



EVIDENCE SNAPSHOT

GRID Alternatives SolarCorps Case Study



BUNDLED EVALUATION AND CAPACITY BUILDING PROJECT

Introduction

GRID Alternatives SolarCorps was selected as one of the five projects to include as a case study for the AmeriCorps Climate Change Evaluation Bundle study given its organization's focus on renewable energy. The mission of GRID Alternatives is "to build community-powered solutions to advance economic and environmental justice through renewable energy."

The nonprofit organization pursues this mission through no-cost construction and installation of solar photovoltaic, or PV, technologies, commonly known as solar panels. GRID Alternatives provides their no-cost installation to low-income communities throughout California, Colorado, the Mid-Atlantic states, and Tribal communities. GRID Alternatives serves communities from their eight affiliate offices spread throughout the regions listed above. Program staff shared the reach and impact that GRID Alternatives has had since it first began in 2001 during the California energy crisis:

As an organization, we've installed 20,937 systems. And collectively we're saving families over \$705 million during the lifetimes of the systems. And we're preventing close to 2 million tons of greenhouse gas emissions. So, really, this demonstrates our commitment to the triple bottom line of people, planet, employment.

Across the organization, GRID Alternatives provides services to their communities through the efforts of full-time staff, volunteers, and their AmeriCorps-funded program, SolarCorps. GRID Alternatives SolarCorps currently has a state grant and, as such, members serve in one of the eight regional affiliates. Over the years, they have been a national grantee and a VISTA sponsor.

To learn more about GRID Alternatives and more specifically SolarCorps, researchers visited the GRID Alternatives affiliate North Valley office in Sacramento, CA. During this 2-day site visit in January 2023, researchers conducted interviews and focus groups with:

- 2 program directors,
- 2 program staff,
- 1 staff member from an organization partnered with GRID Alternatives,
- 2 community residents who received services from GRID Alternatives, and
- 5 current members participating in the SolarCorps fellowship.

Researchers also observed SolarCorps training and delivery of solar services and had informal conversations with members during those observations. Specifically, researchers observed SolarCorps leading a hands-on stud finder training for approximately 15 GRID training program participants. Researchers also accompanied SolarCorps staff to observe 2 members and 5–7 program staff begin the first day of solar installation for a community health center approximately 35 minutes away from the North Valley office. During this period of observation, SolarCorps members assisted program staff in placing the solar panels in the correct placement on top of a flat roof.

Description of Program and Context

GRID Alternatives is the nation's largest nonprofit installer of clean energy technology and, as such, pursues many initiatives to make renewable energy more accessible to communities with economic and environmental justice inequities. The following are some of the activities provided by the organization as a whole:

- No-cost solar installation for low-income households,
- Hands-on solar workforce training,
- Technical assistance (TA) and installation for multifamily affordable housing,
- Low-income solar policy advocacy, and
- Connecting low-income communities with electric vehicle programs.

SolarCorps aims to recruit and retain 35 fellows across the 8 affiliate offices to assist GRID Alternatives staff (approximately 450 across the organization) with the no-cost solar installation services, solar workforce training, and community outreach.

These services directly mitigate the effects of climate change by reducing the consumption of resources such as natural gas that produce emissions harmful to the local and global environment. Furthermore, incorporating SolarCorps fellows in the services that a renewable energy organization provides serves to extend valuable training and experience to members from communities served in a field with growing employee demand and a growing role in climate solutions. It is important to note that the specifics of SolarCorps fellow experiences may vary according to the affiliate office with which they serve; for this case study, information pertains to the GRID Alternatives North Valley office.



In the state of California, GRID Alternatives is largely able to perform no-cost solar installation through the funding of the state’s Disadvantaged Communities – Single-Family Solar Homes (DAC-SASH) program. This program provides qualified homeowners with no-cost solar installation systems through “administrators” such as GRID Alternatives. To qualify for DAC-SASH and, by extension, GRID Alternatives services (with some exceptions), homeowners must live in one of the top 25 percent most disadvantaged communities statewide. This is calculated through the [CalEnviroScreen](#), a billing customer of Pacific Gas & Electric, Southern California Edison, or San Diego Gas & Electric. The homeowners must also meet income qualifications as denoted by annual state-administered energy assistance program guidelines.

Services Performed

The following section describes the services provided by SolarCorps fellows (referred to as members from this point forward). Members are integrated alongside teams of GRID Alternatives program staff to assist with no-cost solar installation service, solar workforce training, and community outreach. Occasionally, members serve alongside members from the other affiliate offices.

