

# **Ethical Storytelling for Equitable Outcomes**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Energy efficiency (EE) programs have the potential to reduce energy consumption, utility bills, energy burden, and even housing insecurity for millions of residents. In order to ensure that they reach the communities most impacted by energy and housing burdens, these programs must be implemented with equity at the forefront. Equity in the context of EE may include but is not limited to 1) equitable access to housing security and healthy homes, 2) EE investments for all people, regardless of race or income, and 3) justice for the communities that have historically been excluded from, or even burdened by, the intended benefits of EE retrofits or other housing improvements. Storytelling has been used for thousands of years to preserve culture and traditions and can be a powerful way for organizations to advance their missions. The widespread use of storytelling illustrates the demand for stories but often fails to show how current strategies may be transactional or extractive models of story-collecting. Equity in the context of storytelling refers to the ability of community voices to influence energy and housing policy and practice.

Two energy and housing advocate organizations have worked to develop, document, apply, and share principles for equitable storytelling to amplify the power of residents of marginalized and low-income (LI) communities and to effect EE and housing solutions that truly serve their needs. The authors published a first draft of these ten storytelling principles in a preliminary blog series in 2022; this paper fully expands upon these principles and utilizes two specific case studies to showcase their applications within housing and energy advocacy to ensure equitable outcomes. Finally, this paper describes how storytelling can be leveraged to support equitable outcomes in advocacy from the community to the federal level.

## **Introduction**

Energy efficiency programs can provide significant benefits for multifamily affordable housing, with industry research reporting that EE programs can unlock up to 38% whole-building energy savings (Samarripas and Tanabe 2020). Access to energy-efficient housing reduces households' overall energy burden, defined as the percentage of household income spent on energy bills each year. Reduced energy burden enables more flexibility for how those saved household dollars are spent. The benefits of EE are particularly important to residents of marginalized and LI communities who face persistent income inequality, housing insecurity, and energy burden (Lewis, Hernandez, and Geronimus 2019). About 67% of low-income households experience a high energy burden and on average “spend three times more of their income on energy costs compared to the median spending of non-low-income households (8.1% vs. 2.3%)” (Drehobl, Ross, Ayala 2020). With the option of reducing energy burden through EE measures,

and thus lower monthly energy bills, households can redirect those funds to other expenses such as rent, which provides a higher degree of housing security. However, certain communities remain underserved by EE programs (Drehobl and Ross 2016). Inequity in EE access and subsequent energy burden or housing insecurity is experienced nationally, but each community and household has its own story.

Equitable storytelling has the power to build connections and awareness that support social change. National organizations can uplift personal stories to draw attention to the need for policy and program changes and help identify new approaches to address these disparities intentionally. In their current state, many existing programs have further exacerbated historical inequities, such as the inequitable distribution of EE investments and disproportionate housing insecurity for LI people and renters. Residents' stories highlight how equity, environmental, economic, and health priorities can be mutually reinforced through authentic engagement. These on-the-ground experiences provide roadmaps for storytelling to propel a clean energy future where people from all walks of life are part of the solution.

As it relates to storytelling, equitable approaches call for authentic engagement that adheres to ethical principles of treating people as agents in their own right (Exhale 2011). Equitable storytelling also calls for a disruption of common power structures and processes that have historically excluded underserved communities from decision-making. National organizations like NRDC and SAHF have a responsibility to amplify community voices within existing EE platforms and support their participation in the larger movement for social change in an authentic way. This in and of itself is an equitable outcome that can drive toward additional community benefits such as a fair allocation of resources, continued housing stability, and equitable access to EE programs and benefits.

This paper brings forward the perspectives and experiences of two national groups, Stewards of Affordable Housing for the Future (SAHF) and Energy Efficiency for All (EEFA), who enter the energy conversation from a different angle. For SAHF and EEFA, equitable storytelling is central to creating a greater supply of sustainable and healthy affordable homes nationally and fostering affordable housing residents' sense of agency through their storytelling work and advocacy. As a collaborative of 13 non-profit multi-state affordable housing providers who own and operate more than 140,000 affordable rental homes nationwide, SAHF brings an owner's perspective to scale up EE with its members and the broader affordable housing sector. EEFA is a national partnership of affordable housing, health, energy, and environmental advocates, and communities working in 12 states who come together to increase all renters' access to affordable and healthy homes through EE. EEFA and SAHF's work was supported by lessons from The National Housing Trust (NHT), which used storytelling in its "Where Will We Live?" housing policy campaign. NHT's on-the-ground experience supported the development of EEFA's storytelling principles and its Storytelling Toolkit (NHT 2020) guided SAHF's storytelling at two affordable housing communities.

