

# Clean Energy Communities Process Evaluation

## *Final Report*

Prepared for:

**New York State Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA)**

Tracey DeSimone

Project Manager, NYSERDA

Prepared by:

**Industrial Economics, Inc**

Cambridge, MA

Cynthia Manson

Principal

Emma Fox, Ph.D.

Senior Associate

Veronika Koziel

Associate

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# 1 Introduction to the CEC Process Evaluation

The New York State Energy Research and Development Authority’s (NYSERDA’s) Clean Energy Communities (CEC) program provides opportunities for municipalities to access: 1) grant funding, 2) support from community coordinators, 3) guidance regarding high-impact clean energy actions, and 4) recognition for expanding clean energy to improve communities across New York State. The CEC Program envisions local governments as “critical partners in achieving a new energy vision for New York State.” The goal of the CEC Program is to provide technical support and grant funding for municipalities that may want to implement clean energy actions, but may be unclear about where to start, or which actions may have the greatest impact.

With the Clean Energy Fund (CEF) 2.0 investment planning underway, beginning in 2026, the CEC model may shift to a new framework for local government engagement. NYSEDA’s initial proposed changes suggested that the focus of the CEC Program would shift away from intensive and CEC-specific Coordinator support and high levels of targeted funding to broader decarbonization strategies for local municipalities, reduced financial support for energy saving measures (e.g., installing LED street lighting), and toolkits/guidebooks to support municipalities pursuing energy efficiency (EE), building electrification (BE), and other decarbonization solutions.<sup>1</sup> The public comments in response to NYSEDA’s proposal included letters from approximately 100 municipalities across New York State providing comments in support of the CEC Program as it is currently structured.

In response to the overwhelming support from public comments, NYSEDA has determined that the next version of the CEC program will not follow the initially proposed model, but will

## Definitions:

- **Director** – Individuals working at locally-based organizations that contract with NYSEDA, who oversee the hiring and management of Coordinator activities in their territory. Directors report directly to NYSEDA and provide progress updates on behalf of their team of Coordinators.
- **Coordinator** – Contractors engaged by the CEC program to conduct the core public outreach and program interactions. Coordinators report to Directors.
- **Territories** – Territories are groupings of NYS economic development regions that fall under the jurisdiction of the directors and their coordinators. Each community-based organization that supports the CEC program is responsible for up to hundreds of municipalities in their territory.
- **High Impact Actions (HIAs)** – Actions that local governments can take to reduce energy use, cut energy costs, earn designation as a Clean Energy Community, and secure no-cost-share grants from NYSEDA.

<sup>1</sup> See for more information NYSEDA’s response to public comments regarding local government engagement: <https://documents.dps.ny.gov/public/common/ViewDoc.aspx?DocRefId=%7BE0EB7C8F-0000-C879-88F6-8B9A43FF3A52%7D>

continue similar to the existing program model under a different funding source (Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, RGGI, funding).

NYSERDA Program Staff are interested in systematically documenting the benefits and positive aspects of the program that have not been captured in past market or impact evaluations. In particular, the NYSERDA Program Staff wish to understand the extent to which the current program structure and processes contributes to benefits and positive impacts from the CEC Program, such as the role that Coordinator technical support plays in municipalities' decisions to pursue HIAs and match-free grants (see [Section 1.2](#)).

In this process evaluation, the evaluation contractor characterized the extent to which the current CEC Program structure has inspired municipal action toward high-impact clean energy projects or participation in other clean energy programs. Additionally, the evaluation contractor characterized the extent to which participant needs are met through the program and identified barriers that prevent municipalities from adopting clean energy solutions.

## 1.1 Program Description

The CEC Program invites municipal governments to make clean energy changes in their jurisdictions. Participating communities select and implement projects from a pre-approved set of high-impact actions (HIAs), in exchange for points to qualify them for no-cost-share grants to pursue additional actions. Municipalities are required to formally submit documentation of their completed HIAs to NYSERDA for review and approval, and to receive grant funding. Grant templates are available to streamline the submission process, and NYSERDA has accelerated the grant approval process by establishing pre-approved grant types, thereby expediting the award process for many pre-approved project types.

To implement this program, NYSERDA CEC Program Staff work with contracting organizations that are responsible for program implementation (i.e., as Directors and Coordinators) in different territories across NYS. In each contracting organization, a Director hires, trains, and works with Coordinators to conduct “front-line” municipal outreach and technical support to encourage and aid municipal participation in the CEC Program. Broadly, the CEC Program provides four main services to participating municipalities:

1. Technical support throughout the HIA selection and application process;
2. Clear pathways for implementing HIAs (i.e., a “menu” of options for pre-approved projects);
3. Match-free (i.e., no cost-share) grants to reward HIA implementation; and

#### 4. State-wide recognition through point-based designation levels and rankings.

All municipalities (county, city, town, or village governments) in New York State are eligible to apply for funds and take advantage of these services.

