

Power on the Block: Empowering Residents to Impact Community Change Through Electrification and Decarbonization

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ABSTRACT

Historically, champions of environmental policies have not considered how those policies impact communities of color. This negligence leads to harmful and heartbreaking outcomes. As cities across the country begin to acknowledge and reform their approach, state and local governments are seeking to change the status quo.

Washington, D.C.'s, Department of Energy and Environment (DOEE) is developing new decarbonization policies and programs, and they want to ensure residents' voices are incorporated into the planning and implementation. National Housing Trust (NHT) is supporting DOEE in this effort by leading a pilot project focused on meaningful engagement of underserved residents to ensure that their lived experience is reflected in future government decisions. Residents participating in this project live across two NHT-owned multifamily affordable housing communities serving low-income and predominantly people of color. In addition to providing input to DOEE, resident feedback will impact NHT's building decarbonization decisions. Resident engagement was completed in November 2023.

NHT's paper will discuss our engagement strategy which includes community-wide events, small group discussions, and Community Based Organization (CBO) partnerships. We will identify the results of the pilot, including level of resident participation and what we heard from residents. The paper will highlight lessons learned about how to effectively engage residents on decarbonization topics, like electrification. We will also discuss how resident feedback is being incorporated into DOEE's policy planning. Finally, we will provide recommendations for how local governments, in partnership with affordable housing providers, can build long-term relationships with under-resourced communities and CBOs for policy development.

Introduction

Cities and states are increasingly seeking to decarbonize buildings to meet carbon emission reduction goals. Implementing decarbonization strategies, such as building electrification, can deliver significant benefits to under-resourced communities. However, electrification policies can also have detrimental unintended consequences if not carefully designed to account for the challenges and burdens impacting these communities.

Like most major cities, Washington, D.C. struggles with equity challenges, including a lack of affordable housing and high childhood asthma rates that disproportionately fall on the shoulders of people of color. These challenges do not exist in isolation. Recognizing the impacts of climate change on more vulnerable populations means that policies to combat climate change must alleviate, not exacerbate, social inequities (EPA 2021). As such, achieving equitable climate outcomes requires centering the voices of impacted communities in policymaking discussions. Through the *Equitable Electrification Community Engagement* project, National Housing Trust (NHT) is supporting DC's Department of Energy and Environment (DOEE) to do just that: engage residents in conversations about electrification to inform policy decisions. This project, which is centered around a community engagement model that combines community-wide education and small group discussions, will ensure DOEE has the resources to support ongoing collaboration and help equitably achieve the District's climate goals by meeting both short-term and long-term objectives.

Washington D.C.'s Decarbonization Goals

The District of Columbia is already experiencing the impacts of climate change and has continually reaffirmed its commitment to climate action over the last two decades. The latest action came at the COP28 Local Climate Action Summit in December 2023, when Mayor Muriel Bowser released Carbon Free DC, the District's comprehensive strategy to becoming carbon neutral and climate resilient by 2045 (DOEE n.d.). Carbon Free DC lays out key strategies to transform the drivers of emissions across all sectors — buildings, energy, transportation, and waste — focusing on ways to reduce wasted energy and use more clean, renewable power, while building a more resilient and livable city for all residents.

The biggest driver of emissions in the District is the energy used to heat, cool, and power its buildings, accounting for 71% of total carbon emissions as of 2019 (DOEE 2023). Consequently, Carbon Free DC and the plans it supports and expands upon — including Clean Energy DC and Sustainable DC 2.0 — focus keenly on policies and programs to lower building-related emissions through reducing energy used by buildings while decarbonizing the sources of that energy. One of the most important strategies to addressing both the efficiency and power supply aspects of these plans is electrification.

Electrification involves converting from a fossil-fuel burning system — such as a gas-fired furnace, boiler, or stove — to an electric alternative, such as heat pump heating, cooling, and water heating, or induction stovetop. These electric alternatives are often more energy efficient and can be powered by clean, renewable electricity, unlike combustion equipment. This conversion can also yield non-energy benefits, such as cleaner indoor air, the potential for lower utility bills (BEI 2020), and more comfortable living conditions (Joselow 2023).

