

PATHWAYS to ADVANCE EQUITY in FEDERAL PROGRAMS

Opportunities for Integrating California's Strategies for Equitable Climate Investments

SUMMARY OF REPORT BY LINDSEY CAIN, LAUREN DUNLAP, MAYA GUTIERREZ, SONIA ZAMORA, AND LANA ZIMMERMAN

In the face of climate change and environmental racism,¹ the federal government and the State of California are engaged in parallel missions to invest in reducing environmental harms while uplifting pollution-burdened communities.

At the federal level, the Biden administration's Justice40 Initiative mandates that disadvantaged communities receive at least forty percent of the benefits of certain federal investments.² Executive branch agencies are now working to meet Justice40 goals through their programs and investments, the latter of which are being supplemented by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law of 2021 and the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, which have provided over \$500 billion in funding for environment- and climate-related programs. This presents an unprecedented opportunity to advance environmental justice.³

As the federal government works to ensure that investment benefits are more equitably distributed, it can learn from state-level strategies and actions

California, in particular, has made significant progress in focusing investments in disadvantaged communities over the past decade.⁴ The California Strategic Growth Council (SGC) is working to help federal agencies achieve more equitable investment outcomes – in part by incorporating design features of the Transformative Climate Communities program (TCC) – into climate equity investments throughout the country.

Over the past year, our team of public policy graduate students at UCLA has sought to understand how best to assist SGC in creating an effective engagement strategy with federal agencies. To inform SGC's federal engagement efforts, we explored how agencies with Justice40-covered programs can adopt SGC's equity-focused practices for place-based, community-driven climate programs to achieve more just investment outcomes. We identified opportunities for SGC to support federal agencies' Justice40 goals, highlighting where there is potential to incorporate TCC features. This document summarizes our **final report**.

- 1 Environmental racism is a form of systemic racism that disproportionately burdens people and communities of color with health hazards, forcing them to live in proximity to toxic waste. See World Economic Forum, "What Is Environmental Racism and How Can We Fight It?" <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/07/what-is-environmental-racism-pollution-covid-systemic/>
- 2 The White House. "Executive Order on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad." January 27, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/27/executive-order-on-tackling-the-climate-crisis-at-home-and-abroad/>
- 3 The White House. "Fact Sheet: The Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal." March 29, 2023. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/11/06/fact-sheet-the-bipartisan-infrastructure-deal/> and US Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works. "Inflation Reduction Act of 2022." Accessed April 6, 2023, <https://www.epw.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/inflation-reduction-act-of-2022>
- 4 Callahan, Colleen, Daniel Coffee, J.R. DeShazo, and Silvia R González. Rep. Making Justice40 a Reality for Frontline Communities: Lessons From State Approaches to Climate and Clean Energy Investments. Luskin Center for Innovation. October 2021. <https://innovation.luskin.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/luskin-justice40-final-web-1.pdf>

We used several methods to address our research question, including interviews with federal government employees and SGC staff; a survey of federal employees; and an analysis of department websites, strategic plans, and other materials concerning Justice40 and environmental justice efforts.

TCC FEATURES UNDERPINNING OUR ANALYSIS

We based much of our analysis on eight core features of TCC, as shown in Figure 1. Each feature is designed to make the outcomes of TCC more equitable for communities receiving funds.

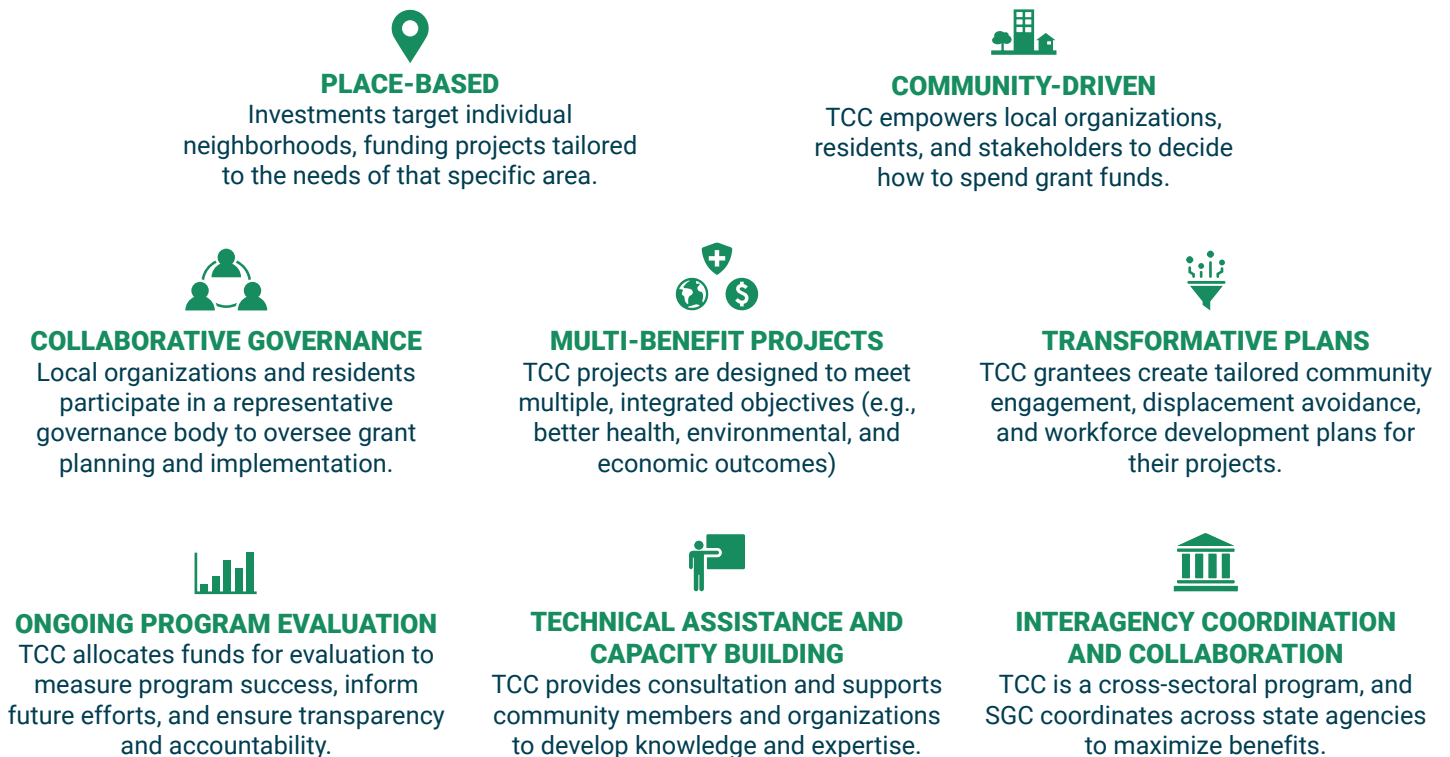
FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We identified five agencies and fourteen programs for SGC to target. These agencies and programs have the most potential for shared-learning with SGC and for incorporating features of TCC. The top five agencies are the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Energy, the Department of Transportation, and the Environmental Protection Agency. The target programs are listed in Table 1 on the next page.