For groups or individuals at any scale – from national organizations to individual advocates – storytelling can be an effective starting point to address the inequitable distribution of EE investments by building personal relationships with underserved communities and collecting their stories to drive change from a local to national level. Rather than centering traditional, often technical policy language, these stories deepen relationships between individuals, communities, and advocates and focus on what people face in their daily lives. National groups provide a platform to share and amplify these individual stories or voices in an

organized manner that can be more effective in guiding key decision-makers toward more equitable outcomes. SAHF and EEFA each see storytelling as an important means of securing resources and tools that can validate the importance and support their memberships' on-the-ground work. For SAHF, peer exchange is a long-standing strategy wherein members can foster connections around abstract/technical topics like EE, see the impact of their work through sharing success stories and lessons, and influence others to meaningfully participate in a movement where they feel supported in their work driving their organization and/or community towards an equitable outcome. Building on this experience, SAHF has more recently engaged in following the impact of its work and sharing the stories of residents who are part of the energy upgrades at its members' properties. SAHF, EEFA, and NHT believe that social change, like advancing EE in affordable housing, requires people and communities to have their stories elevated authentically. By investing in storytelling grounded in ethical principles, national groups can support and build a broader movement focused on the realities of its members' and communities' on-the-ground experiences.

## **Ethical Principles for Equitable Storytelling**

National organizations are uniquely positioned and resourced to share stories in multiple venues and gather support for an effective call to action. Yet, this opportunity often means national organizations are in a position of relative privilege. Equitable storytelling grounded in ethical principles values not only the stories of the people being shared but recognizes that how they are shared matters. Ethical principles provide a framework for acknowledging inherent power dynamics and building the infrastructure that allows people who otherwise may not be heard to have a voice, authentically and without exploitation. By supporting people and renters living in affordable apartments in sharing what comfort and security mean to them, their participation is supported in creating and shaping better policy. Furthermore, advocates also hold stories of collective transformation through the work and many may also bring from personal experiences. It is an important responsibility of national organizations to build a culture of storytelling that supports the development of strong relationships with each other and the people they hope to impact. The act of sharing stories creates personal connections, allows for growth and learning, and sheds light on advocacy that is often technical.

Energy policy and housing affordability advocacy touch on personal and collective stories about the home. Equitable storytelling is gathering and sharing stories for use in advocacy while upholding the highest standards of ethics throughout the engagement with storytellers, the creative development of the story, and its communication in its final form. Adhering to these standards of ethics, EEFA has developed the following ten ethical principles for equitable storytelling to build compelling narratives that support its advocacy work. The authors published a preliminary version of these principles in a short blog series in 2022, but detailed guidance for specific applications of the principles within advocacy was not included (Bertolacini and Ramirez 2022). This section outlines the ten ethical principles for equitable storytelling in greater detail. The following section, titled “Equitable Outcomes”, outlines broader equitable outcomes from storytelling within energy, utility, and congressional advocacy. The final section, “Principles in Action”, describes two examples of specific case studies that showcase historical applications of the principles and how they can achieve equitable outcomes on-the-ground.

### **Principle #1: Gain Informed Consent**

It is the best practice of story collectors to receive consent to use collected stories for a wide range of uses before sharing them more broadly. Informed consent enables individuals, such as tenants or owners, and organizations to retain ownership over how their stories are shared (Exhale 2011). This upholds the safety and security of the storyteller and cultivates a positive, trusting relationship with the story collector. Once a trusting relationship has been established between the storyteller and the story collector, it is often unnecessary to initiate a sign-off on minor variations of the consent agreement.

Consent realization may look different in practice depending on whether the storyteller is an individual or an entity. If, for example, an EE advocate interviews an affordable housing building resident on their monthly electricity costs for an infographic explaining energy burden, they should 1) obtain consent for collection and dissemination of the story, 2) tell the storyteller how their information and story will be shared, and 3) inform the storyteller once the interview contents have been distributed.

### **Principle #2: Learn the Context and the History of the Storyteller**

When working with members of underserved communities, advocates should bear in mind any historical legacies of inequity – such as racism, classism, and ableism – that may affect the relationship with the storytellers they engage with, how comfortable the storyteller is in sharing their personal experiences, and the storyteller’s perception of who the energy and housing sectors benefit. Writers from the Green and Healthy Homes Initiative (GHHI) and The Urban Institute state, “Equity at any point in time is the aggregation of past actions and outcomes that resulted in disparities. The original disparity and its effects may persist. The community that was negatively affected by a past disparity may also connect all programs governed by similar service structures as part of the same system that caused the disparity regardless of whether an individual program was responsible” (Martín and Lewis 2019). For example, housing and energy policies have historically exacerbated segregation and caused displacement of residents. As a result, the groups affected by those past disparities may have preconceived notions about the programs and policies that energy and housing activists advocate for.