Benefits aside, however, widespread electrification requires a paradigm shift that will only be realized on the short time scale needed to mitigate climate change impacts with sweeping policy and program changes. These monumental changes are already underway, as evidenced by

an array of recent legislation to codify D.C.'s goals and plan updates to guide future policy and program development, including:

- Clean Energy DC Building Codes Amendment Act — a formal commitment to net-zero energy (NZE) and all-electric new construction and substantial rehabs by Dec 31, 2026.
- Greener Government Buildings Amendment Act — applies NZE and all-electric standard to publicly owned and funded buildings early, beginning Oct 1, 2023.
- Climate Commitment Act of 2022 — codifies the goal of carbon neutrality, moving the goal 5 years earlier to 2045, District-wide, and for public operations even earlier, to 2040.
- Clean Energy DC 2.0 — an update in progress to the first version of this plan which is the roadmap to achieving D.C.'s greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction goals.

DOEE's Priority on Community and Resident Engagement

With so many climate and energy commitments on the horizon that will impact all aspects of life in the District, there is an unprecedented opportunity for underrepresented residents to help shape these goals and how they will be implemented in a way that is fair and, ideally, compensatory for the many disadvantages saddled onto their communities via decades of systemic oppression. Accordingly, alongside the flurry of sustainability goals in development, DOEE and District Government, broadly, have also started formally prioritizing and centering equity throughout their operations.

At the District-level, Mayor Bowser established the Mayor's Office of Racial Equity in 2021 to focus on developing an infrastructure to ensure policy decisions and District programs are evaluated through a racial equity lens.¹ The office also carries forward the implementation of the Racial Equity Achieves Results (REACH) Emergency Amendment Act of 2020 (D.C. Act 23-521), codifying, among other things, the use of Racial Equity Impact Assessments for viewing all proposed legislation through a racial equity lens, and the charge that District agencies incorporate racial equity into their operations, budgets, programs, policies, rules, and regulations.

In carrying out this charge, DOEE identified the potential impacts of electrifying and, conversely, failing to electrify equitably, as a major risk to and opportunity for the most vulnerable District residents. As a result, it became clear how critical it would be to engage disadvantaged communities before electrification policies and programs are developed so their voices can help chart the path toward equitable decarbonization from the start. This led DOEE to put forward a Request for Applications in mid-2022 to implement the Equitable Electrification Community Engagement Grant, funded by fees levied on building permits going into D.C.'s Green Building Fund.²

Now, DOEE intends to amplify findings from this outreach while operationalizing the strategy for engaging equitably with District residents. By involving DOEE staff who work directly on policy and program development in these engagement efforts, resident feedback has already started informing the Clean Energy DC 2.0 plan update which will guide upcoming electrification initiatives. Additionally, NHT's equitable engagement strategy is being referenced as a starting point for designing community benefit plans for DOEE-administered Federal

¹ <https://ore.dc.gov/>

² Following the award to NHT and their substantive findings coming out of the initial grant period, DOEE amended the grant, extending the initial period by one year through September 2024 to replicate the pilot project at a third property beginning in the spring of 2024.

programs such as U.S. Department of Energy’s Home Energy Rebate programs and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Climate Pollution Reduction Grant.

Finally, as DOEE continues to identify potential threats and benefits of the changing energy infrastructure, it seeks to reconcile these theoretical issues with residents’ lived experiences. Future topics of engagement should focus on topics such as the risk of burdening low-income residents with an increasing share of the gas distribution system as wealthier residents electrify and stop paying for their portion of the gas network’s growing maintenance costs. The agency can build from NHT’s model to nurture a budding reciprocal dialogue between residents and DOEE to fold frontline communities’ local interests and concerns into city-wide implementation plans.

Project Strategies

NHT and DOEE established short- and long-term objectives that drove the project strategies (see Table 1 below for project objectives). To achieve these objectives, NHT’s strategies included:

- Selecting properties that serve under-represented communities of different demographics to understand how their perceptions of electrification might differ.
- Co-designing and co-implementing engagement strategies with Community Based Organizations (CBO) and residents trusted by community members.
- Hosting a “Power on the Block” community celebration event at each participating property to introduce the community to DOEE and the project.
- Facilitating small group discussions (at least 2 group meetings at each participating property) led by CBOs to understand resident perspectives on electrification.

Table 1. Equitable Electrification Community Engagement project objectives

Short-term objectives	Long-term objectives
Understand residents’ concerns and daily challenges and ensure that residents of under-resourced communities can freely share their concerns and perspectives on decarbonization.	Support DOEE and CBOs to replicate resident engagement strategies with under-resourced communities.
Provide residents with relevant information to demystify and identify the benefits of decarbonization and understand D.C.’s decarbonization goals.	Build long-term relationships between DOEE, CBOs, and under-resourced communities to support ongoing dialogue on policy development.
Provide DOEE actionable feedback to inform policy decisions.	
Engage trusted CBOs to support resident engagement.	
Identify lessons learned to support DOEE in future engagements.	

