

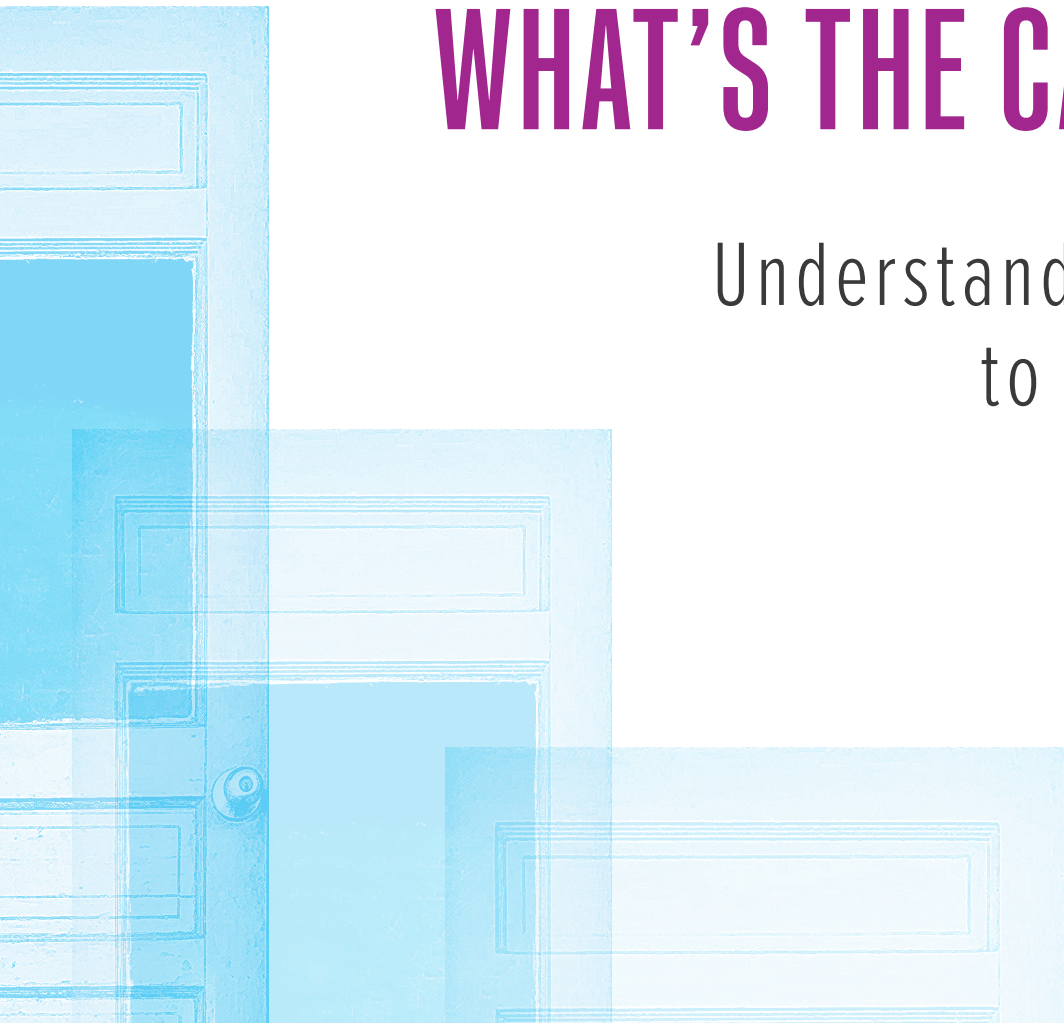
# WHO ARE

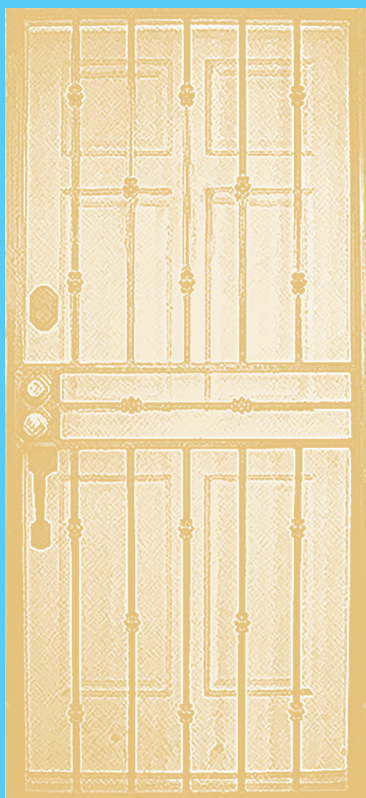
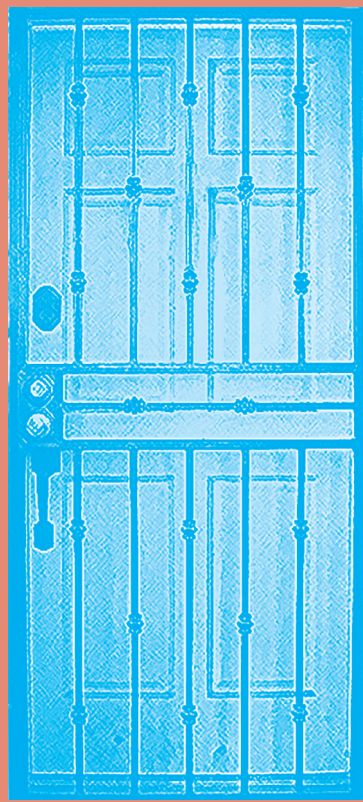
# you WITH