We looked at each of these top agencies holistically, and listed key offices for SGC engagement, noted any target programs, and described overarching themes from our document analysis and interviews. Additionally, we presented a brief synopsis of each target program, as well as our recommendations for SGC’s potential engagement of each program.

Figure 1. Equity-Focused Features of the Transformative Climate Communities Program

These core features of TCC are designed to make outcomes more equitable for communities.



PLACE-BASED

Investments target individual neighborhoods, funding projects tailored to the needs of that specific area.



COMMUNITY-DRIVEN

TCC empowers local organizations, residents, and stakeholders to decide how to spend grant funds.



COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE

Local organizations and residents participate in a representative governance body to oversee grant planning and implementation.



MULTI-BENEFIT PROJECTS

TCC projects are designed to meet multiple, integrated objectives (e.g., better health, environmental, and economic outcomes)



TRANSFORMATIVE PLANS

TCC grantees create tailored community engagement, displacement avoidance, and workforce development plans for their projects.



ONGOING PROGRAM EVALUATION

TCC allocates funds for evaluation to measure program success, inform future efforts, and ensure transparency and accountability.



TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND CAPACITY BUILDING

TCC provides consultation and supports community members and organizations to develop knowledge and expertise.



INTERAGENCY COORDINATION AND COLLABORATION

TCC is a cross-sectoral program, and SGC coordinates across state agencies to maximize benefits.

Table 1. Target Justice40-Covered Programs

Program	Agency
Appalachian Regional Commission Grants	Appalachian Regional Commission
Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) Program	Federal Emergency Management Agency
Choice Neighborhoods	Department of Housing and Urban Development
Communities Local Energy Action Program (LEAP)	Department of Energy
Community Development Block Grant	Department of Housing and Urban Development
Community Economic Development (CED)	Department of Health and Human Services
EJ Office (Environmental and Climate Justice Block Grants)	Environmental Protection Agency
Indian Community Development Block Grants	Department of Housing and Urban Development
Land and Water Conservation Fund	Department of the Interior
Office of Community Revitalization	Environmental Protection Agency
Rebuilding America’s Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE)	Department of Transportation
Thriving Communities Program	Department of Transportation
Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) Planning Program	Department of Transportation
YouthBuild Program	Department of Labor

FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS AND SURVEYS

- There is a disconnect in the federal government regarding the definitions of key terms used in federal programs.
- Some features of TCC were difficult for federal employees to distinguish between, which may create barriers in effective communication from SGC.
- The difficulties experienced with implementing ongoing program evaluation create barriers to improving current and future federal programs.
- There is a need for consolidated and improved data tools for identifying and targeting disadvantaged communities.
- There are important differences between California’s state requirements and the federal government’s requirements concerning environmental justice and supporting disadvantaged communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SGC

Based on our findings, we recommend several broad actions for SGC to take to further its federal engagement:

- Enhance communication with federal agencies by defining TCC features clearly and unambiguously.
- Support the development or improvement of a data tool for federal agencies to identify and prioritize disadvantaged communities.
- Support a more unified understanding of environmental justice tenets, including definitions of key terms, by advocating for overarching training for federal employees.
- Prioritize shared-learning opportunities with federal agencies and smaller equity-focused organizations to avoid overburdening communities.
- Engage the legislative branch to encourage the inclusion of TCC features in statute underpinning new and existing programs.

In conclusion, our research shows that many federal programs have potential to incorporate features of TCC, several agencies are conducting work that aligns with SGC’s, and many federal employees are interested in learning strategies to advance equity.