



CIRCA Report Cover Waterbury Energy Efficiency Outreach

2/28/2024
Clean Water Fund



Connecticut Institute for Resilience
and Climate Adaptation



Sponsored by a Climate & Equity grant from the Connecticut Institute for Resilience and Climate Adaptation (CIRCA). CIRCA is a partnership between the University of Connecticut and the State of Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. More information can be found at: www.circa.uconn.edu

Report Narrative Template

Summary (1 paragraph): Please provide a brief summary of the completed grant project, including activities, outcomes, and lessons learned.

Clean Water Fund is pleased to submit this report to CIRCA detailing our completed grant project (Agreement Number: CA-6214850). We are sincerely grateful to CIRCA for their support to expand direct outreach to low-income residents in Waterbury and assisting them to take advantage of Home Energy Solutions energy efficiency services.

Grant Project Activities:

- *What activities did your organization complete using Climate & Equity funds?*
- *Please indicate any important project milestones (such as hiring a staff member, holding a workshop series, completing a draft plan, etc.).*
- *Where did your organization complete activities? Please indicate any project sites (specific locations if possible, or general neighborhoods). Feel free to add any maps or photos.*

Thanks to funding from CIRCA, we completed several grant project activities including:

- hiring an Energy Justice Community Organizer,
- developing outreach materials and flyers,
- connecting with local leaders and community groups,
- conducted outreach activities including reaching out to church leaders, worked to set up two tabling events and conducted door to door outreach in low-income neighborhoods.

We also had several meetings with local leaders in Waterbury, environmental justice leaders and members of the Energy Efficiency Board to discuss the work in Waterbury and share lessons learned.

Grant Project Outcomes:

- *What outcomes resulted from the grant project activities?*

Our first project goal was to hire a local community organizer. Sharod Blizzard, a lifetime Waterbury resident, joined our team as our Energy Justice Community Organizer on July 17th. The hiring process took longer than expected as we wanted someone from the community. Sharod's story is compelling as he grew up in a housing project in the city, went on to college to obtain Bachelors and Masters degrees in business administration and has years of success in corporate settings, leading teams and exceeding business goals. Sharod decided to join Clean Water Action to "give back" to his community.

In his short time, Sharod has connected with local leaders, reached out to churches, worked to set up a tabling event (which unfortunately was cancelled due to weather), and done door to door outreach, talking directly with residents about energy efficiency programs that can help save money and make homes more comfortable. He also provided valuable guidance on materials/flyers that can be distributed in the community.

Sharod has also connected with other environmental justice leaders and members of the Energy Efficiency Board to share direct experience on the numerous barriers that impact participation and provided suggestions that will likely engage more residents in an efficient manner. For example, we are now working with a State Representative from Waterbury to set up a community forum with food, to provide both on-site education, sign up assistance and a stipend for attending. We hope that this 'model' will help us spread the word by having residents talk to their neighbors and family members.

- *Was your organization able to achieve your project goal? If yes, please explain how the outcomes of your project achieved the goal described in your organization's project application; if not, please explain the challenges that prevented the goal from being achieved.*

We did not achieve our goal of getting 300 residents to sign up for energy efficiency service. This was due to several factors outside of our control. First, energy efficiency program budgets were maximized which contributes to delays in getting assessments by certified contractors completed.

The hiring process for Sharod took longer than expected and though he hit the ground running, in the Fall, many residents are extremely busy with other priorities including work schedules, back to school activities etc. Residents often did not have time to schedule appointments to get services. As a result, we spent more time meeting with local leaders, energy efficiency board members, etc. to discuss the structural and cultural barriers to participation and brainstorm new creative solutions to deepen community engagement.

- *Was your organization able to engage the community described in your organization's project application? If yes, please describe the community engagement involved in your project.*
- *Please use specific metrics wherever you can (for example, number of outreach meetings held, number of trees planted, number of community residents reached, number and names of partner organizations, etc.)*

In addition to meetings with community leaders, we also worked to engage residents directly in their communities. Sharod's intimate knowledge of Waterbury's neighborhoods and the residents that live there was critical to educating them on the free energy efficiency program available to them. By meeting people where they are and having trusted conversations about the economic benefit of these services, Sharod was able to provide information on how to sign up.

Capacity-Building Progress:

- *Community capacity-building: How did your project help to increase the capacity of vulnerable communities in Connecticut to mitigate, plan for, and respond to climate change impacts?*

Our work in Waterbury helped to build the capacity of vulnerable communities in key ways. First, we educated low-income residents about the Home Energy Solutions program that enables them to get free energy efficiency upgrades in their home, saving them money on energy bills. While talking with residents, we were also able to share information on how reducing emissions impacts air quality. Waterbury has very poor air quality from transportation, surrounding highways and numerous polluting facilities. Sharod was able to point out these connections with high asthma rates in the community, furthering the importance of energy efficiency improvements. Directly connecting energy efficiency with health impacts resonates with many residents as often, either they are dealing with the ramifications of air pollution or their family or neighbors are as well.

Second, because of Sharod's unique experiences, he was able to provide clear perspectives on the significant barriers to community engagement. Many barriers are well known such as lack of trust of corporations, language barriers, juggling multiple jobs/ parental responsibilities and fear of landlords. Sharod also pointed out how even things like the actual application process, time gaps between connecting with residents, job completion and seeing a decrease in bills and lack of immediate incentives often contribute to lack of participation.

- *Organization capacity-building: Did you learn any lessons / make any connections / develop any resources through this project that will help your organization do its work more effectively in the future?*

As a result of this project, we've learned more about the complexities, structural and cultural barriers that hinder community engagement. We connected with other environmental justice leaders, municipal leaders, local community groups and members of the energy efficiency board to discuss these barriers and new ways of maximizing outreach and engagement. With Sharod's insight and input from other groups, we are hoping to get support from the local community foundation to host 1 or 2 forums where we not only provide education and immediate support to sign up for energy efficiency services but also provide a stipend for participants and seek their support in reaching other members of their community. We also need new ways of reaching and incentivizing landlords to participate without putting the burden on the tenants. This will be an on-going focus of our work.

- *Knowledge-sharing: Do you have any advice for other organizations doing similar projects?*

In addition to partnering with local groups, we learned the value of having a member of the community serving as the energy justice community organizer. We hope to expand this model to other environmental justice communities in Connecticut.

Summary of Spending

Overall, resources provided by UConn CIRCA allowed us to further this important work, stay nimble, and respond to changing and at times challenging situations.

Significantly more funding than originally anticipated was used to support Anne's time as the CT State Director. Anne spent a significant amount of time working to ensure the hiring process was equitable and we hired an organizer – Sharod Blizzard – who is from the community this work is taking place in. The hiring process took longer than expected, but we are glad that we waited until we connected with the right person for the job. Hiring someone earlier, from outside the community, would likely not have allowed us to make as much progress as we did. Additionally, Anne was working to further this effort before we made the hire. This situation is also reflected in the reduced amount spent on Sharod's salary, who worked fewer months than we had originally planned.

Less funding was needed to cover our communications staff time, but we did need to use more funding to cover staff time related to administration and financial management of the grant. Finally, the Director of Operations position (previously named "Administrative & Project Support") received a substantial raise during this grant period, which resulted in slightly higher than anticipated costs for that line item.

Overall, less than expected was used for direct expenses, mostly related to the challenges laid out in the narrative report.