# WHAT'S THE CATCH?



Understanding Barriers  
to Participation







ILLUME conducted a one-of-a-kind study to examine why people do not participate in programs in Massachusetts.<sup>1</sup> In addition to mailed surveys and phone calls, we knocked on more than 500 doors to answer one pressing question:

## Who are we missing in our programs and services, and why?

Many of us already equate citizenship with active engagement in a community. That engagement can take many forms. If we construe “energy citizenship” narrowly, seeing only participants in decarbonizing efforts as “engaged” while counting non-participants as “disengaged,” we risk misunderstanding our communities. We must look beyond whether customers are informed about efficiency programs, and look even more closely at other factors that may impact their engagement. These may include access to stable housing, resources, perceptions of enrollment programs, trust in the messenger, and most importantly, time.

The vast majority of us use energy and pay for energy programs. However, very few of us take part in the benefits they offer. Without greater levels of participation, we will not achieve the market traction needed to meet our aggressive greenhouse gas reduction goals. *How can utilities and program administrators engage nonparticipants in a year marked by disruption, misinformation, and distrust? And how can utility customers trust the information they see about programs, many of which can seem too good to be true or appear counter to the utilities’ interest in selling energy?*

Even with the best-laid efforts, those who need programs and services the most—and often live in housing with the highest energy savings potential—are the least likely to take advantage of them. This is especially confounding in the case of people in disadvantaged communities that may qualify for low-cost or free programs. For decades research has sought to uncover why eligible customers do not participate and understand how to overcome the barriers they face. Here, we share our recent analysis of who does not participate in our programs.

***“Anything that requires a permanent change is a homeowner thing.”***

*– Survey Respondent  
(renter), phone interview*



## Missing the mark: Who are we missing? And what matters most to them?

Nonparticipants are not a monolith. There are myriad reasons someone may not take the time to seek out energy efficiency programs and services. And while there is no single characteristic that defines this group, there are common trends. **Here are some of our key insights:**

### Families concerned with more pressing basic needs

Households with lower incomes necessarily prioritize day-to-day essentials like food, shelter, and childcare over anything else. Signing up for a program is often a luxury they can't afford — a luxury of time, headspace, and, in many cases, finances. When compared to their everyday needs, many see energy efficiency as irrelevant to their lives, a frivolous luxury, or simply something that does not apply to them. If a living wage is critical for combatting climate change, cities and utilities may have to shift from the micro (household) level to a macro (community) approach to meet aggressive EE goals.

### Residents with Limited English Proficiency (LEP)

Customers with LEP expressed two primary barriers to participating in programs: **(1)** they do not fully understand and, therefore, mistrust the offer, and **(2)** they cannot engage *throughout* the program. Many LEP residents reported a fear of being taken advantage of. But this is not about trust per se; residents with LEP indicated they may not fully understand what they are being asked to sign up for and how it benefits them. To make things worse, when they do take steps to participate, they are quick to drop out because programs fail to provide language services throughout the customer journey. For example, even if a program offers marketing messages in languages other than English, residents with LEP often need to schedule appointments, speak with contractors, or fill out applications or paperwork to actually participate — tasks that often lack options in multiple languages.



## Those who lack trust in institutions and outsiders

Many individuals we spoke with viewed energy efficiency as government programs, similar to Medicaid. In some cases, this created credibility for the program and could lead to increased participation. In other cases, however, this view was reason for caution. People who do not trust the government extended their skepticism to energy programs and services. This was especially true among those with negative beliefs about, or experiences with, government agencies. For example, people who are undocumented or who live in communities with undocumented individuals expressed fear of participating in programs and services that require them to give identifying information because they worry that their personal information will be reported to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Others have had bad experiences with outsiders more generally, people unknown to themselves or their community, and fear scams or malintent.

**Households experiencing transience.** These households—often renters moving from place to place—do not feel they can make upgrades to their homes because they do not own the property and do not believe their landlord would agree to participate on their behalf. Worse, many renters do not trust their landlords and do not believe that their landlord would make improvements just to help them save money. When we spoke with landlords, we found that tenants' perspectives were often validated: some landlords do not allow renters to pursue upgrades while others avoid programs out of fear that a building inspection might uncover code violations that require repairs.

