



# Midwest “Solarize” Solar Group Purchase Programs



## **CONTACT:**

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## **MORE:**

[www.midwestrenew.org/solargroupbuy](http://www.midwestrenew.org/solargroupbuy)

## PROGRAM OVERVIEW

### Purpose:

Improve consumer understanding of the potential for solar energy investments on their home or business, increasing deployment of highest value/lowest cost solar energy in communities across the Midwest.

### Background:

Group Buys are important tools for scaling solar deployment in a market in a short period of time. When done correctly, they can be beneficial to everyone involved, including residents, businesses, local organizations, and jurisdictions. They work by aggregating demand for solar, usually in a small geographic area, achieving economies of scale. They lower the solar installers' "soft costs" further by providing up-front customer education en masse, leading to a higher-than-average conversion rate for solar leads. Home and business owners see lower prices for their solar array, and communities move toward achieving their sustainability goals.

## WHY GROUP BUY?

In a solar group buy, people learn about solar together, with neighbors, local business owners, and community leaders. Working in partnership, we provide high value education that informs people about the technology and the investment potential.



### Property Owners

Property owners get access to lower prices for high quality solar arrays that save them money on their electric bill for decades and increase their energy independence.

## WHO BENEFITS?



### Communities

Communities reach their climate goals faster through the education and investment of their residents in solar photovoltaics.



### The Environment

Emissions from hundreds of thousands of pounds of fossil fuels are avoided thanks to dozens of property owners producing their own clean electricity.

### *In a survey of group buy participants in 9 solar group buys in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin...*

- **74%** said it was important or very important that the group buy program is managed by an independent, nonprofit organization (i.e. The Midwest Renewable Energy Association).
- **67%** said it was important or very important that the group buy program has the support of a municipality.
- **70%** said it was important or very important that the information provided at the Solar Power Hour is developed by an independent, non-profit organization.
- **83%** said they found the Solar Power hour informative or very informative.
- **93%** said they knew more about issues relating to solar as a result of the program.
- **84%** said they are more likely to pay attention to energy policy issues in their state because of their participation in the solar group buy program.
- **85%** said they are now more aware of solar resources and tools available to them.

# PROGRAM SPECIFICS

This specific Group Buy program can be thought of as a two phase process. Phase 1 involves setting the program up for success and Phase II involves implementation of the outreach, education, and installation of solar PV. Each partner has key responsibilities to make the program a success.

## PROGRAM PHASES:

### PHASE I Activities (6-8 weeks)

1. Convene program partners
2. Establish roles for program partners
3. Convene Advisory Committee
4. Establish RFP requirements if different from template (union-made components, etc.)
5. Issue RFP to relevant industry networks and review submitted proposals with Advisory Committee
6. Select solar installer, begin regular meetings with local team + installer
7. Identify target demographics, groups, organizations (farmers, business owners, residents of certain neighborhoods, members of certain organizations)
8. Identify local Solar Power Hour facilitator
9. Schedule 7-20 outreach sessions (Solar Power Hours) at key locations
10. Make contact with promotional partners and establish expectations, trades, partnerships
11. Create logo, branding, website, posters, handouts, sign up forms, tracking spreadsheets
12. Create Solar Power Hour presentation
13. Convene volunteer street team to identify key locations and distribute promotional materials

### PHASE II Activities (16-20 weeks)

1. Issue press release announcing the program
2. Facilitate 7-20 Solar Power Hours
3. Track sign-ups, site assessments, proposals, and signed contracts
4. Respond to questions/concerns from participants
5. Communicate progress with participants regularly
6. Implement Continuous promotion strategy
7. Optimize sign-up to contact timeline, including site assessments and proposals
8. Install solar on local properties

***Solar Group Buys inspire many people to go solar who otherwise wouldn't.***

In a survey of group buy participants in 9 solar group buys in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin... **When asked how likely they were to install solar without the group buy...**

- ***59% said unlikely or very unlikely***
- ***25% said likely or very likely***



## PARTNER ROLES

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### JURISDICTION / MUNICIPALITY / LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS

**Assistance from the jurisdiction/  
municipality/local organizations may take  
the form of:**

1. Providing logistical assistance
2. Securing public space for info sessions
3. Providing promotional support via their promotional and informational dissemination networks
4. Potential advertising assistance
5. Assisting the MREA in making connections with local individuals and organizations that may be strong partners

