

Free solar power fosters community trust — and saves wallets



BACKGROUND

This case study explores how project partners from the Green Together Collaborative helped build community trust in a TCC-funded solar installation program. Stories from two lower-income homeowners, Gloria Zuniga and Phillip Martinez, illustrate the power of partnering with trusted, local organizations who understand their communities. For more on Green Together’s solar projects, see [page 52](#).

Interviews for this case study were conducted in August 2022.

A GRID Alternatives team installs solar panels on a rooftop in Pacoima. Photo courtesy of GRID Alternatives

GLORIA ZUNIGA is a longtime Pacoima resident — she moved from East Los Angeles with her husband in 1981, and they raised their children there. Now, one of her favorite parts of living in Pacoima is the community. “The community members come from similar backgrounds as mine — we all share the same foods and speak the same language.”

Zuniga has been familiar with Pacoima Beautiful (the community-based organization that leads the Green Together Collaborative) for years, attending its events and workshops to build relationships and skills, as well as to get help filling out paperwork. She trusts the organization completely, particularly because of a yearslong relationship with one of the staff members.

When Zuniga learned from Pacoima Beautiful about Green Together’s free solar installation opportunity, run by GRID Alternatives, she was initially apprehensive. But her concerns were soon assuaged by the connection between the

program and Pacoima Beautiful. “I believe the program will benefit the community greatly, bringing people together and building closer ties.”

It wasn’t the first time Zuniga had heard about solar. Motivated to reduce her soaring electricity bills, she had already started to explore the option of rooftop panels on her home — in fact, she was already partway into a contract with another solar company, preparing to pay \$40,000 for the panels. So, she called Pacoima Beautiful. “The staff immediately told me about the free GRID Alternatives solar installation program and helped me cancel my previous contract.”



Gloria Zuniga at her church. Photo courtesy of Gloria Zuniga

“I learned about Green Together from Pacoima Beautiful. They are a trustworthy organization — I know they would never steer me in the wrong direction.”

GLORIA ZUNIGA

The savings won't end with that \$40,000. Zuniga anticipates significant savings on her energy bills — as much as \$200 per month, based on her first month of saving. The savings will enable her to catch up on some bills she is late on, and more. “With the long-term cost savings, I would like to invest in household projects, such as fixing part of the roof, painting the house and fixing up the living room flooring.”

Hoping to spread the wealth (and earn referral rewards from GRID Alternatives), Zuniga has recommended the solar installation program to other members of her community. One family she referred is partway through the process of having their roof inspected to have the panels installed.

PHILLIP MARTINEZ was born and raised in Pacoima, and he has lived there nearly all his life. He lives with his sister in a home he owns and works at Keck Hospital of USC.

Martinez' favorite part of living in Pacoima is the weather, although it has recently made his energy bills skyrocket. With the air conditioning set to a comfortable temperature, his bimonthly bills exceeded \$700 for two months in the summer of 2022. So, when a representative of GRID Alternatives knocked on his door to help him sign up for free TCC-funded solar panels on his roof, he took the opportunity to lower his future bills.

“My bill is a little high right now — like over \$700. It's because we're using air conditioning. It's been hot out here — in the hundreds.”

PHILLIP MARTINEZ

He was initially apprehensive about the program, knowing that some others in his community ended up paying monthly for solar. But when he had a chance to talk out the details on the phone with a GRID Alternatives staff member, he was reassured — they explained that the panels would be 100 percent free to him and would only save him money. In the first two months that the solar panels were installed and turned on, Martinez's bimonthly bill was less than half of what it would have been without them.

Now that he trusts GRID Alternatives about the cost (or lack thereof), Martinez has recommended the solar installations to people he knows in the community. Getting others on board will not only help GRID Alternatives to reach its TCC goals, but it also will earn Martinez some extra cash from referral incentives. He noticed that his neighbors, like him, are often initially skeptical that the solar panels are free.

Not everyone jumps at the opportunity, though — some are already too far into paid solar contracts with other companies, and some simply don't trust that the panels will be free. “I told them that I successfully got the solar panels installed, and I haven't had a single bill to pay.”

“GRID Alternatives does not immediately ask for a credit check or a down payment like other companies. It's a testament that they will not charge you at all.”

GLORIA ZUNIGA

“Some people are like, I'm not sure about that, that it's free. They're hesitant. But some have said they would check it out.”

PHILLIP MARTINEZ

In fact, even the upgrades needed on his recently installed roof were covered. GRID Alternatives took care of everything, getting the roof ready and the solar panels installed over the course of a few months and working with the housing inspector when the project hit a snag, so that Martinez wouldn't have to.

More upgrades are in Martinez's future: He has plans for the money he anticipates saving on his energy bills. It will help pay for some bathroom repairs, better insulation in his attic and improvements to the outside of his home, including fixing the fence around the house.



Phillip Martinez at his home in Pacoima. Photo courtesy of Phillip Martinez