

Addressing Climate Change using a Justice Lens Approach

Columbia University SIPA Capstone Project
Produced for the Center for Popular Democracy

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Abstract

The aim of this project was to investigate ways in which disadvantaged communities, who have historically borne the brunt of environmental injustices, can gain greater access to federal funding under the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). In collaboration with the Center for Popular Democracy, we explored how community organizations and other entities can access funding opportunities. The team produced a user-friendly toolkit that provides information on eligibility criteria, application procedures, and other relevant details for obtaining IRA funds, as well as an advocacy report that analyzes the funding application and distribution process using a justice lens and offers concrete recommendations. Additional outputs included regular grant updates for CPD; a compilation of stakeholder comments on the IRA; and a project report that summarizes our work, discusses research challenges and limitations, and offers recommendations for the future development of this project as new IRA information becomes available.



Introduction

The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), signed into law in August 2022, is the largest investment in addressing climate change in United States history. The IRA aims to help communities that have faced environmental injustices, bearing the overwhelming brunt of toxic pollution and enduring underinvestment in infrastructure and critical services. The IRA establishes several new environmental justice grant programs with the aim to improve public health, reduce pollution, and revitalize communities that are marginalized, underserved, and overburdened with pollution while increasing access to affordable and accessible clean energy.¹

The bill allocates \$370 billion dollars in funding distributed in the form of competitive grants, loans, bonds, and tax credits for eligible entities.² This project focused on three grants within the IRA: the Environmental and Climate Justice (ECJ) Block Grants, Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (GGRF), and Neighborhood Access and Equity (NAE) Grant.

Our team collaborated with the Center for Popular Democracy (CPD), a national advocacy organization that works to create equity, opportunity, and a dynamic democracy through partnerships with community based organizations, who they refer to as affiliates.

This project summarizes our project process, key outputs, challenges and limitations, and recommendations for next steps as more information about IRA funding opportunities become available.

Process

Through conversations with CPD, we first narrowed our analysis to the three grants listed above, due to both their relevance to CPD's affiliates as well as their focus on climate justice. We examined these grants using a justice lens to assess the accessibility, accountability, eligibility, and transparency of each grant, and their implications for equality and non-discrimination.

We began with desk research, examining both the text of the IRA itself as well as secondary sources. While this initial research provided some insight into limitations of the IRA that are included in the advocacy report, it mostly focused on gathering and synthesizing information

¹ "Fact Sheet: The Inflation Reduction Act Supports Workers and Families." The White House. The United States Government, September 20, 2022.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/08/19/fact-sheet-the-inflation-reduction-act-supports-workers-and-families/>

² "Inflation Reduction Act Guidebook." The White House. The United States Government, September 20, 2022.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/cleanenergy/inflation-reduction-act-guidebook/#:~:text=The%20Inflation%20Reduction%20Act's%20%24370,from%20critical%20minerals%20to%20efficient>

about application processes and eligibility criteria to be incorporated into the toolkit to be used by potential applicants. An early version of this toolkit and a corresponding presentation analyzing the ECJ Block Grants was shared with organizations that work with CPD and were interested in applying for the funding.

After the ECJ Block Grants application deadline, we conducted interviews with potential applicants to understand more about their experience with the application process, or for those that chose not to apply, barriers or factors influencing that decision. CPD sent an initial email to affiliates requesting their feedback, which our team then followed up on regularly. We sent a list of questions to affiliates in the email and asked for their response either in writing or through a short phone call with a member of the capstone team.³ Participants were given the option for their comments to be unattributed.

The advocacy report is informed by the affiliate interviews as well as desk research that included a review of online application materials, grant websites, and public comments. We summarized these findings, supplemented by additional research into public comments and other feedback where available, into the advocacy report.

Project Outputs

Toolkit

Our first objective was to help affiliates working with CPD more readily access funding. Our team worked with CPD to identify the funding opportunities most relevant to their affiliates' areas of engagement and created a toolkit and compendium presentation that synthesized the application process and other key information. While these resources are being actively used by affiliates in their application process, the toolkit is also designed to be a framework that CPD, affiliates, and future capstone teams can update as additional information becomes available.

On a preliminary review of the three identified IRA grants, we noticed that the application deadline for the ECJ Block Grants was fast approaching. In the interest of time, we flagged these deadlines to CPD immediately. CPD informed us that affiliates were unsure how to access these funding opportunities and were unclear on the application processes and requirements. To that end, the team prepared a toolkit to be directly distributed to affiliates, and would provide all relevant information regarding accessing funds in one central document.

The toolkit collates publicly available information in relation to the identified funds, provides information regarding the types of grants, eligibility criteria, quantum of funds, methods and steps for accessing funding, as well as highlighting certain lacunae that may impact funding decisions

³ See Appendix C for the emails sent to request feedback.

and distribution. Through the course of the consultancy, the toolkit was also modified to create a presentation for a webinar hosted by CPD. CPD used this presentation to familiarize affiliates with different grant opportunities and run them through a step by step process of applying for funding.

Advocacy Report

In the next stage of our consultancy, we analyzed relevant grants to support CPD in advocating for improvements to IRA funding distribution processes. The team developed an advocacy report informed by human rights and social justice lenses that evaluates the IRA and related funding applications based on issues of accessibility, accountability, eligibility, transparency. The themes of accessibility, accountability, eligibility, and transparency have been presented separately in the advocacy report, but in practice are interrelated. As it relates to each of these themes, this report also addresses implications for equality and non-discrimination, and analyzes the expressed aims of these grants of supporting communities most affected by climate change

The advocacy report is designed to be used by CPD and affiliates in conversations with policymakers to ensure that funds reach low-income and disadvantaged communities and are distributed using a rights-based approach. We first summarize key advocacy takeaways for the IRA generally as informed by our analysis of our three grants of focus. Because funding is distributed through different agencies, each program is then analyzed individually for future grant or agency-specific advocacy efforts.

Additional Outputs

The client requested additional outputs, including regular communication regarding relevant grant updates, public comment analysis, and affiliate interview notes. We included a summary of relevant public comments in the advocacy report and provided it to the client for their ongoing advocacy efforts and future reports. We also shared notes and takeaways from feedback collected from affiliates during the application process with CPD. To ensure timely and relevant updates, we maintained consistent communication with CPD through biweekly meetings and regular email updates, highlighting urgent deadlines and opportunities.

Challenges and Limitations

Working with dynamic information

Information regarding some of the grants was missing or incomplete, as the legislation was passed only in August 2022. In order to implement the IRA, the federal government is allocating a budget to various government agencies to create a mechanism for grant distribution through a competitive process with defined criteria.

The mechanisms for distributing the grants have not yet been fully determined, and various agencies are at different stages of defining the criteria and the process of submitting candidacy. For example, for some of the grants at the same agency (EPA), criteria or deadlines have been established for distributing the grants, while for others, the deadlines and criteria are still to be determined.

Furthermore, while a deadline was not determined for certain grants, during our research we found a close deadline of mid-April for a relevant grant. In light of this finding, we shifted our focus to produce an interim toolkit in the middle of the semester, so that the product would be relevant and useful for the client.

Our report needed to adapt to this dynamic reality so that CPD could effectively monitor developments published by the various agencies.

Communicating with the the client's affiliate organizations

CPD works with approximately 50 civil society affiliate organizations spread across the United States. Our main communication was with CPD, and interactions with the other affiliated organizations was limited. Therefore, we encountered some difficulties in obtaining affiliate perspectives to be incorporated into the report. While affiliates provided feedback on the toolkit during an online webinar, there was a low response rate to email requests for additional information from affiliates regarding their experiences accessing funds. Our initial thought was to include a case study section in the final report, based on information gathered from affiliates' experience. However, since the response rate to our inquiries was limited, we ultimately decided to forgo this part of the report and instead use the information we did obtain through interviews to inform separate sections of the report.

