

National Caucus of Environmental Legislators

Energy Affordability Messaging Toolkit



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NCEL Energy Affordability Messaging Toolkit

Contents & Methodology

Methodology

This Toolkit explores effective messaging for clean energy and affordability policies and is designed to be used alongside NCEL's [Energy Affordability Briefing Book](#). The content is organized around three policy categories: **Delivering Near-Term Relief (Section 1)**, **Protecting Customers & Reforming the System (Section 2)**, and **Building a Low-Cost Clean Energy Future (Section 3)**.

Each section includes an overview, key messages, corresponding policy options, and questions that legislators can expect from constituents. This Toolkit also includes quotes taken directly from stakeholder interviews, providing further context for the messaging strategies provided.

Finally, certain sections in the Toolkit provide deep dives on featured policy options contained within the companion Energy Affordability Briefing Book. These featured policy options are either widely applicable to state legislators or require specific messaging support to facilitate deeper understanding.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction



U.S. Energy Affordability and Public Perception

Affordability is [weighing heavily](#) on Americans right now, as [cost-of-living pressures](#) — from health care to rent to groceries — squeeze household budgets from every direction. Electricity bills are [rising across the country](#), and polling shows that [Americans believe utilities' drive for profits is a leading cause](#). For legislators, meeting people where they are and acknowledging their frustration over increasing bills can open the door to deeper conversations about reforms and solutions.

How This Toolkit Can Help

This Messaging Toolkit is designed to help legislators have productive conversations about energy affordability. The options offered here are grounded in public polling data and stakeholder interviews, drawing on input from organizations working with local communities, technical experts, bipartisan legislative advisors, and more.

While the content is designed to be useful across the nation, no two communities are the same. A message about rate assistance will land differently in rural Georgia than in suburban Pennsylvania. Farmers may be more concerned about land use, while a Tribal community may be more focused on energy sovereignty. State legislators can pair the insights from this Toolkit with their own knowledge of their community's story, values, and concerns to help drive effective messaging.

