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CLEAN ENERGY, LOST WAGES

Bridging the Community
Solar Jobs Gap in Illinois



Executive Summary

Since Illinois passed the Climate & Equitable Jobs Act (CEJA) in 2021, ratepayers invested heavily in building a strong clean energy economy in-state. But instead of delivering jobs and training opportunities for Illinois workers, community solar projects - small, offsite, subscriber-based arrays supported by state energy incentives - have too often relied on out-of-state crews, sending paychecks and training elsewhere.

Community solar lets households, small businesses, and public entities subscribe to electricity from a shared solar project and receive bill credits – no rooftop required. In Illinois, most community-solar projects participate in **Illinois Shines**, the state’s incentive program that awards renewable energy credits (RECs) to approved projects. Those RECs are purchased with ratepayer dollars, which means Illinois customers are funding the build-out of these projects in exchange for clean energy and consumer benefits.

Our research indicates that **60 percent of community solar projects in Illinois are being built by out-of-state contractors**, and **more than four out of five of those workers (82.6 percent) are from outside of Illinois**. Illinois ratepayers are purchasing clean power and subsidizing a large share of jobs that do not land in our communities. Instead, the paychecks from those projects pay rents and mortgages for workers in at least 36 other states. Meanwhile, **community solar projects built under union project labor agreements (PLAs) – staffed almost entirely by Illinois residents (94 percent) – are few and far between**.

What does this cost us? Using the final 2025–26 Illinois Shines block sizes for all community solar projects and the U.S. Department of Energy’s latest industry cost benchmarks, we estimate that almost **\$100 million in construction wages will be exported out of Illinois this program year**. Because community solar blocks frequently open fully subscribed each year with a substantial waitlist rolling forward, these lost paychecks and apprenticeship hours will continue year after year without policy changes.

This has implications for Illinois' equity goals too. Because Illinois' Minimum Equity Standard (MES) relies heavily on in-state residency criteria to identify



OUT-OF-STATE CONTRACTORS

Out-of-state contractors file **over 60% of payrolls** for Illinois community solar projects.



OUT-OF-STATE WORKERS

Four in five community solar workers on those projects travel from another state.



EXPORTED WAGES

Illinois **exports almost \$100 million** in community solar construction wages every year.

Equity Eligible Persons (EEPs), out-of-state crews are less likely to meet the state's strict equity goals. Three of the core EEP pathways are Illinois residency-based (living in communities eligible for the state's Restore, Reinvest, and Renew (R3) program, living in an Illinois environmental justice community, or participating in a CEJA workforce program), while the remaining pathways are formerly incarcerated or foster-care graduates.

When projects rely on out-of-state crews, those workers are ineligible for the residency-based EEP pathways by definition. Meanwhile, contractors that are majority owned or controlled by EEPs are assumed in full MES compliance – another reason that Illinois-based workforce and ownership matter for meeting equity goals.

The solution is simple: lower the PLA threshold to cover community solar projects under 5 MW. Illinois designed CEJA to create clean energy and good jobs. PLAs improve job quality and significantly increase the likelihood that projects are staffed by local workers – keeping with CEJA's goal for in-state workforce development – regardless of where the prime contractor is based. Lowering the PLA threshold would turn ratepayer investments into more family-sustaining paychecks for Illinois workers, while also building in-state contractor capacity and **upholding the spirit of CEJA: Illinois ratepayer dollars supporting Illinois workers and businesses.**

Community Solar Construction in Illinois

Our research indicates that 60 percent of community solar projects in Illinois are being built by out-of-state contractors, and four in five workers on those projects travel from another state.

Illinois has made major investments in renewable energy through the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act (CEJA), with the explicit goal of building a clean energy economy that delivers good jobs and training opportunities to Illinois workers. Community solar is a centerpiece of that effort, representing more than half of all non-utility scale solar projects in the state.¹ Widespread community solar deployment – with projects currently capped at 5 MW in size – should expand access to renewable energy while ensuring local economic benefits. Yet the record of Certified Transcripts of Payroll (CTPs) filed with the Illinois Department of Labor shows a very different reality: most construction work on community solar projects is being performed by out-of-state contractors.

Since CEJA's passage, more than 17,000 CTPs have been filed on ground mount community solar projects. 86 Illinois-based contractors have filed only 40 percent of these payroll reports while 66 contractors headquartered outside of Illinois filed 60 percent.² Put simply, out-of-state firms are traveling from as far away as California, Montana, New Jersey and Florida and performing the majority of the work on projects that Illinois ratepayers are subsidizing.