Recommendations

Build on the toolkit as more information is available about existing and future funding opportunities.

The toolkit is designed to be a living document that can be updated as more information becomes available. While currently the toolkit is designed to synthesize information for affiliates, the framework could also be expanded to include reporting requirements, as that information becomes available.

Increase engagement with affiliates to incorporate their perspectives and experiences in future advocacy.

The webinar provided an opportunity to engage directly with affiliates who were interested in applying for funding through the IRA. As more information and funding opportunities become available, it may be useful to have regular times for affiliates to come together to discuss best practices in navigating the application and reporting processes.

Additionally, it may be helpful to use the toolkit to frame conversations with applicants to collect their feedback on the process, which can then be used to expand the advocacy report and further inform efforts to improve the grantmaking process.

Engage with funding agencies to understand challenges on their end.

The toolkit and the advocacy report were informed by and developed with the perspective of the applicants' experiences. It may be helpful to expand the analysis with conversations through funding agencies like the EPA or DOT. A more robust understanding of the funders' perspectives will strengthen advocacy efforts and may also provide more clarity to application processes and reporting guidelines.

Appendix A - Toolkit

ACCESS AND ELIGIBILITY BRIEF FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE BLOCK GRANTS

Written by Columbia University Research Team

Last Updated: 03/02/23

Environmental Justice Block Grants Overview

The Environmental and Climate Justice Block Grants, funded at \$3 billion, invest in community led projects in disadvantaged communities and community capacity building centers to address disproportionate environmental and public health harms related to pollution and climate change. Within the program, there are two separate block grants available: The Environmental Justice Government to Government Program for local government entities, and the Environmental Justice Collaborative Problem-Solving Cooperative Agreement for community-based nonprofit organizations. Please use this resource to determine if your organization is eligible for either of these grants and receive high-level guidance on project eligibility and grant applications.

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[Legislation](#)

[Webinar and Transcripts](#)

[EPA and White House Materials](#)

[Further information and regular updates](#)

Environmental Justice Government to Government Program

The EJG2G program provides funding to governmental entities at the state, local, territorial and tribal level to support and/or create model government activities that lead to measurable environmental or public health results in communities disproportionately burdened by environmental harms and risks.

In-depth EPA guidance here:

<https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2023-02/EJG2G%20Amended%20Request%20for%20Applications%20February%202023.pdf>

Eligible Entities	Earmarked Funds	Project Eligibility	Application Requirements	Target Communities
<p>Eligible through partnerships between different levels of government (state, local or tribal) and a CBO.</p> <p>(i) State Govt and CBO (ii) Local Govt and CBO (ii) Federally recognized tribal government and CBO (iv) US Territories, Freely Associated States and Tribal Governments in remote areas*</p> <p>Entities that are not CBO's can partner with</p>	<p>70 projects of up to USD \$1 million each for three-year project(s).</p> <p>Funds have been earmarked for different levels of government (state, local, or tribal) and Freely Associated States.</p> <p>State Government: USD \$20 million for approx. 20 awards of USD \$1 million each.</p> <p>Local Government: USD \$20 million for approx. 20 awards of USD \$1 million each.</p>	<p>(i) Community-led air pollution monitoring, prevention, & remediation (ii) Investments in low-zero-emission & resilient technologies & related infrastructure (iii) Mitigating climate & health risks from urban heat islands, extreme heat, wood heater emissions, & wildfire events (iv) Climate resilience & adaptation (v) Reducing indoor toxics & indoor air pollution (vi) Facilitating engagement of disadvantaged communities in state &</p>	<p>Emphasis on utilizing existing resources of assets of applicants and integration of Environmental Justice considerations.</p> <p>Application Process & Timelines: (i) Final application due on 14 April, 2023. (ii) Registration through: sam.gov and grants.gov. <i>Finalizing registration can take 1 month+.</i> (iii) Projects to commence in December 2023. (iv) All funds to be drawn down in a 3 year period. No extensions allowed.</p>	<p>Geared towards benefitting disadvantaged communities.</p> <p>Disadvantaged Communities: Understood through EPA's EJSCREEN tool (or other EJ-based mapping tool) to help characterize and describe the target community.</p> <p>Proposals should include relevant information such as demographics, geographic location, and community history.</p> <p>Environmental Justice: Fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, income with respect to</p>

<p>eligible entities on a EJG2G project.</p> <p>Partnerships with 3 or more Partners belonging to different Stakeholder Groups is strongly encouraged.</p> <p>*For US Territories, States and Tribal Governments in remote areas, it appears that partnership with CBO's is not necessary.</p> <p>Contact and Additional Info: For more information, contact Omari Burrell (Burrell.Omari@epa.gov)</p>	<p>Federally recognized tribal government: USD \$20 million for approx. 20 awards of USD \$1 million each.</p> <p>US Territories and Remotes Tribes: USD \$10 million for approx. 10 awards of USD \$1 million each.</p> <p><i>Funding for US Territories & Remote Tribes may flow directly to disadvantaged communities, which may conduct their own pollution monitoring & report violations to relevant authorities.</i></p> <p>Relevant Agency: National Environment Justice and Civil Rights Office, EPA</p>	<p>federal advisory programs, rulemakings, & other processes.</p> <p>Examples of eligible Project Activities:</p> <p>(i) Research and public education (ii) Small-scale clean-ups installations of air or water filtration systems (iii) Disposal and energy recovery training (iv) Workforce development to support low and zero emission and resilient technologies towards community revitalization (v) Equitable transportation and mobility</p>	<p>Mandatory Documents:</p> <p>(i) Application for Federal Assistance (ii) Budget Information for Non-Construction Programs (iii) EPA Form 4700-4 Pre-award Compliance Review Report (iv) EPA Key Contacts Form 5700-54 (v) Project Narrative Attachment Form (vi) Itemized Budget Sheet (vii) Environmental Results/Logic Model (viii) Letters of Commitment from Partners (ix) Resumes of the Project Manager (PM) and other key personnel (xi) Health Impact Assessment</p>	<p>development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.</p> <p>Special Considerations/ Priorities for 2023 Application Cycle:</p> <p>(i) Climate Change, Disaster Resiliency, Emergency Preparedness. (ii) Local areas with populations of 50,000 or less with limited access to resources. (iii) Community Network areas selected by the Rural Partners Network (iv) Coal and Energy Communities</p> <p>*Applicants claiming rural status must provide census data, population figures, descriptions of local resources, etc. for EPA to validate.</p>
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Environmental Justice Collaborative Problem Solving Cooperative Agreement

The Environmental Justice Collaborative Problem Solving Cooperative Agreement is a Block Grant issued by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to provide financial assistance to community-based nonprofit organizations or a partnership of community-based non-profit organizations to address local environmental or public health issues in their communities. The program assists recipients in building collaborative partnerships with other stakeholders (e.g., local businesses and industry, local government, medical service providers, academia, etc.) to develop solutions to environmental or public health issue(s) at the community level.