We adopted this approach because we wanted to ensure the engagement model was rooted in trust and built a relationship between residents and DOEE. The residents we engaged with live in historically marginalized communities who have experienced decades of systemic oppression, spurring significant mistrust with local and federal government. For many residents, this was the first time they would interact with D.C. government staff or were invited to provide feedback on District efforts. For this reason, it was important that the Resident Engagement Leaders (REL) and CBOs were individuals who were reflective of the community, understood residents' concerns and perspectives, and ensure they were accurately represented in the final recommendations to DOEE.

Property Selection

NHT piloted this project at two NHT-operated multifamily affordable housing communities reflecting traditionally under-represented communities in climate and energy policy development. In selecting these properties, we sought to represent different types of housing ownership and/or rental affordability to reflect potentially differing points of view. We also selected properties with active tenant associations to draw in residents who are already familiar with the process and value of community engagement. Both properties also have existing onsite fossil fuel or gas-powered systems and appliances. It was important to select communities that have demonstrated the need for energy efficiency and electrification upgrades in their buildings to ensure that discussions are grounded in real challenges and opportunities relevant to residents' daily lives.

The first property selected was Copeland Manor, a predominantly Black community in the Marshall Heights neighborhood of Southeast D.C. Copeland Manor is a limited-equity cooperative³, with most residents earning below 50% Area Median Income (AMI). The community of 61 families has an active tenant association. The three-building property was built in 1966 and rehabilitated in 2011, with renovations to apartments and common areas and replacing HVAC and domestic hot water equipment. Solar thermal and a photovoltaic (PV) system have also been installed.

The second property, Monsenor Romero, is in the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood of Northwest D.C. The community is majority Latinx and Spanish-speaking, with incomes ranging from 30-50% of AMI. In 2009, NHT Communities, NHT's real estate development entity, assisted residents with acquiring and preserving this historic building, which was last renovated in 2014. The community of 63 families also has an active tenant association.

Co-Designing and Implementing Engagement Strategies

NHT recognized the vital role of engaging trusted community members to co-design and lead the engagement. This was important because low-income residents have historically been left out of conversations about policies that directly impact them. This has led to tension and mistrust between marginalized communities and District government. By working with trusted and culturally competent community members to serve as our CBO partners and RELs, it

³ A limited-equity cooperative is a homeownership model in which residents purchase a share of the development to maintain its affordability.

ensured outreach and engagement with residents began in a positive way and allowed DOEE and NHT staff to build a relationship with residents.

The CBOs played an instrumental role in shaping the engagement process to ensure that resident voices were heard, including supporting the planning and implementation of Power on the Block events, helping to develop communication tools for resident outreach, facilitating small group discussions with residents, and engaging with the larger community. NHT selected two CBOs to support this project: Robin Lewis with Smart Beginnings Business Solutions (our CBO partner at Copeland Manor), and eco-Latinos (our CBO partner at Monsenor Romero). Choosing CBOs that connected to and demonstrated cultural competence with the targeted communities was important, especially at Monsenor Romero, where most residents only speak Spanish.

RELs were also selected at each property to help shape the engagement process, support resident outreach for small group discussions, and ensure resident voices were accurately represented in our recommendations to DOEE. Initially, the REL role was designed to be an individual with connections to the residents and surrounding communities, though ultimately, existing residents from the properties were selected to serve this role. We wanted to ensure the individuals who served as RELs were trusted individuals from the community, understood the concerns and priorities of the other residents, and would provide a unique perspective other project members would not have. RELs were also compensated for their time and received a \$2,250 stipend over five months.

Power on the Block Community Celebration

NHT designed an engagement model called ‘Power on the Block’ to launch the *Equitable Electrification Community Engagement* project at both properties in the summer of 2023. The Power on the Block events were designed to:

- Introduce residents to the benefits and challenges of building decarbonization;
- Build upon REL’s existing relationships with community members and develop new ones;
- Provide residents an opportunity to get to know DOEE and learn about the project; and
- Solicit participants for the small group discussions.