In some GRID Alternatives offices, including the North Valley office, members conduct rotations in the three service areas, each of which is described in detail below (i.e., No-Cost Solar Installation, Workforce and Volunteerism, and Community Outreach). This approach allows members to have exposure to various focus areas in the solar industry and develop technical skills in valuable topics to better inform their future career exploration and knowledge of solar overall. At the North Valley office, members typically spend 3–4 months in each service area.

No-Cost Solar Installation

Members who assist with no-cost solar installation for low-income households within the North Valley service area spend time working throughout the various stages of GRID Alternatives solar installation. These are known as the Construction Teams within the organization. Construction members help to complete all aspects of the solar installation process to include:

- Initial assessment of approved income-qualified client households to determine the roof's eligibility to receive solar installation,
- Solar system design to conceptualize the panel placement/angle of each household,
- Applying and obtaining the necessary permits to install solar panels,
- Installation of solar panel systems on the roofs of households, and
- Obtaining final approval of the solar construction from government officials and interconnection to the applicable utility system.

From the time of homeowner application to receiving no-cost solar installation to the final interconnection to the homeowner's utility provider, GRID Alternatives typically aims for completion in 6 months. This expectation can be variable given the time required to prepare application materials, conduct site visits, design solar panel layouts, obtain approval from city and county governments, install the solar system, pass inspection from city and county governments, and connect to various utility providers.

In addition to those steps, requirements and regulations may vary according to the local government policies and their local capacity to process all the planning documents, permits, and inspections required to install residential solar systems. When GRID Alternatives provides services to nonprofit clients that benefit low-income families, affordable housing providers, environmental justice partners, and underserved communities (e.g., local food banks, community health centers, multifamily housing complexes), this timeline can extend to multiple years.

Workforce and Volunteerism

To support GRID Alternatives' goal of providing hands-on solar installation training to community residents, members serving on the Workforce and Volunteerism Team assist program staff in recruiting, training, and managing prospective trainees and volunteers. Workforce members assist with GRID Alternatives' Installation Basics Training (IBT) program—a 200-hour introductory course to acquire the skills to pursue employment in solar construction fields. IBT program participants are recruited from the communities that GRID Alternatives serves, predominantly low-income and people of color who are looking to enter the solar workforce or those from construction-related fields looking to acquire solar installation skills.

Members supporting this team operate like teaching assistants. Members assist workforce development program staff in teaching the curriculum of GRID Alternatives workforce programs such as the IBT. For example, researchers observed two SolarCorps members leading an IBT session (approximately 10–15 trainees) in a hands-on training to locate studs using a stud finder.

In addition to their recruitment and training support, SolarCorps workforce members also assist trainees in locating employment following the IBT program. Through GRID Alternatives' partnerships with organizations interested in hiring entry-level employees with dependable solar skills, SolarCorps members provide information to IBT participants about upcoming job opportunities and facilitate connections with partner organizations. SolarCorps members also share information about the SolarCorps fellowship, a frequent pipeline for IBT participants (see the Recruitment and Selection section for more details).

Community Outreach

Members serving on the Community Outreach Team educate low-income families on the benefits of household solar systems and available resources in their community to pursue solar installation and increase household energy efficiency. SolarCorps outreach members spread awareness of GRID Alternatives' no-cost solar installation, determine if homeowners are eligible for GRID Alternatives' programs, communicate with families throughout the solar installation process, and help eligible families locate and apply for energy assistance programs.

Community outreach fellows often approach the community in settings that have an existing draw to residents, such as farmers' markets. In the words of one program staff, "We have a lot of outreach fellows who are just kind of out in the community doing tabling events, talking to community members. Letting them know about different programs that we might have that they might qualify for." A community beneficiary of GRID Alternatives' no-cost solar installation discussed the significance of GRID Alternatives' approach to outreach:

I know that solar companies have a bad rep because they're very pushy. Especially the private solar companies, they're very pushy. And since GRID Alternatives is a nonprofit, they must reach out and provide a message that they're a nonprofit. They're not here to take your money. They're here to give you solar if you qualify for it. If you qualify for it, then it will pretty much be a free solar system that can help you out. Help your family, help reduce the bills, and help reduce climate change. ... I feel like it's very hard to go into a market where people already have a very negative view of you already. I would say that's the hardest part and it's the most important part that GRID must do or the SolarCorps [must do].

Role of Partners and Community Involvement

This section describes the role of partners in working with GRID Alternatives and broader community involvement.

Role of Partners

Across the more than 100 partners that GRID Alternatives maintains, SolarCorps partnerships vary widely in the purpose and frequency of collaboration. Partner organizations are often used for additional funding sources (e.g., financing for nonprofits), providing solar installation resources (e.g., solar design software), and offering training opportunities for members (e.g., SolarCorps training days).