### SOLAR INSTALLER

**The solar installer is responsible for:**

1. Attending Solar Power Hours to answer technical questions and meet potential customers
2. Providing a user-friendly platform or process for customers to sign up for site-assessments
3. Providing customer proposals no more than 48 hours after site assessment
4. Attending weekly program calls with MREA and other partners
5. Reporting progress regularly (weekly if possible)
6. Being familiar with local permitting and interconnection processes
7. Helping promote the program before, during, and after

### MREA

**MREA is responsible for the following, either independently and/or partnerships with local organizations:**

1. Coordinating the overall process
2. Coordinating on-site presentations (with help from local partners)
3. Scheduling events
4. Facilitating weekly phone calls with partners
5. Promoting through media
6. Branding (logo, aesthetic)
7. Developing resources (posters, brochures)
8. Developing a website
9. Assembling advisory committees
10. Preparing requests for proposals, establishing requirements and qualifications for the installer, including but not limited to: NABCEP certification, Master Electrician on staff, locally headquartered.
11. Reviewing request for proposals
12. Vetting installers
13. Scheduling events
14. Meeting with interested parties

*"I'm very excited to participate, once again, in the Solar program through MREA. It was very successful the first time around and we were able to help get solar power installed in a variety of venues."*

**-Mike Wiza,  
Mayor of Stevens Point, Wisconsin**

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## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

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***Customers adopt solar when their neighbors or others in close proximity adopt solar<sup>1</sup>.***

A strong focus on building a market in a concentrated geographical area over a relatively short period of time can build a market for years to come. Working with a single installer on a group buy program may seem like it crowds out their competitors, but the boost to the market outlasts the program timeline, improving market conditions for all stakeholders.

***The presence of affinity groups that advocate for solar lead to more installations in a given area.***

We work with as many local jurisdictions and organizations as we can to promote the solar effort, often partnering with them to host our free, public, one-hour educational “Solar Power Hours.” We emphasize local engagement through email newsletters from multiple organizations, social media, press, and radio to meet a large and diverse base of constituents.

***Discounts with deadlines help a greater number of people decide that “now is the time.”***

The MREA was established in 1990 with the mission of promoting renewable energy through education and demonstration. We have found over the years that delivering information is not as effective as delivering actionable information. Our programs include incentives like discounts that are tied to deadlines, so a greater proportion of our audience decides that now is the time to take action.

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<sup>1</sup>Graziano, Marcello, and Kenneth Gillingham. “Spatial patterns of solar photovoltaic system adoption: the influence of neighbors and the built environment.” *Journal of Economic Geography* 15.4 (2015): 815-839., Bollinger, Bryan, and Kenneth Gillingham. “Peer effects in the diffusion of solar photovoltaic panels.” *Marketing Science* 31.6 (2012): 900-912.

## PAST SUCCESSES

The following are just a few of the past successes throughout the Midwest that we have had with these types of programs. *We have run over 20 programs in Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota.*

### **CEDAR RAPIDS & LINN COUNTY, IA:**

In 2017 we led a group buy totaling 607 kW installed on 104 homes. We worked directly with city and county staff at Cedar Rapids and Linn County Public Health, as well as The Nature Conservancy of Iowa, Iowa350.org, and Indian Creek Nature Center to schedule education sessions all over the county, and promote the program widely in the press, in person, and online. Nearly 500 individuals learned about solar at 23 Solar Power Hours.

### **URBANA, IL:**

In 2016 we led a county-wide group buy totaling 605 kW installed on 81 homes and small businesses over 6 months. Over 430 individuals learned about solar at 24 Solar Power Hours. All told, over 140 homes and businesses received custom solar site assessments in the program. Out of this group, 81 participants signed a contract to go solar, for an aggregate total greater than \$65,600 in savings on energy costs in year one, offsetting over 1 million lbs of CO<sub>2</sub> in that same time frame.

### **MILWAUKEE, WI:**

A partnership with the City of Milwaukee's Environmental Collaboration Office and Milwaukee Shines program has involved recurring neighborhood-based group buys totalling 599 kW installed and counting. The program has led to over 164 installations on homes and small businesses since 2013. Over 700 individuals have been reached with solar education in the Milwaukee Metropolitan area.