The imbalance is even more stark at the top of the market: the top three and seven of the 10 contractors filing the most payrolls are based out-of-state. Meanwhile, Illinois-based firms like Kelso-Burnett have demonstrated a longtime commitment to building projects with skilled union labor under the guidance of a PLA. Lawmakers created CEJA's solar incentives to build *Illinois* jobs, not to subsidize solar contractors from other states.

¹ [2025-2026 Program Year Final Block Sizes](#), Illinois Shines Capacity Dashboard, accessed 9/29/25.

² Illinois Department of Labor, Certified Payroll Portal

This isn't an isolated issue; it's playing out in communities across the state. Currently, Illinois has a wide-open market where out-of-state crews show up anywhere a developer sends them. Contractors are traveling hundreds of miles to staff projects across the state, and once a developer brings a firm in, the relationship tends to lock in and repeat. You can see it in the developer/contractor pairings: Knobelsdorff Electric files roughly two-thirds of SunVest's payrolls and several out-of-state firms like Hoosierland Excavating work almost exclusively for Nexamp. The takeaway is simple: once they come, they stay – the same non-Illinois vendors are cycling through ratepayer-funded builds across many counties.



OUT-OF-STATE CONTRACTORS

Top 10 Contractors by Payrolls Filed: 2021 to September 15, 2025

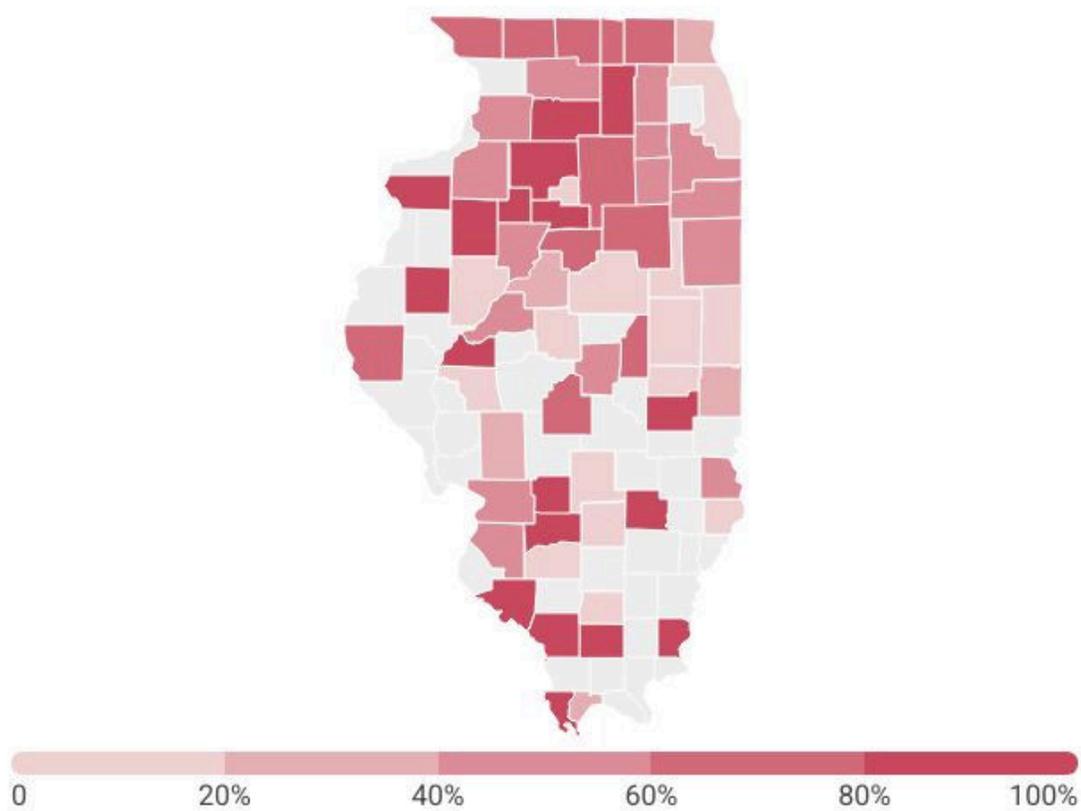
Source: Illinois Department of Labor, Certified Payroll Portal

Contractor	Headquarters	Payrolls Filed (Percent Total)
Babcock & Wilcox Construction	Charlotte, NC	1,368 (7.9%)
RECON Corporation	Swartz Creek, MI	1,266 (7.35%)
Knobelsdorff Electric	Goodhue, MN	1,081 (6.3%)
Kelso-Burnett	Rolling Meadows, IL	1,044 (6.1%)
National Labor Contractors	Indianapolis, IN	550 (3.2%)
Jolma Electric	Ashland, WI	534 (3.1%)
GRNE Solar	Palatine, IL	526 (3.1%)
Hoosierland Excavating	South Bend, IN	512 (3.0%)
BTB Energy Solutions	Ingleside, IL	505 (2.9%)
SLR Renewables	Victor, MT	496 (2.9%)

The map below ([interactive version accessible here](#)) demonstrates how Illinois communities are losing out on CEJA's clean energy benefits. Note that 38 Illinois counties did not have any community solar payroll records for the period since CEJA. These counties are represented in white.