Employer partnerships serve as an important avenue for SolarCorps members' future employment. For national, regional, and local solar employer partners that are seeking to hire trained and skilled members, they have access to GRID Alternatives' online resume bank. Solar installers in California metro areas are currently paid \$25-\$30 an hour.¹

Partnerships focused on providing materials or funding to GRID Alternatives and, by extension, SolarCorps member activities ultimately serve to mutually advance the missions and priorities of partner organizations and GRID Alternatives alike. For example, a partner that provides cost-free licenses for their solar design software to GRID Alternatives allows SolarCorps members to learn design skills in software that employers use. In addition to the increased use of their design software, this partner advances their mission to expand solar in an equitable approach through the work of GRID Alternatives and SolarCorps.

¹ GRID Alternatives [Open Positions](#), retrieved August 28, 2024; Indeed [Solar installer salary in California](#), retrieved August 28, 2024.

A partner that provides financing to nonprofits so they can transition to solar systems explained the impact of their relationship with GRID Alternatives and SolarCorps:

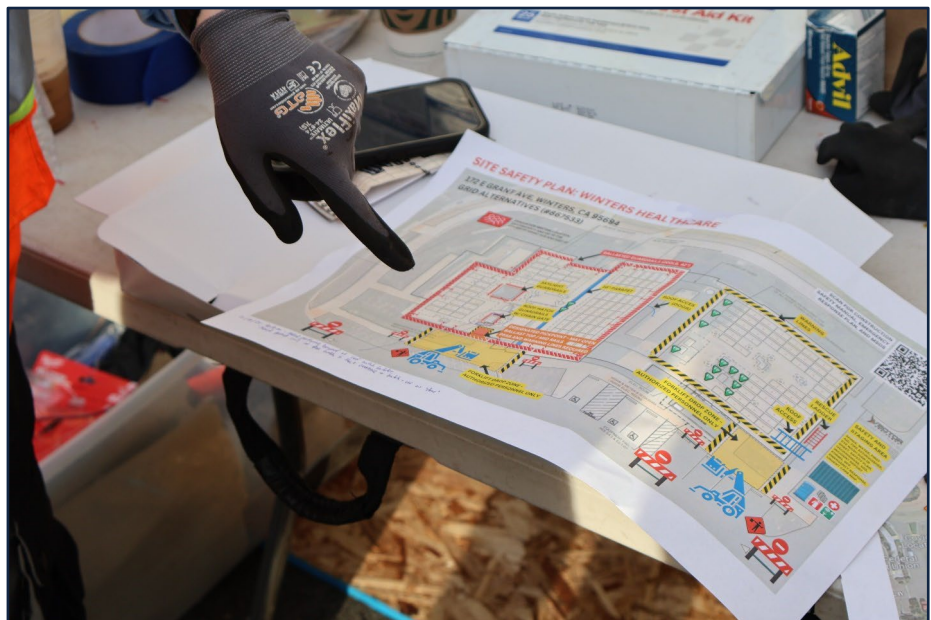
GRID has a great reputation; they do all different sizes of projects. ... The goal is to help the nonprofit save money and go solar. They just do an excellent job of doing that and their mission is aligned with our mission. ... They come into a project; we know they're going to do a great job on the install. ... They're going to work with us, say, if the numbers are a little bit too high and we need them to adjust the numbers to make economic sense for the nonprofit to do so, so they can save some money. Then they're willing to adjust their numbers to make it make sense for us and to make it make sense for the nonprofit.

Community Involvement

A common phrase to describe GRID Alternatives' mission—"People, Planet, Employment"—was consistently mentioned by program staff and members. At the forefront of this phrase and often in staff and member responses was "people" or "community." GRID Alternatives and SolarCorps prioritize the involvement of their communities in several ways.

For the direct services that SolarCorps supports, communities participate in the no-cost installation process, training programs, and outreach efforts. Program staff shared, "I think from recruitment to implementation, everything we do is really community-based."

Members who serve on the Community Outreach and Solar Installation Teams are embedded within their communities, often communicating with residents in their spaces (e.g., flea markets, farmers' markets, households). Community Outreach members help to spread information about renewable energy resources and GRID Alternatives services and to assist low-income families throughout the lifecycle of their solar



installation. Through these members' efforts, community residents are adequately informed of the solar process, technology, continued resources, and maintenance. Similarly, solar installation members involve community members by informing them of the solar system installation details and engaging in educational discussions surrounding renewable resources.

One SolarCorps member explained the impact of the interactions with community residents:

And what I love about this too is—not only does it feel like we're making a difference—but it also brings awareness too. Because there have been times where we did an install and people will come up and say "Hey, what are you all doing? Oh, I would be interested; can I get the number? What company are you with?" "Oh, we're with GRID." "How does that work?" It's bringing more into those disadvantaged communities where people are getting interested.

