



COMMUNITY CLIMATE CONVERSATIONS:

Insights for Developing a
Community-Driven Climate Strategy

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Land Acknowledgement & Legacy of Enslaved Peoples

This report was produced in Rhode Island on the ancestral homelands of the Narragansett, Nipmuc, Pokanoket, and Wampanoag peoples. We remember that these lands were stolen through genocide, ethnic cleansing, forced assimilation, and forced removal. We acknowledge that even the history we have documented is incomplete, and that Indigenous communities continue to be denied access to their lands through state-sanctioned violence.

We also recognize that Rhode Island's economy and infrastructure were built, in large part, by the labor of enslaved Africans and their descendants and peoples brought here against their will and subjected to brutal oppression. Their stolen labor and generational displacement have shaped deep disparities that persist today.

We affirm the self-determination of Indigenous Peoples and the liberation of all communities oppressed by colonialism and slavery. We name these struggles as requirements for building a future in which all people are dignified, autonomous, and truly free.



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ABSTRACT

Roots 2Empower spoke with 220 community members between July and October 2025 to prepare them to engage in the development of Rhode Island’s 2025 Climate Action Strategy (“2025 Strategy”) in a series of seven meetings in Providence, Pawtucket, and Central Falls that we named “Community Climate Conversations.” These meetings were directed at residents of environmental justice areas who are disproportionately impacted by climate change, and we promoted them intentionally to achieve that end. Accessibility was our primary focus. We ensured participants could easily understand the content (in terms of both language and clarity), attend the meetings at convenient times and locations, and share feedback in multiple ways, during the presentation, in small group discussions, through a feedback form, and by emailing us at any time. To foster equity, inclusion, and accessibility, we applied an iterative approach, adapting to participants needs, and took away copious lessons about how to further improve community engagement efforts in the future. Overall, we found that Rhode Island’s environmental justice community members are eager to learn, share their perspective, and participate in shaping climate resilience. After learning about the state’s efforts to combat climate change, most people were more or slightly more worried than before coming to the meeting and over half were likely or very likely to participate in environmental justice initiatives. To engage civically in these issues, the top needs that emerged were stipends, transportation, language support, more education, government transparency, and an approach that is inclusive to community members. Our research findings provide evidence that trusted community-based organizations like Roots 2Empower are essential bridges between the government and community members, and ensure overburdened residents have equitable access to engagement. Involving community members in decision-making not only improves the design and implementation of policies, but also fosters equity, transparency, and trust.



CANTALOUPE
Honey
ORANGE

BURRER
MISCELLANEOUS

BURRER
MISCELLANEOUS

FREE VEGETABLE \$4.19
Oh Happy Day Hybrid





INTRODUCTION

The 2021 Act on Climate set economy-wide enforceable targets for greenhouse gas emissions reductions, incrementally increasing each decade and culminating in net-zero emissions by 2050. To meet that mandate, an Executive Climate Change Coordinating Council (EC4) was created, comprising officials from state agencies with responsibility and oversight relating to accessing, integrating, and coordinating climate change efforts.¹ By the end of 2025, the EC4 is required to submit a plan for meeting emission reduction targets that includes “an equitable transition to climate compliance for environmental justice populations, redress past environmental and public health inequities, and include a process where the interests of and people from populations most vulnerable to the effects of climate change and at risk of pollution, displacement, energy burden, and cost influence such a plan.”²

In advance of this process, Roots 2Empower spoke with 220 community members over a series of seven meetings between July and October 2024 to prepare them to engage in the development of the plan and understand what support they would need to do so. During these meetings, we educated participants about the causes of climate change from an environmental justice lens, provided an overview of climate action the state is taking, and gathered feedback. While the majority of survey respondents (61.2%) reported that they were more or slightly more worried about climate change after learning what the state was doing to combat this issue, over half (51.8%) were likely or very likely to participate in environmental justice initiatives in their community and were eager to learn more. This report provides an overview of the key themes that emerged throughout our seven Community Climate Conversations (“Conversations”), including the key impacts residents of environmental justice areas are facing, their feedback on state-led action, what support they need to participate in climate resilience efforts, and recommendations for the state to implement to achieve the equity and community engagement requirements in the 2021 Act on Climate.

¹ R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-6.2-1

² R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-6.2-2 (a)(2i)(v)





Roots 2Empower is a community-based organization that uses direct service, education, public policy, and community engagement to confront social injustice and advance equity in Rhode Island and southern New England. Our mission is to foster an equitable, community-driven transition to a regenerative economy through public education, skills-building, and environmental connection. Community-driven climate strategies are not only foundational to equitably achieving Rhode Island's greenhouse gas emission reduction targets, they also improve efficacy of policy implementation. Research consistently demonstrates that involving local communities in decision-making not only improves the design and implementation of policies, but also fosters equity, transparency, and trust. In cities like Quito, Ecuador, community workshops led to actionable climate projects that directly benefited marginalized neighborhoods (Chu et al. 2016). Similarly, studies reveal that community participation enhances awareness, encourages collective action, and leads to better, more inclusive outcomes (Khatibi et al. 2021, Cheezum et al. 2018, Wiseman et al. 2010). By ensuring the voices of those most vulnerable to climate impacts are heard, Rhode Island can address past inequities and identify equitable solutions that create lasting resilience. When communities are engaged, everyone wins: policies are stronger, relationships are deepened, and outcomes are more sustainable.



In the model employed in Ecuador for the 2007 Quito Climate Change Strategy and later the 2012-2016 Quito Climate Action Plan, an NGO was hired to coordinate community engagement as a trusted voice within the community (Chu et al. 2016). When the government makes a connection with the community, either directly or through an NGO (which will be increasingly important when trust and a pre-existing relationship is lacking) the people within that community are much more willing to participate. The government will face less pushback or skepticism toward climate initiatives and will continue to see participation from the community over time (Nickel and Schnurr 2024). NGOs excel in facilitating meaningful community involvement by bridging the gap between residents and policymakers. To fulfill the equity provisions in the Act on Climate, the state should partner with NGOs like Roots 2Empower at the earliest stages of plan development to bring the expertise, community trust, and resources necessary to actualize these principles.