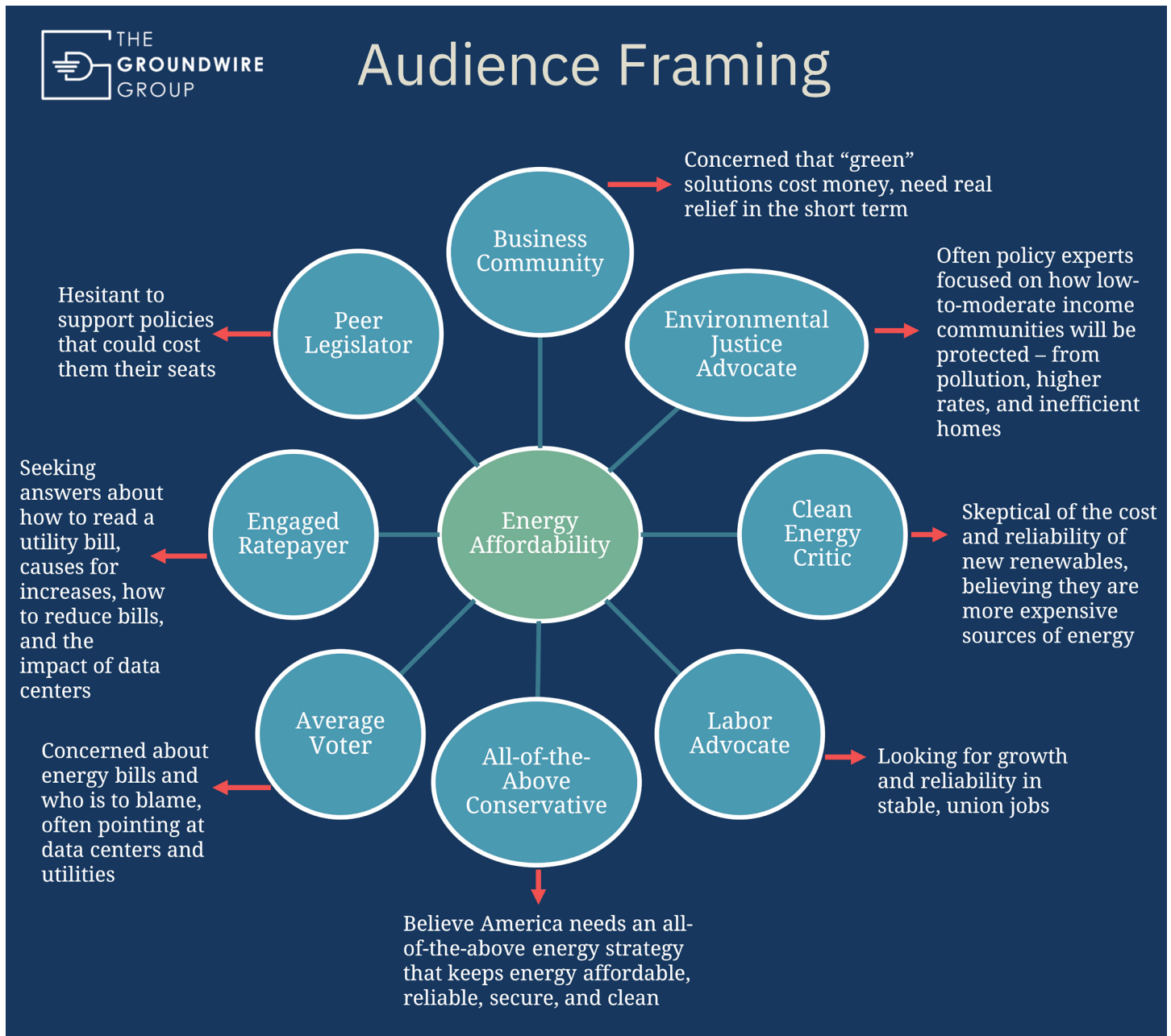


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Understanding Your Audience

Drawing on public polling, news coverage, and social media analysis, this Toolkit identifies eight distinct audience segments and examines how each responds to proposed clean energy and affordability policies: (1) what motivates their support, (2) what triggers their skepticism, and (3) what kinds of arguments are most likely to move them. Those insights directly inform the messaging strategies throughout this Toolkit, helping legislators tailor their approach to the specific people they are trying to reach. This same local knowledge can be used in policy creation. Involving communities and stakeholders in shaping policy — not just messaging — can lead to more durable outcomes. Below is a snapshot of the findings:



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Section 1: Delivering Near-Term Relief

Section Overview

Americans are increasingly feeling the [impacts of rising energy prices](#). The energy burden is particularly acute for low-income households that are paying [higher percentages](#) of their total income towards electric bills.

Ratepayers [seek to hold someone accountable for rising prices](#) — often it's utilities, and sometimes it's data centers. They are also actively seeking tangible, household-level solutions that give them autonomy over their energy usage and bills.

The policies highlighted in this section can help states provide near-term relief to constituents facing rising energy bills by **(1) addressing data center impacts**, **(2) providing direct relief to customers**, and **(3) shifting the costs of climate change off of residents**. Unlike decisions to cut energy efficiency or roll back climate targets, these are pathways for near-term relief that do not compromise climate or affordability solutions in the future.

Impacts & Perceptions

- **Data Centers:** [78% of Americans](#) say they are concerned that building new data centers will cause their bills to rise.
- **Relief for Customers:** [75% of voters](#) support federal energy assistance programs.
- **Shifting the Costs of Climate Change:** [71% of voters](#) believe oil and gas companies should pay a share of the costs for climate-related damages.

Interview Insights

- “People think it’s a basic human right to be able to have electricity and have enough to eat.”
- “People don’t know about [...] bill assistance and energy efficiency programs and how to access them.”
- “You can turn this back on the utilities by saying, ‘The utilities are not keeping rates down and it hurts all of us [...] and isn’t that a bad thing?’ Most will say, oh yes!”



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Section 1: Delivering Near-Term Relief

Addressing Data Center Impacts

Overview

The expansion of data centers is leading to a [massive increase in energy use](#) in the U.S., forcing grid operators to [increasingly rely](#) on dirtier and more expensive power plants to meet demand. Data centers have become [a target for frustration](#) over the affordability of energy, access to resources, and the sense that community voices are not sufficiently heard in development decisions. Messaging that focuses on accountability for data centers to limit waste, prevent fraud, and lower costs [performs well across the political spectrum](#).

Key Message

Without careful planning and guardrails, data center growth can cause [unpredictability in grid planning](#) and [increase electric bills](#) for ratepayers. Data centers can take on more of the cost burden created by the industry's growth to ease household costs.

Policy Options

See Section 1A of NCEL's [Energy Affordability Briefing Book](#) for policy options to address data center impacts, including:

- Protect Households and Businesses from Costs
- Require Data Centers to Bring Their Own New Clean Energy
- Require Data Centers to Operate Flexibly
- Require Data Centers to Support Customer-Owned Clean Energy
- Charge Data Centers for Direct Bill Assistance

Common Questions from Constituents

Q: Will my bills go up because of data centers in the area?

Data centers can lead to [increases in electric bills](#) for local ratepayers — but that outcome is not inevitable. If data centers are developed with effective guardrails, protections, and agreements in place, their development can [potentially pay for upgrades](#) to the grid that may have previously fallen on ratepayers.

Q: Should we just require data centers to build their own off-grid energy supply?

Even if data centers build new gas generation behind the meter, as some technology companies are doing, [they will still raise prices for households by increasing demand for fuel](#). One way to protect customers is to require data centers to procure new clean energy.