Advocates should commit to understanding the historical relationships and legacies of the storyteller that may shape their perceptions of the work and energy and housing advocacy as a whole. The advocate is responsible for researching historical events and past injustices to give context to the stories they collect and avoid potential retraumatization of the storyteller, particularly when their organization has perpetuated that in the past. This learning can be done through intentional qualitative and ethnographic research of past harm, taking accountability for their role in that harm, practicing active listening with the storyteller, interrogating the history of the national organization, and holding community discussions. Conducting this background research and learning is the advocate’s responsibility; it is important not to rely solely on the storytellers impacted by the harm to relay this information, as they have likely already done the labor of informing perpetrators of harm of their problematic practices and their impacts. Advocates and story collectors should take the time to search for that information to gain understanding before asking them for additional labor and education.

### **Principle #3: Understand the Impacts of Technology**

The breadth of reach to social media followers, content readers, and other digital



audiences has grown significantly with the expansion of online communication platforms. The ability to share stories with the public has reached previously unimaginable levels. Technology improvements have helped expand the impact of housing and energy advocacy, allowing for more direct engagement from impacted community members. At the same time, advocates must remember the privacy and security risks of the internet, and work to protect storytellers from misuse or manipulation of their stories online. Inclusive and accessible mediums should also be considered as not all audiences have access to equivalent levels of technology.

#### **Principle #4: Create a Supportive Environment for Storytelling**

Collecting stories about EE and affordable housing often involves conversations with members of underserved communities who may have been excluded, exploited, or otherwise negatively impacted by institutionalized inequity. For example, a GHFI report titled “Leading with Equity in the Clean Energy Transition” reports that as a result of the United States’ history of racist and discriminatory housing policies, such as redlining, “Black and Brown Americans are significantly more likely to live in older, energy-inefficient homes with structural deficiencies, outdated appliances, and faulty energy systems” (Norten, et al. 2021). Due to the social stigma attached to these systemic circumstances, the individuals or groups that experience them have to apply additional emotional labor to work through society-imposed stigmas to discuss their stories openly, especially with a stranger.

Story collectors must approach conversations among storytellers with an awareness that their current circumstances are not their fault or a result of their actions, but rather are a product of a broken system built on discriminatory policies and laws. It is incumbent on the story collector to bring this understanding to the story-sharing space and create a supportive environment for storytellers to open up about their experiences on topics that are often stigmatized or suppressed. This may also include a critical examination of historical power dynamics, how power is currently distributed within the storytelling space, and how the story collector may have inadvertently or intentionally reinforced those discriminatory policies and laws. Creating a safe environment for story sharing may require an intentional unlearning of the dominant narratives told by the energy and housing sectors and an acceptance of accountability for individual or organizational complicity in those narratives. When EE and affordable housing advocates succeed in building a safe space for vulnerable stories to be shared, other storytellers with similar experiences are encouraged to join the conversation. Creating spaces where sensitive and personal stories can be safely shared may decrease the emotional labor required to share those stories.

#### **Principle #5: Our Default Should be Whole Stories, Not Talking Points**

Whole stories are powerful, transformative, intersectional, and authentic, and can instill a larger impact than generalized summaries or talking points. Advocates are often encouraged to over-simplify stories into talking points to emphasize a key narrative for a campaign. However, the potential for stories to exert influence and build connections is greater when storytellers can share their vulnerable and whole truth. The advocate should honor these authentic stories by sharing them in full, rather than boiling the stories down into generic talking points and summaries. This may entail the admittance of stories that breach beyond their project’s current scope(s). The incorporation of stories that reach beyond EEFA and SAHF’s customary focus can

encourage advocates to learn more about subjects and realities in which they lack formal education, but that have a significant bearing on the improvement of equitable advocacy.

Not all stories are positive. While advocates understand the desire to share the positive impact of their work in the energy and housing sphere, there is a necessary commitment to listening to issues and disparities that storytellers raise. As advocates disseminate collected stories to others and the public, the default should be to share the whole, authentic stories, rather than truncated talking points, even if it is felt that those better convey their overarching message or fit more directly within the project's scope.

### **Principle #6: Build Strong Relationships**

Energy and housing advocates must invest time and attention in cultivating strong, trusting relationships with their partners. Many of these advocates are in the position to build bridges across different sectors, organizations, and stakeholder groups. Successful partnerships co-create energy and housing solutions, rather than resorting to transactional arrangements. Story collectors must understand their role as outsiders to the story sharers, and bear in mind the historical inequities that may affect a group's desire to trust or partner with members of the energy and housing sector. It is important to bring humility and willingness to the conversation and realize that not all relationships necessitate the same foundation. Depending on the context of the partnership, different requirements may be necessary to establish trust and respect. For some relationships, staying in contact with the storyteller and following up with information on how their story has been shared will be an important step to maintaining trust.