NHT staff and RELs led community outreach to encourage residents to attend the event. Described as a summer block party, members of the project team conducted door knocking, designed and distributed event flyers, and coordinated with onsite Resident Service Coordinators to send reminders to residents leading up to the event. During outreach, we wanted to ensure the event's purpose was relayed to residents. We shared that Power on the Block was being coordinated with DOEE and that the department is currently updating the District’s climate goals, but they wanted to first hear from residents to ensure the final Clean Energy DC 2.0 plan is equitable and addresses the concerns and priorities of their community. We also told residents that there would be an opportunity to participate in community meetings to provide feedback and that they would be compensated for attending.

Realizing that residents have other priorities and concerns at home, such as work, caring for their children, keeping on top of bills, and other stressors, we wanted to ensure the Power on the Block events were a fun and engaging opportunity for the community to come together. For

this reason, we invited several local organizations who provide services in the community to attend Power on the Block. Local organizations who attended include:

- Ounce of Care, NHT's healthcare partner whose onsite Healthcare Navigators help residents sign up and renew their medical insurance, schedule doctor appointments, and more;
- Strong Start, D.C.'s Early Intervention Program for infants and toddlers with disabilities and developmental delays;
- D.C. Public Library neighborhood branch staff;
- Pepco, D.C.'s electricity provider;
- D.C.'s Sustainability Energy Utility (SEU) whose staff helped sign residents up for the District's Solar for All program (which provides residents with community solar credits on their utility bills); and
- Project Create, who led arts and crafts activities for younger residents.

These organizations staffed information tables at the event, distributed resources, and met with residents so they could learn more about the programs and services available in their community. Monsenor Romero's food security partner, Hungry Harvest, also distributed fresh produce to residents during the community's event, and NHT's Community Outreach and Impact (COI) team distributed back-to-school supplies and helped residents sign up for subsidized in-home internet through the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP). We also ensured that vendors who attended Monsenor Romero's Power on the Block event were Spanish-speaking so residents would be comfortable engaging with the different organizations.

In addition to inviting community organizations, we worked closely with the CBOs and RELs to ensure the event focused on community cohesion and celebration. We had a variety of games for residents of all ages to play including an interactive magnetic matching game and scavenger hunt to introduce residents to the topic of electrification. Local restaurants with food reflective of the communities catered both events, including an El Salvadorian restaurant in the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood that Monsenor Romero residents often frequent. Music was provided by a family member of a Copeland Manor resident who volunteered to DJ and brought a 360 photobooth.

The Power on the Block events needed to represent the culture of the residents and community where they were being held. For many, this was their first time hearing about DOEE and the department's work in the District. In historically marginalized communities, there is often a distrust of local and state government agencies, and we wanted to be sensitive of this sentiment. The project team had a table set up in the same area as the other vendors where we shared informational flyers with residents that served as their introduction to electrification at a very high level and focused on the daily effects of climate change on people's lives and the benefits of building electrification. The flyers featured vibrant colors and graphics, as well as contact information for the NHT project lead, encouraging residents to contact us for more information. As residents visited our table, we shared a brief synopsis of the project, similar to the information shared during our outreach prior to the event. Residents were then invited to complete a small group discussion interest form. We wanted to emphasize to residents that attending the small group discussions would be an opportunity to provide input and feedback on DOEE's Clean Energy DC 2.0 plan while it was still being drafted. The project team recognized that historically when these communities are asked to share feedback on District government

policies or programs, if they are asked at all, it is typically after the plan or language has already been finalized and their feedback was not incorporated.

During and after the event, Copeland Manor residents mentioned this was the first time, in a long time, the community had such an event, and they enjoyed spending the evening with their neighbors. Several even asked that we make it a reoccurring event. Residents at Copeland Manor and Monsenor Romero stated that they were excited for the opportunity to attend small group discussions and have a voice in the design and implementation of D.C.'s climate plan.

Small Group Discussions

After the Power on the Block event, the project team began planning small group discussions. We ensured the community engagement opportunities were scheduled when it was most convenient for residents to prevent any barriers to engagement. Residents indicated their availability when they completed the interest forms, which allowed us to schedule two 90-minute meetings at optimal times for both properties. All four small group discussions, which were attended by 54 residents, were held on weekday evenings in the Fall of 2023. At least two planning meetings were held before conducting the small group discussions by NHT, DOEE, and CBO staff where we drafted the small group discussion agenda and guiding questions and finalized a post-session survey.

Before the small group discussions were held, we hosted a mock small group discussion at each property which were attended by NHT staff, onsite property management, and Resident Services Coordinators (RSCs), and were led by the respective CBO partner. These mock sessions were conducted the same way the small group discussions would be held and served as an opportunity for onsite staff to share their feedback. Property management and RSCs shared additional background information about existing and ongoing resident concerns that could potentially be raised during the actual small group discussions. The mock sessions also helped us decide if enough time was allocated for residents to share their lived experiences and identify opportunities for additional resident input not already included.

