

# Illinois Solar for All Expansion: Residential Solar Outreach Grant

## Project Narrative

**Project Title:** Removing Barriers to Participation in Illinois Solar for All in Oak Park

### **Applicant Information and Qualifications**

Applicant: Village of Oak Park

Type of Entity: Municipality

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### **Applicant Background:**

The **Village of Oak Park** is a full-service home rule municipal corporation located in Cook County, Illinois. Oak Park is a thriving, transit-oriented community with a population of 54,583 located immediately west of the City of Chicago and known for its great neighborhoods, architectural heritage and innovative public policy initiatives. Within its 4.5 square miles live one of the region's most diverse mixes of cultures, races, ethnicities, professions, lifestyles, religions, ages and incomes.

Each year the Village of Oak Park receives an allocation of Community Development (CDBG) funds from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. These funds are used for a variety of programs supporting the CDBG program's goals of neighborhood revitalization, expanding economic opportunities, and improving access to community services for low- and moderate-income individuals. One such funding opportunity this fiscal year include energy efficiency grants for income eligible households. Because of these income-eligible grants the Village has experience working with households that qualify for Illinois Solar For All programs and have been actively promoting the ILSFA program with households through existing grant outreach.

The applicant has not been suspended, debarred, or otherwise excluded from receiving Federal funds as specified in 2 CFR 200.332 and 2 CFR 180.300.

### **Project Description**

#### **Project Location:**

The Village of Oak Park proposes providing customer outreach and assistance services to income eligible residents within Oak Park, Illinois. While there are no income eligible Census tracts in Oak Park as determined by the Illinois Solar for All program's Income-Eligible Census Map, there are households throughout the Village which qualify for Illinois Solar for All programming.

According to the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), in the Village, 43.6% of the housing units are single family homes. Of the multifamily units, 2,535 units, more than 10% of all units in the Village, are in buildings with between 2-4 units. Twenty five percent (25%) of owner households are cost burdened and 9% are severely cost burdened. For renter households, 44% are cost burdened with 21.3% severely cost burdened.

Knowing these numbers of cost burdened households, the Village knows that there are many residents who might meet the requirements of the Illinois Solar for All Program, particularly in renter occupied homes. Since these households are not concentrated in certain areas or Census tracts of the Village but are spread throughout, a significant amount of outreach is needed to identify and provide assistance to the income eligible households.

According to the Illinois Solar for All website, there are sixteen approved vendors in Cook County and several are currently registered vendors in the Village of Oak Park. With assistance through the proposed program, Oak Park residents will be able to connect with approved vendors.

### **Project Description:**

The proposed project will incorporate outreach and assistance for the ILSFA Residential Solar (Small) Program into Oak Park's soon-to-be-established Energy Efficiency and Electrification One Stop Shop (OSS) as described in detail below. In addition to raising general awareness of ILSFA, incorporating outreach into the OSS will give prospective participants all the tools they need to understand their eligibility, identify repairs needed, receive assistance to complete those repairs, and receive assistance with applications and connecting to approved vendors in one place for ILSFA. By providing all of these services in one place, Oak Park residents will have a greater interest in pursuing participation in ILSFA and have the tools they need to successfully result in a completed solar installation.

The Village of Oak Park is in the process of developing an Energy Efficiency and Electrification One Stop Shop (OSS) for residents in single family up to mid-sized multifamily homes. The OSS will provide free energy audits and reports to residents as well as guidance to identify and prioritize projects, access available incentive programs, and navigate contractor selection and building permits. While the OSS will be open to all Oak Park residents regardless of income, the Village will utilize the OSS to assess income eligibility of households and connect them to grants and incentive programs for which they would be eligible based on income for the ILSFA program.

The purpose of establishing the OSS is to make it easier for residents in single family up to mid-sized multifamily properties to identify the energy efficiency and electrification needs and opportunities of their homes, provide guidance to implement projects that will save energy and reduce utility costs, and to connect residents to existing incentive programs to which they may be eligible, such as Illinois Solar for All (ILSFA). Through many years of offering energy efficiency grants and working with the Climate Coaches program of a grassroots community organization Oak Park Climate Action Network (OP-CAN), the Village has identified some barriers to participation in existing energy programs. A major barrier is a lack of knowledge on the part of the resident to understand the energy efficiency of their homes and which upgrades or projects to put into place to make a difference in efficiency and utility bills. The OSS will overcome this barrier by providing home energy assessments resulting in Home Energy Roadmaps which will prioritize potential projects based on cost, impact, and what needs to be done first to support future projects. This process can be used to overcome barriers to participation in ILSFA by identifying

eligible properties, laying out the steps to be taken before installing solar, connecting to the resources necessary to support those steps, and assisting with applications and contractor management to support successful solar installation.