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Section 1: Delivering Near-Term Relief

Providing Direct Relief to Customers

Overview

With roughly [40% of households](#) experiencing energy insecurity in 2025 — and one in four low-income families spending [more than 15%](#) of their take-home pay on energy bills — all ratepayers can benefit from relief programs. Much like grid upgrades, fuel-cost swings, and approved utility costs, the cost of recovering unpaid utility bills is consistently spread across all ratepayers.

[Direct low-income relief programs](#) help households most in need while reducing costs for all ratepayers by lowering uncollectible balances and collection costs that are otherwise shared across the rate base. Additionally, by enabling some households to pay at least a portion of their energy bills, it reduces the amount that other ratepayers cover. Messaging can focus on these widespread benefits rather than benefits for only certain communities. More education and resources about how to access and navigate these programs can increase participation and awareness.

Key Message

[One in six American households](#) is behind on paying their electricity bills. When your neighbors can't afford to pay their bills, it affects everyone. The unpaid balance and the cost to try to recover those funds are spread through every other ratepayer's bills, including yours. Meanwhile, the more households that are paying in — even if only a portion of their bill — the more the costs of running the energy system are spread out. If we make it possible for vulnerable customers to afford their energy bills, we can avoid extra costs to all other customers as well.

Featured Policy Options

Adopt Rate or Bill Caps for Vulnerable Customers: States can cap rates or bills for a subset of customers (e.g., through a [percentage-of-income payment program](#)) or set lower rates for certain customers.

- **Messaging Note:** The costs of shutoffs and unpaid bills are [spread across all ratepayers](#). Because of this, programs that make energy more affordable and therefore reduce disconnections for low-income households ultimately benefit every customer. However, bills may increase again once these programs expire. To get ahead of this, legislators can communicate transparently about the duration of bill caps and plan early for how to communicate about eventual increases.



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Expand Weatherization and Energy Efficiency Programs: States can provide funding to fix energy leaks, replace old insulation, and upgrade inefficient appliances. Weatherization saves the average household [nearly \\$400](#) per year, and every dollar spent leads to [\\$1.72 in energy savings](#) on average.

- **Messaging Note:** Weatherization and energy efficiency programs are increasingly being [targeted for cuts](#) because they remove a line item from a utility bill, thus providing the appearance of bill savings. Messaging can note that cutting these programs may seem like a short-term win, but that doing so [increases costs and reduces savings](#) over the long term. Additionally, while [public support](#) for these programs is high, many residents do not know how to access them effectively. Increasing customer education offers a clear opportunity to boost participation in weatherization and energy efficiency programs.

Other Policy Options

See Section 1B of NCEL's [Energy Affordability Briefing Book](#) for additional policy options for providing direct relief to customers, including:

- Expand Customer Rebates
- Ban Utility Shutoffs and Provide Fee Waivers

Common Questions from Constituents

Q: What goes into my utility bill?

Utility bills include all the [costs involved in providing services](#) like electricity, water, gas, or sewage. [For electricity](#), this includes generation (power plants), transmission (high-voltage lines that move energy), and distribution (lines, poles, transformers, and meters that deliver electricity to homes and businesses). For the nearly [75% of Americans](#) served by a privately owned utility, bills can also include [return on equity](#) — the profit margin regulators allow utilities to earn. Increasingly, other costs — like payroll or wildfire mitigation — are included in utility bills as well.

Q: Are there ways I can take control of my electricity bill and usage?

[Some costs in your bill are set through regulatory processes](#), but there are steps you can take to lower it. Weatherizing your home by sealing off drafty spots or replacing old insulation can save your household [hundreds of dollars per year](#) on average. So can upgrading from less efficient appliances to newer, [energy-efficient models](#). “[Smart appliances](#)” can also run during times when demand is lower and rates are cheaper. These solutions may be more accessible to a homeowner than a renter, but improvements to how energy efficiency and weatherization programs are designed and accessed can benefit all residents.



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Section 1: Delivering Near-Term Relief

Shifting the Costs of Climate Change Off of Residential Customers

Overview

Climate-related risks are driving higher energy costs by creating a need for [resilience investments](#), [liability insurance](#), and repairs after extreme weather events, such as [hurricanes](#). In response, [people feel that they are being overcharged on their energy bills](#), and [most believe utilities are to blame](#). Policies that shift these costs from ratepayers to utilities can appeal to residents' intuition about the challenges at hand. Policies that shift costs to large polluters — such as [cap-and-invest programs](#) — may not be as intuitive but can [still resonate](#) with some explanation.

Key Message

In many places, households are expected to foot the entire bill for grid damages from extreme weather — such as wildfires and hurricanes — and for protections to prevent future damage. Instead, companies whose pollution contributes to extreme weather, along with the utilities that profit from these projects, can share in these expenses.