We wanted to ensure that throughout the small group discussions residents were speaking from their own experience and that the conversation could be connected to their daily lives. To do this, we began each discussion by asking residents how climate change impacts them. This led residents to talk about the extreme weather events that affected the District this past summer, such as smoke from Canada's wildfires, extreme storms and flooding, and heat waves. Monsenor Romero residents, who are predominantly immigrants from El Salvador, shared that there have been more and more natural disasters in their home country which has forced people to abandon their homes and move elsewhere. Residents also discussed how these events have affected their health by triggering asthma and other chronic illnesses, which led some residents to lose income because they could not go to work. Other residents mentioned increases in their utility bills because of extreme or fluctuating temperatures.

After asking residents to share how climate change impacts them, the facilitators asked them to share more about their day-to-day experiences and how certain concerns are exacerbated by climate change. We asked residents the following questions to 1) better understand the existing concerns and issues they are facing, 2) connect the benefits and importance of electrification and decarbonization in addressing these concerns or issues, and 3) gather information DOEE should incorporate into the Clean Energy DC 2.0 plan.

- What is the biggest concern you have with the physical space where you live?

- What would you change in your apartment that would help you and your family live healthier?
- How much of your household income is typically spent on energy bills? Are there times when energy costs become particularly burdensome? What strategies do you use to manage energy expenses while affording other essential needs?
- What is your comfort level in your apartment? Does it differ in the winter versus the summer? How do you address your unit being too hot or too cold?
- Did you have issues with moisture in your unit?
- Do your appliances work properly? How do you feel about the appliances in your home?
- How do you feel about gas versus electric cooking? Why?
- What do you like in/about your unit?

Our CBO partners then described the District’s decarbonization priorities at a high level, and asked residents what they thought about policies to remove gas and other fossil fuels from homes to address in-door and out-door air quality. At the end of the small group discussions, residents were asked to complete a survey. The survey asked if residents found the session useful, felt listened to, would participate in future small group discussions, had additional questions about DOEE’s Clean Energy DC 2.0 plan, and if they would like to receive updates from DOEE on the climate plan. Space was provided for additional feedback. Figure 1 summarizes the survey responses.