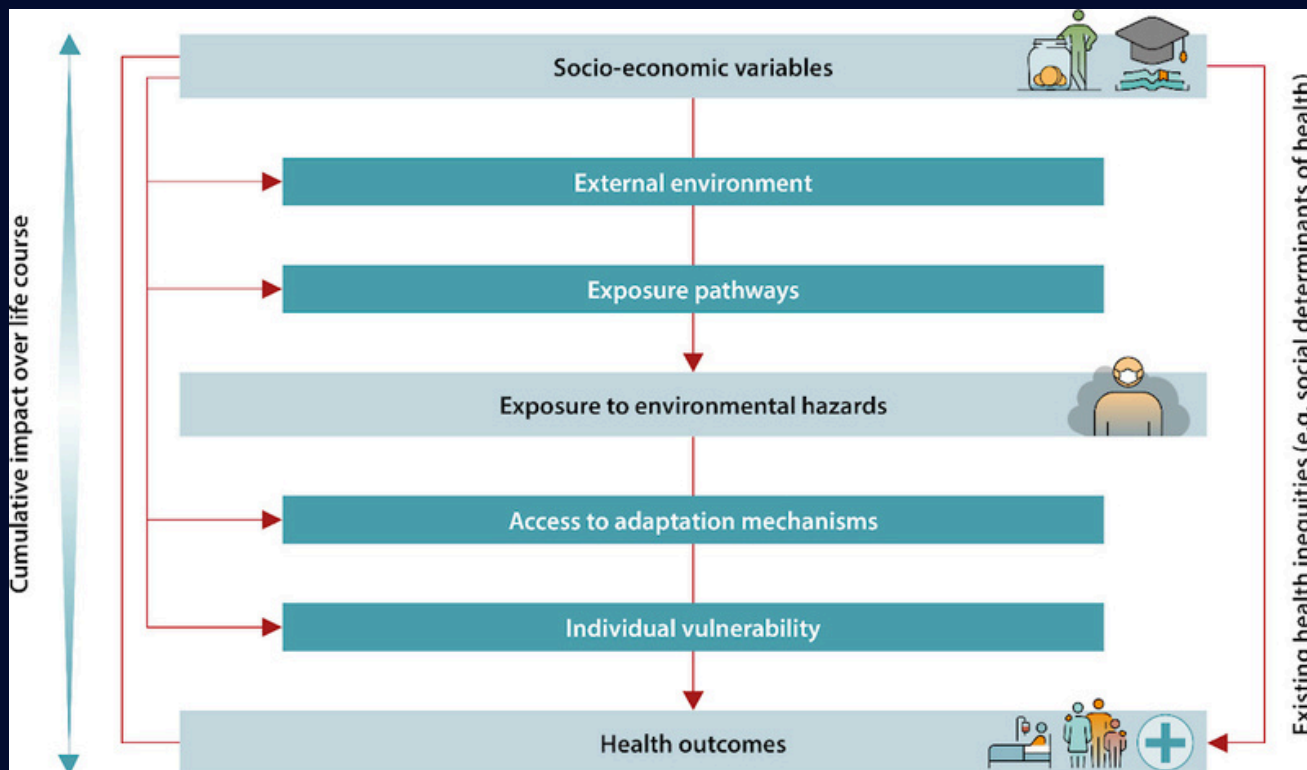
Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH) already has a framework in place for community-centered decision-making in its health equity investment strategy that functions through Participatory Budgeting (PB). The PB process connects community members to decision-making by allowing them to brainstorm ideas and create project proposals. Then, the community-at-large votes on which projects should be funded and implemented, giving everyone decision-making power. Research shows that PB not only reduces poverty, improves neighborhood conditions, and fosters community connectedness – it also improves civic engagement (RIDOH, 2024 [1-2]). Rhode Island’s investment in PB has already resulted in several health-focused projects in the Central Falls and Central Providence communities, including a Lead-Free Water Project and Peer Mental Health Training (RIDOH, 2024 [14-15]). This PB framework would thrive if used in designing climate resiliency projects and already intersects with environmental issues at the core of health inequity. Other U.S. cities have already implemented PB for climate justice, such as in Chicago’s West Humboldt Park neighborhood, where residents chose to install green roofs on neighborhood properties to combat the urban heat island effect and reduce building energy costs.

The connection between environmental, economic, and health inequities are well-known and documented. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2024 Environmental Justice Report:

Socioeconomic characteristics of individuals, community and health outcomes interact in a multitude of complex and cumulative ways, with research demonstrating that different types of environmental harms tend to cluster in the same community (Banzhaf, Ma and Timmins, 2019) (Figure 0). For instance, poor residential conditions of low-income groups and exposure to indoor pollution can lead to risks to compromised respiratory systems, which in turn makes them more vulnerable to outdoor air pollution (Solomon et al., 2016). Other variables linked to socio-economic status, such as location of their residence exposed to higher traffic emissions from mobile sources (e.g. vehicles) and inability to move out of the area due to financial constraints, further disproportionately expose communities living in the area to greater level of air pollution to the detriment of their health (Barnes, Chatterton and Longhurst, 2019; Park and Kwan, 2020).



Figure 0. Clustering of environmental harms



Source: OECD 2024, Adapted from (Wakefield and Baxter, 2010[137]) with authors' edits based on (Siroux, Agier and Slama, 2016[136]) and (Burger and Gochfeld, 2011[111]).

To ensure the 2025 Climate Action Strategy redresses past environmental and public health inequities, it must consider how these overlapping and interlocking disparities exist in Rhode Island. In 2014, when compared to all 50 states, Rhode Island had the 6th highest exposure gap between whites and nonwhites when it came to nitrogen dioxide outdoor air pollution (Zou et al. 2014). When it comes to coastal access, race and ethnicity are strongly correlated to travel distance, with Black and Latinx populations associated with longer travel distances to coastal sites where marine activities such as swimming and fishing are available (Twichell et al. 2022). Across Rhode Island, low tree coverage and a lack of green space is strongly correlated with race and poverty (PVD Tree Plan, 2023). We know these environmental disparities have been linked to a number of health risks, including respiratory illness, cardiovascular disease, and cancer that manifest across a wide range of socio-economic variables including income, race, indigeneity, age, and sex. The OECD report notes that “exposure to environmental hazards can contribute to short-term



and long-term maternal health impacts (e.g. miscarriage, higher risk of breast cancer)” (Boyles et al., 2021). These women might face a “double jeopardy” posed by exposure to environmental hazards and other chronic stressors (Morello-Frosch and Shenassa, 2006). Furthermore, it is important to consider these lifetime cumulative impacts “given the inequities at birth or in-utero can have lasting consequences for welfare and gaps in opportunities between children based on family backgrounds” (Currie, 2011). These alarming and longstanding impacts point to an urgent need to increase collaboration between RIDEM and RIDOH to ensure equity is integrated in the 2025 Strategy.

In addition to health outcomes, Rhode Island must consider the inequities in how the cost and benefits of environmental policy are distributed. The OECD report explains:

While it may seem intuitive that environmental improvements would benefit society at large,... improvements in overall environmental quality do not necessarily guarantee that the benefits are enjoyed by all segments of the population (Mitchell, 2019) or that the relative gaps in environmental quality experienced are narrowed; indeed, a recent study suggests that while air quality has improved overall in the United States, the gap between the most and least polluted areas remain relatively stable (Colmer et al., 2020). The inequitable distribution of costs and benefits of policies might be additionally exacerbated by insufficient monitoring and enforcement efforts, potentially causing disparities in compliance with environmental regulation.

This underscores the necessity to pair the actions committed to in the 2025 strategy with robust monitoring and enforcement mechanisms that contain specific and transparent equity measures.

Of particular concern to our meeting participants were energy and housing costs. The OECD report highlights these issues that are commonly referenced in the global discourse. Unsurprisingly, low income households who spend a disproportionate portion of their income on energy bills are more severely impacted when energy prices increase (Bento, 2013 via OECD, 2024). Also unsurprisingly, the impact is felt more drastically since, across the world, low-income people tend to live in energy inefficient dwellings and own inefficient appliances (Schleich, 2019, via OECD, 2024).

These challenges can be best addressed when communities are at the table, participating in decision-making about how state investments in climate resilience are spent. As the state



works towards that end, it must be acknowledged that a growing body of peer reviewed studies on the procedural elements of environmental justice point to barriers in accessing information, participation in decision-making and legal recourse. The Report warns: “With studies finding that the effective use of environmental information depends on socio-economic factors including educational attainment ([Shapiro, 2005](#)), simply making more information available without adequate consideration of the barriers to the use of information can inadvertently amplify the adverse outcomes for vulnerable communities” (OECD, 2024). The report goes on to explain the importance of the design of engagement opportunities:

Even if opportunities are available and formally open for anyone to participate, some communities, including those less equipped with resources (e.g. language, time, internet connection), can still be excluded from participatory opportunities ([Karner et al., 2018](#)). Without adequate recognition of existing barriers and biases, increasing participatory opportunities might reinforce existing inequalities (*ibid*). There is a risk of self-selection bias, with open calls for participants typically attracting participants who are more likely to be older, male, well-educated, affluent and urban ([OECD, 2022](#)). Past examples of community engagement suggest that poorly designed participatory processes can even leave communities frustrated and discourage them from further participation ([Ruano-Chamorro, Gurney and Cinner, 2022](#)).