With her gas cut off,  
everything else is irrelevant

Ana sighed as she sat down for an interview with our team. She was on a break from the Community Action Program (CAP) agency where she worked. As the interview team explained the program offerings, she interjected, “They just turned my mother’s gas off. It’s November and they turned our gas off. I thought they weren’t supposed to do that. And we have children in my home. What are we supposed to do?” She explained that they owed \$117 on the bill and had paid \$90 but could not pay the bill in full. She expected that her substantial payment would delay the disconnection. She was distraught that the gas had been turned off just at the beginning of winter, and worried for her children. Although she was interested to hear about program offerings, all of them seemed irrelevant compared to her urgent need to have her gas turned on again. Understandably, access to heat was her primary concern.

“When we came to the US, my husband told me never to share any information because it could be used against us in the future. Have you seen the new policies the current administration has implemented? He was right all along.” - Intercept Interviewee

“When they say it’s free, it is not true. Nothing is for free.”  
- Intercept Interviewee

1609

Surveys  
with Customers

89

Interviews with Customers,  
In-Person and Via Telephone

19

Surveys and Follow-Up  
Interviews with Property  
Managers and Owners

23

Interviews with  
PA Staff and Community  
Organizations

## BUILDING TRUST IN AN ERA OF MISINFORMATION (WHAT IT TOOK)

To reach the unreachable, our team had to swim upstream, weeding out inaccurate addresses and building trust in communities where we were seen as outsiders. In an era of misinformation and conspiracy theories, and in a year of heightened feelings of unease with Census workers also canvassing for information, ILLUME was well aware of the challenges we faced with this research effort.

To reach as many people as possible, we used mail, email, and telephone touchpoints in four languages. And, when we knew we were still missing people, the ILLUME team went door-to-door to collect surveys from customers who had not participated in programs in the past. While time and resource intensive, our door-to-door efforts were the most enlightening. Those who spoke with us emphasized the importance of trust and were more receptive to our team when we partnered with agencies, neighbors, or family—those considered a part of their community—to complete our work.

Even when people refused to speak with us, we learned from it. People who answered the door but did not participate cited a fear of scammers and distrust of outsiders, in addition to a lack of interest. For these customers, the notion that someone was there to help them (including on behalf of their utility company) was hard to believe.



# SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES BY EXPANDING COMMUNITY

To raise program awareness, one of the best known and most effective strategies is partnering with organizations already embedded and trusted in the community (see interview with Rosa Gonzales). Food banks, faith-based organizations, and local government agencies have long-standing relationships, have established trust, and regularly communicate with the people they serve. Many utilities and program administrators have likely already leveraged these relationships and hit a customer participation ceiling. How do you expand your community to reach deeper into communities?

## Here are our go-to suggestions:

### 1. Break The Mould And Create New Partnerships

Go beyond historical implementation partners and establish new relationships with other types of organizations to help reach the truly disenfranchised. In some cases, this means working with organizations that specialize in serving non-English speakers rather than the greater disadvantaged community. When outsiders like program staff show up together with other community members, it establishes a stronger sense of trust and legitimacy than an outsider could gain going it alone.

### 2. Customize Outreach Approaches

Looking for ways to reach nonparticipating segments? Different outreach efforts tend to reach different types of people. To reach higher income customers and those with college degrees, our research found that online outreach (emails, web surveys) should be your go-to. For outreach to renters, lower income households, and those without college degrees? Pick up the phone, but if choosing between online or mail methods, online is best. For lower income LEP households and retirees, mail is better than online approaches. Understanding who responds to which type of effort can increase the participation of groups of interest.

### 3. Use Customized Marketing Strategies

Customization is key to effective program recruitment. If done well, your marketing can reinforce the idea that programs provide benefits that will improve the daily lives of customers in ways that really matter to them (e.g., health benefits, more money for necessities, improved home value). Your messaging can directly address misconceptions like “energy efficiency is only for the wealthy, it’s a luxury” and “programs are government run/funded.” By speaking to a community’s specific concerns, you will bring more residents into your programs.

### 4. Streamline Participation

Treat your residents’ time like a priceless resource. Challenge your design and implementation teams to create opportunities that are “least-time” to combat the perception that participating is onerous and detracts from more pressing concerns. Lower hurdles like asking would-be participants to make multiple phone calls or schedule and reschedule appointments with contractors. For LEP customers, ensure that they can navigate the entire participation process in the language of their choice.



*“Knowing about someone that has gotten the service before and sharing their experience can go a long way in making people more comfortable using the services.”*

*- CAP Agency, community organization interview*

*“I think partnering with local organizations is what has really made everything click for us. It really added a level of trust about what we do, who we are, and people feel confident and safe in dealing with us.”*

*- CAP Agency, community organization interview*

## CLOSING

By exploring the characteristics of customers left behind by our programs, and taking the time to listen to their lived experiences through an extensive, multimodal research effort, we were able to bring our clients in closer conversation with all of their residents, not just the easy to reach. And, by going the extra mile to hear their stories, we were able to craft specific and concrete ways to overcome common barriers. It starts with listening, and then grows into a set of recommendations that might just benefit all the communities our programs aim to serve.