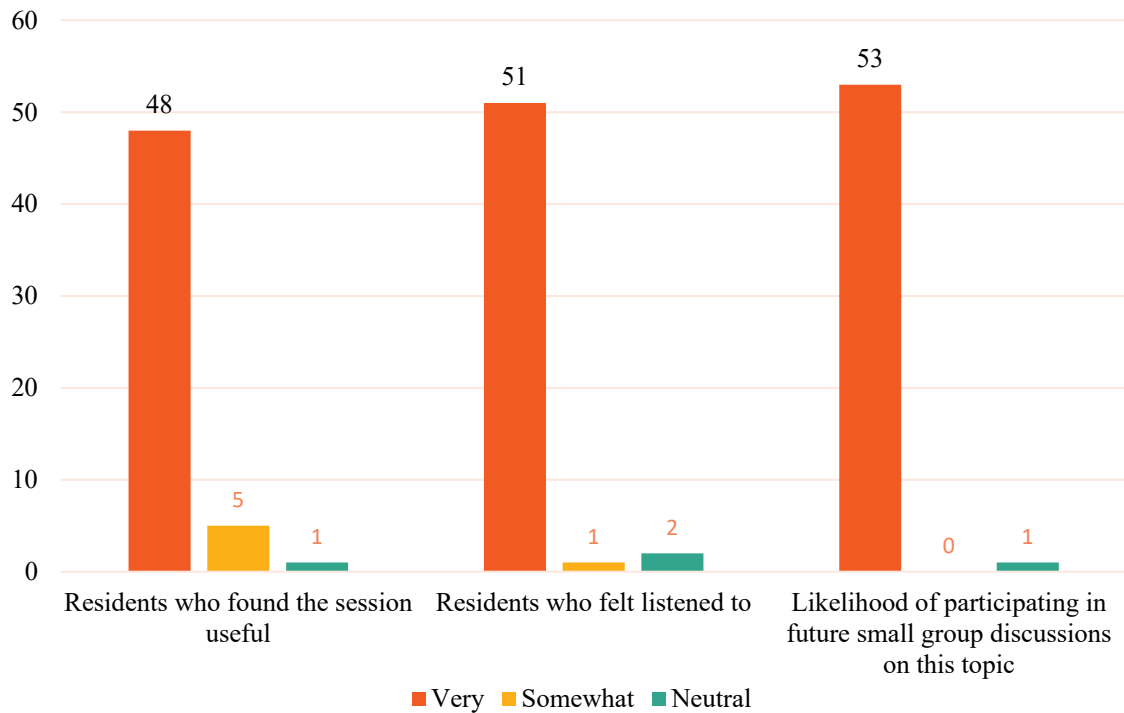


Figure 1. Resident responses to small group discussion survey

Key Findings

Residents expressed several consistent priorities and concerns across all four small group discussions about the importance of an equitable electrification transition:

- Residents understood and expressed their concerns about the negative safety and health impacts of fossil fuel equipment and want their health and safety prioritized;
- Residents expressed concerns that they would have to bear the costs of electrification and higher utility bills;
- Residents want continued community engagement and education so they can be kept up-to-date on the city's progress towards its goals and have the opportunity to provide feedback in the future; and
- Residents want DOEE to center equity throughout this work.

Health and Safety Concerns

Residents, even those who prefer gas cooking, agreed that switching to electric appliances and systems would make their homes healthier and safer and hoped the transition would mitigate health risks like asthma and other chronic illnesses exacerbated by gas and fossil fuel systems and climate change. Residents, especially those with young children, emphasized safety concerns with having a gas stove in their home. There have been instances where children have accidentally bumped into the gas stove, turning on one of the burners. Stoves have also been left on when no one is home and the fire department had to evacuate the building after reports of gas smells. This led residents to share other health and safety concerns they would like addressed through electrification and decarbonization retrofits in their homes. Chief among those concerns was improving kitchen ventilation, remediating mold issues, updating heating and cooling systems and replacing insulation — which has caused utility bills to fluctuate each month. There were also requests for system and appliance maintenance regulations to prevent further safety hazards or emergencies, as well as installing back-up power systems in case of power outages to ensure residents still have access to essential services.

Increased Costs

Residents made it clear to the project team that they did not want to take on additional financial costs during or after the electrification transition. Many residents indicated that they already suffer from high utility bills and cannot afford to have their household costs increase. There were concerns that once units are retrofitted with more efficient appliances and equipment, that the cost of these upgrades would be passed onto residents in the form of increased rents. Residents shared several ways that costs could be kept low during this transition such as expanding eligibility criteria for federal and local utility assistance programs so more District residents qualify; ensuring there is transparency about the costs and benefits to residents undergoing retrofits in their homes; and explore other complementary upgrades to electrification that deliver financial benefits to low-income communities such as installing more green roofs and solar panels in communities. While DOEE could not guarantee that utility bills would not go up during this transition, they did note that keeping costs low is a priority for the department.

Community Education and Engagement

Residents also shared feedback and recommendations for future community engagement and education. Many of the residents were not aware of DOEE, the work they do in the District, or the policies and plans to address the climate crisis before participating in the small group discussions. For this reason, they encouraged DOEE to expand their presence in communities by sending notices in the mail, attending Ward meetings, creating outreach committees that are led by community members, and even designing a mobile education vehicle that can travel around the District and educate residents about climate change and the department's climate plan. Residents were also clear that as long as they are informed, fairly represented during the decision and implementation process, and were not forced to take on additional burdens (like increased utility costs), they are in support of DOEE and the District's Clean Energy DC 2.0 plan. Residents unanimously agreed that this is important work that needs to continue to ensure their homes, community, and planet are safe. Residents also emphasized the importance of continued government-supported community engagement work. Whether led by DOEE or other government agencies, residents would like the continued opportunity to, as one resident described it, "have a voice at the table."

Center Equity

Historically, these communities have not benefited from the same investments and opportunities as others in D.C. Residents want to ensure that their communities receive the same quality appliances and equipment as wealthier wards in the District. They also want to make sure their property's retrofits are on a similar timeline as other neighborhoods, meaning they do not have to wait years for their appliances and equipment to be upgraded. Residents discussed other green infrastructure barriers or challenges that would need to be addressed, such as a lack of electric vehicle charging stations in neighborhoods east of the Anacostia River and increased surge fees where stations are available. There were also concerns and hesitation about the idea of having to learn how to use a new appliance. Many residents noted that they prefer cooking with a gas stove because that is how certain food from their cultures has always been prepared. Residents do not want this transition to have unintended consequences for their traditions and culture. Despite their own concerns, residents also acknowledged that others in the District are even more vulnerable than they are. Residents advocated for an equitable clean energy transition that grants all neighborhoods the same opportunities.