### 1.2 Program Impacts and Prior Evaluations

The CEC Program was built on the previous Cleaner Greener Communities program. Developed by NYSERDA in 2016, CEC has been funded in three successive rounds, with differing designs each round. Currently, the program is in its third round of funding (Round 3.0). NYSERDA’s public CEC tracker website indicates that CEC Program has a total of 942 participating communities (counties, cities, towns, villages, collectively called “municipalities” in this report), or 60% of the total 1,595 communities in New York State (**Figure 1**).<sup>2, 3</sup> More than 77% of participating communities have completed *more than one* HIA (official CEC designation status requires completion of at least four). Of the total, 85 large municipalities (9% of participants) and 857 small municipalities (91% of participants) have participated in the CEC Program.<sup>4</sup> Participating small municipalities represent 59% of all small municipalities in NYS (1,463 total). Participating large municipalities represent 64% of all large municipalities in the state (excluding New York City, 132 large municipalities).

Though the NYS large municipality market is well represented by CEC Program participants, 120 participating small municipalities have populations of less than 1,000 residents. The median population of *all* participating municipalities is only 3,515 residents. Of the participating municipalities, 36% have not yet achieved CEC designation status (which requires at least 4 HIAs), having completed approximately one HIA. The program has 605 Designated Clean Energy Communities, with a total of 5,342 HIAs completed to date.

A recent market evaluation of the CEC Program found that the program had “successfully reached a majority of New York State communities with a high rate of retention and deeper participation”

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<sup>2</sup> NYSERDA. 2025. Clean Energy Communities Map. Accessed online January 2025:

<https://www.nyserderda.ny.gov/All-Programs/Clean-Energy-Communities/Tracking-Progress/CEC-Map>

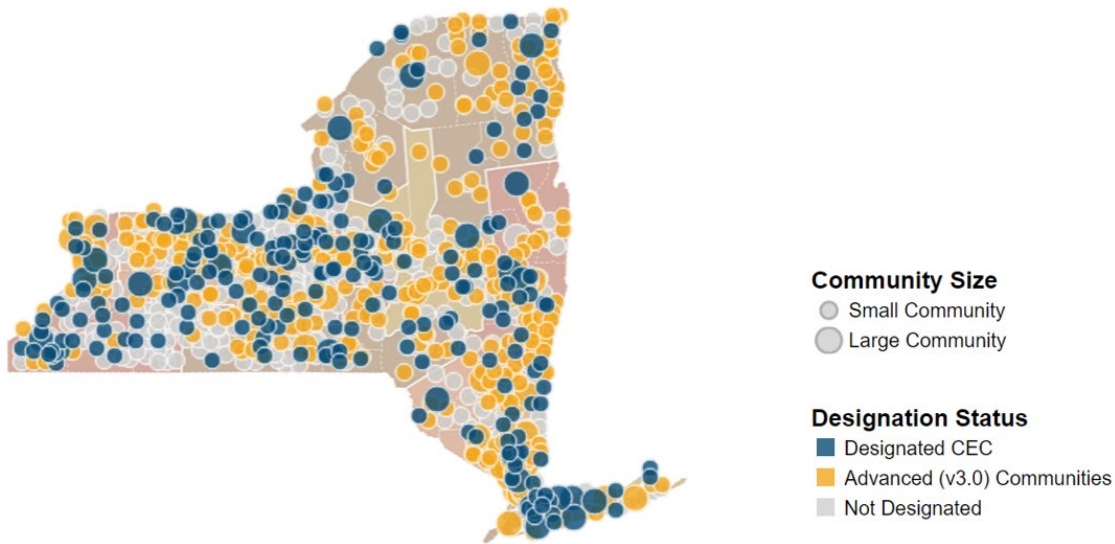
<sup>3</sup> Loomis, J. and Steiner, E. 2022. Clean Energy Communities Market Evaluation: Program Years 2018 – 2020. *Final Report*. Prepared by Opinion Dynamics for NYSERDA under Contract 104544.

<https://www.nyserderda.ny.gov/-/media/Project/Nyserda/Files/Publications/PPSER/Program-Evaluation/2023-03-Matter-No-16-02180-NYSERDA-CleanEnergyCommunities-Report.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> NYSERDA defines “large municipalities as having 40,000 or more residents, and “small municipalities as having 39,999 or fewer residents.

(i.e., more HIAs) by longer-term participants.<sup>5</sup> It is within this context that the broader benefits of the CEC Program are being explored through this study.