The report further cautions that a lack of meaningful engagement results in a lack of public support, stalling progress on critical environmental issues (Wolsink, M, 2007 via OECD, 2024). This isn’t unique to the U.S.; this dissatisfaction about decision-making is observed worldwide (van de Grift and Cuppen, 2024 via OECD, 2024). We observed this across our meetings, with participants consistently reporting not only the need for increased information, but increased education, both in schools and for adults. There was an emphasis on providing information in formats that were accessible, in digestible sections, diverse formats, with plenty of opportunity for small group discussion and questions, as well as access to translation. Specifically, participants reported that it’s not enough to provide policy documents. They wanted the support of community-based organizations like ours to break down the information, weigh the potential impacts, and explore alternative solutions.

All of this points to the necessity for the state to work with community-based organizations like Roots 2Empower (R2E) in developing their community engagement plans and climate implementation strategies.



METHODS

R2E launched a series of Community Climate Conversations with four main goals: (1) educate communities about the root causes of climate change, (2) understand the climate impacts and disparities they are already experiencing, (3) share information about what the state is doing to combat these impacts and how they can benefit, and (4) gather their input and amplify their vision for building climate resilience. To do this, we authored a booklet, “Fostering Environmental Justice in the Ocean State: Past, Present, & Future Perspectives to Guide a Just & Equitable Transition to a Regenerative Economy” that served as a primer, providing a holistic overview of climate change and environmental justice in Rhode Island. The booklet reviews the causes and impacts of climate change, the state’s climate policy, clean technology incentives and how to access them, and workforce training opportunities.

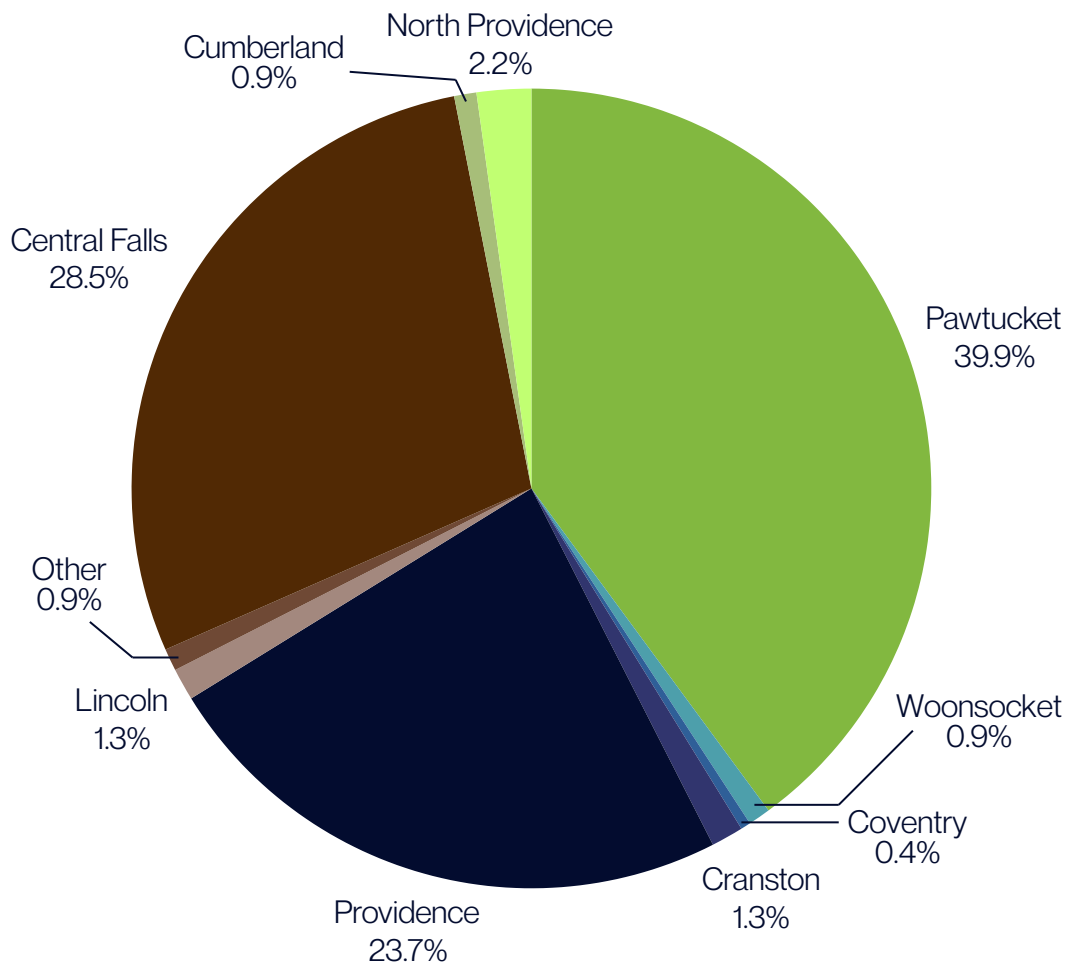
To ensure we were responsive to community input and needs, we took an iterative approach to each Community Climate Conversation, making adjustments throughout. Due to our adaptive approach, not every Community Climate Conversation covered the same material; however, everyone had access to all the information in the booklet. For instance, in our first two meetings we used the booklet alone as our discussion tool. During these meetings, it was difficult to get through all of the information, so for the remaining meetings, we asked participants to read the booklet in advance and instead presented a summary. What remained consistent, however, were the series of reflection questions we discussed in the meeting, through the feedback form we provided at the end, or in some cases both. For the purposes of this report, we consolidated these reflection questions into four main threads: (1) How are participants feeling the impacts of climate change and what are their major concerns? (2) What feedback did they have on state-led climate action? (3) What is their vision for climate resilience in their community? (4) What do they need to participate in shaping government action and resilience efforts? We present these themes visually in word clouds and elaborate in descriptions for each.



The Community Conversations were held at various dates and times from July to October of 2024 in Providence and Pawtucket. To ensure we were reaching residents of environmental justice areas and those most impacted by climate change, each event was promoted only in community spaces, such as coffee shops, libraries, grocery stores, our Facebook page, and through our community partners. We aimed to make the events as accessible as possible, so we only held them in locations on public transit lines. The conversations were centered around Providence, Central Falls, and Pawtucket residents to focus on the areas with the highest environmental and economic disparities, but we also saw participants from Cranston, East Providence, Cumberland, Lincoln, North Providence, West Warwick, and Woonsocket (see Figure 1). We partnered with other community organizations, such as the Local Initiatives Support Corporation, the People’s Port Authority, and the Immaculate Heart of Mary Church Cape Verdean Church on the Central Falls border of Pawtucket.