In-depth EPA guidance here:

<https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2023-01/EJCPS%20Request%20for%20Applications%202023.pdf>

Eligible Entities	Earmarked Funds	Project Eligibility	Application Requirements	Target Communities / Important Definitions
<p>- A community-based nonprofit organization (CBO) or</p> <p>- a partnership of community-based nonprofit organizations that is documented with a signed Letter of Commitment</p> <p>CBOs should be prepared to engage with stakeholders in the following strategic plan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Issue Identification, Visioning, and 	<p>Total estimated \$30 million</p> <p>\$25M for CBOs proposing projects for up to \$500k each (50 awards anticipated)</p> <p>\$5M for qualifying small CBOs with 5 or fewer full-time employees proposing projects for up to \$150k each (approximately 33 awards)</p>	<p>Eligible projects must address one of the following:</p> <p>(i) Community-led air and other pollution monitoring, prevention, and remediation, and investments in low-emission and resilient technologies and related infrastructure and workforce development that help reduce air pollutants</p> <p>(ii) Mitigating climate and health risks</p> <p>(iii) Climate resiliency and adaptation</p> <p>(iv) Reducing indoor toxics and indoor air pollution</p>	<p>Application Process & Timelines:</p> <p>(i) Final application due on 10 April, 2023.</p> <p>(ii) Registration through: sam.gov and grants.gov. Finalizing registration can take 1 month+.</p> <p>(iii) Projects to commence in October 2023.</p> <p>(iv) All funds to be drawn down in a 3 year period. No extensions allowed.</p> <p>Mandatory documents:</p> <p>(i) Application for Federal Assistance</p>	<p>Environmental Justice: The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.</p> <p>Meaningful involvement: People have an opportunity to participate in decisions about activities that may affect their environment and/or health; the public's contribution can influence the regulatory</p>

<p>Strategic Goal-Setting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community Capacity-Building and Leadership Development Development of Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships and Leveraging of Resources Consensus Building and Dispute Resolution Constructive Engagement with Other Stakeholders Sound Management and Implementation Evaluation 	<p>Special considerations:</p> <p>(i) Address climate change, disaster resiliency, and/or emergency preparedness, especially those working to address the needs of underserved and vulnerable communities</p> <p>(ii) Rural areas</p> <p>(iii) Health Impact Assessment projects</p>	<p>(v) Facilitating engagement of disadvantaged communities in public processes</p> <p>Examples of eligible Project Activities:</p> <p>(i) Research and public education</p> <p>(ii) Small-scale clean-ups</p> <p>(iii) Disposal and energy recovery installations of air or water filtration systems</p> <p>(iv) Workforce development to support low and zero emission and resilient technologies towards community revitalization</p> <p>(v) Equitable transportation and mobility</p>	<p>(ii) Budget Information for Non-Construction Programs</p> <p>(iii) EPA Form 4700-4 Pre-award Compliance Review Report</p> <p>(iv) EPA Key Contacts Form 5700-54</p> <p>(v) Project Narrative Attachment Form</p> <p>(vi) Itemized Budget Sheet</p> <p>(vii) Environmental Results/Logic Model</p> <p>(viii) Letters of Commitment from Partners</p> <p>(ix) Resumes of the Project Manager (PM) and other key personnel</p> <p>Contact and Additional Info: For more information, please contact Jacob Burney ()</p>	<p>agency’s decision; community concerns will be considered in the decision-making process; and decision makers will seek out and facilitate the involvement of those potentially affected.</p> <p>Disadvantaged Communities: Use EPA’s EJSCREEN tool (or other EJ- based mapping tool) to help characterize and describe your target community.</p>
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In-depth EPA guidance here:

<https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2023-01/EJCPS%20Request%20for%20Applications%202023.pdf>

APPENDIX

SOURCES

Content for the Access and Eligibility Brief for Environmental Justice Block Grants has been derived and edited for clarity from official EPA guidance included in the Additional Resources below.

DEFINITIONS

CBO: Public or private nonprofit organization that supports / represents a community, certain populations within a community through engagement, education, and other related services provided to individual community residents & community stakeholders.

* CBOs are ineligible for direct funding under this RFA.

Tribes located in Remote Areas: Federally recognized or state recognized tribal governments located in rural areas with limited or no access to CBOs to partner with. Remote areas may also be characterized by limited access to public or private resources commonly found in metropolitan areas. Applicants must explain in their application why they qualify for remote status.

Note: Remote federally recognized tribes that apply in partnership with CBOs will be placed in the federally recognized tribal government track featuring \$20 million of IRA funding. Remote state recognized tribes that apply in partnership with CBOs are only eligible for the remote tribal government track featuring \$10 million in EPA appropriations funding.

Fair Treatment: No one group of people, including racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic groups, should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Legislation: <https://www.congress.gov/117/plaws/publ169/PLAW-117publ169.pdf>

Webinar and Transcripts

EJG2G

<https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/environmental-justice-government-government-program>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2xy4XZ5Oks>
<https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2023-01/ejg2g-pre-application-webinar.pdf>
<https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2023-02/ejg2g-pre-application-webinar-2-7-23.pdf>

EJCPS

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2xy4XZ5Oks>
<https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2023-02/ejcps-pre-application-webinar2.pdf>
<https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2023-01/ejcps-pre-application-webinar.pdf>

EPA and White House Materials

EJG2G

https://www.democrats.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/environmental_justice_in_the_inflation_reduction_act.pdf
<https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2023-01/EJG2G%20Request%20for%20Applications%202023.pdf>
<https://www.grants.gov/web/grants/view-opportunity.html?oppld=345311>
<https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2023-01/Fact%20Sheet%20on%20the%20Environmental%20Justice%20Government-to-Government%20Program.pdf>

EJCPS

<https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2023-01/EJCPS%20Request%20for%20Applications%202023.pdf>
<https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2023-02/ejcps-faq-2023.pdf>
<https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2021-12/ejcps-case-studies.pdf>

<https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2021-12/ejcps-model-guide.pdf>

https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2023-01/EJCPS%20Fact%20Sheet%202023_updated_Final_12.19.22.pdf

Further information and regular updates

EJCPS: <https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/environmental-justice-collaborative-problem-solving-cooperative-agreement-5>

EG2G: <https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/environmental-justice-government-government-program>

EPA Landing Page: <https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/environmental-justice-grants-funding-and-technical-assistance>

Additional assistance webinars and calls may be scheduled. Details may be posted on above-mentioned websites and sent out by the EPA-EJ Listserv and the EPA Environmental Justice and External Civil Rights Twitter account.

Appendix B - Advocacy Report

Addressing Climate Change using a Justice Lens Approach Advocacy Report for Selected Inflation Reduction Act Grants

Columbia University SIPA Capstone Project, Center for Popular Democracy

Noga Shlapobersky, Kaitlyn Nelson, Ananya Mukherjee, Shahar Somech, and Owen Odigie

Faculty Advisor: Kristina Eberbach

Last Updated: 05/01/2023

Introduction

The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), signed into law August 2022⁴, is the largest investment in addressing climate change in United States history. The IRA is the first bill aimed to help communities that face environmental injustices, bear the overwhelming brunt of toxic pollution and endure underinvestment in infrastructure and critical services.⁵ The IRA establishes several new environmental justice grant programs with the aim to improve public health, reduce pollution, and revitalize communities that are marginalized, underserved, and overburdened with pollution while increasing access to affordable and accessible clean energy.

The bill allocates \$369 billion dollars in funding distributed in the form of competitive grants, loans, bonds, and tax credits for eligible entities. This report analyzes three grants within the IRA: the Environmental and Climate Justice (ECJ) Block Grants, the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (GGRF), and the Neighborhood Access and Equity (NAE) Grant. These three grants represent several stages in the application process: the application cycle for ECJ Block Grants has already closed, the GGRF is in progress, and there is no information released yet about the NAE Grant.