Once established, the Village will work with community-based organizations, internal grant and assistance programs, existing partnerships and touchpoints with landlords and residents, and other outlets to make sure the community is aware of the OSS and the offerings it provides as described in Task 2. Participants who may be income eligible will be identified by many means. One of the initial onboarding questions when signing up for the OSS will be a self-assessment of income qualification which will be later verified by the OSS consultant. The Village can target outreach to properties likely to be income eligible by using contacts based on previous CDBG funds used, rehabilitation loans, and energy grants given. The Village will also work with existing partners such as the Oak Park Housing Authority to identify potentially qualifying participants.

Once potentially income qualified households are identified, the OSS will be able to provide assistance to those households to verify the qualification, identify actions which need to be taken before solar can be installed, and assist with ILSFA signups.

The ILSFA outreach, assistance, and enrollment will be incorporated into the proposed One Stop Shop and will include the following elements:

- Conduct building assessments for single family and small to midsize multifamily (2-20 units) which will include, at a minimum, a measurement of insulation (IR), building airtightness (blower door), an evaluation of existing appliances, and identification of the biggest contributor to heat loss in the home.
- Design Home Energy Roadmaps which will be personalized multi-year plans based on the building assessments which prioritize projects based on complexity, price, and energy savings and provide basics on project scopes and projected price ranges.
- Provide expert assistance on available incentive and financing options.
- Coordinate a help desk to answer resident and building owner questions related to energy and electrification projects, bid and contractor evaluation, building permits, and other relevant and related topics.
- Identify compatible and stackable financing and incentives including, but not limited to, ComEd's Whole Home Electric program, Illinois Solar for All, Illinois Home Weatherization Assistance Program, and the Village's rehabilitation and energy efficiency loan and grant programs as well as a strategy to connect income eligible households with appropriate programs.
- Develop education workshops and materials related to the benefits of energy efficiency and electrification, including guides related to the common building types and technologies found in Oak Park.
- Coordinate with Village Staff, Utilities, State program representatives, and Village or regional sustainability organizations to incorporate community and regional sustainability goals and programs.

The proposed grant-funded project will include the following tasks:

### **Task 1: Program Design**

Work with the OSS consultant to increase participation in ILSFA by integrating ILSFA Residential Solar (Small) program into the overall OSS design resulting in an operations plan and participant eligibility and verification process which includes the ILSFA program outreach and verification process. This task will be a subset of the overall OSS design and will specifically identify when and how the ILSFA outreach will be incorporated.

### **Task 2: Identify Eligible Participants**

Once the OSS is open, the Village, the OSS consultant, and community partners will identify potentially eligible properties. This will include small multifamily property owners, single family rental homes, and owner-occupied single-family homes. The Village will leverage existing partners and community organizations to identify properties and community members. Partners may include other institutional entities in the Village such as the school districts who can help connect to families which qualify for free or reduced lunch programs and the park district which offers scholarships to income eligible homes. The Village will also leverage existing groups which connect community members in the Village such as Climate Outreach Oak Park, the Interfaith Green Alliance, Beyond Hunger, the Oak Park Housing Authority, the Oak Park Township and other organizations which serve low income, elderly, or disabled community members. The Village will also consult records of past participants in income eligible Village programs such as CDBG, housing rehabilitation and energy efficiency grant programs.

The onboarding process to the OSS will include a self-assessment of income eligibility of the participant. While the OSS will be available to everyone in the community regardless of income, specific focus will be made during the marketing of the program to ensure participation by households eligible for ILSFA. For example, the Village works with Climate Outreach Oak Park (COOP) to promote existing income eligible grant programs through their unique network of community-based volunteers and youth street team outreach strategies. This same approach will promote the OSS resulting in more participation by income eligible households and more sign-ups for ILSFA.

Identifying eligible participants for ILSFA is a vital component of Oak Park's program. While there are no income eligible Census tracts in Oak Park as determined by the Illinois Solar for All program's Income-Eligible Census Map, there are households throughout the Village which qualify for Illinois Solar For All programming. The Village's outreach strategy will be tailored to target those income eligible households across the Village.

