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Title: The Solar Technical Assistance Team (STAT) Experience: Lessons in Designing, Executing, and Evaluating an Energy-Sector Technical Assistance Program

Abstract: Objective: Discuss a case study in program design and impact measurement based on insights from the National Renewable Energy Laboratory's Solar Technical Assistance Team program. The session will focus on two key themes: (1) strategic program design to enhance the impact of government-funded programs assisting non-technical audiences in a technical field, and (2) the relationship between impact measurement and iterative program design. Abstract Over a 10-year period, the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) worked with over 150 state and local government entities across the country to provide expert assistance on solar technology-, policy-, and financing-related questions through NREL's Solar Technical Assistance Team (STAT) program. Funded by the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), the STAT program provided state and local governments with direct access to national lab subject matter experts, tools, and other non-financial resources to address a wide range of solar-related questions. The STAT program offers a valuable case study into the provision of non-financial support in a technical field to a non-technical audience. In evaluating a decade of STAT programmatic iteration, NREL identified five key themes associated with high-impact program design: (1) dynamic scoping of technical assistance interventions (which included input from program implementers, subject-matter experts, and the state and local entities requesting assistance); (2) frequency of interactions; (3) addressing divergence in market experience; (4) balancing individualized assistance and replication, and; (5) impact measurement and program evaluation. Because the lessons learned are not specific to the STAT domain (solar energy), findings may be transferable to other government-funded analytical support programs. Impact measurement and program evaluation constituted the most significant change in program design over the 10-year STAT lifespan. The approach expanded beyond simple counts of technical assistance interventions in the program's early years to a more robust methodology to measure the impact of assistance through both quantitative and qualitative indicators. In the final year of the STAT program, NREL adapted the Colorado State University's (CSU) Community Readiness Model (CRM) originally developed by the CSU Tri-Ethnic Center to assess a community's readiness to address issues such as drug and alcohol abuse and to tailor response efforts accordingly to the STAT context. In adapting and piloting the CRM approach, the STAT program identified a potential new pathway for measuring and evaluating program impact for energy-sector technical assistance programs. This session will provide a deep-dive into the STAT impact measurement and evaluation methodology and its dynamic relationship to program design and implementation.