This report first summarizes key advocacy takeaways for the IRA generally as informed by analysis of these three grants. Each program is then analyzed individually for future grant or agency-specific advocacy efforts. This report is based on a review of Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) websites, landing pages of application portals,⁶ civil society analysis reports, and email and phone conversations with several civil society organizations whose work is relevant to the grants reviewed.

Each grant is examined through a justice lens to assess the accessibility, accountability, eligibility, and transparency of each grant, and implications for equality and non-discrimination. The themes of accessibility, accountability, eligibility, and transparency are presented separately in the report, but in practice are interrelated. As it relates to each of these themes, this report also addresses implications for equality, non-discrimination, and analyzes the expressed aim of these grants of supporting communities most affected by climate change. The accessibility lens examines issues related to the application process including how readily available information is for potential applicants, with a particular focus on increasing access for organizations and communities that have not historically benefited from federal funding. In accountability, the focus is on mechanisms to ensure funding and resources are allocated to the intended beneficiaries and that appropriate feedback structures are in place. The eligibility section focuses on definitions of intended beneficiaries and target communities. Finally, the transparency analysis focuses on the availability

⁴ The Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, Public Law No: 117-169, H.R.5376 117 Congress (2021-2022).

⁵ "Fact Sheet: The Inflation Reduction Act Supports Workers and Families." The White House. The United States Government, September 20, 2022.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/08/19/fact-sheet-the-inflation-reduction-act-supports-workers-and-families/>

⁶ Information available once an applicant has registered with the EPA was not reviewed for this report as the authors were not eligible to register on SAM.gov and Grants.gov.

of information and whether there are opportunities for communities and applicants to provide feedback.

Key Takeaways

The IRA presents a unique opportunity to address climate justice. This section focuses on areas for improvement to further strengthen this groundbreaking legislation. Additional analysis of strengths and areas for improvement can be found in the grant-specific analysis sections.

Accessibility

Application and grant information can be insufficient and in certain cases, overwhelming.

There are multiple concerns with transparency in relation to the identified grants. While certain grants suffer from a lack of information, such as the Neighborhood and Equity Access Grant, other grants such as the ECJ Block Grants have considerable information and resources. However, the volume of information can be overwhelming and inaccessible to a layperson.

The EPA and other funding agencies can address this issue by introducing additional resources such as helplines or expert assistance with the grant process. This is particularly important for smaller community based organizations (CBO's) that may require additional support in navigating the process.

Information is not always available and accessible in all languages.

Grant websites and application materials for the three grants examined are only available in English. Including information in Indigenous languages and those spoken by migrant communities could increase funding accessibility of disadvantaged communities, which is an explicit goal of these grants. Given the intention of much of the funding is to benefit historically disadvantaged communities, linguistic access is crucial to fulfilling this goal.

Application process is lengthy and burdensome.

Applicants must have an active SAM.gov and Grants.gov registration in order to apply. The process can take a month or more for new registrants and registration must be renewed annually, which gives a competitive edge for organizations that have received federal funding in the past year and disincentivizes smaller organizations with limited capacity and resources to apply. For example,

the checklist for the SAM.gov registration process is 18 pages long.⁷ Registration on SAM.gov provides a “UEI” that only validates an organization's legal business name and address. After applicants get recognized with an UEI, they then also need to register on Grants.gov to apply for funding, which requires its own process.

Information is not always shared with an appropriate amount of time to apply.

The application timeline for the ECJ Block Grants was extremely crunched, with application and eligibility information released approximately 3 months before the deadline. Opportunity for public comment was initially just one month, and later extended to two. For other grants, such as the Neighborhood Access and Equity Grant, no timeline or information is available, making it difficult for potential applicants to prepare or for stakeholders to provide feedback on the application process.

Exacerbated by the complexity and lengthiness of the registration process, lack of information adds an additional barrier for applicants, especially organizations with fewer resources. Funding agencies should implement outreach programs in which information is widely publicized and sent directly to potential applicants. Multiple eligible applicants for the ECJ grants indicated they learned about grant opportunities last minute and/or from other nonprofits rather than the EPA. In addition, more time should be provided for submitting public comments.

Accountability

Accountability structures and reporting mechanisms are unclear or do not exist yet.

All three grants lack clarity in how grant recipients are held accountable to serving intended beneficiaries, i.e. “disadvantaged communities.” Given the purpose of these grants to support climate resilience in marginalized communities, it is crucial that grant recipients demonstrate how funding will directly benefit these communities. Reporting mechanisms are not communicated online or during the initial application process, which gives organizations little time to prepare for any future reporting requirements.

Eligibility

More clarity about terms like “disadvantaged communities” is needed to help ensure funds are equitably allocated to reach target beneficiaries.

⁷ “Entity Registration Checklist: SAM.Gov.” U.S. General Services Administration. The United States Government.
https://iae-prd-videos.s3.amazonaws.com/pdf/entity-checklist.pdf?X-Amz-Algorithm=AWS4-HMAC-SHA256&X-Amz-Date=20230430T192902Z&X-Amz-SignedHeaders=host&X-Amz-Expires=86399&X-Amz-Credential=AKIAY3LPYEEEX3RP4EDU2%2F20230430%2Fus-east-1%2Fs3%2Faws4_request&X-Amz-Signature=73587b5f48e600b6c4282ef15739b27e4678296e36dc09556af61f1ae7d019cd

There is a lack of clarity in certain terms used to describe beneficiaries, i.e. “disadvantaged and underserved communities,”⁸ and “communities disproportionately burdened by environmental harms.”⁹ While the EPA has conducted a few public consultation processes to collect feedback on defining these terms, it is crucial that the EPA and other funding agencies implement these suggestions to ensure guidance is comprehensive and does not exclude any marginalized communities.

Transparency

The IRA lacks a feedback loop.

The Request for Information (RFI) mechanism utilized by the EPA for the ECJ Block Grants is a good model and can be replicated for other grants. The EPA should close the feedback loop and ensure that public comments are addressed. At present, no mechanism exists to ascertain whether public comments are reviewed and adequate amendments or clarifications made to the IRA. Upon initial review, it appears that certain concerns raised by the public, such as ambiguity surrounding the term “disadvantaged communities,” have been only partially addressed by providing additional clarification in the grant proposal guidance documents.

Environmental and Climate Justice Block Grants

Key Takeaways

- The Request for Information feedback mechanism facilitated by the EPA garnered many public comments, all of which should be addressed and/or followed up on.
- The many available resources for potential applicants should be made more accessible to first time federal grant applicants and non-English speakers. Additional support such as translations and helplines would also benefit accessibility.
- Applicants only had 3 months to complete a complicated application with long technical wait times. To ensure applicants have the time to successfully submit an application, the EPA should improve early outreach to potential applicants, especially for smaller CBOs that may require additional support in navigating the process.
- There is a lack of clarity around certain terms used to define the purpose and scope of grants and their intended beneficiaries. The EPA should provide clear guidance regarding terms such as “disadvantaged communities.”

⁸ “Environmental Justice Problem-Solving Cooperative Agreement Program: Request For Applications.” The Environmental Protection Agency. The United States Government, January 10, 2023. <https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2023-02/EJCPS%20Amended%20Request%20for%20Applications%20February%202023.pdf>

⁹Ibid.

- Accountability structures such as reporting mechanisms are unclear, and may be burdensome for smaller CBOs. There is also a lack of accountability metrics towards the communities intended to benefit from the grants.

Background

The Environmental and Climate Justice (ECJ) Block Grants¹⁰, funded at \$3 billion, invest in community-led projects in disadvantaged communities and community capacity building centers to address disproportionate environmental and public health harms related to pollution and climate change. Within the program, there are two separate block grants available: the Environmental Justice Collaborative Problem-Solving Cooperative Agreement for community-based nonprofit organizations and the Environmental Justice Government to Government Program for local government entities.