**Figure 1. CEC Participation Map Illustrating Program Participation**



### 1.3 Evaluation Objective

The objective of this evaluation is to qualitatively characterize the benefits of the CEC Program implementation process that are not presently captured in evaluation reports, document participant satisfaction, and identify lessons learned. This report describes the extent to which the CEC Program has successfully inspired municipal action toward HIAs and characterizes the barriers that prevent municipalities from adopting clean energy solutions. This report also describes the perceptions from NYSERDA Program Staff, CEC Directors and Coordinators, and municipal representatives about whether municipalities would continue to pursue HIAs in the absence of grants and Coordinator support.

The evaluation is framed around 12 main evaluation questions that address three main topics:

1. **Program implementation**, including barriers municipalities face when participating; program accessibility for municipalities; sources of information about the CEC Program that municipal representatives trust; and interests or goals that motivate participants to join.
2. **Participant needs met**, including participant satisfaction and whether their needs are met through the CEC program; municipal staff capacity building; and the extent to which the CEC program “smooths the path” for clean energy adoption.

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<sup>5</sup> Loomis, J. and Steiner, E. 2022.

3. **Lessons learned**, including process innovations and how NYSERDA can improve the effectiveness of the program in the future.

#### 1.4 Methodological Overview

The evaluation contractor conducted a process evaluation to understand the implementation of the CEC Program and the ways in which Coordinators support CEC activities by municipalities. As a part of this effort:

- Reviewed CEC Program data and public comments submitted in a petition to the Department of Public Services (DPS) on the proposal to consolidate New York State’s portfolio of energy efficiency programs.<sup>6</sup>
- Collected primary data using interview and focus group methods.

The data collection period for this evaluation began in September 2024 and extended through November 2024. The data collection objective, purpose, and methods for the CEC process evaluation are outlined in **Table 1. Section 4** provides additional methodological details, and **Appendix A** provides detail about the evaluation contractor team’s data cleaning methodology for the public comments and CEC list of municipalities used to develop the sample for focus group recruitment. **Appendix B** provides a crosswalk table of research questions and supporting data.

**Table 1. Data Sources, Participants, and Activity Type**

| Data Source   | No. Activities                             | No. Participants  |
|---|--|---|
| Interviews with CEC Program Staff                                 | 2 Individual Interviews, 1 Group Interview | 4   |
| Interviews with CEC Coordinators                                  | 5 Group Interviews                         | 18  |
| Interviews with Directors   | 4 Individual Interviews                    | 4   |
| Public Comments   | 1 Review                                   | 85 (3 documents were not converted properly so IEc (“evaluation contractor team”) coded 82 comments using NVivo software and reviewed 3 outside of the program) |
| Focus Groups with municipalities participating in the CEC Program | 2 Focus Groups                             | 18  |

<sup>6</sup> Public comments on the DPS petition in question can be found at the following link: <https://documents.dps.ny.gov/public/MatterManagement/CaseMaster.aspx?MatterCaseNo=18-m-0084&submit=Search>

The evaluation contractor team did not solicit perspectives from non-participants as a part of the data collection effort. However, perspectives represented in data collection do include participating municipalities that have not yet achieved CEC designation status.

## 2 Process Evaluation Results

This section presents the results of process evaluation investigation into three different program areas: 1) program implementation, 2) participant satisfaction, and 3) lessons learned.

The results described in this section for all three program areas are informed by the analysis of the following data collection efforts and sources: interviews with NYSERDA Program Staff, CEC Directors, CEC Coordinators, municipal focus group participants, and public comments from a DPS filing for the CEF 2.0.

### 2.1 Program Implementation

This section presents findings about the CEC Program design, focusing on the following: 1) the barriers municipalities face when participating, 2) how accessible the program is to municipalities, 3) trusted sources of information, and 4) the interests or goals that motivate participants to join the program. **Appendix C** of this report contains a complete list of codes and coding frequencies by interview group.

#### *2.1.1 In the absence of the CEC Program, what barriers might municipalities experience in adopting clean energy solutions?*

Any grant program requires an application from potential recipients; the CEC Program is no different in this respect. However, unlike a typical state funding program, the CEC Program serves municipal governments, which are famously understaffed and often under-resourced. The CEC Program elements that aim to reduce grant application barriers include personalized technical support from Coordinators and pre-approved project types.