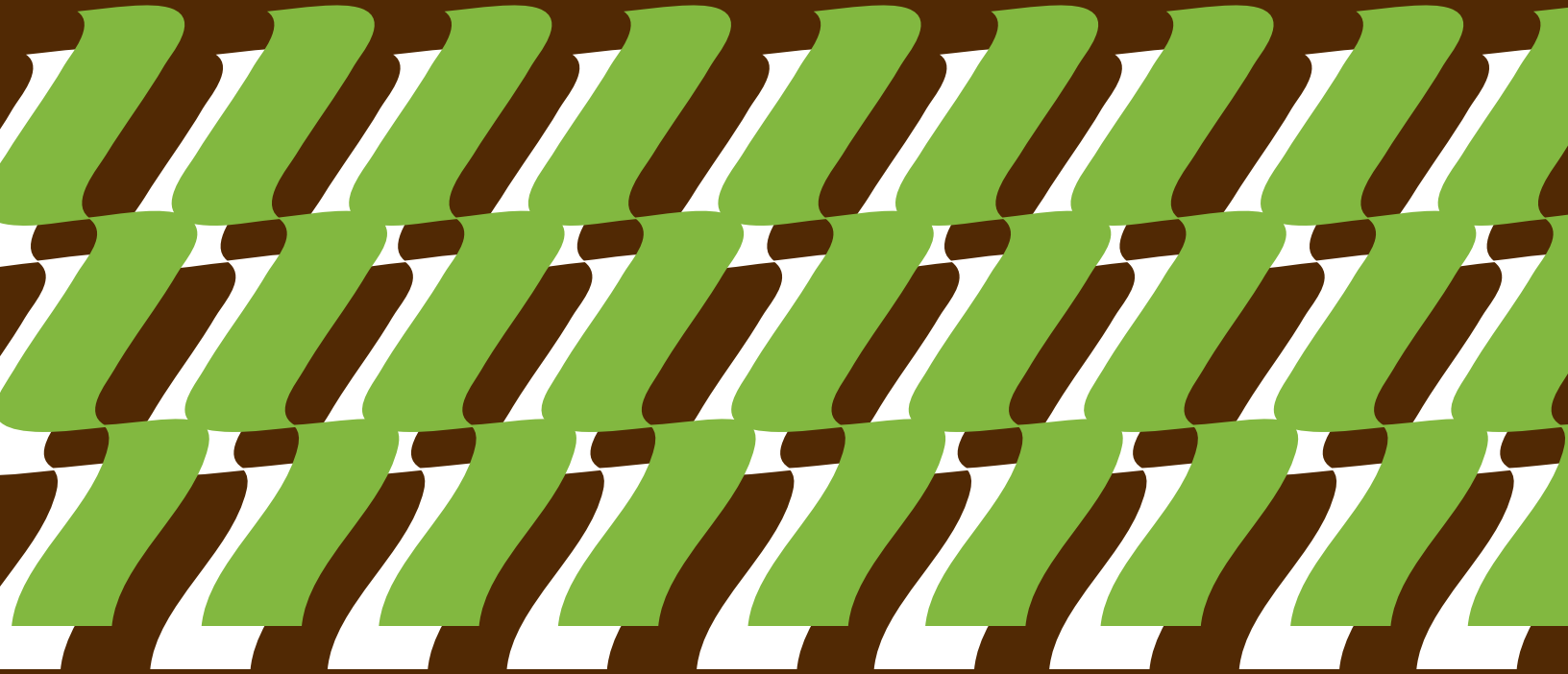
At each meeting, participants were asked to complete an anonymous Demographics Survey upon arrival and a Feedback Survey before leaving.

Figure 1. Participant Residencies





FINDINGS





Demographics

Of the 238 people who registered, we saw 220 attendees across our 7 events. From that pool, 170 attendees filled out the voluntary demographic form from which we obtained the following data.

Participants of all ages attended our events, with a fairly even distribution across age groups (see Figure 2). Approximately 50% of community members were aged 39 or younger, while approximately 30% of folks were aged 40 to 80. These numbers could be slightly skewed by the 20.6% of participants who declined to provide their age.

Our events consistently displayed a greater representation of women, with 55.9% of respondents identifying as female. Of the respondents 38.2% identified as male, 4.1% of respondents identified as non-binary, and 1.8% participants preferred not to answer (see Figure 3).

Figure 2. Age of participants

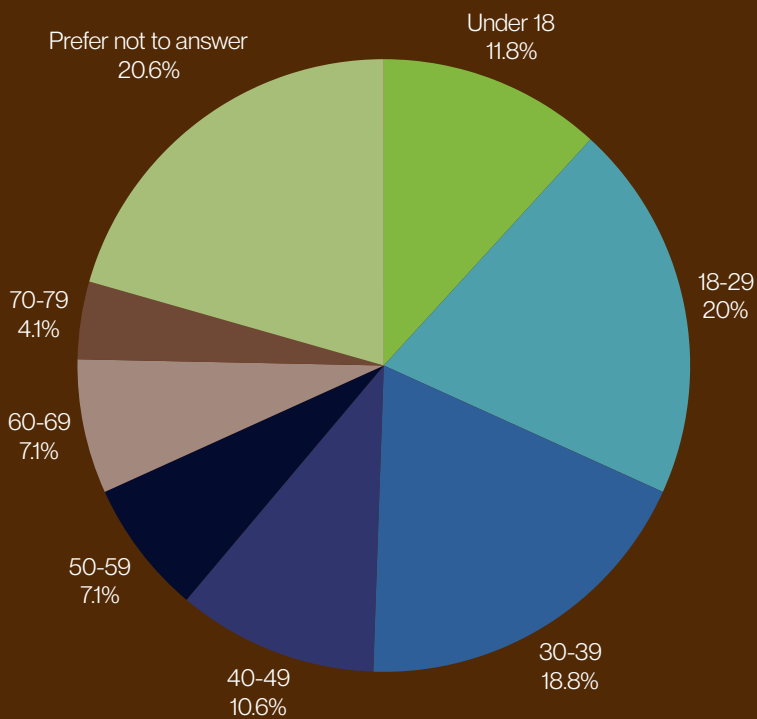
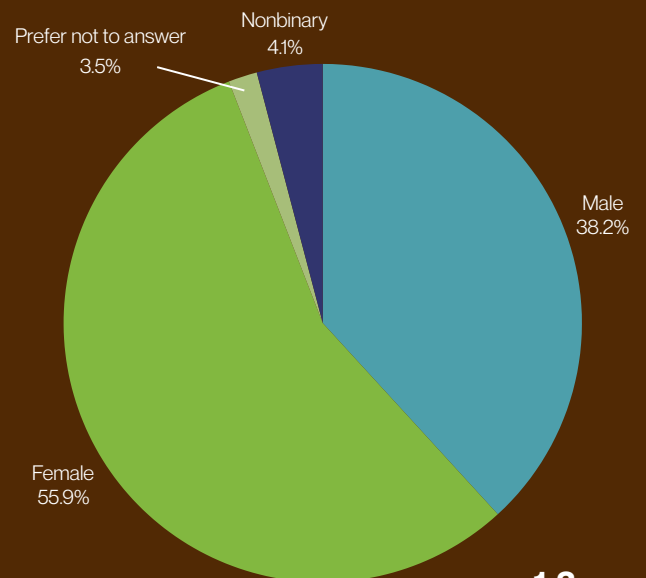