To be eligible for the ECJ Block Grants, projects are required to address one of the following areas: (i) community-led air and other pollution monitoring, prevention, and remediation, and investments in low-emission and resilient technologies and related infrastructure and workforce development that help reduce air pollutants, (ii) mitigating climate and health risks, (iii) climate resiliency and adaptation, (iv) reducing indoor toxics and indoor air pollution, or (v) facilitating engagement of disadvantaged communities in public processes. Eligible project activities are not strictly outlined, and examples provided include research and public education, workforce development, equitable transportation and mobility, and small-scale clean-ups.

The Environmental Justice Collaborative Problem Solving Cooperative Agreement (EJCPSA) provides financial assistance to community-based nonprofit organizations or a partnership of community-based nonprofits to address local environmental and public health issues in their communities. Using a collaborative problem-solving model, the grant supports CBOs in building partnerships with stakeholders such as local businesses, local government, academia, etc. to develop solutions to environmental or public health issues at the community level.

The EJCPSA has been an Environmental Protection Agency program since 2004, and through the IRA has received a total estimated \$30 million in funding. \$25 million has been allocated for CBOs proposing projects for up to \$500,000 each, with around 50 awards anticipated. Another \$5 million is allocated for qualifying small CBOs with 5 or fewer full-time employees proposing projects for up to \$150,000 each, with approximately 33 awards anticipated.¹¹ Special

¹⁰ The Inflation Reduction Act, Subtitle B- Hazardous Materials, Sec. 60201.

¹¹ “The Environmental Justice Collaborative Problem Solving Cooperative Agreement.” The Environmental Protection Agency. The United States Government, February 21, 2023.

<https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/environmental-justice-collaborative-problem-solving-cooperative-agreement-5>

consideration will be given to applicants working to address climate justice issues in “underserved and vulnerable communities,”¹² as well as projects that will support rural areas.

The Environmental Justice Government to Government (EJG2G) program provides funding to governmental entities at the state, local, territorial and tribal levels to support and/or create model government activities that lead to measurable environmental or public health results in communities disproportionately burdened by environmental harms and risks. The IRA funds this program at a total of \$1 million each for 70 three-year projects. The funding is split between different levels of government, with twenty funded projects at the state, local, and tribal levels, and ten projects in U.S. territories and remote tribes.

The application deadline for the ECJ Block Grants was April 14th, 2023, with selected projects set to commence in November 2023 for a 3-year funding period. Interested eligible entities were required to apply through SAM.gov and Grants.gov, and submit multiple documents such as a project narrative form, itemized budget sheet, environmental results/logic model, and letters of commitment from partner organizations, in addition to federal funding forms and contracts.

Accessibility

The ECJ Block Grants and their purpose, eligibility, and application requirements are outlined on the EPA website. Most of the information applicants need to apply successfully is in one centralized location on a landing page for the grant.¹³ The EPA landing page includes a grant overview, organization eligibility criteria, deadline details, information on earmarked funds, project eligibility criteria, links to the application, EPA contact information for assistance, and additional resources including informational videos and webinars, FAQs, prior years’ funded projects, case studies from the EJCPSA program, and a factsheet on the program.

The EPA has also released a separate document which elaborates on the application process and its requirements for each block grant. This document is well organized, and provides step-by-step instructions and questions to answer for all parts of the application. Detailed merit evaluation criteria is provided for every application component, as well as an overview of the review and selection process. In the appendix, the EPA provides additional recommendations for preparing a strong application, and provides templates and examples for budget sheets, and a variety of other additional resources. The EPA hosted two pre-application assistance webinars for the ECJ Block Grants in January and February 2023.

While plentiful, this information may be overwhelming and difficult to digest for a layperson, given that there is a large volume of data and no available helpline to address questions and assist with the grant process. This may raise concerns of an indirect bias towards larger CBO’s which have

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Supra N. 8.

greater capacity, including prior experience accessing federal funding. These challenges may undermine the ECJ Block Grants' overall objective of benefitting historically disadvantaged communities.

In a public comment, the American Public Health Association (APHA) wrote about the need to

“diversify methods of informational outreach, including offering virtual, in person, and media/print information, and working with community leaders to share information appropriately.”¹⁴ Also discussed is the lack of translation services provided by the EPA and a suggestion to add a “capacity-building component to support organizations in continuing their grant activities once the funding period ends.”¹⁵ The APHA also recommends that due to limited capacity of interested organizations, “before communities submit a full application, they could submit a short letter of interest for initial program screening prior to application submission. If the letter of interest indicates that the group is a good fit for the program, EPA can then request a full application.”¹⁶

Several accessibility issues should be considered regarding published grant guidelines. The EPA does not provide any translation services for non-English speakers, nor does it have translated documents on its landing page. If application resources in languages other than English exist, they are not readily accessible. Additionally, EPA guidance states that applications must be written in English, and “applications written in languages other than English will not be considered for award.”¹⁷ Considering the overlap between communities disproportionately affected by climate change and immigrant or non-English speaking communities, the EPA could do more to provide access to translation services.

The application timeline also presents barriers to access, especially for first-time applicants for federal funding. Although there were three months in between the announcement of the grant opportunity and the application deadline, registering through the online federal funding portals SAM.gov and Grants.gov is a complicated and lengthy process. It can take up to one month to complete SAM.gov registration, and applicants who might not have learned about the ECJ block grant opportunities at the time of initial publication may be limited in their ability to submit an application on time. Amendments to the Request for Application (RFA) for the EJG2G program were introduced as late as February 21, 2023 while the application deadline was April 14, 2023. This limited time frame can make it difficult for organizations to apply. As one staff member of a civil society organization explained: “Our organization is not planning on applying for funding due to the difficulties in figuring out the process. We had a hard time navigating the different websites

¹⁴ Regulations.gov. “Environmental and Climate Justice Block Grant - Request for Information (RFI)”, Public Comments, Accessed May 1, 2023.

<https://www.regulations.gov/docket/EPA-HQ-OEJECR-2023-0023/comments>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Supra N. 5.

and finding the different forms we had to fill out. I don't think we would consider applying in the future.”

This barrier is particularly burdensome for smaller CBO's that might have less capacity to prepare multiple application forms and documents in addition to completing the online registration process on time. Considering that the EJCPSCA specifically allocates \$5 million for small CBOs with 5 or fewer full-time employees, the EPA should be mindful of the application challenges smaller organizations face and should set realistic deadlines, streamline the application, and provide adequate support for applicants who have questions about the process.

In a public comment, the District of Columbia Department of Energy and Environment stated that the EPA should

“support community-based organizations (CBOs) that are already performing work in the identified program areas within disadvantaged communities and allow funding to be used to support those organizations’ operational expenses.”¹⁸ They also mentioned that “many CBOs are under-resourced and have limited capacity to devote to comprehensive federal reporting requirements. Acknowledging the need for proper oversight, we recommend that EPA implement different reporting requirements and frequency for government grantees versus CBO grantees.”¹⁹

Accountability

While there is considerable EPA guidance and resources available for the ECJ Block Grants, it is unclear how accountability mechanisms will play out for each of these grants. Both the EJG2G and the EJCPSCA envision a partnership model between multiple stakeholder groups, as the EJG2G program requires partnerships between eligible CBO's and a minimum of one governmental entity (local, state, or federal level), and the EJCPSCA grant requires a collaborative partnership between a CBO and another stakeholder group. The allocation of responsibilities of each of these partners is not delineated clearly in available information about these grants.