[They say,] "Oh I didn't even know this place even existed." I remember someone was coming to me and [name] and was like, "Oh that's cool, women on the roof, wow." That was cool, that was a nice moment.

In connection with the solar training programs that GRID Alternatives provides (e.g., IBT) and SolarCorps recruitment efforts, the residents of the communities GRID Alternatives serve are involved through participation in the IBT program and serving as SolarCorps members. GRID Alternatives staff use several pipelines to target the recruitment and selection of community residents and, as a result, members of the community are involved through service (see Recruitment and Selection section for more details).

Program staff described how IBT outreach connects with communities:

That's where we do the deepest community outreach, if you will. That's the initial step into the clean energy industry with participants from the most local of communities with the highest barriers to employment. And then once they get on that track, they come through that program. And if it's something they really take to, and show a passion for, those are the ones that usually get into our AmeriCorps fellowship.

Speaking to the value of having the community involved in the program and serving as AmeriCorps members, program staff shared:

I think that when they [community] see folks that look like them, that they feel represented by, they are much more likely to engage with us. ... And they [community] will be able to connect with folks who look like them who have similar life experiences.

According to program staff, this involvement of the community through SolarCorps service returns dividends to the well-being of communities:

The emphasis of the AmeriCorps program is its direct service work. I think with workforce development, specifically, how to learn how to better serve the community through working directly with them in the classroom. And same with the Outreach and Construction fellows. They're all doing that direct service work within their respective communities. We also have an emphasis on recruiting from the communities that we serve as well. Not from the outside—we're intentional about that. And a lot of fellows reflect on that just being a meaningful part of the experience and they're going back and serving in their community.

National Service Members

The section describes the member recruitment and selection processes, members' reasons for joining the program, and member demographics. Also included are perceptions about the stipend and training received.

Recruitment and Selection

GRID Alternatives' recruitment goal for an 11-month cycle is typically 35 members using the funds granted through AmeriCorps. As available, GRID Alternatives also funds additional SolarCorps fellows without the use of AmeriCorps dollars. In preparation for the current cycle of members, GRID Alternatives received approximately 500 applicants. Successful SolarCorps recruitment comes from two main sources: 1) Referrals from SolarCorps alumni and solar installation clients and 2) IBT program participants aware of the fellowship who go on to apply to join SolarCorps. While these sources often lead to the majority of SolarCorps members, GRID Alternatives also uses online job postings and job boards such as Service Year to maintain a well-rounded recruitment approach and program awareness.

To illustrate these efforts, of the five members who participated in a focus group, three decided to apply to SolarCorps following their experience in the IBT program while the other two members discovered the program through online postings.

Through GRID Alternatives' reputation of performing valuable, no-cost services for the community in a field with increased occupational demand, SolarCorps can successfully recruit through word-of-mouth referrals and programs that train residents in the community. Through these intentional pipelines, the program draws residents from the communities they serve to the SolarCorps program, which is in line with their mission to equitably incorporate economic and environmental justice communities into the broader transition to renewable energy.

In addition to strong pipelines to recruit members from the communities GRID serves, program staff are also intentionally focused on equity during the SolarCorps selection process. When reviewing applications to the SolarCorps program, staff purposely encourage female, non-White, and low-income representation across SolarCorps membership. This attention can largely be attributed to GRID Alternatives' goal to provide access to the renewables industry for underserved communities that may not otherwise be included in traditional pathways to construction and renewable energy occupations.

Description of Member Characteristics

When asked about the typical characteristics of a SolarCorps member, program staff responded that the general demographic can be characterized as members who are not typical of the solar industry. GRID Alternatives SolarCorps has a high representation of female, non-White, and residents of environmental justice communities within the SolarCorps program and the broader organization. The general underlying characteristic of many SolarCorps members, according to program staff, is the likelihood that members are often undergoing a major transition in life such as a career change or entry into the workforce following education.

Why Members Join

When the five members participating in the focus group were asked about their reasons for joining SolarCorps, one member said GRID Alternatives aligned with their values. This member explained, *"I was looking for work with something that was a bit more aligned with my values, as opposed to just part-time work. And I was reading more about the company and just resonated with many [of their] values."* One member was looking for a job, and for the three members who had taken part in the IBT program, becoming a SolarCorps fellow was the next step to getting experience in the solar energy field. One such member shared:

I think that I went and tried to apply to other solar companies. I just wanted to be in the solar field. And everyone was getting hired at GRID; I just put my application in because I wanted to work in the solar field. This was the one place that did pick me because they weren't expecting 6 months to a year's worth of already professional experience work. You have to know what you're doing when you go there, rather than here or there training you for up to 11 months. So, when you go out into the field you'd be like, "I have a whole year's worth of experience now." So, you have a better chance to get one of those professional installation jobs with an actual [for-]profit company.