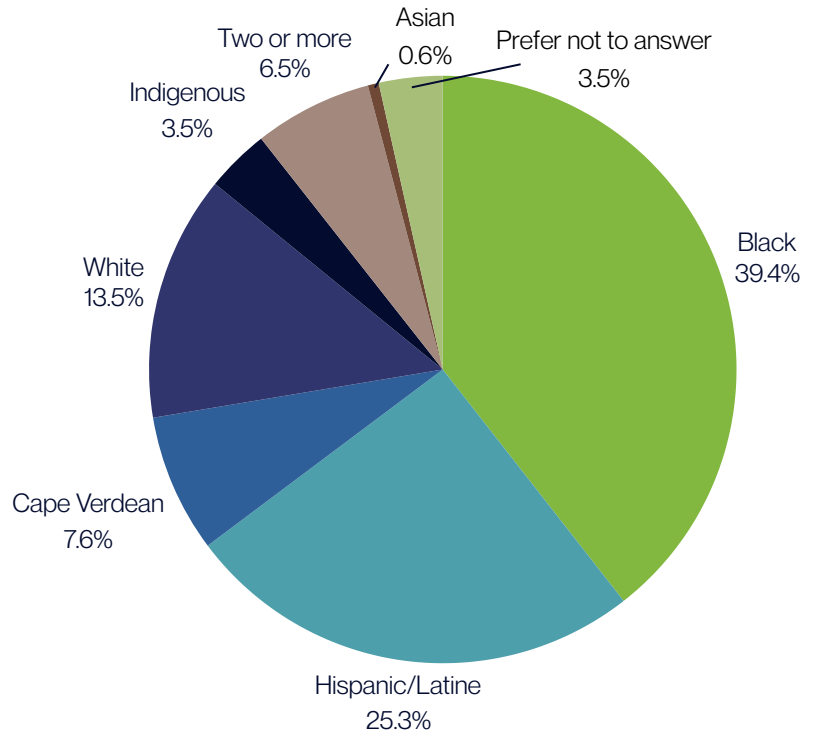
Figure 3. Gender of participants





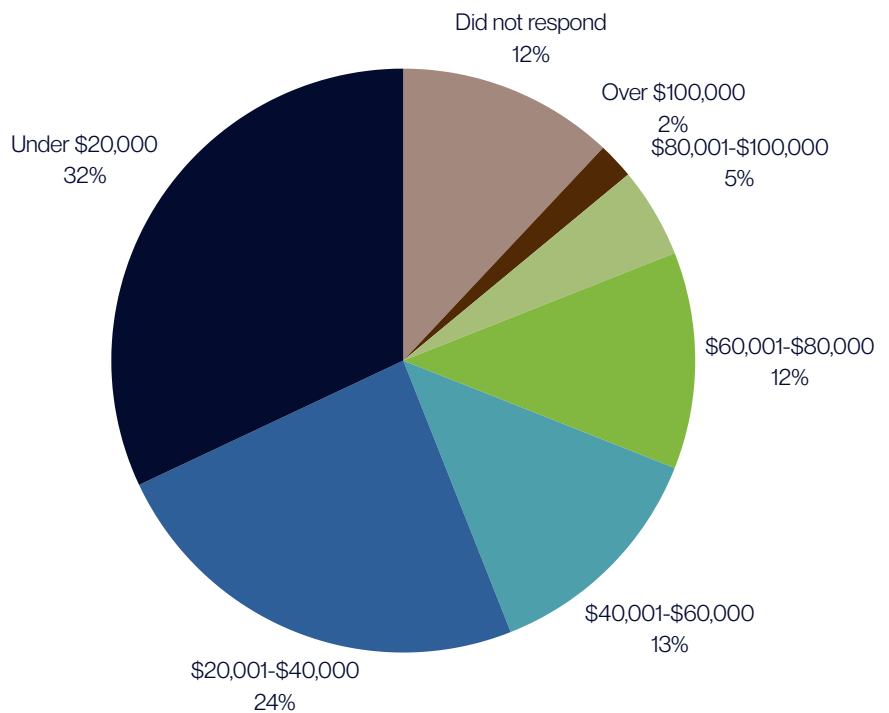
The conversations successfully achieved their goal of reaching marginalized communities, with the vast majority of respondents identifying as non-white and low-income (see Figures 4 and 5). Among the community members surveyed 47% identified as Black, with 7.6% of those folks identifying specifically as Cape Verdean. 25.3% of respondents identified as Hispanic or Latine and 13.5% of respondents identified as White. 6.5% of respondents identified with two or more races/ethnicities, which most often was Black and Latine. 3.5% of folks were Indigenous, which involved identities such as American Indian, Indigenous Liberian, Mexican Mestizo, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.

Figure 4. Race/ethnicity of participants



Our Demographic Survey also asked respondents to report an estimate of their household income. Most folks qualified as Low-Income or Very Low-Income,³ with 55.3% of respondents earning less than \$40,000/year (see Figure 6). 68.2% of respondents made below \$60,000/year. Only 7.1% of respondents earned more than \$80,000/year.

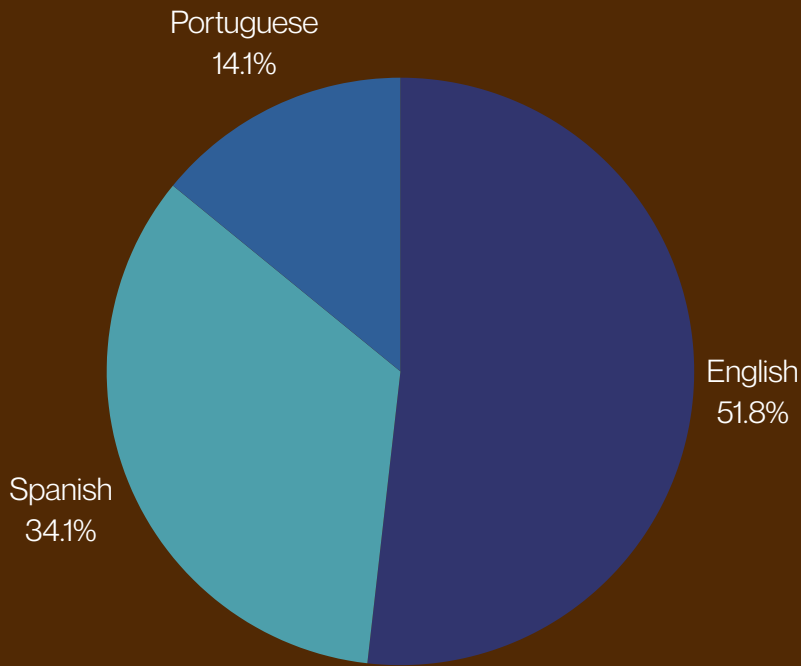
Figure 5. Income of participants



³ Regional Housing Services Office. Income limits. Retrieved January 3, 2025, from <https://www.rhsohousing.org/home/faq/what-are-income-limits>; U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). QuickFacts: Providence City, Rhode Island. Retrieved January 3, 2025, from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/providencecityrhodeisland>



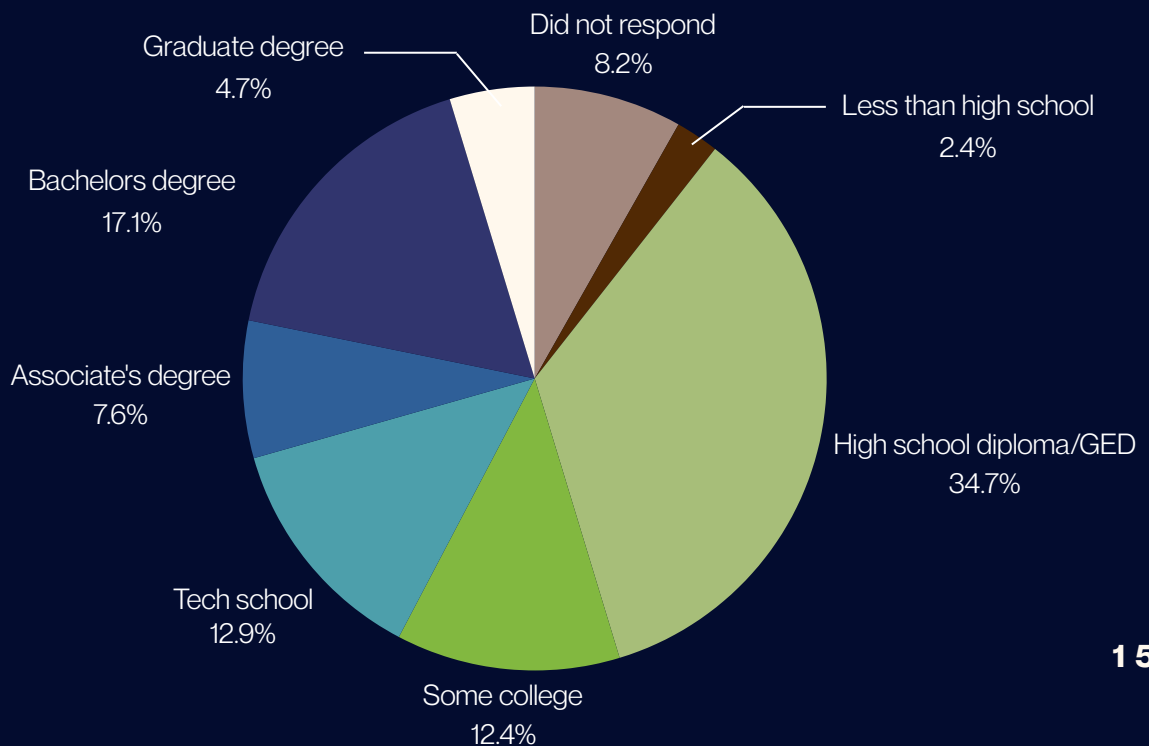
Figure 6. Primary language of participants



We saw nearly half of respondents (48.2%) were non-English speakers (see Figure 6). 34.1% of folks spoke Portuguese, which was bolstered by our event at the Cape Verdean Church, and 14.1% of folks spoke Spanish. The remaining 51.8% of respondents spoke English as either a first or second language.