### **Principle #7: Know When to Let Storytellers Speak for Themselves**

Whenever possible, advocates and organizations should facilitate the sharing of firsthand, lived experiences. Storytellers in the energy and housing space should have the space to share their own stories, either within their communities or testifying to local decision-makers. Advocates can support the direct efforts of storytellers by actively listening to and championing the goals and needs of the storyteller's community, deferring to the preferences of the storyteller, and bridge-building by providing connections to additional opportunities to engage in energy and housing policy through an advocate or organization's networks.

However, in other circumstances, direct engagement of the storyteller is either infeasible or not preferred by the storyteller (for privacy or other reasons). In some cases, advocates hold direct relationships, such as with funders, decision-makers, media, or other advocates. When advocates act as intermediaries in sharing stories, they hold the tension of uplifting the voices of impacted people, while also holding space for further opportunities for storytellers to engage directly on issues that affect them.

### **Principle #8: Provide Platforms and Opportunities for Storytellers to Engage in Participatory Processes**

Energy and housing advocates often testify on the benefits of EE and affordable housing in front of utility regulators, legislators, or other decision-makers. To support community activism in these spaces, advocates should uplift resident voices by providing opportunities for them to participate directly in the advocacy process. This may include creating avenues for

residents to provide feedback on proposed policies or to give direct testimony on their lived experience. Personal narratives from residents on how EE and housing programs have impacted their comfort, health, and finances can be very compelling and are important for decision-makers to hear directly.

### **Principle #9: Prioritize Stories from Members of Underserved Communities**

While all stories are useful communication tools for movement building, advocates should prioritize stories from members of historically underserved and underrepresented communities. These stories are less likely to have been already broadcasted or uplifted, and often surface valuable perspectives and experiences that have been historically ignored or erased. Story sharers should prioritize the stories of communities that have been most negatively impacted by structural and institutional racism in the past. Their stories are more likely to suggest strategies for community-driven movements and solutions led by frontline communities of color, which are critical to an anti-racist energy and housing system. Storytelling within underserved communities can also serve as a powerful organizing tool and engagement strategy, beyond just the story collection. As advocates seek to use their activism to achieve equitable outcomes, they must invite underserved community members to engage as storytellers.

### **Principle #10: Uplift Resistance Stories**

Resistance stories “exemplify challenges to the racial status quo and effort on the part of many ordinary people to hold our country and its institutions accountable for racial justice and the espoused ideals of our democracy. Resistance stories provide inspiration and ideas drawn from what others before us have done to work against racism and for justice. They alert us to a longstanding and ongoing historical process of anti-racism that we too can join” (Bell, Roberts, Irani, and Murphy 2008). Story sharers should dedicate considerable effort to uplifting resistance stories and experiences that seek to dismantle racism and white supremacy. Story sharers should focus on resistance stories rather than Stock Stories, which are “those told by the dominant group, passed on through historical and literary documents, and celebrated through public rituals, law, the arts, education, and media representations to name a few” (Bell, Roberts, Irani, and Murphy 2008). Stock Stories, such as the one that tells of the inevitable success of rugged individualism, are widely accepted and ubiquitously shared; they do not need the advocates’ help in propagation. As advocates, effort should be spent breaking down the racist assumptions our society and policies are built upon and sharing stories that start to undo the inequitable status quo.

## **Equitable Outcomes**

The principles provided in this paper are key elements of telling stories in a way that honors every person’s humanity, dignity, and inherent value. The “how” matters. The “why” matters too – with people’s personal experiences having the power to promote changes to systems and better outcomes for groups that have faced environmental injustice. Stories can be used to engage many types of stakeholders, including federal and local policymakers, program implementers in EE and health, philanthropic funders, and other mission-driven lenders. Storytelling is also an important tool for movement-building within LI households and

communities. The following sections will detail the types of equitable outcomes that can be expected if these principles are adopted, from the community to the federal level.

### **Community Connection: Movement Building and Increased Support Networks**

Under-resourced communities and affordable housing residents with inefficient systems, high energy burdens, and other environmental injustices know the factors that affect their lives and solutions that would be meaningful to them (NEWHAB 2019). They are a part of the solution and the best voices and advocates to speak to their priorities. Sharing one's story is an empowering experience and hearing from others whose lived experience mirrors one's own is also assuring and empowering. Storytelling is a way to bring people together and can promote shared goals and actions that influence program and policy solutions. To illustrate, residents of a property that was featured in a SAHF video came together for a viewing party when the video was launched, providing an opportunity to share even more stories amongst each other and cheer each other on as they shared their stories.

