

No-cost solar program reduces energy bills and relieves residents from heat



Moneik Johnson in her home in Watts. Photo credit: Moneik Johnson

BACKGROUND

This case study explores how TCC dollars have helped Watts residents achieve energy cost savings through rooftop solar and energy efficiency projects. Specifically, the story highlights how no-cost solar installations through the TCC-funded “Solar Watts” program have benefited Moneik Johnson and Sandra Garcia. See [page 61](#) for more information about this project.

The interviews for this case study were conducted in June 2021 and January 2023, respectively.

MONEIK JOHNSON is a longtime and active member of the Watts community, where she has owned her home for more than two decades. With fewer green spaces than other parts of the region, Watts is a disproportionately hot community — and it’s only getting hotter due to climate change. Johnson has experienced this heat firsthand. Despite the heat, she has never had air conditioning in her home. She has struggled to pay her electricity bills, even without the major expense of cooling her home to a comfortable level.

But this is changing. After having solar panels installed on her home for free through Watts Rising’s home solar program, she is already experiencing major benefits. Once the panels were turned on, she immediately began seeing a difference in her electricity bill. “I was really happy. It came down tremendously... This last bill was the best bill. I’ve never seen a bill like that since I’ve been a DWP customer,” Johnson said.

Before having solar installed, Johnson was making monthly payments to pay off her electricity bill debt. Now, she can pay the bill in full. “I’m able to just pay it all at once as opposed to making payments on it. It’s always been a thing that I’m making payments, and to be able to pay it off feels good.”

Lower electricity bills mean that Johnson can now afford to keep her home cooler and more comfortable. She plans to

get air conditioning in the winter, when she might be able to take advantage of sales.

“I know that now it’d be affordable for me to get air conditioning. I’ve been wanting it because it’s so hot.”

MONEIK JOHNSON

Johnson first heard about the Solar Watts program through a local family roofing business, where she has worked as an office manager for over 20 years. The company was working with GRID Alternatives, so Johnson knew she could trust the organization. When the solar program launched, she was one of the first in line to have GRID Alternatives install solar panels on her home.

“The company I work for does a lot of work for GRID Alternatives, so I saw that Solar Watts was a real program. I knew they weren’t making homeowners pay.”

MONEIK JOHNSON

Johnson has been sharing her positive experience with installing solar to encourage others in her community to sign up for the program. “I’ve been telling all my neighbors that I know. It’s a good thing to have.”

SANDRA GARCIA has lived in Watts with her mother and younger brother since 2017, when she purchased her first home amid skyrocketing rents. Having grown up in South Central Los Angeles, she has lived in several different neighborhoods. When she moved to Watts, she found a strong sense of community among neighbors who watch out for one another.

As a member of the Watts Rising Community Advisory Group (a group of residents, business leaders, and other community stakeholders who help guide Watts Rising activities), Garcia is no stranger to TCC. She has seen how the many TCC-funded projects have begun to benefit her community. “My neighbors are passionate about it. They want a safer and healthier community for their kids, for themselves, and for their parents. I see the improvements already. Other places in LA are changing due to gentrification, but I have the sense that it’s different here — it’s community led.”

Garcia first learned about Solar Watts during a Community Advisory Group meeting, when a GRID Alternatives staff member presented on the free solar installation program. If it had been presented in any other context, she said, she would have been immediately skeptical that the panels could be installed for free. As the information came from a trusted source — an organization where a Watts Rising colleague worked — she trusted it and decided to apply for the program.



Sandra Garcia, a homeowner in Watts. Photo credit: Sandra Garcia

“I know solar panels cost a lot of money. If I had heard it anywhere else, I’d be like, what are you talking about? How is it free?”

SANDRA GARCIA

After the panels were installed, Garcia got the first updated power bill that August. During the hottest time of the year, the bill reflected the financial help that solar panels can bring to residents. These savings have been a relief to her budget. Garcia attended UCLA for her undergraduate and master’s degrees, and she is currently pursuing a Ph.D. there. And while she worked full time during her master’s studies, she has had to cut back her work hours since starting her doctoral studies, which cuts into her savings.

“It was the hottest month of the last few years. It was 100 degrees for days and days. We had AC on every day and night. And our bimonthly bill was still \$100 less than normal. It was a huge difference.”

SANDRA GARCIA

Now, the extra money she saves on energy goes straight into replenishing her savings.

And it’s not just air conditioning that has gotten cheaper and more environmentally friendly for Garcia: charging her electric vehicle (EV) has also gotten easier. “I used to notice my bill go up if I charged my EV more than five times in a month. Now, I feel very comfortable charging, and it’s fantastic because I have to commute. It’s made my worry about charging at home just nonexistent. With both that and the air conditioning, it just gave me peace of mind, and it’s more comfortable now.”

In addition to lower bills to cool her home and charge her car, Garcia’s pocketbook was saved by GRID Alternatives’ roof upgrade program. Before getting solar panels, her home needed a stronger roof, which would usually come with a \$10,000 price tag. But GRID Alternatives was able to cover half of the cost, and since Garcia knew she would need to upgrade her roof soon anyway, she signed up for a payment plan with a local roofer for the other half.

In the coming years, Garcia is saving for a down payment on a new home, and the savings from the Solar Watts panels are helping her toward that goal. “The savings from the solar panels increase my financial bandwidth and gives me more options.”