This leads to considerable ambiguity in terms of responsibility allocation, cost burden or splits, documentation, and process obligations such as conducting environmental impact assessments, fund management, and ultimate responsibility for managing the project. The ECJ Block Grants require applicants to submit “letters of commitment” with partnering entities but do not provide any support on what these should look like. Smaller CBO's may be disadvantaged in such a situation, owing to concerns of lower bargaining power and capacity to negotiate, which could negatively impact the success of these grants. The EJG2G program envisions the creation of government structures and partnerships which could be replicated in the future, but does not define governmental roles or responsibilities. It would be appropriate for governmental

¹⁸ Supra N. 11.

¹⁹ Supra N. 11.

responsibilities to be well defined in light of the EJG2G's overall objective of creating "model government activities."

In the same vein, success metrics or fund utilization frameworks have not been touched upon by the EPA. Terms such as "measurable results" have been loosely used in connection with these grants, with no real understanding of what these results should look like or how they should be measured. A larger overarching question of accountability is the lack of clarity on reporting mechanisms and EPA oversight post fund distribution. The IRA does not envision any accountability structures towards the ECJ Block Grant's intended beneficiaries themselves: historically disadvantaged communities.

In a public comment, the Latino Community Foundation indicates that to achieve highest impact,

*"grant recipients either 1) demonstrate they serve climate impacted communities; or 2) work in a census tract that reflects demographic groups that represent climate-impacted groups."*²⁰

The ECJ Block Grants do not seem to have any grievance redressal mechanism in place. This holds true for concerns or grievances for various stages of the grant process, including pre-application and application stages, the competition process, funding decisions and allocation, and implementation. Grievances may relate to questions of eligibility, rationale for rejection of an application, options to re-submit applications in case of error, receipt of partial funding, and fallout of a partnership during any stage of the grant cycle. Given that both grants require high degrees of collaboration between multiple organizations and groups, it would be prudent to have a codified grievance redressal structure.

Eligibility

The EJG2G program envisions a mandatory government partnership. While this may be imperative in its mandate towards creating "model governmental activities," such a requirement may indirectly favor larger CBO's with pre-existing government relationships, or CBO's who have the funds and capacity to access governmental agencies and entities. Only eligible CBO's have access to EJG2G funds through their governmental partnerships.²¹ These prerequisites, while aspirational, may on the ground end up being limiting. The EJG2G application process encourages applicants to partner with at least 3 different stakeholder groups. A state, federally recognized tribal government, or local government qualifying partnership with a CBO counts as only one stakeholder group. Such large groups and partnership structures may lead to their own operational roadblocks with considerable potential for miscommunication, poor project management, inefficiency, and ultimately deadlock.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Other than for US Territories and Remote Tribes where the community can directly receive funding.

The ECJ Block Grants have specifically been designed to benefit historically “disadvantaged communities”, which colloquially refers to communities which have faced a disproportionate impact of climate change and fallouts of environmental degradation and destruction. This terminology is often used in climate justice circles, however a lack of clear definition of the term in the IRA is cause for concern. Certain secondary governmental resources refer to the EPA’s Environmental Justice Screening Tool as a method for understanding what constitutes a “disadvantaged community.” However, public comments solicited by the EPA raise concerns about the ambiguity of terms defining the intended beneficiaries of these grants.

Similarly, while the IRA calls for “environmental justice” considerations to be included in application documents for the EJG2G program, the EPA is yet to provide direction on what this term entails. This could be a double edged sword as the lack of a strict definition allows entities to make broad and purposive arguments towards environmental justice, yet such freedom may inhibit fund flows to communities that need it the most.

Transparency

On February 9, 2023, the EPA issued a Request for Information (RFI) to solicit public comments on the ECJ Block Grants. The RFI requested input about program design, types of projects to fund, reducing application barriers, reporting and oversight, and technical assistance. As of April 2023, 180 public comments have been posted on the federal website. The ability of individuals and organizations to submit feedback to the EPA is crucial to ensure transparency and public involvement in the decision-making process. Since the ECJ Block Grants are meant to support communities vulnerable to disproportionate climate change impacts, groups working on the ground alongside communities should be able to shape the grant and its implementation.

The RFI is a good model and should be continued throughout the funding disbursement process. It is also essential that the EPA communicate how it will use public comments to amend and improve the ECJ Block Grants, and that they are held accountable towards implementing feedback.

Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund

Key Takeaways

- Available resources for potential applicants should be made more accessible to first time federal grant applicants and non-English speakers. Additional support such as translations and helplines would also benefit accessibility.
- Grants and funding amounts are disproportionately earmarked to larger and higher-capacity organizations, neglecting low-income and disadvantaged communities.
- The EPA engaged in a consultation process to obtain public comments on various issues regarding outreach and accessibility to low-income and disadvantaged

communities. Once guidelines are published by the EPA, advocacy groups should reference relevant questions (listed in the appendix) to examine how the EPA implemented public advice on these issues.

- Listening sessions and the consultation process facilitated by the EPA lasted for less than two months, which is not enough time for communities to provide meaningful feedback. To ensure applicants have time to successfully submit feedback, the EPA should improve early outreach, especially for smaller CBOs.
- Advocacy efforts with the Environmental Financial Advisory Board (EFAB)²² could include contacting local representatives on the board, asking for more NGO and tribal representation on the board, and asking the EPA to ensure board meetings are transparent, recorded, and open to the public.

Background

The Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund²³ will provide competitive grants of nearly \$27 billion to mobilize financing and leverage private capital for clean energy and climate projects that reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This first-of-its-kind program has an emphasis on projects that benefit low-income and disadvantaged communities, and includes two separate grant competitions: the General and Low Income Assistance Fund (GLIAF) and the Zero Emission Technology Fund (ZETF).

The GLIAF competition will award \$19.97 billion in competitive grants to low-income and disadvantaged communities. Its goal is to create a national network of nonprofit entities that will facilitate technical assistance and capacity building necessary to strengthen the ecosystem of CBOs, small businesses, workers, suppliers, and financial institutions required to accelerate the transition to an equitable net-zero economy and catalyze the jobs of the future.

The ZETF competition will award \$7 billion in competitive grants to states, tribes, municipalities, and eligible nonprofit entities. Its purpose is to enable the deployment of residential rooftop solar, community solar, and associated storage and upgrades in low-income and disadvantaged communities to ensure all families have access to low-cost clean energy.

Accessibility

Between the two grant competitions under the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund, fewer grants with smaller funding amounts are allocated to the GLIAF, which is specifically meant to support low-income and disadvantaged communities. The EPA expects to award between 2 and 15 grants

²² “Environmental Financial Advisory Board.” The Environmental Protection Agency. The United States Government, April 27, 2023. <https://www.epa.gov/waterfinancecenter/efab>

²³ The Inflation Reduction Act, Subtitle A- Air Pollution, Sec. 60103.

only for the GLIAF program,²⁴ while the other competition that doesn't target low income communities (the ZETF) will award 60 grants. While the IRA also targets low-income and marginalized communities, this disparity within the GGRF will disproportionately support larger organizations that may be in less need of significant federal funding. To ensure the GGRF is equitable and accessible, the allocation of funding should be considered and potentially modified to provide more funding opportunities for communities with the greater need.

Eligibility

As on date, detailed information about the application process has not been released by the EPA. Current guidance states that “the Agency expects to release Notice of Funding Opportunities for these competitions in early summer 2023, which will clarify the details of each funding opportunity and further details about the project eligibility.”²⁵

An important entry point for advocacy efforts is to engage with the EPA on ways to influence the eligibility criteria for both grants under the GGRF. The EPA conducted listening and advisory sessions, reaching out to the general public to get advice on implementation that takes into account issues of accessibility for low-income and disadvantaged communities. As part of these sessions, the EPA published a list of questions relevant to each grant²⁶ to consider as part of the consultation process. Since the consultation process is now over, the next step is to make sure the EPA incorporates public feedback on these issues. Relevant questions from this consultation process are listed in the Appendix.