Policy Options

See Section 1C of NCEL's [Energy Affordability Briefing Book](#) for policy options to address shifting the costs of climate change off of residential customers, including:

- Shift Costs to State Budgets
- Charge Polluters and Shareholders for Grid-Hardening Investments and Insurance

Common Questions from Constituents

Q: How are the effects of climate change factored into my electricity bill?

Utilities pass along many of the costs of climate change impacts to their ratepayers. Your electric bill could include the cost of [rebuilding the grid after wildfires or hurricanes](#), the cost of [making the grid more resilient](#) to future climate-change-fueled disasters, and the [cost of insurance](#) to protect utilities from financial losses if the infrastructure they own contributes to a disaster (such as if a power line spark causes a wildfire).



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Section 2: Protecting Customers & Reforming the System

Section Overview

Unlike other businesses, [utilities operate as a monopoly](#). The [government grants utilities the exclusive right to operate in a region](#), without competition, because building multiple sets of infrastructure to deliver electricity to the same neighborhood is both inefficient and costly. In exchange, [regulators oversee utilities](#) to ensure they are offering reliable service and fair rates for consumers. However, there is [growing suspicion among Americans](#) that the rates that they pay are unfair — a concern validated by [trends in utility profit margins](#). As a result, many feel powerless over how much they are charged for utilities.

The policies highlighted in this section can strengthen protections for ratepayers by **(1) strengthening utility regulation, (2) auditing utility spending and increasing transparency, (3) protecting customers from volatile fuel prices, (4) exploring public ownership to increase accountability to the public, and (5) improving and expanding competitive electricity markets.**

Impacts & Perceptions

- **Control Over Costs:** [80% of Americans](#) say they feel powerless over their utility charges.
- **Utility Blame:** A majority of Americans — Democrats, Independents, and Republicans — increasingly blame [utility companies](#) for high energy prices.
- **Potential Savings:** “Fuel cost-sharing” can save ratepayers money: one study shows that during the pandemic, it could have saved ratepayers at least [\\$2 billion](#).
- **Support for Publicly Owned Utilities:** [68% of voters](#) support having a publicly owned utility as their utility provider.
- **Costs of Monopolies:** Residential ratepayers in monopoly utility states have missed out on [\\$250 billion in savings over the past 16 years](#).

Interview Insights

- “*Intuitively, most Americans are pretty directionally correct in the big picture of why their bills are so high and rising.*”
- “*That message [of corporate greed] resonated strongly and intersected naturally with the data center issue. It reinforced a broader public sentiment that elected officials were prioritizing corporate interests over everyday people.*”



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Section 2: Protecting Customers & Reforming the System

Strengthening Utility Regulation

Overview

Regulators — [Public Utility Commissions \(PUCs\)](#) in most cases — serve as the only check on utility plans that determine customer energy rates. However, a [large majority](#) of Americans do not understand what PUCs are or how they operate. Messaging can begin with what PUCs are, what they do, and how constituents can engage with them.

Key Message

A Public Utility Commission (PUC) is a state government body that sets the rules for electric, gas, and water companies — including how much they can charge customers. It is the main, and often the only, check on utility spending. As their responsibilities continue to grow, many PUCs are [unable to adequately protect customers](#) due to staffing and resource shortages. By equipping PUCs to make informed decisions on utility requests, we can strengthen oversight, improve accountability, and help ensure public participation.

Featured Policy Options

Revise Utility Profit Model: States can adjust rules to reward utilities for performance rather than investment. States can pursue [Performance-Based Regulation \(PBR\)](#) designed to incentivize utilities to minimize costs, increase efficiencies, and support customer ownership of energy resources. However, for PBR to effectively reduce bills, PUCs [can establish stringent performance metrics and incentives](#) that can overcome the existing profit motive to maximize spending on traditional infrastructure.

- **Messaging Note:** Legislators can start by laying out the incentive models these policies seek to address, by saying, for example: “Utilities currently have no reason to reduce customer bills, and every reason to spend more. Policies that reward utilities for keeping costs down can result in both utility and household savings.”

Rightsize Utility Profit Through Return on Equity (ROE) Reform: States can lower bills by requiring [PUCs to revisit ROE](#) — the profit utilities are allowed to earn on their capital investments — to ensure it is based on the most recent information regarding the minimum level necessary to attract investors.

- **Messaging Note:** Executive pay is also a helpful way to illustrate this point. Audiences already suspicious of utility profits will find it intuitive that guaranteed returns and CEO compensation are two sides of the same dynamic.



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Other Policy Options

See Section 2A of NCEL's [Energy Affordability Briefing Book](#) for additional policy options to strengthen utility regulation, including:

- Expand the Mandate and Capacity of Public Utility Commissions
- Limit Utility Power to Fully Drive Decisions

Common Questions from Constituents

Q: How will you prevent utilities from raising my rates just to make more money?