Stipend

Generally, members participating in the focus group felt that the stipend (\$1,600/month before taxes) was not sufficient to meet the cost-of-living needs in Sacramento. Members appreciated the support provided by program staff in applying for CalFresh, or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (SNAP), benefits. Despite the

stipend and additional supports such as SNAP, inflated costs pose difficulties to members during their service terms. One member shared:

If I am being honest, it would help if there was more ... because it's very expensive. ... It [the stipend] gets taxed and it would help if it's more, because it is a sacrifice ... we are able to apply for [Electronic Benefits Transfer, or EBT, for SNAP]. That helps. And there are also other discount programs that they do give ... with inflation it's expensive regardless. And with EBT that can only go so far.

GRID Alternatives staff also noted recruitment challenges in California's major cities, given the size of the stipend and the cost of living.

A continual challenge we find is we're in California—especially Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco—where the cost of living is so high that the living allowance is prohibitive for a lot of folks. They can't live off of that, so that's a barrier.

Since most focus group members were residents in the community before their service, they explained they had other supports (e.g., family, partners) that could assist them with basic needs not met by the stipend. These members went on to explain that the valuable skills and experience provided through SolarCorps and the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award outweighed the stipend. One member shared:

To me, the education grant at the very end is going to help me tremendously [to] get into a better electrician's program than I was planning on doing. I was going to do the IBEW [International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers] 5-year apprenticeship but that's going to take 5 years to get through the whole program. And if I use that grant, it's going to pay for half of my schooling, and then it'll take me about 2 years instead of 5 years to get to where I want to be at. So, the actual program is going to help me in the very long run get my career going.

Training

GRID Alternatives provides many opportunities to members for informal and formal training. Members begin their service receiving AmeriCorps–required training and an introduction to GRID Alternatives, often during the Pre-Service Orientation organized by GRID Alternatives staff. Following the Pre-Service Orientation held virtually for all members across the GRID Alternatives affiliate offices, members undergo a second week of virtual training focused on an introduction to solar topics.

During their service term, members engage in hands-on training provided by GRID Alternatives staff who are responsible for organizational activities with which members assist (i.e., no-cost solar installation, solar workforce training programs, and community outreach). During a visit to the GRID Alternatives North Valley office, program staff discussed the approach to training members currently in the Solar Installation rotation of their term experience and briefly reviewed the training materials available to members of the Solar Installation Team. During this rotation members receive training in four areas: solar installation, operations and management, project management, and solar design.

At the beginning of each rotation, members complete self-paced trainings under the supervision of program staff who have full-time positions on that rotation's team. Materials include videos, presentations, and explanatory documents to orient each member to the skills and information required to immerse themselves in the rotation activities. Members can discuss challenging content with program staff, conduct hands-on training such as wire size identification, and complete quizzes on training content to gauge their comfort with the materials.

Following each member's completion of the "classroom" training for each rotation, members are increasingly incorporated into the service operations of program staff. For example, members of the Solar Installation



Team accompany program staff on visits to examine the suitability of homeowner roofs and collect the data necessary to design solar layouts for each house (e.g., roof pitch). Members have a detailed site visit checklist to document and explain each step of the activity for members to reference throughout their rotation. According to members and program staff alike, this structure is necessary to reinforce member skills and accommodate the change in activities associated with rotations without compromising the quality of service.

When asked about the quality of training provided, members were pleased with the approach and adequacy in preparing them for their service activities and obtaining future career skills. One member explained:

The training was pretty good and very hands-on, especially when it comes to the roof or even IBT. But to actually get on the installations and see the whole situation get brought together, I like it. I can do stuff I didn't think [of]. I come from working in call centers and jobs like that and I never thought I could do this. So now I can go on a roof and install solar and water and combine box by myself. ... Yeah, I'll say A-plus training for sure.

To assist members in pursuing their interests, GRID Alternatives provides each member with \$600 to enroll in courses or certification programs that align with the topics or career fields in which they are interested. Throughout their service terms, all SolarCorps members also attend virtual "SolarCorps Days" once a month to facilitate personal and professional development across the cohort. Aside from the members across the eight affiliate offices being able to use this organized time each month to connect, members receive training from experts in a variety of topic areas such as environmental justice, professional development, and other optional opportunities. Examples of these training opportunities include:

- Historical policy in environmental justice & barriers to implementation
- Restorative practices implementation
- Correlation between health status and environmental setting
- Informational interviews and professional correspondence
- Employer panel and resume sessions
- How to make the average person more environmentally minded

Outcomes

This section includes information about performance measurement and evaluation, including any challenges. Program outcomes, both member and community, are described as well as a discussion of the facilitators and barriers to meeting the intended outcomes.