### **Efficiency Program Advocacy: Increased Resources and Better Program Design**

Bringing the human element of EE into public utility commission meetings to build support for LI efficiency programs is one of the primary ways the EEFA initiative has used storytelling. LI programs frequently incorporate different targets and procedures than market-rate programs (EEFA 2015). For example, they may use different cost-effectiveness criteria. Regulators who are used to evaluating programs on certain quantitative metrics may find it difficult to embrace the rationale for applying different criteria to LI programs. Stories that demonstrate the power of these programs to their constituents and that contextualize efficiency measures' broad impacts beyond traditional program evaluation metrics can go a long way to demonstrating LI programs' value and building support at utility commissions. For instance, members of the national EEFA Storytelling Team worked on a project to capture the benefits of energy efficiency programs that are traditionally not reported, such as successful partnerships and relationship-building in program design. This guide could be used by energy efficiency advocates to showcase the wide range of benefits of successful program design when pushing for new programs and efficiency resources. Effective advocacy can result in greater resources for LI programs, income qualification criteria that are less burdensome to residents or can reach a larger share of LI households, and/or a package of efficiency measures that deliver deeper energy savings and a richer set of non-energy benefits.

### **Housing Advocacy: Mobilizing Affordable Housing Providers Towards More Impactful Energy Efficiency**

That efficiency measures convey a plethora of quality-of-life benefits – increased comfort, health, safety, and resilience as well as financial and education benefits – is well documented (Chant 2019). Mission-driven affordable housing providers care about the health and well-being of the residents of their properties. Their concern for these quality-of-life factors is reflected in the investments that they make in resident services. Yet efficiency measures are often overlooked as drivers of these same sets of positive life outcomes. Personal stories, such as

the ones shared by EEFA, help paint a more holistic picture of the benefits of efficiency upgrades and can provide a relatable experience for the audience. Sharing these stories with affordable housing owners can help open the door to broader conversations around building upgrade decisions, prioritizing a different set of measures that might be chosen by looking only at utility cost savings. For example, within the SAHF network, seeing videos of resident experiences at other properties inspired a member to take on a more in-depth resident engagement process ahead of a retrofit. Changing the conversation so that quality-of-life benefits are part of the objectives for an upgrade also points to the importance of involving residents in decision-making and having the process be responsive to their priorities.

### **Financial Advocacy: Building Interest Among Funders**

Another set of stakeholders where storytelling approaches can be applied to promote more equitable outcomes is funders, whether in philanthropy or the lending community. For philanthropy, storytelling can play multiple roles. Illuminating a program's direct community impact for a funder can make the work more meaningful to them and build support for a program. Alternatively, funders may themselves understand the impact of storytelling and have an interest in incorporating storytelling into the work that they fund. Another way that storytelling may be a factor in philanthropy is as an internal accountability mechanism for grantees. Genuine and authentic engagement with groups that are sometimes designated the "beneficiaries" of programs can act as guardrails on program implementation to help ensure that programs engage participants as agents in the program. In some cases, lenders and investors will have a similar interest in understanding the human impact of projects they support. This is particularly true of mission-driven lenders such as Community Development Financial Institutions, which have particular social objectives they aim to achieve through their loans.

### **Congressional Advocacy: Increased Momentum at the National Level**

Federal programs such as the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) and the Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP) reduce energy burdens and improve housing quality for many households (Lewis, Hernandez, and Geronimus 2019). Support for federal affordable housing programs also improves opportunities for LI households to live in efficient, healthy housing. Housing and efficiency advocacy groups that meet with members of Congress and/or Congressional staff can use storytelling to personalize the impacts of programs and add a human element that will help key messages "stick" in the minds of staff members (NHT 2020). Members of Congress are particularly motivated by the impacts of programs on people in their districts, and storytelling tied to their local constituency will be more effective. Ideally, this would mean sharing stories from their district, but advocates can also draw a line between stories and similar communities in the Member's district. Building Congressional support can protect valuable programs during budget cuts, make the case for their expansion, and illustrate the value of program changes that allow for more impactful implementation. For example, a story about the bill savings and improved health and comfort a household experienced after participating in the WAP was paired with a proposal about increasing funding for health and safety measures that would decrease the number of households unable to participate in weatherization due to health and safety deferrals.

## The Principles in Action: Achieving Equitable Outcomes on the Ground

The case studies below share the on-the-ground experiences of two national actors working with affordable housing residents and providers to elevate the impacts of efficiency upgrades and utility programs. By using the principles, these projects provide a narrative of the workers, advocates, people of color, and renters most impacted by their work, guide decision-makers toward more equitable outcomes, and strengthen relationships with those who choose to share their experiences.