### **BLOOMINGTON-NORMAL, IL:**

By working closely with the Normal, IL based Ecology Action Center, the Solar Bloomington-Normal program reached 242 individuals with Solar Power Hours, leading to 425 kW of solar added on 29 properties, including two commercial installations sized at 75 kW and 124 kW.

**EDUCATION:** In total, our free information sessions have educated over 4,600 individuals throughout the Midwest.



## Solar Urbana-Champaign



Solar Urbana-Champaign began when Scott Tess, Environmental Sustainability Manager for the City of Urbana, regarding technical assistance for solar in permitting, planning, and zoning, expressed interest also in the possibility of engaging the community with a group buy, at which point MREA staff met with Tess. Partners included Environmental Law & Policy Center (ELPC), Illinois Green Economy Network (IGEN), and the City of Urbana. After confirming municipal support, MREA issued a competitive Request for Proposals (RFP) for the Solar Urbana-Champaign program in September 2015. Proposals were reviewed by the advisory committee, including representatives from MREA, ELPC, IGEN, and Urbana. The advisory committee then made a recommendation to Urbana's conservation committee.

The press release announcing the program's launch was issued the week before Thanksgiving, inviting Champaign County locals to attend a December 2 launch event at Common Ground Food Co-op. Common Ground was selected as a location for the program's launch because the nature of a cooperative mirrors the program: the participants pool their resources to meet a desired outcome. The launch event was the first of 24 Solar Power Hours, free one-hour information sessions that cover the basics of solar, the program, and financial outlook for a few example homes and businesses. These Solar Power Hours were held all over Champaign County, but focused mostly on the cities of Urbana and Champaign at libraries, churches, corporate "lunch-and-learns," and other community spaces, coordinated by MREA staff. The program partners set a deadline of May 31 for participants to sign contracts, and potential participants attended Power Hours as late as mid-May.

The program was promoted through the website [SolarUrbanaChampaign.com](http://SolarUrbanaChampaign.com), radio, posters, brochures, yard signs, billboards on the side of public buses, public television, and in articles in print and on the web. The program partners issued press releases at every benchmark (100 kW, 150 kW, and 250 kW), which increased the legitimacy of the program and drew more would-be participants to the Solar Power Hours. Crucially, promotional help came from email blasts by local environmental and interfaith organizations to their networks, and emails from the program itself encouraged recipients to forward to their networks, expanding the reach and scope of the program's success.

Champaign-Urbana seemed "ready" for the group buy. Among its residents are progressive, highly educated individuals with incomes that can absorb the upfront cost of solar. All told, 81 homes and business went solar, totaling 605 kW in installations. The Solar Power Hours reached over 430 individuals with enlightening information about the process and costs of going solar. The solar contractor hired at least two individuals as a direct result of the program.

## TESTIMONIAL

### Dan Bucks (Milwaukee)



“Going solar in the first instance was based primarily on doing the right thing environmentally. That decision, though, is reinforced by the fact that solar is financially sound--especially when one considers that energy costs will begin to rise again in the next three or four years. Now is a good time because the economics of solar have reached the point of breaking even over a reasonable period of years--especially with the advantages of MREA’s Solar Buy program.

I am uncertain if we would have proceeded without the Solar Buy program making it simple, easy and even more cost-effective. Managing the steps on our own--selecting an installer, handling the multiple, different incentives, working with the utility company--would have been a major obstacle to moving forward. One important but overlooked factor about the program is its partnership with Arch Electric--a talented, veteran installer. One does not need to worry about shopping around for a quality installation contractor. MREA has already done that and has created a top-notch team that does a careful, high quality job in a highly professional manner.

I also appreciate that in doing an installation, Arch Electric puts safety first. Mounting electrical equipment on the top of a house has certain inherent risks, and Arch Electric does everything possible to minimize those risks.

I guess, in hindsight, what surprised me was how complicated it would have been without the support of the Solar Buy program. Solar Buy makes this process about as simple as it can be given the complexities that are otherwise involved. It is definitely the best option for most homeowners to go solar in Wisconsin now.”



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