropolitan Area
East Garfield Park	Cicero	North Chicago	Randolph County
Austin	Garfield Ridge-Chicago	Park City	Perry County

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<sup>3</sup> Community median income verified through [Community Snapshots by CMAP](#).

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		

3. The Program Administrator recommends integrating the site prescreening survey into the income eligibility intake form.

Under Bright Neighborhoods, the Program Administrator has taken on the customer acquisition, outreach, and marketing to evaluate if this can streamline the process for the participants and reduce soft costs, such as marketing and outreach to customers, on the Approved Vendor. The Site Prescreening Survey was added to the role of the Program Administrator with the intention of diverting homes that were known to be ineligible due to shading or home repair needs. With this identification, the Program Administrator would divert them to either Community Solar or the Home Repairs and Upgrades Pilot.

The Program Administrator encountered a high rate of drop-off of income-eligible participants at this stage, despite multiple follow-ups. Additionally, the survey and submitted photos were not enough to adequately assess the health of a home’s roof or its solar potential impacted by shading. The Program Administrator removed this as part of the participant process following a mid-year review of the initiative in February 2024 and instead used the questions on the income eligibility intake form to notify the Approved Vendor of any issues with the referral.

- *The Program Administrator recommends integrating the Site Prescreening Survey into the income eligibility intake form to gather this information from the participant in one form to share with the Approved Vendor during the referral.*

To use these recommended questions on the income eligibility intake form, the Program Administrator 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.

The proposed Bright Neighborhoods program roles for Program Year 7 are listed in the below table.

ILSFA Program Administrator	Approved Vendor
Marketing and outreach	Provide and obtain signatures for disclosure form/participant contract

Participant recruitment	Some outreach and solar education (at some Program Administrator hosted events)
Income verification	Site assessment and solar project design
Provide participants with support during the customer journey and installation process with the Approved Vendor when necessary	Part I application
Facilitate additional coordination with job training and placement programs and incorporation of energy efficiency measures	Part II application
	Installation (using job trainees)

4. The Program Administrator recommends adjusting the Approved Vendor Request for Proposal (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 participants who were sent to their community’s Approved Vendor, 5 were unable to move forward because of a need for home repairs. As small and emerging businesses, the selected Approved Vendors faced financial constraints that prevented them from supporting the identified repair projects.

The Program Administrator would like feedback on the following options to address both the issue of deferred maintenance for many Bright Neighborhoods participants and the difficulties in completing home repairs presented by our small and emerging businesses. The Program Administrator is open to other options proposed by stakeholders that can help address these barriers.

1. *Adding a preference on the RFP that would give additional points to a vendor who is willing to work on the Home Repairs and Upgrades Pilot. The prioritization 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 the Approved Vendor works with a designee, the designee qualifies as a small and emerging business, and the Approved Vendor can financially support participation in the Home Repairs and Upgrades Pilot while achieving the small and emerging business prioritization with the designee.*

5. The Program Administrator will take what they learned from the first year of the initiative to update the outreach strategies to continue evaluating best practices for engaging the target audience.

In preparation for the re-launch of the initiative in the 2024-2025 Program Year, the Program Administrator will focus on identifying and establishing partnerships in the proposed expanded West Garfield Park community area 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".