### Case Study #1: Stories from Those Affected by Energy Efficiency Upgrades in Michigan

**Background.** Beginning in 2019, the EEFA Storytelling team partnered with Michigan EEFA (MEEFA) coalition leaders to tell the story of a senior living facility Pablo Davis, the energy efficiency retrofits it underwent, and the tangible impacts those upgrades had on residents. MEEFA had already done work with other partners to collect the stories of Pablo Davis' residents before the retrofit, but the work to incorporate these individual experiences into a larger, targeted narrative had stalled due to a lack of resources and some technical expertise.

Pablo Davis Elder Living Center is an 80-unit facility in southwest Detroit and “it is home to one of the largest solar installations on a multifamily building in the state of Michigan” (EEFA Website, 2021). Pablo Davis is owned and operated by a non-profit called Bridging Communities. In February 2020, they renovated the living center to improve the energy efficiency of the building and added solar panels to the roof (EEFA 2021).

Elevate Energy conducted the energy assessment, supported by the Detroit Local Initiative Support Corporation (LISC), and the renovations were financed by the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC). Overall, the project cost \$7.29 million, with the financing led by Owen and Jan Derry, financial consultants for Bridging Communities (MEEFA Case Study, 2021). The renovations saved the building \$34,000 in utility costs in 2020, freeing up funding for Pablo Davis to better serve its residents.

Livability and affordability were driving factors for the energy efficiency retrofits. Each of the 80 units received “new windows, doors, appliances, and lighting. The addition of solar panels and a new generator improved resiliency and brought comfort to residents on oxygen tanks or other life-supporting equipment” and, in addition, “the exterior got more landscaping, signage and restored sidewalks, and the units a fresh coat of paint” (MEEFA Case Study, 2021). Due to these upgrades, Pablo Davis decreased its energy use intensity by 30% and received an ENERGY STAR score of 80, making it a top performer.

**Stories.** The project was owned, led, and managed by MEEFA, and the Storytelling Team's participation objectives were to provide thought partnership and financial resources as needed. The MEEFA coalition had conducted resident and owner interviews before the renovations were completed. The EEFA Storytelling Team got involved in 2019 to support the coalition in building out a full story of Pablo Davis' efficiency upgrades, and how the improvements benefited the residents and the owner, Phyllis Edwards, alike. The preliminary objectives of the storytelling project and interviews were to showcase the benefits of the energy efficiency retrofits at Pablo Davis and how they were made possible by funding from LIHTC. However, as the project evolved, the project managers and filmmaker shifted the narrative to

demonstrate how the individual EE stories of the residents and owner at Pablo Davis feed into a broader story of environmental problems and energy justice solutions in Detroit, a city with a long history of “wealth inequality, pollution, and community organizing” (EEFA Blog, 2021).

This narrative transformation embodies how the principle *Our Default Should be Whole Stories, Not Talking Points* was a driving value throughout the project. Although Pablo Davis was able to achieve significant efficiency and bill savings successes, only highlighting those wins on their own would ignore the context in which this project took place; the broader move toward a just energy system, one that relies heavily on community organizing and local expertise, in southwest Detroit. The filmmaker described the story’s trajectory as that of an “onion”, with the individual experiences of the residents, owner, and financial consultant at Pablo Davis as the “inner story”, and as we peel back the onion’s layers, expands out to a broader frame centered on environmental justice and transformational change to the energy system in Michigan.

**Results.** The deliverables from this project included two case studies (Figures 1 and 2), a Pablo Davis Energy Savings Study (Figure 3), a final video (Figure 4), and a Process Survey, created by Brittany Turner of EcoWorks. These deliverables were developed with the storytelling principles at the forefront and contributed to the following equitable outcomes:

- Efficiency Program Advocacy and Financial Advocacy: the deliverables were used by advocates at the municipal and state level to build support for additional LISC funding by showcasing the energy, financial, and comfort benefits of the grant dollars at Pablo Davis.
- Community Connection: The deliverables advanced movement building by inspiring similar EE in affordable housing storytelling projects and investments across the other 14 EEFA states, and they honored the people at the front of the retrofit project by documenting their stories – transforming them into institutional knowledge passed down at Pablo Davis, and within the Detroit area as a whole.