Right now, utilities make [more money by spending more money](#), and you are footing the bill. This can be addressed by strengthening the rules that regulators, often PUCs, use to oversee utility rate requests. States can improve PUC funding and resourcing, cap utility profit margins at the minimum level needed to attract investors, reward utilities for cutting costs, limit guaranteed returns on investment, and provide dedicated customer advocates.



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Section 2: Protecting Customers & Reforming the System

Auditing Utility Spending and Increasing Transparency

Overview

[Most Americans do not fully understand what's in their energy bill](#), leaving them reliant on government oversight of utility spending. Trust in state and local government is much higher than trust in the federal government, [but even trust in state governments has been slowly declining](#). Putting the customer's rights and needs at the center of the messaging, with a focus on transparency, can help build trust at the state level.

Key Message

Utilities profit by spending more on infrastructure, and customer bills often include hidden fees and surcharges on top of that. Customers deserve to know what's in their bills. Auditing utility spending, eliminating “[junk fees](#),” and giving regulators the tools to push back can help put a check on rising bills.

Policy Options

See Section 2B of NCEL's [Energy Affordability Briefing Book](#) for policy options to address auditing utility spending and increasing transparency, including:

- Audit Grid Spending
- Increase Bill Transparency and Remove Unnecessary Fees

Common Questions from Constituents

Q: How will you hold utilities accountable for costs?

Right now, utilities earn more when they spend more. That can change. Utilities can earn profits [by delivering results for customers](#) — lower bills, greater reliability, and less waste — instead of being rewarded for higher spending. Stronger transparency rules can also ensure that when a utility asks for a rate increase, customers can see exactly what they're spending it on and whether these costs are justified.



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Section 2: Protecting Customers & Reforming the System

Protecting Customers from Volatile Fuel Prices

Overview

In some states, [utilities can pass higher-than-expected fuel costs from supply chain disruptions on to ratepayers](#). The idea of “[fuel cost sharing](#)” is generally popular among voters. A [majority of voters](#) agree that monopoly utilities should share the burden of higher fuel costs, rather than passing all costs on to customers. However, the messaging that resonates the most is not “fuel cost sharing.” Rather, “utility accountability” or “fair power pricing” tends to land better with the public.

Key Message

When [natural gas prices spike](#) due to supply chain disruptions, global conflicts, or extreme weather, utilities pass the entire increase directly to customers. Changing the rules to make utilities share in that risk can help protect customers from unpredictable price swings. It can also create a financial incentive for utilities to invest in cleaner, more price-stable energy sources.

Policy Options

See Section 2C of NCEL’s [Energy Affordability Briefing Book](#) for policy options to address protecting customers from volatile fuel prices, including:

- Require Utilities to Share in Fuel Price Risk

Common Questions from Constituents

Q: How will you prevent unexpected, large cost increases?

Not all increases in your energy bill come from using more electricity — they’re often driven by swings in natural gas prices. Under current rules, when outside factors like [war](#) or [extreme weather](#) cause prices to jump, [utilities can pass those cost increases on to customers](#). Requiring utilities to absorb some of those costs creates a financial incentive to invest in more price-stable energy sources and demand-side solutions, [like solar, wind](#), and [demand response](#). In addition to providing lower, more stable costs, these resources also provide [significant reliability benefits during extreme weather](#) and other periods of high demand.



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Section 2: Protecting Customers & Reforming the System

Exploring Public Ownership to Increase Accountability to the Public

Overview

Households served by publicly owned utilities have [lower utility bills on average](#) because private utilities are [incentivized](#) to maximize shareholder returns rather than limit costs. Whether the policy approach is to expand public options or establish comprehensive public ownership of grid infrastructure, messaging can focus on keeping corporate profits from inflating personal bills.

Key Message

For most Americans, [one company controls their local electricity system](#). That company is [structured to prioritize shareholder expectations](#), often ahead of customers. But public alternatives are available that drive down costs and put the customers first, including [state-run green banks](#), [community choice aggregation programs](#), and [full public ownership of electrical infrastructure](#).

Policy Options

See Section 2D of NCEL's [Energy Affordability Briefing Book](#) for policy options for exploring public ownership to increase accountability to the public, including:

- Explore Utility Municipalization
- Enable Public Development of Clean Energy
- Allow Municipalities to Buy Their Own Power

Common Questions from Constituents

Q: Why is the government suited to manage the grid rather than the utility that has been doing so for decades?

State governments are elected to represent everyone living in the state. When determining how to build its energy system, the state government considers (1) [how it will get electricity to everyone who needs it](#), (2) [how it can collaborate with neighboring states](#), (3) [the impacts of the energy system on the communities where infrastructure is hosted](#), and (4) [the economic benefits of that system](#). When a state or local government purchases infrastructure from an investor-owned utility, it [shifts accountability](#) toward the people the grid serves rather than shareholders. State governments are [qualified to balance these decisions](#).