Transparency

As part of the greater consultation process, the EPA launched a series of listening sessions with the general public and key stakeholder groups to express their concerns on the implementation of the GGRF. Zoom sessions took place in November 2022, and session recordings are publicly available on the EPA website and YouTube.²⁷ In these sessions, the EPA provided guidance on ways the public can communicate with the EPA and encouraged submitting public comments.²⁸

²⁴ “Fact Sheet: The Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund.” The Environmental Protection Agency. The United States Government.

<https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2023-02/Greenhouse%20Gas%20Reduction%20Fund%20Factsheet.pdf>

²⁵ “The Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund.” The Environment Protection Agency. The United States Government, April 19, 2023.

<https://www.epa.gov/greenhouse-gas-reduction-fund/program-resources#register>

²⁶ “The Inflation Reduction Act: Overview.” The Environmental Protection Agency, The United States Government, January 2023.

https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2022-12/12%2009%202022_OAR%20IRA%20Overview_public.pdf

²⁷ *YouTube*, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qeeyyTT3Jil&t=2s>. See also *YouTube*, 2022.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ppwMqgfbXZg&t=14s%2C>.

²⁸ Regulations.gov. “Commenting on EPA Dockets”, Accessed May 1, 2023.

<https://www.epa.gov/dockets/commenting-epa-dockets#rules>

The EPA appears to have invested time and effort into encouraging public participation in the implementation process, including feedback on how to best ensure funds reach low-income and disadvantaged communities. Examples of such questions and comments were published by the EPA as part of the consultation processes²⁹, and can be found in the Appendix.

Certain aspects of the consultation process might have advantaged larger, more affluent organizations to influence grant criteria and distribution. While key timeframes and deadlines are not yet publicly available, the IRA was enacted in August 2022, and the listening sessions took place in November 2022. This quick turnaround, in addition to a less than one month window to submit public comments, might not have been enough time for communities to meaningfully engage with the consultation process. Smaller organizations with less capacity might not have been aware of this process, further disadvantaging their feedback from being successfully considered by the EPA. Unless an organization has the capacity to keep close track of the process and frequently check websites for updates, it is likely the opportunity will be missed. Information about the consultation process is only available in English, which may prevent non-English speaking communities from participating. The initial call for public comments should have been published in additional languages, as well as participation guidelines and resources.

As part of the EPA's efforts to engage with the public, the EPA established the Environmental Financial Advisory Board (EFAB)³⁰, an advisory expert committee tasked with identifying ways to lower costs and increase investment impact. The Board consists of officials from state and local governments, leaders from the finance community and other business industries, selected federal employees, and other members of civil society such as tribal, environmental, and other nongovernmental organizations. Although a helpful tool for oversight, only 3 seats on the 37 seat EFAB are currently occupied by civil society members.³¹ To ensure the EFAB is representative of the communities that are meant to benefit from the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund, including low-income and disadvantaged communities, the Board should diversify its members. The EPA should facilitate greater representation from local communities, NGOs, and tribes on the EFAB, make the selection process for members more transparent, and ensure meetings are recorded and open to the public.

Neighborhood Access and Equity Grant

Key Takeaways

- There is no information about the application process for the Neighborhood Access and Equity grant yet.

²⁹ Supra N.23.

³⁰ Supra N.20.

³¹ "U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: Environmental Financial Advisory Board, 2022 Roster." The Environmental Protection Agency. The United States Government.

https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2022-06/EFAB%202022%20Roster_0.pdf

- This grant may supplement or follow a similar process to the Reconnecting Communities Program in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.
- Encouraging components from the Reconnecting Communities application process that should be continued in the process for the Neighborhood Access and Equity grant include information available in Spanish and Chinese (in addition to English) and opportunities for unsuccessful applicants to debrief with funders.
- Concerns include providing adequate information with enough time to ensure historically underrepresented groups can provide feedback about the mechanism as well as access funding.
- Care should be taken to increase transparency around the application process and to ensure that disadvantaged communities – for which some of the funds are earmarked – are equitably identified and engaged in the process as well represented in award recipients.
- Organizations can begin working with and advocating to their local government to identify potential projects even before information about the application is released.

Background

The Neighborhood Access and Equity Grant³² provides nearly \$1.9B in grant awards to projects in communities that have been divided or cut off from economic opportunity by highway infrastructure and/or that increase green space. About a third of the funding in the Neighborhood Access and Equity grant is designated for “economically disadvantaged communities.” The Federal Highway Administration will be responsible for distributing the IRA funds through a competitive grant process.

Though information about the application process for this grant is not available yet, the Reconnecting Communities program, funded by the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL), may be an indicator. It is not clear exactly how the grant funding will be distributed, but it will likely be added to the funds for the Reconnecting Communities program and distributed through the same mechanisms. If not exactly the same program, the similar goals between the two funding programs make lessons learned from Reconnecting Communities relevant to advocacy efforts for the Neighborhood Access and Equity Grant.

The initial applications for the Reconnecting Communities pilot were due October 2022, and the first 45 awards were announced in February 2023. It is likely that applications for the IRA funding will follow a similar process to the Reconnecting Communities program, so the advocacy analysis here is built on lessons learned from the Reconnecting Communities pilot.

Planning and capacity building grants are also available to nonprofits, and the Reconnecting Communities program prioritized partnerships between CBOs and governments in reviewing the

³² The Inflation Reduction Act, Subtitle E- Transportation and Infrastructure, Sec. 60501.

applications, so an effective application could include a planning process spearheaded by a CBO to prepare for a capital project led by local government.³³

Accessibility

The webpage for the Reconnecting Communities program under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law is available in Chinese and Spanish on the U.S. Department of Transportation's website.³⁴ This webpage includes translations of the application requirements, frequently asked questions, and information about prior awards.

However, the application itself is still submitted through the Grants.gov portal and requires a SAM.gov registration, for which information is only available in English. As noted above, these applications are burdensome processes that are difficult to navigate even if English is one's first language. Additionally, though tribal governments are eligible to apply, no information is available in Indigenous languages.

The Reconnecting Communities pilot program also established the Reconnecting Communities Institute,³⁵ which provides technical assistance to applicants, prioritizing resources for organizations from economically disadvantaged communities. This practice is a good step in increasing accessibility and providing additional assistance to targeted communities, and should be incorporated in the Neighborhood Access and Equity Grant process if there are not already plans to do so.

Accountability

There is not yet information available about the reporting requirements for the Neighborhood Access and Equity Grant.

Eligibility

There are three types of projects identified in the IRA that are eligible for funding under the Neighborhood Access and Equity Grant:³⁶

1. Capital construction projects to "improve walkability, safety, and affordable transportation access through projects that are context-sensitive." Capital grants are only available to nonprofits or community-based organizations.
2. Capacity building activities to identify, assess, plan, and engage the public in projects eligible for capital construction projects.

³³ "Reconnecting Communities FY 2022 Awards." U.S. Department of Transportation. The United States Government, March 9, 2023.

<https://www.transportation.gov/grants/reconnecting-communities/reconnecting-communities-fy22-awards>

³⁴ "Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program". U.S. Department of Transportation. The United States Government, February 28, 2023. <https://www.transportation.gov/grants/reconnecting-communities>

³⁵ "Reconnecting Communities Institute." U.S. Department of Transportation. The United States Government, April 24, 2023.