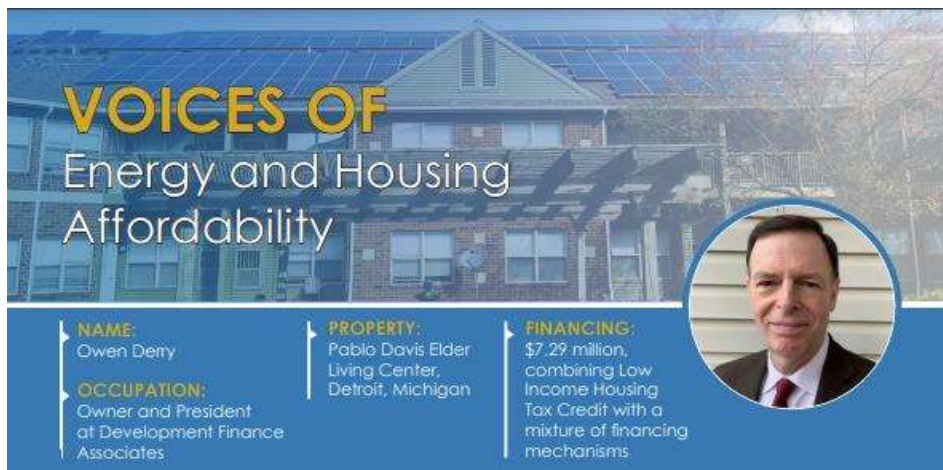


Figure 1. The finance profile of Owen Derry is part of the inner story perspective. Source:

<https://www.energyefficiencyforall.org/resources/voices-of-energy-and-housing-affordability-pablo-davis-financial-consultant/>



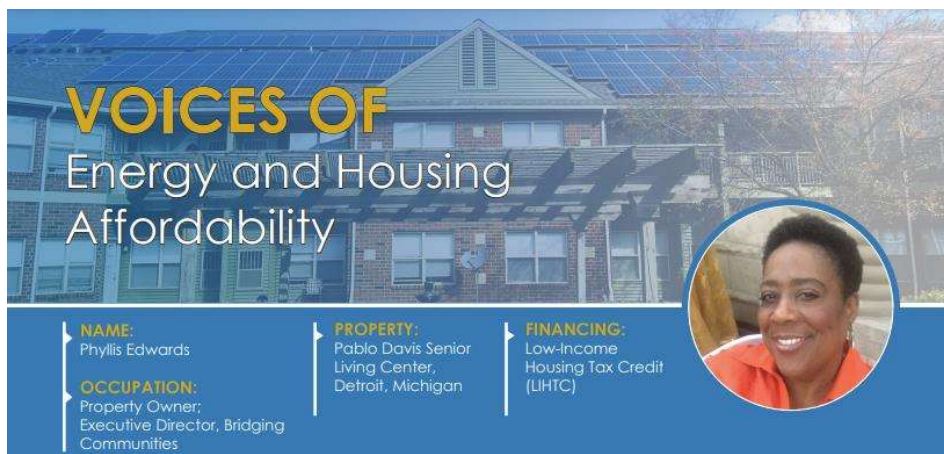


Figure 2. Profile from Phyllis Edwards, owner of Pablo Davis, part of the inner story perspective. Source: <https://www.energyefficiencyforall.org/resources/voices-of-energy-and-housing-affordability-pablo-davis-owner-profile/>

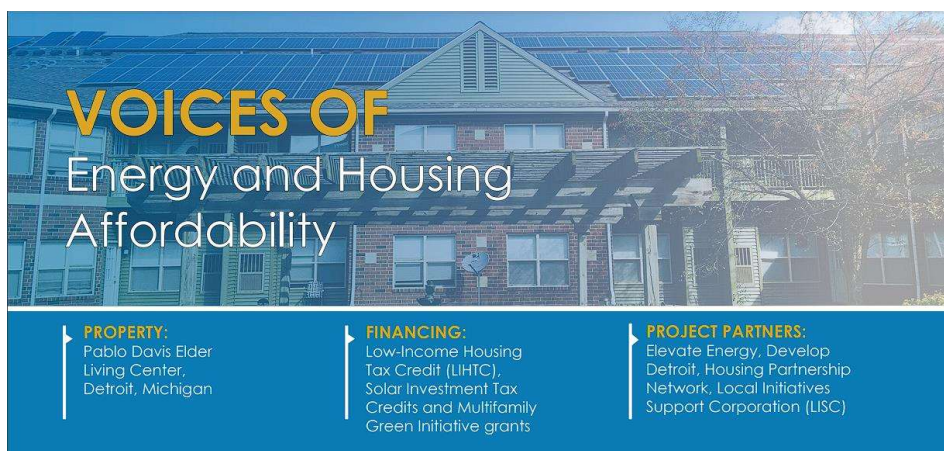


Figure 3. Pablo Davis energy savings study - part of the “inner story” perspective. Source: [https://assets.ctfassets.net/ntcn17ss1ow9/67QspsyDSZZjuTSHu7ReTR/fbf0e02e7598484645f7e1716dddb021/MEE\\_FA\\_Pablo\\_Davis\\_Energy\\_Savings\\_Summary\\_-\\_FINAL.pdf](https://assets.ctfassets.net/ntcn17ss1ow9/67QspsyDSZZjuTSHu7ReTR/fbf0e02e7598484645f7e1716dddb021/MEE_FA_Pablo_Davis_Energy_Savings_Summary_-_FINAL.pdf)