Performance Measurement and Evaluation

When explaining GRID Alternatives' relationship to AmeriCorps performance measures, program staff focused on difficulties associated with the narrow measurement selection and scope applicable to the many services that SolarCorps provides. Program staff found the performance measurement language to be restrictive for the allowable outcomes.

For example, one of the performance measures, EN1 (Energy), outlines an output of providing retrofits to at least 1,550 housing units or structures. According to program staff, this output is straightforward, however, the associated outcome they were required to select is not entirely representative of the impact that SolarCorps provides in the area of their no-cost installations. The associated outcome with this performance measure is the number of housing units/structures with reduced energy or reduced energy costs. While the number of housing units is a notable outcome, program staff felt that the ability to define their outcome as an estimate of cost savings provided would be a more representative outcome, but they are not able to include estimates of cost-savings over time as an outcome without violating AmeriCorps requirements. Program staff explained:

Yes, it's easy to do our target output of 1,550 housing units or structures. But then it was like the outcome can't be cost savings because that's like an estimate. But we can't in the moment say the impact because the impact happens over time. So, it's not a false outcome but it doesn't feel like an accurate illustration of the impact. ... The system we install today is going to save money over the next 20 years, but you can't count the projected 20 years of greenhouse gas reductions or the 20 years of financial savings.

Program staff also explained the conflicting interests of balancing AmeriCorps' requirement to only conduct predetermined activities over the 3-year grant period with the evolving practices and priorities in the renewable energy space. As an organization centered around technology with constantly changing techniques, products, and forms of implementation (e.g., electric vehicles [EVs]), programs in the renewable energy space need to be flexible to account for evolving practices and priorities. Especially as the priorities and attainable climate solutions of local governments and community residents change, requirements to conduct only specified service activities can pose a barrier to programs such as SolarCorps with a mission to be responsive to the needs of local communities and low-income and diverse communities. One program staff went on to explain the challenge, adding context to how this issue affects the SolarCorps membership:

Funding is very restrictive, especially with this industry changing so quickly. This is a 3-year grant where what they're doing can't change over the course of 3 years. So now we're moving into EV, and I know how attractive that would be to individuals, but we can't offer slots in there, because we'd have to wait for another round.

Member Outcomes

As mentioned, the SolarCorps program has a strong emphasis on the personal and professional development of each member while simultaneously providing meaningful and equitable climate solutions to low-income and often historically underserved populations. This section describes member outcomes in the areas of civic engagement, technical skills, and career preparation.

Civic Engagement

Program staff shared that service with SolarCorps illustrates to members the impact of providing accessible services to their communities, especially when engaging with populations that may not otherwise have equitable access to renewable household energy. Program staff and members both shared that feedback from community residents who receive workforce training and no-cost solar installation often mentions the impact of seeing people who look like them (referencing gender/race) in the solar field as reassuring of the

services SolarCorps and GRID Alternatives provides and encouraging them to view solar as an attainable career field.

Further supporting this sentiment, *GRID Alternatives SolarCorps Impact Report for the 2022–2023 Cohort* stated that 85.7 percent of surveyed members felt “they were provided opportunities for meaningful service that matched what they signed up for.” One program staff also described the impact on member civic engagement as it relates to interest in continuing to address community-facing issues following their formal service, explaining:

The first thing that came to mind was an interview that I did with one of the fellows, where he was like, “SolarCorps showed me that service can be a profession. Service doesn’t have to be volunteering on Saturday morning. It can be a career in serving communities as a viable option.” I think in that way, showing folks the value of community engagement, and just the value of community, period. I feel like this is a whole other tangent, but the U.S. is slowly becoming more and more isolated, and community is not as valued as it once was. Just giving folks the opportunity to realize that there’s an opportunity to have a career in this and that it’s real and tangible ... and valuable in its own way.

Technical Skills and Career Preparation

In addition to SolarCorps’ and GRID Alternatives’ commitment to providing clean energy to local low-income families and training and job support placement for qualifying individuals, SolarCorps prioritizes the personal and professional development of the members. The program displays this priority through their many formal training opportunities, individual training incentive (\$600), unique program structures (e.g., rotations), and daily interaction/instruction from program staff with solar expertise.