Illinois Community Solar Map: Payrolls Filed by Out-of-State Contractors

Source: Illinois Department of Labor, Certified Payroll Portal



These findings point to a structural problem: Illinois has designed its incentive programs to create good jobs and strong businesses within the state, but much of the economic benefits are flowing outward. Communities that host solar projects are bearing the impacts of construction and land use, without the local hiring and career opportunities in return. Without reforms, CEJA risks becoming a clean energy jobs program for other states rather than for Illinois.

Worker Residency Data: Who's Getting the Work?

FOIA records from the Illinois Department of Labor confirm that out-of-state contractors not only win a large share of community solar work, they also rely disproportionately on out-of-state labor.

A review of certified payrolls filed by 10 of the most prevalent out-of-state community solar contractors working in Illinois shows that 82.6 percent of their workers live outside of Illinois. Their workforce came from 36 other states, most frequently residing in Indiana (114), Minnesota (112), Wisconsin (94), Texas (69) and Florida (50). Casey Electric, based in Tell City, IN, has filed nearly 500 weeks of payroll records for Illinois community solar projects but never employed more than one Illinois resident on any job – its crews come almost entirely from Indiana and Kentucky. Similarly, Hoosierland Excavating, located just six miles from the Michigan border in South Bend, IN, has filed over 500 CTPs and employed only one Illinois worker – until partnering with local union labor under a PLA. Its workforce otherwise comes from Indiana and Michigan.

2



OUT-OF-STATE WORKERS

60% of community solar projects are being built by out of state contractors. On those projects, **four in five workers on those projects are from another state.**

Illinois ratepayers are footing the bill while the majority of community solar construction jobs go out of state, shifting wages and training opportunities across state lines. Illinois workers and their communities deserve better. Meanwhile, some of the largest community solar developers in Illinois – through representation on the Illinois Solar Energy Association (ISEA) board – are helping shape industry positions in energy negotiations that will impact ratepayers for years to come.

What is this Costing Illinois Communities?

The community solar industry's reliance on out-of-state workers is costing Illinois almost \$100 million in exported wages every year. Meanwhile, Project Labor Agreements on community solar are few and far between.

We estimate that Illinois exports about \$95 million in community solar construction wages to out-of-state workers every year. This estimate applies the total 2025–2026 Illinois Shines community solar block capacities to 2025 cost benchmarks from the U.S. Department of Energy's National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL).³

These lost wages have a real impact in Illinois communities. In the Metro East region, community solar buildout is disproportionately handled by out-of-state firms. Certified payrolls show extreme reliance on non-Illinois contractors in Randolph (98 percent of payrolls from out-of-state firms), Bond (100 percent), Clinton (86 percent), Madison (59 percent) and St. Clair counties (57 percent). Together, 72 percent of the payrolls filed on community solar projects in these five counties – representing more than 1,300 weeks of work – were filed by out-of-state contractors.



EXPORTED WAGES

We estimate that the community solar industry's reliance on out-of-state workers is **costing Illinois almost \$100 million in exported wages every year.**

³ Estimates based on 2025-26 final block capacities for Traditional Community Solar, Community Driven Community Solar, and EEC Community Solar ([Illinois Shines Program Dashboard](#), 6/2/2025).

Assumptions: Conservative 1.34 inverter loading ratio to convert block capacities reported in MWac to MWdc to align with NREL cost benchmarks. \$1.55/Wdc project capital costs based on 2025 NREL cost benchmarks for commercial PV projects. Labor costs assumed at 15-20% of total capex. ([National Renewable Energy Laboratory](#), 1/2025). Estimates verified by certified payroll records and total project costs for actual community solar projects in Illinois.

By comparison, projects built under project labor agreements (PLAs) overwhelmingly employ Illinois workers. In five PLA-covered community solar projects (three of which were mere miles from the state border), 94 percent of workers lived in Illinois. The lowest percentage of Illinois resident participation occurred on a PLA-covered project built primarily by contractors from Massachusetts and Nebraska, but even then 88% of the workers employed by these out-of-state contractors lived in Illinois. Unfortunately, PLAs on community solar projects are currently the exception rather than the rule.