## Zoom Out to Environmental Justice Frame: *An Energy Efficient Project In a Cloud of Pollution*

- 48217 [the most highly polluted zipcode in Michigan] is down river from Southwest Detroit



Figure 4. Examples of the broader energy and environmental context in Detroit – part of the “outer story” perspective. Source: <https://www.energyefficiencyforall.org/resources/voices-of-energy-and-housing-affordability-pablo-davis-building-renovation/>



## Case Study #2: Advocating for Energy Efficiency in Georgia

**Background.** In the former EEFA structure, the EEFA national team and its affiliated organizations (a subsection of EEFA that at the time was primarily made up of larger, nationwide organizations) controlled the primary buckets of funding for the project, distributing the resources to state and local partners via pass-through grants and contracts. This structure caused an extreme difference in power between the national and state/regional teams and was frequently reinforced by problematic practices in each national organization. Due to a growing awareness of the problems created by this dynamic, Georgia partners worked to forge new connections with the EEFA national partners through EEFA's Storytelling Working Group. Georgia EEFA coalition partners worked with national partners to develop a video and related blog to share the benefits of EE from a building owner's perspective (Chowdhury 2018). This story was part of the Georgia coalition's advocacy to support increased investments in EE programs directed to multifamily affordable housing from one of Georgia's largest utility providers, Georgia Power.

**Story.** Working closely with partners at EEFA national and locally in Georgia EEFA to establish ongoing communication throughout the story planning and development process, Georgia partners connected the national team with Chisom Housing. From this relationship, the story's objective was co-created: showcase the benefits of EE in affordable housing for decision-makers in Georgia. The story centered around Sarah Bageley, from Chisom, a building owner in Georgia. Sarah shared the multiple benefits of the Georgia Power Energy Assessment and Solutions Program in cutting energy bills and reducing energy burdens for building owners and residents. To facilitate the storytelling process, the partners created a storyboard and a list of questions for Sarah that would become the framework for the final video. The EEFA national team also provided resources for the creative process, such as video equipment and editing support. In addition, EEFA national worked closely with Sarah and the Georgia coalition in creating a plan to disseminate the final product.

As the utility continues to propose new energy programs, stories like these highlight the importance of ongoing investment in EE for building owners like Sarah. A few examples of how ethical storytelling principles were implemented include:

- Establishing trusting relationships through thoughtful communication with EEFA's state coalition partners and Chisom Housing.
- Prioritizing the stories of impacted communities, such as those building owners of affordable multifamily housing.
- Creating a positive environment for storytelling by supporting partners' advocacy goals.
- Providing the platform for uplifting stories through sharing the story through the EEFA network through blogs, posting on EEFA's website, and sharing on social media.

**Results.** The final video and blog package illustrated in human terms the issues of energy efficiency and affordable housing that are often complex, making the issues of EE more relatable to a broader audience. Furthermore, this case study highlights how the ethical storytelling principles can be leveraged to contribute to equitable outcomes such as movement building and equitable efficiency advocacy.

- Community Connection and Movement Building: through developing stronger relationships between the Georgia Coalition, the national EEFA Storytelling Working Group, and Chisom Housing, this case study showcases how connections between organizations and multifamily buildings can lead to meaningful collaboration and advocacy for EE programs in affordable housing.
- Efficiency Program Advocacy: by amplifying the voices of those facing the greatest energy burdens to show Georgia Power the benefits of energy efficiency programs on reducing utility energy costs, this case study highlights how storytelling can contribute to powerful advocacy campaigns for utility EE programs in affordable housing.

## Conclusion

Engagement and relationships are an intrinsic part of equitable storytelling. Building strong relationships and trust along the way serves to make change a powerful final product, such as amplifying the personal experiences of underrepresented residents and staff, and it will support an emotional response from its intended audience to take action. Through principles of equitable storytelling, national organizations can honor the dignity of storytellers by representing their stories and supporting their engaging in the national conversation and being part of the solution. Any organization or individual can adopt these principles to nurture meaningful relationships with and uplift the people and communities impacted by the desired equitable outcomes and ensure their collective stories continue to drive positive social change. Equitable storytelling will help to propel a clean energy future where people from all walks of life benefit from both existing and emerging solutions, such as EE and renewable energy.

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