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Title: Equal Access to Sunshine: Barriers & Opportunities for PV in Disadvantaged Communities

Abstract: Though improvements have been made in recent years, barriers still prevent equitable access to renewable energy especially for multifamily properties in disadvantaged communities. This session will focus on lessons learned while navigating the installation of more than 4 MW of incentive-funded multifamily solar PV projects in disadvantaged communities throughout California. Construction and Utility Coordination Prior to and during construction, owners and design teams must navigate widely variable utility rates and interconnection requirements across different regions of an affordable housing portfolio. Interconnection delays can leave low-income properties in a difficult financial spot while they wade through months of delays and unbudgeted expenses for solar systems that are not yet providing any benefit. Additionally, some utilities do not allow virtual net energy metering (VNEM), which can limit or eliminate the ability to deliver financial benefits to low-income renters at direct-metered properties. This session will explore how streamlined design and interconnection pre-approval processes and access to VNEM tariffs across utility territories can even the playing field and reduce barriers to solar access in disadvantaged communities. Post-Interconnection and Billing Once new solar PV systems are online, benefits typically take 2-3 months to appear on bills. Due to the variety of rate and program options, owners and residents are often faced with confusing bills that do not clearly highlight solar production or annual true-up costs, if applicable. This challenge is even more acute for residents who do not speak English natively. Finally, without access and attention to measurement and verification (M&V) tools, our research shows that underperformance of a solar PV system can go unnoticed for months or indefinitely. In an effort to confirm that solar PV systems perform as expected and that owners and residents receive financial benefits, our research includes benchmarking and simplified M&V for all low-income properties served. In this session, we will share lessons learned through ongoing bill and data analysis and explore opportunities for policy changes to better protect owners and residents. We aim to start a conversation about some of the challenges and pain points of solar PV for low-income communities to empower owners and residents alike to realize equitable energy from sunshine.