

# New York Leans into Equity-Focused Climate Goals

Disadvantaged communities face numerous barriers when accessing clean energy and climate adaptation services. To overcome these barriers, NYSERDA enlisted ILLUME to understand these barriers and transform them into opportunities.



# The Challenge

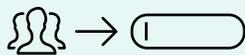
The devastating effects of climate change are evident across New York State and the impacts will not fall equitably across all residents. New York has ambitious climate goals, including to ensure all communities benefit equitably from climate-related investments.<sup>1</sup> To that end, NYSERDA contracted ILLUME to engage vulnerable communities and review access to commodities and services with a justice lens.

# The Approach

ILLUME helped NYSERDA better understand the barriers disadvantaged New Yorkers experience accessing State-offered clean energy and climate adaptation programs and services through a variety of research activities:

- **Online focus groups:** The team conducted five sessions with individuals living in disadvantaged communities, two with community organizations or agencies serving disadvantaged communities, and one with small business owners or their managers operating in disadvantaged communities, engaging 65 total individuals.
- **Stakeholder engagement:** ILLUME facilitated working group sessions with State agency staff across nine different agencies, and discussions with New York's Climate Action Working Group, comprised of environmental justice organizations across the State.
- **Secondary literature review:** The project team reviewed research completed by academic researchers, New York State agencies, other states, and other non-governmental organizations.
- **Public hearings:** We supported the State's convening of two public hearings attended by 97 individuals.
- **Written comments:** The ILLUME Team solicited comments through public notice and an announcement on the Climate Act website.

## Recruiting Focus Groups in Disadvantaged Communities



### Defining disadvantaged communities.

Absent of an official definition of "disadvantaged," the Team used context-specific nuances and general principles to recruit and screen participants. See the [microsite](#) ILLUME created to aggregate state definitions of environmental justice, climate justice, disadvantaged, and vulnerable communities [here](#).



### Traditional recruitment methods don't

**always work.** Allow ample time to recruit using multiple tactics that will also enable word-of-mouth momentum to build. Read our case study, [Understanding Our Underserved Majority](#), to learn more about reaching vulnerable communities. .

<sup>1</sup>New York State's 2019 Climate Act provisions include: reduce greenhouse gas emissions 85% below 1990 levels by 2050, use renewable energy to provide at least 70% of the State's electricity by 2030, achieve a zero-emission electricity system by 2040, and direct at least 35% of spending benefits to disadvantaged communities. (See <https://climate.ny.gov/>.)

## Focus groups anchored the team’s research and offered direct engagement with the people, organizations, and businesses in disadvantaged communities to ask questions such as:

- *How do community members think about climate change, and how does it affect their daily lives? What concerns do they have?*
- *How do community members see themselves reflected in the climate plan? How might it connect to their needs or their communities’ needs?*
- *How do community members currently identify and navigate different services and resources?*
- *What barriers have they encountered? What would help them better access services and resources?*

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## The Results

ILLUME’s research revealed insights and new ideas State and local agencies can adopt. Focus group discussions laid the groundwork for building trust with vulnerable communities – a key precondition for achieving New York’s equity-focused goals.

Our research team identified four categories of barriers impeding access to services:

**Physical and economic structures and conditions:** Economic conditions and historical patterns of inequality affect access and ownership of infrastructure. “Structures” can include physical (e.g., aging housing stock), economic, and social structures.

**Financial and knowledge resources and capacity:** Communities and businesses may experience limited personnel and data systems, access to professional networks, and access to financing options. Residents may face lack of credit and access to financial services. Lack of time also represents a critical limitation.

**Perspectives and information:** Community perceptions of agencies and programs, including lack of trust in local and State authorities, and lack of awareness or understanding of programs due to complex bureaucratic structures.

**Programmatic design and implementation:** Factors such as lack of information to inform program design, complex eligibility requirements, insufficient engagement of communities in the design process, and limited alignment across agencies and resources.

**To overcome these barriers, we recommended actions with specific examples across three themes (see next page).**

Read our [full report](#) for additional recommendations and program examples, including a detailed analysis of how different community levels—individuals and households, local communities, and landlords or businesses—may experience each barrier. State agencies are assessing, refining, and implementing the recommendations based on priority and complexity.

## Recommended Actions:

### THEME 1 ENSURE PROCESSES ARE INCLUSIVE

- Co-design programs or projects with and for communities: *Staff agencies and fund programs to implement co-design processes with communities.*
- Provide meaningful opportunities for public input in government processes and proceedings: *Compensate community organizations to assist with outreach.*
- Work across intersecting issues and interests to address needs holistically: *Recruit community partners, include stakeholders with different areas of expertise, and expand regional collaboration.*

### THEME 2 STREAMLINE PROGRAM ACCESS

- Transition to program models that require little or no effort to participate: *Directly award grants to communities rather than require lengthy and competitive application processes.*
- Establish people-centered policies, programs, and funding across local, State, and Federal governments: *Expand eligibility to maximize impact and coordinate between services.*
- Find and support resource-constrained local governments: *Train local governments to equip them to receive funding.*

### THEME 3 ADDRESS EMERGING ISSUES

- Mobilize citizen participation and action: *Facilitate ways for community members to contact and support each other in emergencies.*
- Improve housing conditions and adherence to local building codes: *Improve housing and energy upgrade incentives for landlords renting in disadvantaged communities.*

## The Takeaway

Vulnerable communities face significant barriers that can make traditional climate change mitigation-related services less effective. Understanding barriers disadvantaged populations face, and how to overcome these barriers, is key to ensuring equitable distribution of climate plan benefits. Even if governments and utilities offer innovative, robust programs, they should not assume programs benefit customers equitably, nor that tweaking the edges will achieve that end. Instead, they should review programs and engage meaningfully and continuously with disadvantaged communities to understand and meet their needs. Otherwise, the most vulnerable communities stand to bear the brunt of climate change's devastating effects.

*"The most important thing is representation and keeping the lines of communication open. People like us are not represented in the rooms where these decisions are being made. We need people who can voice our problems and the needs of our communities."*

- Focus Group Participant

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