Finally, the level of education varied greatly across participants (see Figure 7). 34.7% of respondents obtained a high school diploma or GED equivalent. 12.4% attended some college but did not complete a degree, while 17.1% achieved a Bachelor's degree and 12.9% went to some technical school and got a professional certification. 12.3% had some sort of advanced graduate degree.

Figure 7. Educational background of participants





Qualitative Feedback



Out of the 220 people who attended our meetings, 129 filled out the feedback form, of which a final 28 attended a final session to review our compilation of community input data. The following information is a compilation of the feedback we received during our Conversations and from the feedback form.



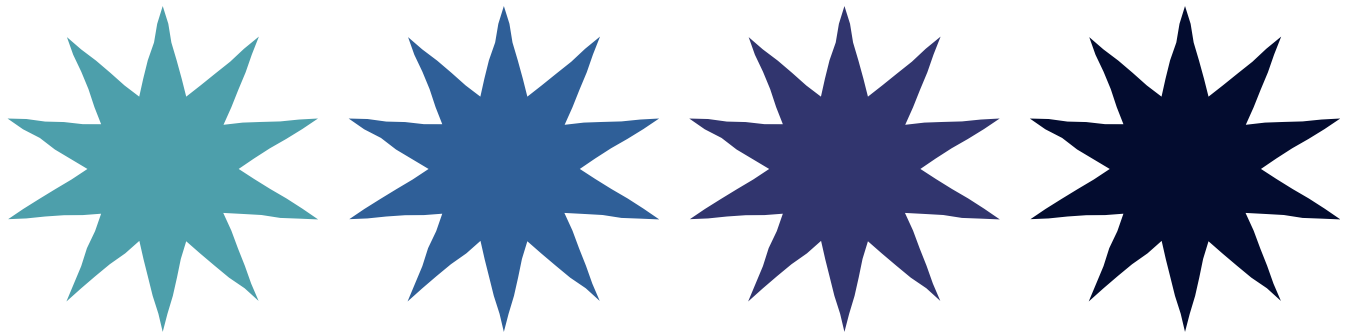
Impacts and Concerns

After presenting information about climate change in Rhode Island, we asked community members about their major concerns and how these changes in the climate and the corresponding health and ecological effects impact them.





The biggest theme that emerged was related to extreme weather—specifically more severe storms, hotter summers, and heavier rainfall, and the related impacts on their health, housing, and transportation. People were feeling these impacts in their everyday life, some in housing that could not accommodate air conditioning or struggling to afford the additional energy costs, making some small apartments even dangerous to be in during summer heat waves. Some reported that the temperatures are unbearable as their working conditions are not equipped for this heat and humidity. Regarding transportation, people noted their cars being damaged in flooding and not being able to get to work as roads became inaccessible. This also brought up poor infrastructure design that is flooding more frequently due to extreme weather, increasing traffic congestion, travel time, fuel consumption, and pollution.



Extreme weather also served as a harbinger for harsher environmental conditions, compounding existing inequities. Participants recognized the ways species migration, invasive species, and agricultural challenges would impact food supply and prices. Many linked these issues back to corporate greed and poor government regulation of polluting industries. The magnitude of these challenges posed mental health for participants as well.

Participants also noted concerns about air and water quality and contamination. This included waterways as well as strong concerns over drinking water quality, with one person remarking that the water that came out of the faucet was brown and not potable. There were concerns about runoff picking up fertilizer, oil, pesticides, bacteria, and other pollutants as it moves through storm drains and ditches into streams, rivers, and lakes.

The decline in air quality raised concerns for people with asthma, which included the vast majority of attendees for all but one of our meetings. One participant stated that their child was getting sick so frequently that they had to miss almost a month of school, which resulted in the school taking them to court. Along with the atmospheric and environmental pollution, the air inside school buildings is not being properly filtered. School buildings can contain mold, harmful chemicals, and poor filtration that can trap germs (American Lung Association). Many reported that their allergy symptoms have increased significantly and



they get sick more frequently, which is challenging when many struggle to access healthcare. A few participants noted that when they go to the doctors, a translator is used via video conferencing which makes it difficult to get their concerns across and cuts into the time with the doctor. Warmer temperatures and shifting seasons paired with increased pollution are increasing the strength and length of allergy season in Rhode Island and across the US. Not only is this a health concern, it's an economic one as well. Allergies can be expensive to manage and make it difficult to focus or do outdoor activities, putting some participant's livelihoods at risk. People also reported increased food and energy prices (food and energy insecurity) and greater difficulty gardening as there is extreme variability in temperatures.

A great deal of community members are concerned that the government is not being transparent about its plans for climate resiliency. People would like to be informed about how the government is going to tackle these issues as their livelihoods are being affected. Participants would like more opportunities to raise these concerns with the state, and in a later section we will report on the feedback community members offered about what support would be necessary to increase civic engagement.





Act on Climate Implementation

We asked participants what feedback they had related to state-led initiatives both in implementation of the Act on Climate and about the clean energy and efficiency rebates.



Respondents largely reported on the need for more community centered events to support their participation in these efforts. For them, community centered meant providing food, childcare, stipends, and taking an inclusive approach to education to ensure there is ample support in understanding the information presented. Community members see gatherings, like those offered by R2E, as an opportunity to learn about different environmental issues available for public comment and a space where they can refine their vision for climate resilience. Many felt that it would take several meetings to continue unpacking these issues and prepare for giving input on something like the 2025 Climate Action Strategy.



Overall, participants thought there was a lack of government transparency and a lack of regular updates about what the state is doing to combat climate action. We informed them about the EC4 Listserv, which they appreciated, but they also prefer text updates and more on social media. Not only do they want to hear about discounts and rebates, but they want to hear about the environmental issues that are happening, such as when there are fires at the Port of Providence or algal blooms in the rivers, and the hazards of toxic releases from industrial facilities. They want the government to take a more inclusive approach, which they suggested could occur by partnering with community-based organizations like R2E to facilitate meetings so that not only is the community going to the government but state officials are coming to community spaces as well. Regardless of the location, participants unanimously agreed that public meetings should be held at locations accessible by public transit. They also underscored that often there is a lack of translation when it comes to updates or public meetings, which makes them inaccessible to non-English speakers.

When it came to the clean energy rebates and incentives, while excitement for these programs was high, there were still a great deal of questions and concerns about the realized price of switching to a heat pump or solar panels, including the need for renters to get permission from their landlord. Many respondents expressed skepticism about their landlords willingness to support these efforts, citing their current undesirable living conditions, the landlord's lack of interest in making improvements, and the threat of homelessness resulting from the housing shortage.

Some folks were disappointed that not all of these programs were available to people who rent, which is often the case for low-income and working-class communities. Participants felt programs like the Affordable Solar Access Program should be expanded to working class individuals under the median household income. Participants felt similarly about heat pumps and thought the low-income incentives should be expanded to working class families. Overall, participants voiced that renters should have more protections that ensure they have access to energy efficiency.