Worker Residency Data for Community Projects Built under PLAs

Source: FOIA to the Illinois Department of Labor

County	Contractor	Total Workers	Illinois Residents	% Illinois Residents
DeKalb	Aldridge Electric (Libertyville, IL)	41	41	100%
Peoria	Mass Electric Construction (Waltham, MA) & Cherne Contracting (Omaha, NE)	57	50	88%
McLean	Legacy Solar (Towanda, IL)	37	34	92%
Adams	Porter Electric (Pekin, IL)	47	46	98%
Madison	J.F. Electric (Edwardsville, IL)	32	31	97%
Total		214	202	94%

CEJA was designed not just to create construction jobs, but to build lasting careers for Illinois workers. Community solar developers also appear to be skirting this goal by using temp agencies to meet their workforce needs. Indeed, the fifth largest filer of CTPs on Illinois community solar projects is

National Labor Contractors, which provides temporary construction workers exclusively for renewable energy projects. Similar temp services providing workers for community solar projects include Tradesmen International, Tradeco, Quality Labor Management and Superior Staffing. Altogether, these five companies have filed nearly 700 payrolls on Illinois projects. Unlike union members – or even employees of non-union Illinois contractors – these temp workers have no clear path to a construction career.

Bad Actors in the Community Solar Industry

OSHA citations, AG penalties, and consumer complaints show a pattern: Illinois ratepayers are subsidizing questionable out-of-state crews while wages, benefits, and training opportunities leave the state.

Public records and agency filings point to recurring safety and compliance issues among out-of-state firms active on Illinois community solar projects. Cypress Creek Renewables – a key member of the Illinois Solar Energy Association – has been the subject of OSHA complaints at nonunion worksites in Florida and North Carolina, as well as a investigation by the Minnesota Attorney General tied to early-termination fees at a community solar garden. Standard Solar received a serious OSHA citation after workers installed panels 40 feet above the ground without fall protection at a Rockville (MD) job. And within Illinois program oversight, Solar Landscape’s SLDIL Portfolio LLC drew two complaints recorded by the Illinois Power Agency in 2024. GRNE Solar (another ISEA member affiliated with Nelnet’s national renewable energy practice) has racked up 26 consumer complaints since 2019 across the Illinois Shines and Illinois Solar For All programs. These aren’t one-offs – they underscore why ratepayer-funded projects need stronger guardrails to protect workers and the public interest.⁴

Ratepayers are subsidizing these bad actors and their crews – sending wages, experience hours, and training opportunities to places like Wisconsin, Iowa, Missouri, and Texas. This is the predictable result of the 5 MW PLA threshold: community solar projects can proceed without the local-hire, apprenticeship, and wage standards that keep jobs in-state. Lowering the threshold would close this pipeline of publicly-supported work flowing to non-Illinois contractors and crews.

⁴ OSHA, [Inspection 1774340.015](#), 9/10/2024; [Inspection 1332213.015](#), 7/18/2018; [Inspection 1189568.015](#), 11/7/2016; Minnesota Attorney General’s Office, [Assurance of Discontinuance](#), 11/7/2023; Illinois Power Agency, [Consumer Complaints & Disciplinary Actions](#), 2/28/2025

Conclusion

Lowering the PLA threshold to cover community solar projects under 5 MW would ensure that ratepayer dollars are going where they belong: to Illinois workers, small businesses, and their communities.

Illinois set out to lead on clean energy – and it worked. CEJA’s market design attracted major developers, new headquarters, and billions in project pipelines. But four years into CEJA’s implementation, it’s clear that state-supported jobs are not consistently landing in Illinois communities. Certified payrolls show out-of-state contractors doing a large share of the work, and FOIA records confirm that confirm that one in two workers (49.9 percent) on community solar projects are non-Illinois residents. The cost of that drift is real – lost apprenticeship hours, slower growth for in-state contractors, and fewer family-sustaining paychecks circulating in Illinois communities despite significant ratepayer investment.

We must align labor standards with the way community solar is actually built: small, distributed projects delivered at scale. The state should also consider implementing clear, comparable reporting on workforce residency, and rewarding developers that partner with Illinois contractors and expand local training pipelines. Above all, let’s close the gap that lets publicly-supported projects proceed without the standards that keep jobs local. Lowering the PLA threshold to cover community solar projects under 5 MW would ensure that ratepayer dollars are going where they belong: to Illinois workers, small businesses, and their communities.