

National Community Solar Partnership



Rural Renewable Energy Alliance

Leveraging Funding Sources to Bring Solar to Low-Income Households in Minnesota

More than **400 solar energy systems** have been installed on low-income households in Minnesota since 2005, enabling participants to **cut their energy bills by 25%**. The nonprofit Rural Renewable Energy Alliance (RREAL) has achieved these results through strategic partnerships with housing authorities, state agencies, community-based organizations and federal resources.

Low-income populations face many barriers to accessing clean, renewable and sustainable energy. In fact, low-income households commonly spend between 15% and 20% of their income on energy-related expenses. The combination of energy inefficient housing and unpredictable energy costs means that many low-income households find themselves stuck in a cycle of energy poverty.

Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) is a federal program that provides funding to states to help low-income homeowners with weatherization and energy efficiency. RREAL has created a successful approach that identifies homeowners who are eligible for LIHEAP funding by working with state and nonprofit

In Minnesota, an innovative program is expanding energy options for low-income households by combining funding from the **Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program** for weatherization and the **Minnesota Renewable Energy Equipment Grant Program** to provide solar thermal and solar electric systems.



For more information contact:

RREAL: www.rreal.org

groups that have pre-existing relationships with potential low-income customers. As RREAL works with LIHEAP participants to weatherize their homes, they also introduce them to the Minnesota Renewable Energy Equipment Grant Program (REEGP) – a grant program that enables homeowners to install solar thermal or solar electricity. The coupling of these two programs allows customers to improve their energy efficiency and meet a significant amount of their energy demand with solar, driving down and stabilizing energy costs for the household.

RREAL's approach to connecting with low-income participants is replicable for other organizations across the country, as the federally-funded LIHEAP program is available in 96% of the counties in the United States.

Lessons Learned

Connecting Programs and Partnerships Makes it Work

RREAL's approach successfully connected existing programs and helped to simplify the customer's experience. It also relies on important partnerships with housing agencies and community-based organizations. These connections have enabled RREAL to make solar accessible to low-income households.

Exploring Weatherization and Community Solar

RREAL is now working to expand their rooftop solar program to include the option to participate in community solar. This gives participants the opportunity to be part of a shared community solar project, rather than putting solar on their individual home. RREAL is currently working with the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe to construct a 200kW shared solar array that would provide energy to LIHEAP recipients in the community. This would be the **first community solar project located on tribal lands in the country**. They hope the Leech Lake array demonstrates the opportunity to provide energy security and cost stabilization to homeowners who might not otherwise be able to afford solar. The installation will have the ancillary benefit of providing training in solar construction to graduates from the Leech Lake Tribal College, thus building local capacity in solar development and installation.

While RREAL would like to be able to offer community solar projects across Minnesota, the task is daunting with over 180 utilities in the state, five of which are in the Leech Lake territory alone. To get started, RREAL has found working with utility cooperatives to be a promising avenue for progressing community solar.