Lessons Learned from Resident Engagement

It was important that the project team had opportunities to reflect and regroup throughout the project to ensure we were adhering to the project's objectives and adjust when needed. Therefore, NHT met monthly with DOEE staff, bi-weekly with CBO partners to plan Power on the Block and small group discussions, and scheduled debrief sessions after resident engagement ended. Through these conversations, we identified lessons learned and best practices that should be implemented in future DOEE-led resident engagement. The following lessons were learned, and practices identified:

- Make information understandable at any level of education and background to navigate misinformation;

- Ensure that conversations are resident-led and purposeful;
- Recognize, prioritize, and appropriately respond to cultural preferences; and
- Be realistic and understanding about residents' reasons for participating in engagement opportunities.

Make Information Understandable

During Power on the Block events, discussions with residents about electrification, decarbonization, and climate change were held at a high level and did not require any background knowledge or prior understanding of the topics. However, because a key factor of the discussions was connecting these issues to residents' lived experiences, our facilitators sometimes had to dedicate more time explaining these concepts and helping residents connect these issues to their daily lives. This connection was easily made by some residents, but other discussions required more time to level-set the topic. Some residents were also hesitant to share their thoughts out of fear that they would be incorrect or judged by others in the room. To help avoid this, our facilitators did not directly correct residents when they shared misinformation but instead encouraged them to think of other causes or impacts of climate change. This set a positive tone at the beginning of each discussion which allowed residents to comfortably share their authentic opinions, concerns, and questions.

Ensure Conversations are Resident-led and Purposeful

While facilitators used the list of guiding questions throughout the discussions, we ultimately wanted residents to take control of the conversations. We found that without being interrupted or redirected, residents felt more comfortable sharing their thoughts. This also allowed us to identify additional concerns and understand perspectives we might not have considered such as further investment into green infrastructure and whole-building retrofits rather than just electrification, increased access to assistance programs, and recommendations for future engagement. This furthered the sentiment that the Clean Energy DC 2.0 plan must promote an equitable clean energy transition that ensures resident concerns such as health, expenses, transportation, and safety are addressed and not exacerbated.

Recognize, Prioritize, and Appropriately Respond to Cultural Preference

It was very important that residents felt represented throughout this project and that project members were trusted individuals in the community. At Copeland Manor, we worked closely with the property's Resident Services Coordinator who had strong relationships within the community with direct knowledge of residents' needs and interests. At Monsenor Romero, the NHT project lead was the former Resident Services Coordinator and still had a close relationship with the residents. These trusted individuals also helped to finalize resident outreach strategies and connected the team to vendors for the Power on the Block events who already had existing relationships with the community. The RSCs were also instrumental in identifying resident needs and supporting resident engagement during the small group discussions. Several residents shared that they were skeptical of DOEE's interest in gathering community input and had it not been for the RSC reaching out to them directly and inviting them to attend a session, they likely would not have participated. We also prioritized and ensured there was Spanish-

speaking DOEE and NHT staff at all Monsenor Romero engagement opportunities and that small group discussions were led by a Spanish-speaking facilitator.

In addition, we did not want DOEE or NHT staff attendance to be a barrier to resident participation or impact what residents shared during the discussions. There were concerns that if DOEE staff attended, residents would be less inclined to share their authentic thoughts and concerns on the District's climate plan. However, we did not want DOEE's absence to imply that they did not value residents' input. We ultimately decided that 1-3 individuals from both DOEE and NHT should attend but have a very limited role in the discussions. DOEE and NHT staff introduced themselves at the beginning each discussion, shared a very brief overview of the project and how resident input will shape D.C.'s climate plan, but did not provide any further input unless residents directed questions specifically to them. This proved to be successful as residents were not hesitant to direct feedback or concerns directly to DOEE staff. In turn, DOEE staff were able to respond and ask follow-up questions about the changes they hope to see. Being able to ask their questions directly to staff and have immediate answers was encouraging to residents. At the end of the discussions, residents would often stay to speak with DOEE and NHT staff one-on-one, asking for information about youth engagement opportunities, other District assistance programs, or to reiterate comments they made during the group conversations. DOEE staff noted that there was exponential value to being able to meet with members from the community face-to-face, an opportunity that they often do not have. This was emphasized in responses from the surveys residents completed after the discussions as demonstrated in Figure 1 above and summarized below:

- 89% of residents found the discussion to be 'very useful'
- 94% of residents said they felt 'very listened to'

Understand Residents' Reasons for Participation

We scheduled the discussions based on resident availability collected from the small group discussion interest forms. Since small group discussions were held on weekday evenings and we met for almost two hours, we wanted to ensure residents were compensated not just for their time, but also for potentially leaving work early or having to make arrangements at home for childcare. Each resident who participated in the discussion received a \$100 gift card. It was also important that the method of compensation would not be considered income and impact a household's eligibility for their existing housing assistance. Since residents only attended one discussion each, it was not as significant of a concern as future engagement opportunities could be if residents are continuously compensated for attending.