Despite these program elements, most municipal focus group participants and some public commentors described the high administrative burden associated with submitting their HIAs to receive grant funding from NYSERDA, despite the availability of pre-approved project templates.<sup>7</sup> All respondent groups emphasized the crucial implementation support provided by CEC Coordinators in overcoming these barriers, by allowing municipalities to fill key capacity gaps to complete clean energy projects and HIAs. Seventy-five public commentors (90%)

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<sup>7</sup> Municipal focus group participants (n=17), public commentors (n=8).

described the implementation support provided by Coordinators as essential to municipal participation in the program. Fourteen focus group participants described free Coordinator support as an enhancement to their capacity to gather data and fill out CEC grant applications.

CEC Coordinators, Directors, and NYSERDA Program Staff similarly noted the essential role of Coordinator technical support in supporting municipalities while they navigate the substantial administrative requirements of applying for and implementing clean energy projects as a part of the CEC Program.<sup>8</sup> In particular, Coordinators explained that they often provide staffing support by helping municipalities find the data needed to complete the benchmarking HIA, a no-cost (and therefore popular) HIA that positions the municipalities to successfully earn grant funding.

Responses from public commentors, Coordinators, Directors, and NYSERDA Program Staff indicate that **limited municipal staff availability is a main contributor toward municipalities' limited capacity to participate.**<sup>9</sup> In particular, five different Coordinators explained that many municipalities rely on part-time volunteers (often retirees) to pursue CEC funding. These volunteers heavily rely on CEC Coordinator support to help them solve problems and answer questions along the way. Broadly, Coordinators emphasized the staffing support role they play in addition to their standard responsibilities, serving as the extra capacity for municipalities who may struggle to gain momentum within the program on their own. Three focus group participants framed this particular barrier as “limited administrative bandwidth.”

A related component of limited capacity to participate is the challenges that some municipalities may encounter with using digital technologies to submit their HIA documentation. Five Coordinators identified that they frequently support municipal staff or volunteers with limited technological experience, and provided specific examples where they helped municipal staff or volunteers to attach a PDF file to an email, log into the NYSERDA web portal, or complete other online application-related tasks. This type of digital literacy support allows Coordinators to boost municipal administrative capacity and reduce the burden of troubleshooting technology issues on top of trying to submit HIA documentation, activities which stretch limited municipal bandwidth. **Figure 2** illustrates the frequency of coded mentions of staffing limitations compared to other participation capacity-related issues that municipalities encounter (e.g., digital technology challenges, limited knowledge of available resources, and limited experience of grant writing and/or management).

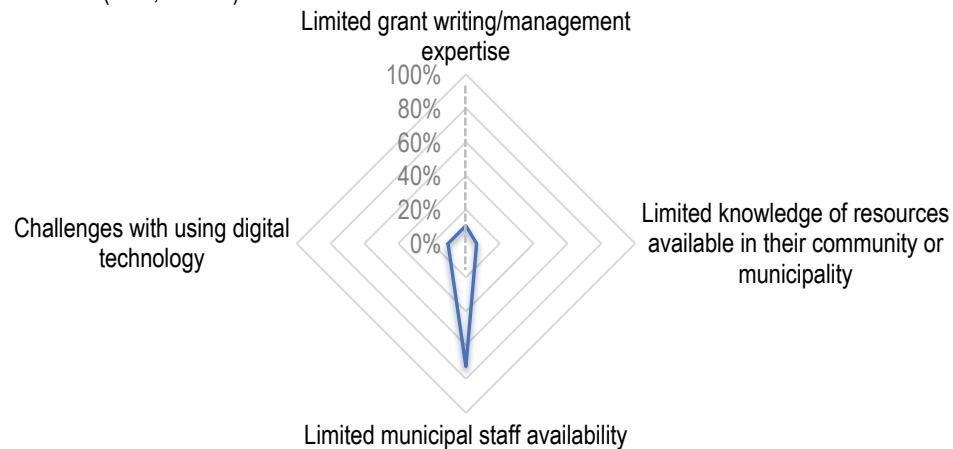
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<sup>8</sup> CEC Coordinators (n=5), CEC Directors (n=3), NYSERDA Program Staff (n=2).

<sup>9</sup> Public commentors (n= 57), Coordinators (n= 5), Directors (n=4), and NYSERDA Program Staff (n=2).

**Figure 2. Coded results for capacity barriers across interview sources and public comments**

Across all respondents, **limited municipal staff availability** was the most frequently coded component of administrative burden (73%, n= 103).



Despite the face-to-face work they do to engage municipalities, Coordinators explained that it is not always easy to establish a relationship with municipal representatives/volunteers. In all five Coordinator interviews, Coordinators explained the **challenges of building a relationship with municipalities who do not trust state programs or are otherwise hesitant to participate in the CEC program; this represents another key barrier to participation**. It takes a long time to build trust with a community. In fact, some of the feedback from participating municipalities highlighted concerns about *new* Coordinators who were less familiar with the program and had not yet developed strong relationships with their respective communities. This suggests that the consistent support provided by CEC Coordinators is an essential feature of the Program, and that it can be difficult to regain and rebuild that trust when lost.

