

EBCE Community Innovation Grant:

People Power Solar Cooperative Final Report

People Power Solar Cooperative is grateful for the \$40,000 Community Innovation Grant from EBCE for the purpose of accelerating clean energy investments that enhance workforce development, promote stronger local economic activity, and increase community resilience. This is the final report of our activities during the grant period, which spanned the COVID-19 pandemic.

The recent wildfires, COVID-19 pandemic, power shutoffs, and uprisings against white supremacy have underscored the urgent need for a redesign of our energy system around people over profit, building resilience and wealth in communities that have been most disproportionately impacted by the current energy system.

The goal of this project was to prove that communities have the ability to take back control of power -- literally, financially, and politically. Currently, when thinking about energy, communities in California are largely fragmented into property owners focusing on individual ownership and renters feeling disempowered to make meaningful decisions for the health, wealth, and stability of their communities under the investor-owned utilities operating in our State. Add to this the increasingly evident consensus that collective action is needed to fight climate change, and it is clear that models that leverage collective action and distributed forms of financing and organizing should play a crucial part in our transition.

Take community resilience as an example: As described in the recent [Resilience Before Disaster report](#) by the Asian Pacific Environmental Network, SEIU California, and Blue Green Alliance, “Resilience Hubs will only benefit communities if the community itself has a real sense of ownership in its co-creation, operation, and governance. This could involve mechanisms for community ownership, participation in decision-making, and other innovative structures.”

This is why we used more than 50% of the grant money invested into designing the curriculum for communities to engage in energy decision making conversations by working with our member-owners, including long-time community organizers and designers. This grant allowed us to understand how much more work is needed in educating our member-owners and their communities to understand our energy system before we can talk about access to energy ownership. The rest of the grant money went into engaging property owners and their communities to understand the financial decisions they can make when they cooperatively own pieces of our energy system. All of these materials will be shared with other energy cooperatives and community-based solar developers around the country in developing a Technical Assistance and Training Program with the People’s Solar Energy Fund¹, of which People Power is a member.

¹ *The People’s Solar Energy Fund partners non-extractive financing with community organizing to build a scalable system of consistent financing and technical assistance for community-led and community-owned solar projects. The emphasis is on projects benefiting low and moderate-income communities and communities of color, contributing to wealth building, job creation, resilience, and a more democratic economy. Learn more [here](#).*

Key Outcomes

- Developed and successfully tested a curriculum for member-owners to understand the basics of solar energy and the grid and identify host sites for community-owned solar. All materials and learnings will be integrated into the Technical Assistance and Training Program that People Power is leading in 2021 to support community-based solar developers across the country with the People’s Solar Energy Fund.
- Worked with 60 site hosts in EBCE territory identified by our member-owners.
- Signed site host agreements for two community-owned projects in EBCE territory.
- Recruited 53 new member-owners in Alameda County who purchased shares to finance the two projects



Here are the four main challenges we faced during the grant period:

Challenge 1: COVID wiping out the stability of many businesses and community centers

When the pandemic hit, the already-limited resources in our communities were depleted even faster as many jobs were eliminated. As a result of pandemic stress, our community’s bandwidth and resources were impacted.

The community center we had identified via community organizing work had to pull out due to severe economic crisis in March 2020. Recognizing that commercial sites were facing challenges during the pandemic, we pivoted to residential homes to address resilience needs. Thanks to the curriculum design work that was done earlier, we quickly pulled together a series of online trainings to engage with our member-owners to identify sites and develop community wealth during this difficult time.

Challenge 2: People have a hard time disconnecting power from land without community solar programs

In 2019, the Cooperative announced the construction of its first solar project in East Oakland, piloting a new model for cooperatively-owned and community-financed solar in California. It is the first energy project in California to be collectively owned by members of the broader community, and not municipally-owned, proving our ability to disconnect the ownership of land from the ownership of power. We used this grant to figure out strategic ways to scale this new possibility for people to steward the energy transition in places where community solar is not yet allowed.

In an environment where most residents do not have access to the benefits of solar ownership because they are renters or have shaded roofs, and in a state like California that lacks viable shared solar programs to facilitate community-subscription to solar projects, we found that more resources are needed in order for our communities to interact with our energy system as more than just consumers.

While we were able to quickly recruit member-owners to buy cooperative shares and fund two community-owned solar projects, the fact that community investor-owners in the cooperative do not see direct bill credits for their ownership of a share in the projects still confuses and alienates many people. Despite our many efforts to give people a sense of ownership, we are finding that people interact largely as passive investors in these projects - instead of as active energy citizens in the cooperative - because they are not recipients of the power that these systems produce. Having access to viable community solar programs in EBCE territory, such as virtual net-metering or the Community Solar Green Tariff, would “complete the loop” by enabling our investor owners to also become subscribers in our projects, and would enable us to size our systems to provide for community members beyond just the usage present at the site itself.

Challenge 3: Providing meaningful residential energy resilience

The urgency around resilience in California is another big motivation for community self-determination. Despite not owning land, many of our member-owners came together to form the Community Backup Power Supply network, where they share cooperatively-owned and -managed mobile battery packs big enough to power refrigerators during power shutoffs. They recognize that many residential resilience programs have concentrated benefits to property owners and those who are in dire medical needs, leaving residents to scramble during outages. They formed this mutual aid strategy to ensure they have access to energy when their power has been shut off.

Combined with this ability for communities to move electrons using people power and mobile batteries in the cooperative, the cooperative ownership of the energy system became even more compelling.



Challenge 4: Identifying a partner who supports the vision

Despite the fact that renewable infrastructure is more easily distributable, our renewable transition is entrenching economic inequality by focusing benefits to the wealthy who own land and have access to capital. As such, private solar installers ultimately follow the flow of capital to find leads. To include everyone in our transition, we must fight for public, nonprofit, and cooperative alternatives that prioritize shared decision-making, financing, and organizing and bring agency to those who lack the capital, real estate, or policies to go solar today.

For the two sites we have confirmed from this grant, we learned the importance of engaging with the right strategic partners. We are partnering with the employee-owned installer, Sun Light & Power, to work through what's needed for Alameda County residents to cooperatively benefit from energy ownership. This partnership has provided us with resources critical for facilitating partnerships and outreach by our member-owners and the community groups.

Conclusion

This Community Innovation Grant allowed us to not only build our second and third community-owned solar projects, it also enabled us to develop the crucial resources and tools that will enable communities to organize around the energy transition moving forward. During the grant period, we witnessed many creative solutions our local community came up with to address their own energy needs, and our resources emerged from these.

This opportunity strengthened People Power's technical, financial, educational, and community-organizing capacity, positioning community groups to set many new projects into motion in the East Bay and across the country in coming years. As this project grows we will build a movement, establishing a platform for education and policy advocacy around community solar, becoming a provider of good local jobs, and building a strong voice for a community-led energy transition.

We look forward to seeing more opportunities from EBCE to invest into the community and build innovative energy solutions that work for us. We value having EBCE as a partner and we hope to have the opportunity to work with you in the future on community solar and resilience -focused projects.



For more information, please contact us at hello@peoplepowersolar.org or visit PeoplePowerSolar.org.