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OPINION

Low-income residents should have access to clean solar energy, too, organizations say

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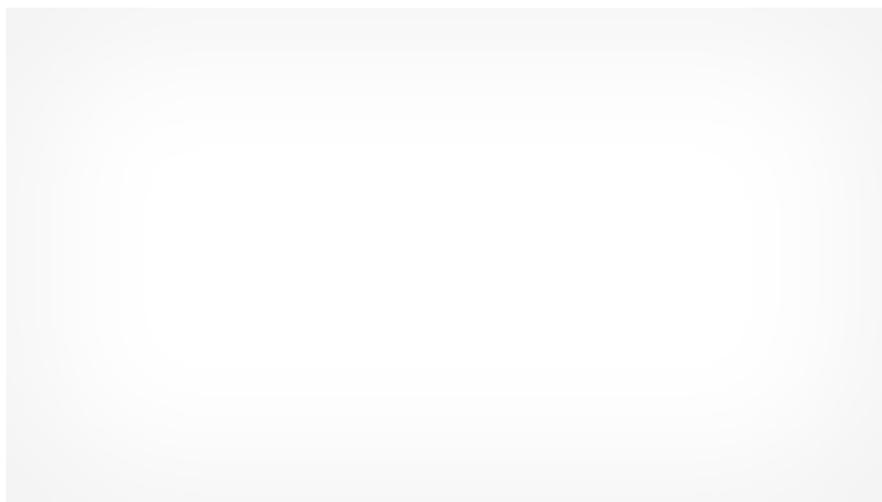
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By [Star-Ledger Guest Columnist](#)

By **Marty Johnson and Beth Galante**

New Jersey accolades for our clean energy leadership are deserved. In 2018, the Garden State established the [Clean Energy Act](#), enabled a [community solar program](#), and under Gov. Phil Murphy's leadership rejoined the [Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative \(RGGI\)](#).



While these initiatives are important, New Jersey's clean energy revolution will be complete only when we ensure that all New Jerseyans – including lower income and disadvantaged populations – benefit as well. So, policymakers, how can we ensure that

New Jersey's lower income communities benefit from this emerging clean energy economy? One simple way is through robust and dedicated funding for lower income [rooftop](#) and [community solar projects](#).

Why is this important? As everyone who lives here knows, New Jersey is expensive, and we shoulder one of the nation's highest electricity rates. Nationally, low-income households spend 8.2 percent of their income on utility bills – a proportion nearly three times higher than that facing wealthier households. And 10 percent of New Jersey households fall below the poverty line. These residents get hit by a double whammy – both a high cost of living and the high cost of electricity. We can design residential and community solar programs that ensure access for lower income residents and change the calculus to make a meaningful difference in their lives.

This N.J. couple found a no-cost way to convert to solar energy

Now is the time to make sure this happens. The New Jersey Board of Public Utilities is considering a new [solar incentive program](#) with roll-out plans for 2020. While targeted incentives are vital for healthy solar industry growth, the current efforts lack a direct focus on lower income residents who struggle under the greatest burden. Examples, like the one in [Connecticut](#), show how funding carve-outs for lower income residents can be game-changing. There, lower income families access solar leasing options, saving them at times over \$1,500 a year when paired with energy efficiency upgrades.

Other states, like [Massachusetts](#) and [Illinois](#), provide direct financial support for lower income solar projects or a higher incentive value for projects serving lower income residents, to make energy affordable for all while greening the environment. We can do the same here in New Jersey.

One potential new source of funds for this is the [RGGI program](#). We must start by recognizing a few facts: New Jersey's lower income residents suffer disproportionate exposure to carbon, sulfur, and mercury pollution that come from burning fossil fuels. They cause heart disease, asthma attacks, respiratory diseases and even cancer. Taxpayer and family costs for these are enormous. Agencies slated to receive RGGI funds can target lower income communities for clean energy projects - and the health and economic benefits they deliver.



Going solar could pay out even more cash in N.J. | Editorial

Direct grants or loans or rebates for installing rooftop solar or participating in community solar projects make economic, not just moral sense. This aligns with Governor Murphy's [Executive Order 23](#), directing state agencies to target and assist communities disproportionately affected by the effects of environmental hazards and climate change.

This targeted clean energy will also increase economic activity and job creation, reduce harmful emissions, and lower energy and health cost burdens for those who bear them the most – our neighbors struggling to make ends meet.

For too long, lower income communities have been left out of the state's clean energy economy, but we can change that. Clean energy should be within everyone's reach. Focused and dedicated investment can meet our shared goal of a green Garden State for all.

Marty Johnson is founder and CEO of Isles, Inc., an urban sustainable development organization. Beth Galante is the vice president of business development and

government relations at [PosiGen](#).

Pari Kasotia also contributed to this piece. She is the mid-Atlantic director for [Vote Solar](#), a nonprofit that works to make solar a mainstream energy resource.

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