Across data collection efforts, respondents noted **pushback from other municipal officials** (e.g., town boards) when trying to participate in the CEC program, as well as **competing municipal priorities** with limited time/resources as additional barriers to municipal participation. While in many cases, respondents noted that Coordinator support could help overcome some of these barriers, municipal official perspectives and priorities are sometimes too entrenched for the CEC Program to incentivize action.

### *2.1.2 To what extent are different municipalities able to access the CEC Program?*

Groups of respondents emphasized different benefits and challenges of CEC accessibility. While the CEC Program design is intended to provide flexibility for earning points and accessing match-

free grants with the support of Coordinators, some respondents feel that the design puts them at a natural disadvantage due to the staffing and resources required to document and submit HIAs.

In particular, the knowledgeable support from Coordinators allows participants to tailor their involvement in the program to best suit their needs. The CEC Program has a set of no- and low-cost HIAs with point values that allow municipalities to access grant funds with limited or no up-front financial investment, providing point of entry for resource-limited municipalities.

Coordinators, Directors, and Program Staff explained how the flexibility of the CEC Program's strategy helps account for the fact that **there is no "optimal" entry point or solution that will meet the needs of all municipalities, positioning Coordinators' knowledge of the program and the specific needs of municipalities in their respective territories' as indispensable.**<sup>10</sup> In all five Coordinator interviews, Coordinators explained that they work hard to reach out to municipalities, promote their inclusion in the CEC Program, and find clean energy solutions that municipalities can reasonably implement.

**Focus group participants and public commentors expressed a perception that the varying sizes (and related capacity) of participating municipalities sometimes puts others at a disadvantage to accessing CEC program funds and resources.** Four focus group participants shared a perception that smaller municipalities have more difficulty accessing resources and funds, giving them a disadvantage in participating in the CEC Program, which is why they need more support and attention. One Coordinator described a perception from smaller municipalities that the program is not designed for them, because they have more limited staff and operating budgets than the larger municipalities. Smaller municipalities pointed out that they typically have limited ability to invest in HIAs to generate points through the CEC Program, making the "snowball effect" of the program harder to achieve.

Money appears to be a key motivator for communities, and **in the most recent round of the CEC program, participants were able to access an increased DAC bonus compared to previous rounds.** Groups of respondents emphasized the importance of the larger DAC bonus grants in incentivizing their participation and getting clean energy projects started. Forty-three Public comments (52%) cited the fact that the many municipalities with DACs have received substantial amounts of funding through the CEC Program. The DAC bonus provides a 50% bonus for participants and communities with DACs make up a high percentage of those participating in the program overall. One Director pointed out that the DAC bonus was what helped communities

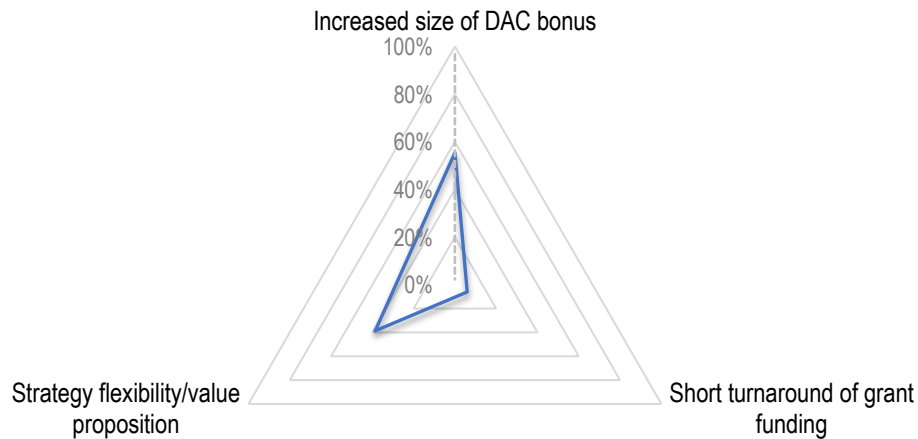
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<sup>10</sup> CEC Coordinators (n=4), Directors (n=2), and NYSERDA Program Staff (n=2).

gain program momentum faster than they would have otherwise. **Figure 3** illustrates the coded mentions of specific program components that enhance accessibility for municipal participants.

**Figure 3. Coded results for “accessibility” across interview sources and public comments**

Across all respondents, the **increased size of the DAC bonus** was the most frequently cited contributor to municipalities' ability to access the program (55%, n= 56 ).