Visions for Resilience

During our meetings and in our feedback form, we asked participants about their visions for building climate resilience in their community. Some themes overlapped with other questions, including the need for participatory democracy: giving community members access to resources and decision-making. Many participants envision a more walkable city and an increase in bike culture. Participants would like to travel in other ways than solely relying on vehicles, including trains connecting various parts of the state. Participants recognize that to build more climate resilience it is important to cut back on transportation emissions, which account for almost 38% of all greenhouse gas emissions in Rhode Island and impact many participants who live near highways. In addition to more diverse forms of transportation, the community suggests improved bus transit (i.e. more direct routes to decrease travel time and more frequent stops) along with making riding the bus free.

People would like to see a transition to clean and renewable energy that is accessible to all. One of the biggest drivers of decarbonization will be clean energy, so building equity into the foundation of this new industry is imperative. Our participants want to see more equitable options for their community to participate in climate resilience efforts. This requires more social infrastructure such as affordable and dignified housing, accessible and affordable childcare, outlets for community connection like the meetings we facilitated, language justice, food justice, including more community gardens and farmers markets, medical





security, and livable wages. It also means increasing access to clean energy technology and energy efficiency—not just for those who are low-income but also working-class people struggling to make ends meet.

Many participants suggested our communities have sustainable waste management, including composting. They commented that some items, like mattresses, are expensive to dispose of and it results in people discarding them in community spaces. Others shared that there should be more opportunities for reuse and that community members should be supported in thinking innovatively.

The community also envisions a greener future, where they have more opportunities to be within nature. Participants overwhelmingly reported a desire for more green spaces, including community gardens. Allowing space for people to grow their own food would enable people to enjoy more aspects of their culture, not only through ancestral agriculture practices but also by having the opportunity to grow food that might not be readily available in stores. Many people shared that resilience efforts should emphasize culture and diversity, restoring ancestral knowledge about regenerative practices. Climate change increases the likelihood of foodborne illnesses and affects food availability, so participants felt community gardens and purchasing locally grown foods would increase resilience against these impacts. Participants also envision industries that the community relies on, such as grocery stores, being cooperatively owned and shared that there needs to be more locally-owned businesses at large. This would allow for more locally grown food to be sold, provide jobs for people in the area, and help shift economic power to the local level, ensuring the profits stayed within the community where they can be reinvested. Community-owned businesses are more likely to follow ethical business practices, which was also a key theme of the environmental justice residents we spoke with. A core piece of climate resilience is ensuring communities have economic and democratic control over the industries that impact their daily lives. Empowering community leadership and focusing on the economic security of families would make the community stronger.

Participants also expressed a strong interest in jobs in the clean energy sector and were pleased to hear about programs like Building Futures' pre-apprenticeship program that uses an earn-while-you-learn model to enable folks to transition into the construction trades. However, some career pathways, such as HVAC, lacked information about training. Overall, these careers would be made more accessible if there were regularly held information sessions with training institutions available to answer questions. In addition, having a website dedicated to jobs in the regenerative economy all in one place, laying out the skills and training needed, the time it takes to become certified, trajectory for career and salary advancement, and outlook for growth would be helpful to our participants.



Enabling Engagement

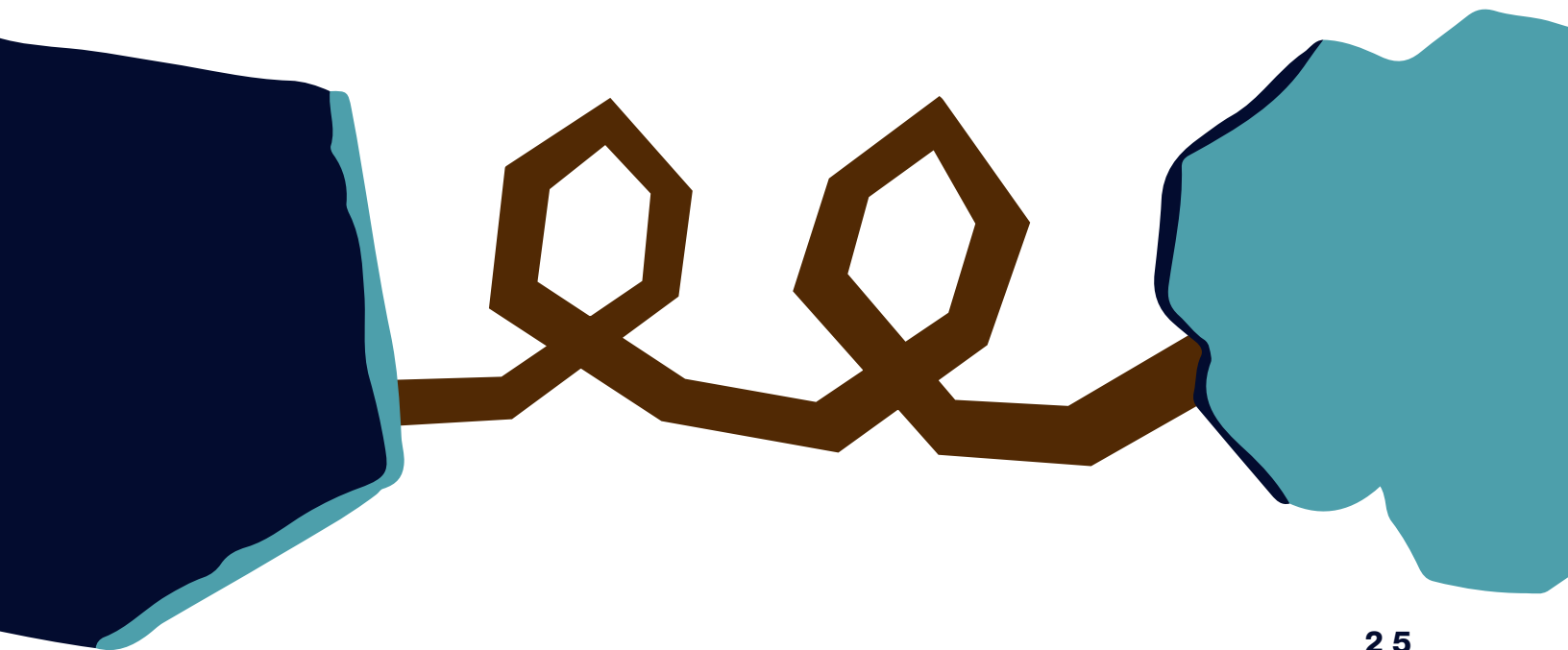
At our meetings and in the feedback form, we asked what actions the government could take to enable their engagement in climate resilience efforts. Participants replied that they would like more accessible opportunities to get involved and greater transparency about what the state is to make tangible changes in environmental justice issues. For them, as mentioned in the Act on Climate Implementation section, increasing equitable access and inclusion meant having more community events and educational opportunities, stipends for participation, childcare, translation, dinner provided, and meetings held in places accessible by public transit. Specifically, they want educational opportunities that are engaging, making technical information accessible by presenting it in diverse formats, and creating plenty of time for questions and discussion. They also want a space to connect with other members of their community and share their experience.





On a more systemic level, to relieve the burdens that inhibit participation, they reported that they need quality jobs, food security, affordable housing, accessible childcare, accessible public transportation, medical security so they can address health concerns, and corporate accountability to limit increasing economic inequality and predatory corporate practices. To our participants, these needs were not separate from climate action or civic engagement but a foundational part. For community members to feel empowered to participate, they need to feel stability in their basic needs being met. They also reported that they needed to feel that their voices were being heard and for there to be transparency about the specific actions the state is taking to address their concerns and accountability through monitoring and enforcement. They want solutions that are actionable and wouldn't result in the same disparities.