In combination with these tangible supports to advance the personal and professional development of members, program staff and members both frequently mentioned the significance of GRID Alternatives’ commitment to equitable solar programming, inclusive of the SolarCorps fellowship. Whether members were recruited through their participation in the IBT program, referrals from GRID Alternatives staff or community residents, or online sources, a common sentiment was the value of an accessible program such as SolarCorps in providing a necessary year of experience to obtain the skills needed for entry-level employment or further education. One member described this phenomenon and SolarCorps’ impact on their technical skills and career pursuits, explaining:

I think for me it’s made me a bit more driven and goal oriented. It’s a really cool program that I never knew existed. I think the amount of support that there is here—it would take a lot for somebody to not use the networks that are in place here. I feel like there’s a lot to be learned. Anybody that’s here that is staff is more than willing to help in any way they can. I think all of that has been such a positive influence, that I’ve just barely gotten a start in renewables, but I can already tell that it’s something I have a passion for—for things around environmental justice and such. But this gives me a bit more power where I felt like I didn’t exactly have before. And also learning new skills along the way. I was never really big into construction before. And now I feel like just the training that I’ve gotten from here has already transformed my skill set.

Furthermore, while SolarCorps aims to encourage members to consider green jobs in their future employment planning, the program authentically incentivizes members to pursue the careers in which they are most interested. Aside from the \$600 provided to each member to complete trainings and obtain certifications of their choice, program staff equip members with the knowledge needed to obtain employment in any field through trainings on professional correspondence, mock interviews, resume reviews, employer panels, and



partnerships centered around member employment opportunities with employers that use the skills developed through SolarCorps service. Several members described the impact this program approach has on their confidence and capability to navigate the career field, with one member sharing:

Yeah, at the end, if any of us ever found this is not for us, the stipend at the end for the education, that really helps. Another thing is also getting help dealing with the tools, which helps too. So that helps, like with the other \$600, yeah, we could be able to use it for tools and also furthering education. They want us to educate more of ourselves, have more of a background of other things too. It's not only giving people a second chance, but also exploring "Hey what are you also interested in?" And making sure we get that personal development time, like, "What are you interested in? What do you see yourself doing?" and helping us. That's wonderful, I love that!

Another member noted:

Freedom. I mean one thing I like is I don't feel like I must do solar, even though I like it. It's like, once your 11 months is done, you can do whatever you want. That gives me that peace ... I can learn whatever I want. I don't have to use that for only solar, I can do other things.

Community Outcomes

SolarCorps improves community outcomes by lowering the energy costs of low-income families, decreasing usage of energy sources that emit harmful pollutants, and training community residents to help them pursue employment with higher pay in solar fields.

Concerning the latter service, SolarCorps provides meaningful training to residents of the communities they serve with a particular focus on assisting populations that may otherwise have barriers to accessing solar training resources (women and nonbinary trainees; justice-involved trainees; Black, Indigenous, and people of

color, or BIPOC, trainees; trainees with disabilities; youth trainees; LGBTQIA+ trainees; and veteran/active military trainees). SolarCorps members assist program staff in providing hands-on supportive training to participants to increase the skill base of community residents and, as the training progresses, SolarCorps members serve vital roles in the process of job placement support for trainees who complete their programs.

Additionally, because SolarCorps members are often residents of the communities they serve, participation in the program further upskills local, diverse communities to implement climate solutions in the form of renewable energy systems. Following their service, SolarCorps members are more equipped to both pursue employment/education and exhibit the ability for residents of their communities to pursue opportunities in the climate solutions and trades space, as one program staff describes:

Getting more folks out and having jobs in solar, in the industry, and a more diverse workforce itself is hugely beneficial to the renewable energy industry. A lot more new ideas, better culture neither I or [program staff] had construction or solar-related roles before we were at GRID. So having that exposure to the culture in construction can be difficult for people of color, for women in construction, and I think that making it more diverse will just make it more popular in general. Which then directly contributes to combating climate change if we're able to make solar a more widespread phenomenon and helping people understand the importance of it as well. That helps—every little bit helps.

Directly related to the climate impact facing communities served by SolarCorps, members and program staff alike provide no-cost solar installation to low-income households. This service provides access to low-income communities to participate in the climate solution and energy cost savings provided by solar, when otherwise, low-income households would often face barriers to obtaining solar through a private organization.

To demonstrate the numerical impact of these services, the *GRID Alternatives SolarCorps Impact Report for the 2022–2023 Cohort* indicated 336 trainees served by SolarCorps members, 1,686 households received solar from SolarCorps members, and across the 8 affiliate offices created \$26,891,697 in energy savings that resulted in 67,120.39 tons of carbon emissions reduced. To illustrate the impact of these services from a family perspective, one community resident explained:

I would say the solar has helped immensely for helping us cut down our costs, so that we can buy the food we need. It relieves my parents' stress about the bills, because my dad did stress a lot about the [Pacific Gas & Electric] bill. But now that he sees we're only paying \$80–90 that's not too bad. You know, I could save this cash for when we really needed it, for like an emergency fund.