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Section 2: Protecting Customers & Reforming the System

Improving and Expanding Competitive Electricity Markets

Overview

About a [third of the country](#) is served by a utility that faces no competition and therefore has limited incentive to provide the lowest-cost energy to consumers. [Competitive electricity markets empower third-party developers](#) to build and operate generation resources and compete in transparent markets to sell their electricity. Markets that span a broad region [allow cheaper energy to flow](#) to areas where demand is highest. States that deploy these policies can frame the issue around existing knowledge and perceptions: most Americans [blame utilities for higher energy prices](#) and [oppose a single company dominating a market](#).

Key Message

Utilities are generally granted [legal monopolies](#) because it's inefficient and more expensive to have more than one company building poles and wires in the same neighborhood. But in some cases, utility monopoly privileges [drive up prices for ratepayers](#). When paired with oversight and other protections, joining regional electricity markets or working with [Regional Transmission Organizations \(RTOs\)](#) lets utilities compete with other power providers to procure lower-cost energy. This can help level the playing field and bring prices down for everyone.

Policy Options

See Section 2E of NCEL's [Energy Affordability Briefing Book](#) for policy options to address improving and expanding competitive electricity markets, including:

- Join Regional Markets or Form New Ones
- Engage with Regional Transmission Organizations to Improve Markets

Common Questions from Constituents

Q: What are regional electricity markets and how do they help reduce costs?

Regional electricity markets are [trading platforms in which different states or utility areas can buy and sell energy](#). Consumers benefit from access to energy from multiple regions, and more options can lead to [cheaper power](#). Participating in a regional electricity market also creates an opportunity for different areas to [plan together and coordinate infrastructure across a larger region](#), helping to optimize the grid for cost-effective performance.



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Section 3: Building a Low-Cost Clean Energy Future

Section Overview

The United States' aging grid will need [upgrades](#) and [additional power generation](#) to deliver stable and affordable energy into the future. State legislators can advance a clean, affordable energy future while simultaneously delivering short- and medium-term relief in energy prices.

Clean energy sources — such as solar, batteries, and wind — are often [more cost-effective](#) than building new fossil fuel resources and [can be built much faster](#). Lead times for large gas turbines [are about five years](#). This has led even energy-intensive data centers to [turn to solar and storage while they wait](#). Prices for gas turbines are expected [to jump 195%](#) from 2019 levels by 2027.

Messaging that centers on unlocking low-cost clean energy and providing ratepayers with more autonomy over their energy can help residents see the affordability benefits of a clean energy system.

The policies highlighted in this section focus on making it easier and more cost-effective to build a clean energy system by **(1) removing deployment barriers for utility-scale clean energy; (2) using procurement, incentives, and public finance to lower costs; (3) expanding distributed energy resources; and (4) improving planning to make best use of ratepayer revenue.**

Impacts & Perceptions

- **Clean Energy:** [73% of Americans](#) believe that building more clean energy will cut costs.
- **Clean Grid:** In [nearly every state](#), a majority of voters support the government moving the country to a 100% clean electricity grid by 2035.
- **Community Solar:** [78% of voters](#) believe community solar — a [Distributed Energy Resource](#) — should be part of their state's energy strategy.
- **Cost of Grid Upgrades:** About [40% of Americans](#) believe energy costs are going up because of efforts to update or expand the grid.

Interview Insights

- “There’s evidence people are starting to connect that clean energy is affordable energy. There’s an openness there that wasn’t there 10 years ago.”
- “We position clean energy as a part of the solution to protect people.”



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Section 3: Building a Low-Cost Clean Energy Future

Removing Deployment Barriers for Utility-Scale Clean Energy

Overview

Despite clean energy often being the [lowest-cost option](#), new projects face delays [due to permitting bottlenecks](#), [years-long wait times](#) to connect to the grid, and local opposition. Over [two-thirds of voters](#) say they would be proud of clean energy projects in their community, but local opposition is causing many projects to be canceled — [most often](#) when the community feels unaware of what's happening. The challenge and opportunity for legislators is to deliver consistent and transparent processes for how clean energy projects will be built in their state.

Key Message

Building clean energy projects quickly and affordably means cutting red tape — but not at the expense of the communities where these projects will be located. We can update and reform the way clean energy projects are planned and built to speed the transition to a low-cost, clean energy system of the future.

Featured Policy Options

Improve Speed and Certainty in Siting Processes: States can set more predictable, informed siting processes by (1) setting up a state siting process for large projects, (2) setting minimum timelines and transparency requirements for municipal siting processes, (3) providing technical assistance for local governments to negotiate strong community benefit agreements, and (4) limiting local government restrictions on clean energy projects.

- **Messaging Note:** Permitting and siting reforms can be communicated as efforts to create [more transparent processes](#) that reflect the input and knowledge of states and local communities. This framing can also emphasize [giving landowners the right to decide the future of their own private property](#) while maintaining [environmental protections](#). Multiple voices can be engaged in these reforms, and legislators can communicate who was engaged and how their input shaped decision-making.