### 2.1.3 What sources do CEC participants trust for information about clean energy programs?

The CEC Program positions Coordinators as trusted sources of information for the program. Where Coordinators have been with the program for many years, the continuity within the Coordinator role provides municipalities with consistency through changes in NYSERDA staffing and shifts in program design (e.g., HIA point thresholds, available grant funds).

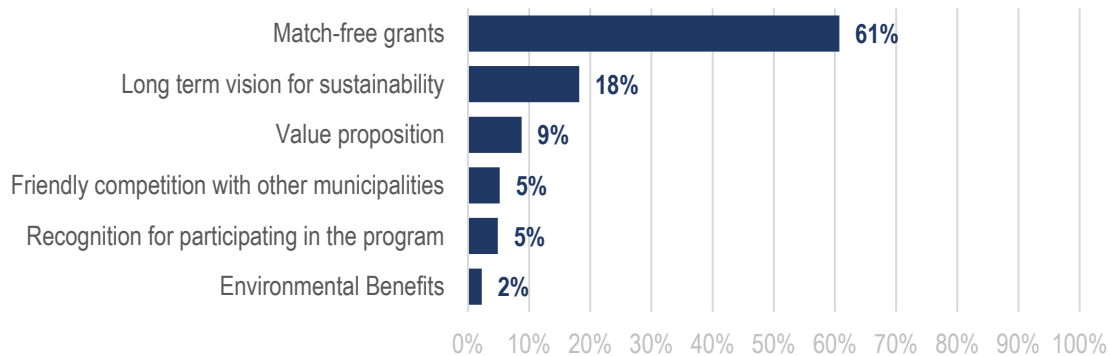
**Municipalities expressed that they trust CEC Coordinators for information about the program and for the technical assistance they provide when implementing clean energy projects.** Seventy-two public comments submitted (87%) discussed their municipal staff’s reliance on the subject matter expertise of CEC Coordinators. These public commentors highlighted the useful services that Coordinators provided them, including guidance that helped municipal representatives identify HIAs that they otherwise may not have considered.

### 2.1.4 What interests or goals inspired municipalities to participate in the CEC Program?

Match-free grants were, by far, the most commonly noted inspiration for participation among respondents. After this key motivator, recognition for achievements and working toward a sustainability goal or vision were also drivers for municipal participation in the CEC program.

**Figure 4** illustrates the relative frequency of responses mentioning match-free grants compared to other interests that inspired municipalities to participate in the CEC program. Extended findings for this research question are described in **Appendix C**.

**Figure 4. Coded results for “interest inspiring participation” across all interview sources and public comments**



Note: “Environmental benefits” is a motivating interest distinct from “long-term sustainability plans or visions” – this topical code relates to broader environmental leadership.

## 2.2 Participant Needs Met

This section addresses participants’ overall satisfaction with the CEC Program, examining whether the program successfully meets participants' needs, how the program helps municipalities build capacity, and whether participants are empowered to go beyond the CEC Program to seek further external opportunities to implement more clean energy projects/activities.

### 2.2.1 *To what extent are municipal needs met through the CEC Program?*

NYSERDA has funded three rounds of the CEC Program. The first round of funding (Round 1.0) initiated the program, and many municipalities accomplished HIAs that required no or minimal investment to achieve points for grants. The second round of program funding (Round 2.0, also called the “leadership round”) was redesigned to cater to municipalities that wanted to be leaders in clean energy adoption. The design for the second round of funding reduced the ability for municipalities to gather points quickly with low investment HIAs, resulting in more limited participation in the second round than in the first round. In launching the third round of funding (Round 3.0), NYSERDA solicited Coordinator input into the design for the points system.

**All respondent groups noted that the changes made to the program structure in Round 3.0 make it easier for municipalities to tailor their participation to meet their own needs using the CEC Program’s extensive menu of HIA options and projects.** CEC Director interviewees

repeatedly cited the role of the coordinators in shaping Round 3.0 of the program, which they described as the right mix of points and match-free grant funding – an improvement over both Rounds 1.0 and 2.0. Coordinators and Directors explained that Round 3.0 of the CEC program also provides an increased the HIA menu allowing municipalities to gain momentum in the program, especially where longer-term participants had exhausted the “low-hanging fruit” HIAs in Round 1.0. One municipal focus group participant commented how the new lowered points threshold established in Round 3.0 helped their municipality achieve a goal they had tried for three years to achieve (a Community Choice Aggregation electricity rates program).

Focus group participants also offered the following features from the CEC Program that were most useful to them:

- Action Grants, available for completing Community Campaigns,
- Designation Grants, available for all municipalities by completing high impact actions, and
- Online Toolkits, Checklists and Templates for Actions.