Participants said the state must make a consistent and long-term effort to rebuild trust among the communities that have for generations been impacted by environmental hazards. Oftentimes, people are more likely to engage with the government when they feel as though their voice is valued and heard, and after years of state-sanctioned divestment in communities of color and low-wealth communities, it's common for people to feel disenfranchised, without the trust or motivation to justify staying up to date with what the state is doing. To make meaningful progress in redressing past injustices and building a more sustainable future, the state must center community input in their planning and decision-making to prioritize initiatives that address their specific needs. Instead of asking community members to go to governmental spaces, participants envisioned the government coming to community spaces and creating non-hierarchical environments to discuss these issues as referenced in the section above.



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CONCLUSION & PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS

The community input that we received during our 2024 community meetings strongly correlated with the research presented in the introduction on the design and implementation of equitable environmental policy and community-centered decision-making. Improvements in environmental quality are not equally accessed and can even increase burdens for disadvantaged communities. Similarly, increased opportunities for engagement does not necessarily result in increased access to participation and can even reinforce existing inequalities. Engagement sessions must be intentionally designed to ensure the information is accessible to participants, providing educational opportunities in advance of seeking input along with translation, childcare, food, stipends, and in familiar community spaces at times and locations accessible by public transit.

It is imperative that these equity implications be considered as the Rhode Island Climate Action Strategy (“RICAS”) is developed. Achieving the Act on Climate mandate of reducing greenhouse gas emissions to 45% below 1990 levels by 2030 will transform the state’s economy and infrastructure and at-risk communities must be centered in this process. This will require deep improvements in community engagement efforts to create equitable access to decision-making paired with increased transparency and accountability. It is essential that a robust equity analysis be conducted for all proposed activities and measures to understand barriers to accessing the environmental benefits proposed in the plan and risk they may pose to underserved and overburdened communities in Rhode Island.

Roots 2Empower is committed to working with the state to ensure we continue to build on these recommendations and grow our consultation of environmental justice communities across the state. The community input outlined in this report provides a strong start to inform the equitable development of the RICAS. To guide the state’s efforts, we have summarized the input we gathered into the following priority recommendations for the Executive Climate Change Coordinating Council (EC4).

To ensure the interests of and people from populations most vulnerable to the effects of climate change and at risk of pollution, displacement, energy burden, and cost, influence the Rhode Island Climate Action Strategy (RICAS), in the community engagement activities, we urge the EC4 to do the following:



recommendation 1

Require Lighthouse Consulting Group and Energy and Environmental Economics (E3) to collaborate with interested community based organizations (CBOs) on community engagement activities during the finalizing of the Engagement Plan, the development of input sessions, and the delivery of educational workshops prior to input sessions.

a To ensure residents have equitable access to the information they need to participate, contract Roots 2Empower (or other CBOs with this expertise) to (i) design and deliver the community input sessions, and (ii) curate educational workshops in advance of community input sessions, specifically for environmental justice residents.

b Ensure all meetings (i) have language access including Spanish and Portuguese translation at a minimum, (ii) provide food and childcare, (iii) are held in ADA-accessible venues located close to public transit, and (iv) are held at a time when public transit is available.

c Ensure workshop participants are consulted about what they would need to access the environmental benefits of the proposed actions and what their concerns are.



recommendation 2

Prioritize low-income disadvantaged communities (LIDACs) for all proposed activities, while taking measures to avoid gentrification and mitigate any increases in housing prices.

a Prioritize community ownership across all sectors and localization of the sustainable economy.

b Prioritize microgrids and grid resilience measures in LIDACs (e.g. rooftop solar and battery storage for government buildings within those communities).

c Prioritize nature-based solutions in LIDACs (e.g., green rooftops, removal of hardscapes, increased green space, community composting facilities).

d Incentivize businesses within LIDACs to install rooftop solar and battery storage.

e Provide ongoing public education forums regarding decarbonization strategies, ideally in partnership with CBOs like Roots 2Empower, about topics including but not limited to clean energy, energy efficiency, and electrification technology; electrical vehicle infrastructure; public transit infrastructure; compost and land management; and building decarbonization.



recommendation 3

Conduct an equity analysis for all activities in the 2025 strategy, utilizing best practices.

a Collaborate with the RI Department of Health (RIDOH) in conducting the equity analysis.

b Create measurable targets for improvements in equity (e.g. reduced exposure to environmental hazards, reduced burden of economic costs, reduced barriers to participation in decision-making, improved health outcomes, increased access to environmental and economic benefits).

c Evaluate impacts of infrastructure development (e.g. asphalt installation within EV charging stations) and include strategies to minimize and mitigate those impacts (e.g. solar parking canopies, green roofs).



recommendation 4

Utilize a participatory budgeting (PB) process, modeled on the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) and RIDOH's Health Systems Transformation Project (HSTP), in which environmental justice community leaders choose the decarbonization strategies the state invests in.

a Collaborate with EOHHS and RIDOH in launching PB steering committee(s), calling on the expertise of those already familiar with PB (such as Health Equity Zones) as well as community-based organizations working on environmental justice, utility justice, and related issues.

b Ensure that the PB process enables environmental justice community members to submit their ideas within frequently trafficked community hubs and that these opportunities are broadly advertised, providing adequate information and education for residents to provide informed input.

c Ensure that the PB process uses a transparent, equitable, and accessible voting mechanism for eligible residents in environmental justice areas to vote on proposals, ensuring all residents have access regardless of citizenship or history of incarceration, and by setting up events at community sites, through canvassing, online voting, and other accessible locations.



recommendation 5

Remove financial barriers to carbon reduction measures by making them cost-free for low-income ratepayers and/or reduced cost for those under the median household income.

a Provide free bus and train fare for low-income transit riders.

b In alignment with RI's Long Range Transportation Plan, adequately fund RIPTA for increased mobility by providing faster and more frequent service; expanding service to new areas; developing high capacity transit services; and making service easier to use.

c Expand low-interest financing opportunities to residents below the median income who want to purchase an electric vehicle but may not otherwise qualify for a loan.

d Expand access to heat pumps and other energy efficiency measures for low and moderate income renters by incentivizing property owners with cost-saving rebates that also protect tenants through legally binding requirements for long-term rent freezes and eviction restrictions.

e Expand access to electric lawn and garden equipment in environmental justice areas by making them available to rent through community libraries or other public institutions.

f Create a graded incentive program to increase clean energy incentives for homeowners making below the median income.



recommendation 6

Identify and provide supports for workers during this equitable transition to address inequity in the state by creating quality and family-sustaining clean energy jobs that pay wages and benefits consistent with or that exceed area wage and labor standards.

- a** Develop programs that directly recruit, train, and retain those underrepresented in the workforce, including women, people of color, indigenous people, veterans, formerly incarcerated people, and people living with disabilities.
- b** Ensure all training programs pay participants while they're training and provide wrap-around services.
- c** Partner with community-based organizations to regularly host information sessions about training programs in environmental justice areas.
- d** Require that the state prioritize contracting Disadvantaged Business Enterprises (DBEs) for the contracting across all activities, including installation of clean energy projects, heat pumps, and other energy efficiency measures.
- e** Prioritize registered apprenticeship programs that create pathways into family-sustaining careers.



recommendation 7

Ensure accountability and transparency throughout the development, refinement, implementation, and reporting of the RICAS.

a

Implement voluntary, anonymous demographic surveys at each community input session and publish the results within the RICAS to provide transparency about the perspectives that influenced specific sections of the report and accountability regarding the equity requirements within the Act on Climate.

b

Inform those who participate in community input sessions about how their feedback will be integrated into the plan.

c

Publish transparent timelines in which each activity will be implemented, the government entity responsible for implementation, the baseline data used, how progress will be measured, and ongoing community input opportunities for each activity that are equitable, accessible, and inclusive.

d

Publish on an easily accessible public platform the health equity outcomes of environmental improvement measures along with climate and emissions reductions.



After the 2025 Strategy is complete, we recommend that the EC4 launch a series of educational events to inform environmental justice communities about how their feedback was included, what activities that will be taking place, how they can be involved, and how progress is being monitored.





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