Other Policy Options

See Section 3A of NCEL's [Energy Affordability Briefing Book](#) for additional policy options for removing deployment barriers for utility-scale clean energy, including:

- Create Fast, Consistent, and Predictable Permitting
- Accelerate Interconnection



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Common Questions from Constituents

Q: Can renewables keep the lights on?

Yes. In fact, renewables and energy storage have played a major role in keeping the lights on and bills low during many different energy challenges. [Offshore wind proved essential during Winter Storm Fern](#), and [Texas's vast solar and storage network has helped the state maintain reliability during heat waves and other extreme events](#). [Energy efficiency](#) and [demand response](#) are also effective tools for keeping the lights on during periods of high demand. Because these resources are “homegrown” — meaning that they are sourced locally and not controlled by any producer or country — their [availability and price do not change dramatically](#) during conflict or war.



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Section 3: Building a Low-Cost Clean Energy Future

Using Procurement, Incentives, and Public Finance to Lower Costs

Overview

High [upfront costs and unpredictable markets](#) currently make it difficult to build clean energy projects, despite these projects being the [lowest-cost new generation](#) in the long run. [Most Americans believe](#) that building clean energy specifically will cut costs. However, not all are convinced, and affordability is not the first benefit Americans name when asked about clean energy projects. Real-world examples of places where clean energy and demand-side solutions are already lowering costs can help make the connection clearer and help create a vision of the future worthy of investment.

Key Message

Success stories around the country show that [states that produce their own wind and solar power are seeing lower energy costs](#). Policies that deploy energy efficiency and other [demand-side solutions can also provide economic benefits for ratepayers](#). Directing capital towards — and motivating utilities to prioritize — energy efficiency, renewables, and related technologies can create a more affordable energy future.

Featured Policy Options

Adopt Energy Efficiency Resource Standards and Clean Electricity Standards: [Energy Efficiency Resource Standards \(EERS\)](#) require utilities to achieve a minimum level of energy savings from the adoption of energy efficiency measures. While many states have EERS, [many can be updated](#) to increase savings requirements and encourage switching from fossil fuels to efficient electric appliances. [Clean Electricity Standards \(CES\)](#) require utilities to procure an increasing share of power from clean sources, creating demand certainty for developers.

- **Messaging Note:** Most Americans [want utilities to be held accountable](#). One way to create that accountability is to require utilities to meet certain standards, such as investing in lower-cost or customer-owned resources over options that generate higher returns for shareholders. Legislators can communicate how these standards create ratepayer benefits (such as rebates or access to more affordable, cleaner energy) while addressing utility power imbalances.

Other Policy Options

See Section 3B of NCEL's [Energy Affordability Briefing Book](#) for additional policy options for using procurement, incentives, and public finance to lower costs, including:

- Adopt Energy Storage Standards and Procurement
- Wield Public Finance



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Common Questions from Constituents

Q: If clean energy is the more affordable solution, why do we need standards and incentives to encourage utilities to build it?

Clean energy is [more cost-effective to operate over its lifetime](#) than fossil fuels. But without a mandate for utilities to build it, [they often default to the status quo](#). Meanwhile, utilities don't take on the risks for spikes in fuel costs, and instead pass those risks to ratepayers. Renewables, which have no fuel costs, can [reduce what customers pay for electricity](#). But without competitive pressure or regulatory requirements, utilities often won't pursue this benefit on their own.

Q: What is the benefit of using public funds to finance energy infrastructure?

Clean energy projects require a large upfront investment. When financing costs are high or markets are unpredictable, [even the cheapest long-term energy options can be too expensive to build](#). Those high financing costs [can get passed on to ratepayers](#). Public financing tools like [green banks](#) and [state bond banks](#) reduce reliance on more expensive private capital, bringing down project costs. Financing projects through green banks can also have broader economic benefits; for every dollar invested through a green bank, three to seven dollars [are mobilized](#) in private capital.



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Section 3: Building a Low-Cost Clean Energy Future

Expanding Distributed Energy Resources (DERs)

Overview

As demand soars and large-scale infrastructure struggles to keep pace, [Distributed Energy Resources \(DERs\)](#) — like residential solar, storage, and [demand response](#) technologies — can step in to [lower costs](#) for individual customers while reducing infrastructure spending for everyone. Both [community solar](#) and [virtual power plants](#) have high levels of [bipartisan support](#). The adoption of these resources can be expanded by limiting permitting barriers, demystifying the more technical aspects of these solutions, and educating consumers about existing programs that make these technologies affordable. Framing these resources as “community power” or “community-based power” can [reduce confusion and build buy-in](#).

Key Message

Distributed energy resources are community-based power. They offer an opportunity for communities to create electricity right at home and manage when electricity is used, thereby reducing peak demand often met by dirtier power plants. The rules can be rewritten to make it easier for more people to own and benefit from these resources.