**However, Coordinators observed that some municipalities do not participate because they do not trust federal programs or face local political pushback against “green” or clean energy technologies.**<sup>11</sup> Fifteen municipal focus group participants also brought up the pushback that they faced from their own local government officials, sometimes stemming from a lack of understanding regarding project requirements (e.g., building codes), climate change denial, high costs, or a reluctance to adopt clean energy technology.

### *2.2.2 How satisfied are municipal participants with the CEC program?*

The CEC Program does not formally or systematically track participant satisfaction. To address this data limitation, the evaluation contractor Team spoke with NYSERDA Program Staff, as well as CEC Directors and Coordinators to understand how they *informally* track participant satisfaction. Additionally, the evaluation contractor team solicited perspectives from municipal representatives in a focus group setting, where participants were forthcoming about the successes and challenges, they have experienced in CEC the program to date. The evaluation contractor team also reviewed public comments about the CEC Program, which provided extremely positive

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<sup>11</sup> NYSERDA Program Staff (n=3) and Coordinators (n=4).

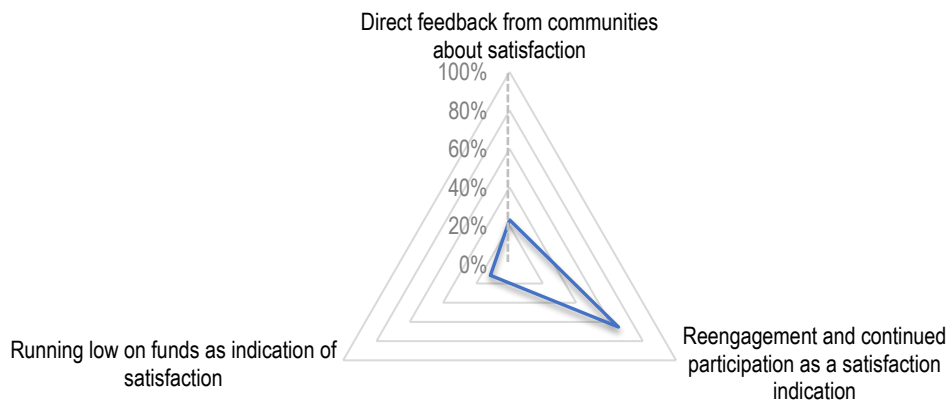
reviews of the CEC Program experience, and the need to continue offering the program in its current capacity.

NYSERDA Program Staff, Directors, and Coordinators typically rely on anecdotal evidence and participation patterns to assess participant satisfaction. Discussion with NYSERDA Program staff revealed that they look to the CEC Program participation rates (particularly continued participation, or program reengagement) and high utilization of funds as an indication of success and satisfaction. Though this assessment is observational, it is consistent with quantitative findings from previous CEC market characterization and impact evaluation studies.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, **Coordinators and Directors stated that they typically receive feedback directly from municipalities about how they are enjoying and benefitting from the program.**<sup>13</sup> They described this feedback as context-specific, immediate, and authentic. **Figure 5** illustrates the frequency of coded mentions of “reengagement and continued participation” compared to other evidence of municipality satisfaction with the CEC program.

**Figure 5. Coded results for “satisfaction” across all interview sources and public comments**

**Reengagement and continued participation** was most frequently coded as a means of assessing participant satisfaction (65%, n= 68 mentions).



<sup>12</sup> See for example: Loomis, J. and Steiner, E. 2022.

<sup>13</sup> CEC Coordinators (n=4), Directors (n=3).

### 2.2.3 How does CEC Program participation bolster staff capacities to fulfill clean energy activities?

#### **A Note on Capacity-Building**

While many of NYSERDA's programs have emphasized capacity building over the years, the 2021 NYS Disadvantaged Communities Barriers and Opportunities Report and the 2022 NYS Climate Action Council Scoping Plan highlighted the need to close the digital divide to advance equity, and noted the lack of core resources (e.g., adequate staffing) as a critical barrier. The findings of the CEC evaluation suggest that the staffing and technical support provided by the Coordinators is an *essential* benefit of the program. While the need for Coordinator support confirms the persistence of digital and staffing barriers, Coordinators themselves help address the barriers with the one-on-one support they provide to municipal participants.

NYS Climate Action Council. 2022. *Scoping Plan*. Accessed online at: <https://climate.ny.gov/resources/scoping-plan/>

NYSERDA, NYS DEC, and NYPA. 2021. *NYS Disadvantaged Communities Barriers and Opportunities Report*. Accessed online at: <https://climate.ny.gov/-/media/Project/Climate/Files/21-35-NY-Disadvantaged-Communities-Barriers-and-Opportunities-Report.ashx>

The CEC Program bolsters municipal capacity to pursue clean energy activities in three ways: 1) providing free technical support to increase municipal staff knowledge of clean energy and grant application conventions; 2) supporting peer-to-peer learning among municipalities by connecting municipalities so they can learn from one another; and, finally, 3) establishing reciprocity with the CSC Program, so points from CSC activities can further a municipality's progress with CEC.