Barriers to Meeting Intended Outcomes

The most pressing barrier from the perspective of both staff and members was the stipend. While SolarCorps aims to recruit members from the communities they serve, the stipend amount can be a barrier to service, especially in urban service areas with high costs of living. Despite the specialized training and increased employability that service with SolarCorps provides, individuals interested in the program and current members face trade-offs when pursuing AmeriCorps-funded positions. One program staff explained:

Money is still a barrier for our fellows, unfortunately, with housing and food insecurity. But as for our AmeriCorps State and National [fellows], at least they can apply for CalFresh and we can refer them to other services that they might be eligible for and that helps. I confirm with them [potential members] three times that they know the pay. It is also necessary to ensure they can live on that pay from our program. I know it's a great opportunity but sometimes they must look out for themselves, and if it's not the right time right now that's perfectly fine. I can refer them to maybe something that would be easier for them to do.

Facilitators to Meeting Intended Outcomes

The program's approach to authentically supporting members and GRID Alternatives' organizational mission and culture, which emphasizes equity and inclusivity, facilitates meeting outcomes. Beyond the meaningful service of providing solar technology and energy cost savings to low-income households, training, and job support for residents of their community—and spreading renewable energy information to communities at large—members are encouraged by SolarCorps staff and GRID Alternatives staff to pursue their personal and professional interests while serving.

SolarCorps members were quick to emphasize the impact that supportive program staff had on their confidence and capability to pursue opportunities of interest to them and, often, in service of their community. One member shared the impact of both serving their community and making a difference with climate change:

I could not imagine how I would be able to provide for my community the way that this company does. It gives you a purpose in a way. Whereas some jobs don't have any purpose at all ... with this, you're able to give back to the community as well as save the environment.

Closing

GRID Alternatives has an unwavering focus on what program staff refer to as the "triple bottom line of people, planet, and employment." Impact occurs in these three areas through enacting the mission, which is "to build community-powered solutions to advance economic and environmental justice through renewable energy." To achieve this mission, SolarCorps members support GRID Alternatives through the following efforts:

- No-cost solar installation for low-income households,
- Hands-on solar workforce training, and
- Conducting outreach to low-income communities.

Through the 2-day site visit and analysis of member, program staff (which is inclusive of the director), partner, and community interview responses as well as observations of training and service delivery, it is apparent that the program is dedicated to achieving its mission of increasing access to renewable technology, developing community connections, and equipping members and community residents with the skills needed for employment in the solar industry.

Notably, program staff and members were quick to describe the uniqueness of GRID Alternatives' authentic dedication to equity for community beneficiaries, SolarCorps members, and program staff. With concrete standards to achieve equitable recruitment, knowledge performance indicators to ensure solar training programs include populations historically excluded from solar and construction, and community agreements among GRID Alternatives and SolarCorps to achieve a safe workplace, GRID Alternatives seeks to implement equity wherever possible. Program staff noted:

This needs to be a safe place to make mistakes but also has to be a place where we acknowledge and understand your privilege and power, including positional power. It's the idea that we cocreate our experiences. Using gender fluid, open and expansive, and accessible language. During onboarding, preservice orientation, laying these out and framing this is how we are at GRID. This is how we're different. ... I just want to add that not only that this is the way we do the work, but that this is the work, if you will. The equity work is just as much the actual implementation of clean energy—the implementation of equitable practices is also the work. And not separate.

SolarCorps members acquire valuable skills and experience, expand their personal and professional development, and serve their communities with invaluable energy savings and reduced emissions. Illustrated by the estimated 30 percent of GRID Alternatives staff who were previously SolarCorps fellows, the program provides a meaningful entryway into renewable energy and demonstrates the impact of equitable climate solutions for low-income, diverse communities.

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About AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps, the federal agency for national service and volunteerism, provides opportunities for Americans to serve their country domestically, address the nation's most pressing challenges, improve lives and communities, and strengthen civic engagement. Each year, the agency places more than 200,000 AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers in intensive service roles and empowers millions more to serve as long-term, short-term, or one-time volunteers. Learn more at [AmeriCorps.gov](https://www.americorps.gov).

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The [AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation](https://www.americorps.gov/office-of-research-and-evaluation) assists AmeriCorps and its partners in collecting, analyzing, and disseminating data and insights about AmeriCorps programs and civic life in America.

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Photo Credit

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