Policy Options

See Section 3C of NCEL's [Energy Affordability Briefing Book](#) for policy options to expand distributed energy resources (DERs), including:

- Adopt and Expand Community Solar Programs
- Establish Virtual Power Plant Programs
- Expand Incentives and Financing for Customer-Owned Resources
- Streamline Interconnection and Permitting for DERs
- Reform Utility Incentives to Support DERs

Common Questions from Constituents

Q: A lot of people can't afford to install solar for their home, even if it does help lower bills. How do we make this more affordable?

There are several ways to make small-scale solar accessible to more households. We could [require data centers to fund rooftop solar installations for local households](#) as a condition of building in a community. Laws enabling “[plug-in solar](#)” — smaller, cheaper modules that renters can use too — would expand access beyond homeowners. We can also [direct utilities](#) to set up programs for customers to purchase power from nearby [community solar projects](#), allowing anyone to benefit from small-scale solar, whether or not they install it on their own rooftop.



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Section 3: Building a Low-Cost Clean Energy Future

Improving Planning to Make Best Use of Ratepayer Revenue

Overview

America's electrical grid is [decades old and urgently needs rebuilding](#) to meet growing demand and extreme weather impacts. While there is [some base-level public awareness of the issues facing the grid](#), there is still a public awareness gap regarding the scope of the problem. Lawmakers can position grid planning reform as a strategy to limit utility influence — putting the future of the grid in the hands of public agencies, rather than utilities. This aligns with [Americans' desire to hold utilities to account](#). However, each policy will require careful attention to accuracy and nuance.

Key Message

The grid that exists today isn't up to the challenges it will face tomorrow. To ensure affordable and reliable energy for everyone, investments can be made to upgrade and expand the grid. Decisions made now will dictate how those investments are made in the years to come — and who reaps the benefits.

Policy Options

See Section 3D of NCEL's [Energy Affordability Briefing Book](#) for policy options to improve planning to make the best use of ratepayer revenue, including:

- Integrate Generation and Transmission Planning
- Require Grid Flexibility and Advanced Transmission Technologies in Planning
- Require DERs in Planning
- Establish State Transmission Planning Authorities
- Increase Participation in Order 1920 Planning Processes

Common Questions from Constituents

Q: How does investing in the grid make bills cheaper?

"Investing in the grid" can mean many different things. We can take steps to make it easier to get power from where it is generated to where it is needed. This can help homes and businesses access abundant, lower-cost electricity instead of competing for scarcer, more expensive power.

This can mean investing in larger solutions, rather than [constant "band-aids"](#) that cost more in the long run. We can [build large transmission lines](#) that connect one region with extra electricity to another that needs it. We can deploy new technologies to upgrade existing lines, reducing "traffic jams" and energy waste in the process. We can also [prepare the grid to better integrate](#) community-based power, like rooftop or community solar.



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Q: How do we make the most out of our existing grid?

There are many ways to improve our existing grid. We can make sure existing interconnections — or sites where power plants plug into the grid — are [fully utilized](#). If there are points of interconnection that aren't, we can direct utilities to build new, clean power there before building elsewhere. We can improve the performance of our grid using [technologies that make our power lines more effective](#) at carrying power from where it's generated to where it's used. We can also direct utilities to prioritize customer-owned power generation — [like rooftop solar](#) — when making plans to improve our grid.

Conclusion



Key Takeaways for State Legislators

Legislators can more effectively advance energy affordability solutions by incorporating their constituents' existing knowledge, demonstrating their ability to champion their constituents' needs, and offering a positive vision for the future. Conversations can be highly localized and specific to the policies legislators choose to advance. This messaging guidance acts as a compass to navigate these discussions, bring constituents in as collaborators, and build support for solutions.

Below are key takeaways from the Toolkit's three primary sections:

- 1. Delivering Near-Term Relief:** Americans are [feeling the pain](#) of energy prices now, and they [seek immediate action](#). Legislators can build trust by acknowledging this frustration and outlining the steps they are taking to (1) protect ratepayers from the impacts of data centers, (2) provide realistic options for keeping up with energy costs, and (3) make bills cheaper right away through rebates and home upgrade programs.
- 2. Protecting Customers & Reforming the System:** Americans [feel powerless](#) over their energy bills and overwhelmingly [blame utilities](#) for the [increasingly expensive electricity](#). The growing consensus that utilities should be held accountable offers legislators an opening to advance system-wide reforms with broad public support.
- 3. Building a Low-Cost Clean Energy Future:** Most Americans do [not associate](#) building new renewables with improving long-term affordability and [do not understand how modernizing the grid](#) contributes to lowering bills. Legislators can offer a positive vision of the future to help make the connections clearer and build momentum for enacting these policies.

Learn More

To learn more about Energy Affordability and specific policy options for your state, visit [NCEL's website](#) and explore the companion [Energy Affordability Briefing Book](#).



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