### **Task 3: Education and Income Qualification Workshops**

The Village and the OSS consultant will host a minimum of 5 educational events focused on increasing signups for the ILSFA program. These education events will be designed to address common barriers.

- Workshops will be a combination of in-person, virtual, and asynchronous to work with various schedules and technology needs.
- Workshops will address common issues which must be addressed before solar installation such as roof repairs and electrical upgrades. The workshops will encourage potential participants to use the OSS for their Home Energy Roadmap and point to existing loans and grants as well as

the proposed grant-funded roof repair grant. The Village currently offers home rehabilitation loans and covers electrical panel upgrades through the energy efficiency grants.

- A minimum of two workshops will provide hands-on assistance in signing up for ILSFA and completing the income qualification.

In addition to these workshops, outreach and education materials will be created for distribution and be available in multiple languages. Examples of such materials will be postcards, utility bill inserts, inserts in the Village's newsletter, flyers, and social media posts.

#### **Task 4: Repair Assistance.**

Once households are deemed to be eligible for ILSFA and have had their home assessments through the OSS, the Home Energy Roadmaps will identify steps necessary before the installation of solar. The OSS consultant will connect participants with resources and guidance to complete those steps.

The Village's home rehabilitation loans can support bringing properties up to code and eliminating health and safety hazards. The Energy Efficiency grants will pay for upgrades to electrical panels.

For repairs not covered by existing grant programs such as home rehabilitation and energy efficiency grants, the proposed grant funded program will provide up to \$10,000 for up to 20 households which sign up for ILSFA to conduct additional necessary repairs before installing solar panels.

#### **Task 5: Approved Vendors**

Once participants have signed up for ILSFA, the OSS consultant will work to connect participants to approved vendors. In addition, the OSS consultant will incorporate guidance on how to become an approved vendor in any vendor/contractor education created as part of the OSS.

### **Anticipated Community Benefits**

The Village of Oak Park has multiple outlets to identify potentially eligible properties. The Village has a long history of administering CDBG grant funds, home rehabilitation loans, and income-eligible energy efficiency grants. Outreach can be made to households that have participated in income-eligible programs in the past.

In addition, the Village maintains relationships with both landlords and tenants in the Village and works with groups such as the Oak Park Housing Authority, the Oak Park Township and other organizations which serve low income, elderly, or disabled community members. These relationships can be leveraged to identify and message to potentially eligible participants.

The Village is currently working with a local non-profit One Earth Local and their program Climate Outreach to Oak Park (COOP) to help market the existing income eligible energy efficiency grants. Although the Village does not have an exact count of income eligible groups, 25% of owner-occupied households and 44% of renter households are cost burdened. From this we can estimate based on the number and typed of housing units that approximately 4,000 single family and small multifamily households may be cost burdened and thus potentially eligible for Illinois Solar For All. Through COOP's extensive networks within the Village, barriers to participation in existing programs include the

administrative burden of the applications. This is one barrier that the OSS is designed to overcome by providing that administrative assistance and allowing for more successful signups for ILSFA.

## Funding Objectives

The proposed grant-funded project provides personalized services and assistance to potential ILSFA participants through the OSS model. By providing a single point of entry to the assessments and assistance needed to get the property prepared for solar installation, submit application materials, and connect with approved contractors the OSS model will address many potential barriers to ILSFA participation. This will result in an increase in solar system installations on qualified homes in Oak Park.

The One Stop Shop will also provide the framework necessary to improve coordination between available programs to address residents' energy use and housing quality. By helping participants access these supporting programs the OSS will reduce barriers related to the home's structural ability to support solar and will increase participation in ILSFA.

The OSS also provides an essential framework for tracking metrics. The OSS consultant will track how many participants use the OSS and the services they use. The number of income eligible participants who receive services related to ILSFA will be measured. The OSS will also include a protocol for follow up to identify which participants have successfully completed energy improvements and accessed complementary incentives, such as the installation of solar energy systems through ILSFA.

## Project Timeline

The timeline form has been completed and uploaded into Amplifund.

## Project Costs Breakdown

The budget form has been completed in Amplifund.

## Performance Measurement

The Village of Oak Park will be responsible for ensuring all reporting requirements associated with the federal funding are met. The Village of Oak Park will provide timely and accurate reporting to the Climate Bank in compliance with all federal and programmatic obligations.

## Funding Compliance Requirements

The Village of Oak Park acknowledges compliance with all requirements related to this US EPA subaward.