We later heard from several residents during our discussions that they initially only came to the meeting for the gift card, and they were not interested in DOEE's climate plan. However, once the discussions began and more information was shared, these residents said they became much more engaged and inclined to share their thoughts and concerns. They also said that previous community meetings would often become hostile, and residents could not freely share their thoughts without fear of retribution by other residents or past property management staff. These same residents said the small group discussions were the opposite of their previous experiences and they felt respected, heard, and that the facilitators valued and appreciated their participation. Residents also shared that being able to meet NHT and DOEE staff and the CBO

facilitator during Power on the Block was helpful because they knew they would be speaking with these same individuals during the small group discussions.

Resident interest at Copeland Manor was much higher than expected. Small group discussions were originally limited to twelve residents per session, but 18 residents attended the first session and 15 attended the second. While interest was not as high at Monsenor Romero, twelve residents attended the first session and 9 attended the second. While Monsenor Romero residents enjoyed Power on the Block and established relationships with the project team, we believe the lower participation at this community was in part due to the language barrier and unfamiliarity with the small group discussion topics. At Copeland Manor, we believe the increased interest in attending the discussions was due largely to the strong engagement residents had with project staff at Power on the Block and as confirmed during small group discussions, the gift card they would receive for participating. Anticipating that financial compensation would be a driver to participation, we still wanted to ensure all residents were actively engaged in the discussion. Our facilitators did an excellent job connecting with the residents and encouraging individuals who were quiet to share their thoughts. We also made sure there was flexibility in how we structured the conversation. As noted before, our residents have concerns and priorities more important than discussing electrification and decarbonization. We gave residents the autonomy to lead the conversation, creating a setting that encouraged participation but still allowed us to identify key priorities or concerns relevant to the project.

Recommendations to DOEE to Impact D.C. Policy

Feedback from residents who participated in the *Equitable Electrification Community Engagement* project was essential to not just finalizing D.C.'s climate plan but also the key recommendations to DOEE to impact future D.C. policy and community engagement. For District policies and programs to be impactful and successful, incorporating methods for collecting resident input will be crucial. Through this project we have identified the following recommendations that DOEE and other District government agencies should consider as they continue to draft and implement policies:

- Ensure policies address problems, challenges, or barriers holistically;
- Community engagement must be pillar of agency work and not done in isolation; and
- Equity must be at the center of all work.

The barriers and challenges low-income residents encounter typically cannot be addressed in isolation. Often, these solutions require systemic changes. This means that while it is important that DOEE prioritizes removing gas appliances and equipment from homes, it is also important that a holistic approach is taken to meet the District's decarbonization goals by addressing other health and safety priorities, for example, whole building retrofits that do not just electrify buildings but target moisture and ventilation concerns. Residents also placed significant value on keeping costs low throughout the transition. DOEE must prioritize reducing costs not just in the form of lower utility bills for residents, but also retrofit and operating costs for building owners and property management to ensure these expenses are not passed onto tenants. This could be addressed in the form of grants and loans for developers or echoing resident suggestions of redesigning utility assistance programs to allow more District residents to qualify.

At the end of small group discussions, residents often asked, “What’s next?” As DOEE finalizes the Clean Energy DC 2.0 plan, it is important that the department continues to prioritize their community engagement efforts. Previous outreach attempts, such as social media posts, have proven to not be enough to ensure residents are knowledgeable about new District policies and equipped to take action. Residents highlighted that DOEE will need to develop a community education plan that prioritizes direct outreach such as posting flyers around neighborhoods, attending Ward meetings, door knocking, mailing information to homes, and just being more present in their communities.

It is crucial that all future work led by DOEE, and other District government agencies, centers equity. The challenges residents experience do not exist in silos; the only way the District can create positive community change is by engaging communities, specifically low-income and disadvantaged communities who have historically been marginalized and not given a voice in this work.

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