<https://www.transportation.gov/grants/reconnecting-communities/reconnecting-communities-institute-rci>

³⁶ Supra N.29.

3. Projects that mitigate or remediate harms from existing infrastructure in economically disadvantaged communities.

While only state, tribal, territorial, and local governments and metropolitan planning organizations can apply for funding for capital projects, planning and technical assistance funds are available to nonprofits.

There are opportunities for local advocacy here, as almost all of the funded projects in the pilot Reconnecting Communities grant were championed by nonprofits even though the funds went directly to the city government. Nonprofits that receive planning and technical assistance funds should work very closely with local governments to ensure that they are aligned in their plans to apply for capital project funding, especially as the Reconnecting Communities Program prioritized applications from nonprofit and public partnerships.

Additionally, the IRA designates \$1.26M for “economically disadvantaged communities.”³⁷ Planning and capacity building grants, as well as projects to mitigate or remediate negative impacts from existing infrastructure, are only available to economically disadvantaged communities. As with the Reconnecting Communities and other federal grant programs, applicants can prove that projects are for economically disadvantaged communities using one of the following tools:³⁸

- EPA Environmental Justice Screening and Mapping tool (EJSCREEN), Socio-economic indicator for low income, block groups in the 80th percentile or above, compared to the State.
- Areas of Persistent Poverty table for the County or Census tract level.
- DOT’s mapping tool for Historically Disadvantaged Communities. See Transportation Disadvantaged Census Tracts in ArcGIS Dashboards.
- Other Federally designated community development zones (for example: Opportunity Zones, Empowerment Zones, Promise Zones, or Choice Neighborhoods).

One potential concern is ensuring that the funds earmarked for “disadvantaged communities” are equitably distributed, especially considering the lack of current information about the program. This is especially important for potential applicants as the grants for technical assistance (for capacity building) and planning (for researching/planning potential projects) are available to nonprofits and only for disadvantaged communities as defined above.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ “Reconnecting Communities FAQs.” U.S. Department of Transportation. The United States Government, April 3, 2023.
<https://www.transportation.gov/grants/reconnecting-communities/reconnecting-communities-faqs>

Transparency

There is little information available about the Neighborhood Access and Equity grant. While it seems expected the funds designated in the IRA will supplement existing funds in the Reconnecting Communities program, neither the Department of Transportation nor the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) has released information about the grant or application process. Under the IRA, funds are available to the FHWA until September 30, 2026³⁹ though it is not clear how long the grant cycle will be once funds are awarded.

Given the condensed timelines of other IRA-funded programs, for instance the ECJ Block Grants, it is critical to provide information early to ensure that all eligible organizations have enough time to prepare application materials to apply. The lack of transparency around the application process, as well as a timeline about when information will be available, prevents organizations from adequately preparing application materials in advance, and may favor larger and/or more well-resourced organizations that can prepare applications quickly.

Additionally, there is a need for opportunities to provide feedback. There is no information yet about opportunities for public comment or other feedback mechanisms, which are important to ensure all stakeholders are involved in developing the application process, especially based on lessons learned through the Reconnecting Communities application process. The lack of public information about opportunities to inform the application process favors organizations with preexisting relationships to federal agencies, a concern for equitable distribution of funds. Given the goals of this grant are to repair historical harms done by infrastructure, there is a need to ensure new voices are represented in both award recipients and the application process itself.

Encouragingly, unsuccessful applicants to the Reconnecting Communities pilot program received an email with information about how to request a debrief,⁴⁰ which helps provide transparency to the decision-making process and should be included in any application process for the Neighborhood Access and Equity Grant.

Conclusion

The IRA represents an enormous opportunity to address climate change. The key takeaways and recommendations identified in this report are intended to increase equity in accessing funding. More research is needed to expand analysis beyond the three grants examined here, and to continue to identify gaps and opportunities as more information about the IRA, funding opportunities, application processes, and feedback mechanisms are released.

³⁹ Supra N.29.

⁴⁰ Supra N.28.

Appendix: Selected EPA discussion questions

The following questions were selected from [discussion questions](#) posed by the EPA during a consultation process and are ones that could inform future advocacy initiatives.

1. How should the EPA integrate the needs of underserved communities into the design of this program, taking into consideration: a. What equity and justice concerns, opportunities, or priorities are most relevant for this program and how can EPA best help address them?
2. How can EPA best address the statutory requirement to consider the “degree to which greenhouse gas air pollution is projected to be reduced in total and with respect to low-income and disadvantaged communities?”
1. How can EPA structure this program to facilitate cooperation and coordination within and across tribal, local, regional, and state agencies to implement climate policies?”
2. How can EPA ensure the benefits of this program reach low-income and disadvantaged communities?
3. What metrics should this program use for measuring success and ensuring accountability?
4. How can we help ensure this program addresses concerns of near-port communities and advances environmental justice?
5. What should EPA consider in the design of the program to encourage grantees to support high quality jobs and adhere to best practices for labor standards, consistent with guidance such as Executive Order 14063 on the Use of Project Labor Agreements and the Department of Labor's Good Jobs Principles?
6. How can EPA design these programs to most effectively benefit low-income and disadvantaged communities that face disproportionate impacts from air pollution?
7. How should EPA use these funds to support national multipollutant air quality monitoring networks (e.g. the Clean Air Status and Trends Network (CASTNET)) in underserved rural communities where gaps in air monitoring data frequently exist?
8. What training and technical assistance would best help communities engage in multi-pollutant air quality planning processes to achieve community benefits of multi-pollutant emission reductions?
9. To what extent has your organization/community integrated a multi-pollutant reduction approach into your air quality planning process or conversations with local stakeholders?
10. Should EPA conduct additional analysis to help refine current plans, or should EPA first provide foundational information on how to approach this topic in your area?
11. Air Quality Sensors: 1. What are the existing and future needs for air quality sensors in low-income and disadvantaged communities?
12. Do you feel that it is important for EPA to research the impact of flue draft on particulate matter emissions in relation to residential wood heating?
13. What specific approaches do you recommend to promote the successful award of these grants to low income and disadvantaged communities most in need of such support?

14. What technical assistance, guidance and other non-financial support is most needed to help schools in low-income and disadvantaged communities implement effective and sustainable IAQ and energy efficiency programs?
15. What types of education, technical assistance, and partnerships that EPA could provide would best support low-income and disadvantaged communities in reducing GHGs associated with electricity generation and use?

Appendix C - Email sent to affiliate organizations with interview questions

Dear [name],

As mentioned during this month's webinar, we are partnering with a team of graduate research students from Columbia University (copied on this email) to better understand the opportunities for funding within the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). We're interested in hearing about your experience. Your feedback will be incorporated into an advocacy report. You have the option to remain anonymous. Kindly reply all by Sunday, April 2.

If you **have or would like to** apply for funding, please reply all to this email and let us know:

- If you have already identified funding, which opportunities/programs are you applying for?
- What have the challenges been in both identifying and applying for funding? What would you change about the process?
- What worked well in the overall IRA funding process?
- Are you willing to participate in a 10 minute call to further discuss your experience to inform future advocacy?

If you are **not** planning to apply for funding, please reply all to this email and let us know:

- Why did your organization choose not to apply?
- What resources/support/changes would you need to consider applying, if any?
- Are you willing to participate in a 10 minute call to further discuss your experience to inform future advocacy?

Please indicate how you would like your comments and feedback to be attributed:

1. My name, title, and organization
2. Just my organization
3. Just my name
4. I'd like all comments to be unattributed

Thank you in advance for your time. We look forward to hearing from you.

Regards,