Importantly, the evaluation contractor team does not consider the staff augmentation service that Coordinators provide to be "capacity building" in its formal sense, because the assistance is not designed to improve municipal staff knowledge through education, or to explicitly enhance the municipality's ability to pursue clean energy activities in the future. Where Coordinators fill in for municipal staff to help locate information for benchmarking, or provide direct technical support when documenting an HIA, the evaluation contractor team considers the activities to be

primarily one-time staff augmentation, a similarly critical service, but distinct benefit from capacity-building.

#### **All groups of respondents noted that the support and subject matter expertise of Coordinators supports municipal participant learning about clean energy actions.**

Coordinators explained that they empower municipalities to engage in what can otherwise feel like a complex endeavor, providing them with the background knowledge and technical expertise to enable them to participate in other clean energy programs; in this sense the CEC program may build capacity by building institutional knowledge, but technical and staffing barriers remain. Respondents from all groups noted that Coordinators take the time to build a personal relationship with each of the municipalities in their territory to provide municipal staff with the support and

expertise they need in any situation.<sup>14</sup> In particular, fourteen municipal focus group participants echoed the support and expertise of the Coordinators in some way they kept everything on track, showed up to meetings, and showed participants how to complete things step-by-step so that they may have the knowledge of requirements to document the next HIA independently.

**The network of CEC Coordinators allows an easy exchange of expertise and information to quickly and effectively answer any questions that a participant, or fellow staff member, might have.** While providing updates from NYSERDA to municipal participants is a standard part of their role, Coordinators explained that a less formal, but perhaps equally important, responsibility is to assist with connecting municipalities with one another to build municipal capacity through information sharing and peer-to-peer learning. One Director referred to Coordinators as the “bee that goes between the flowers to carry that information.” This analogy depicts how Coordinators function as a facilitator between NYSERDA and participants, as well as across participants, ensuring that relevant information is communicated and interpreted in a way that empowers municipalities to continue implementing clean energy projects.

Four Coordinators explained that they view the CEC and CSC programs as complementary, and that many participants can “double dip” between the two programs to maximize the points and funding they receive to implement their clean energy projects. Though they are distinct programs with different requirements, participants observed the overlap of project types between the two programs, which was enough of an incentive to participate in both for some municipalities. Another participant referred to them as “sister programs” that can easily build off each other. Essentially, CSC actions that participants might have implemented previously can count toward HIAs and points accrual to maximize points earned under CEC.

#### *2.2.4 To what extent does participation in the CEC Program create a more favorable environment for the adoption of clean energy technologies by all actors within their jurisdiction?*

As described in [Section 2.2.3](#), the CEC Program has some design reciprocity with the CSC Program, creating a favorable environment for clean energy activities among program participants. The gamification design of points accrual and designation status was intended to inspire friendly competition among communities, and the “snowballing” of points within the CEC

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<sup>14</sup> Coordinators (n=5), NYSERDA Program Staff (n=3), Directors (n=3), public comments (n=70), and focus group participants (n=14).

Program was an intentional decision to help municipalities to build momentum and implement larger and/or more complex clean energy projects within their jurisdiction.

NYSERDA Program Staff explained that the gamification in particular has inspired friendly competition among participants to achieve more actions, and increase their advanced CEC designation (e.g., 1- to 5-stars). Focus group discussions provided further evidence of this friendly competition, as one participating municipality introduced another participating municipality simultaneously as the benchmark for their own community's planned CEC actions.

### *2.2.5 Is the CEC Program helping municipalities in other ways, such as learning about availability and how to access other resources?*

As noted in [Section 2.2.4](#), the CEC Program frequently inspires municipalities to participate in the DEC CSC Program, which allows participants to maximize their grants achieved in CEC by contributing points earned through CSC.

While the CSC program was the main “other” resource mentioned by respondents, Coordinators also mentioned a connection between the CEC Program and the NYERDA Regional Clean Energy Hubs Program, which also sponsors community campaigns (e.g., community outreach-focused activities to engage residents in learning about clean energy and acting in their own homes). Coordinators broadly reported that they have encouraged municipal participants to speak with their local Hub organization to coordinate about community campaign activities. Additionally, though not mentioned by interviewees, the CEC Program lists encouraging local participation NYSERDA's Build Ready Program as a HIA worth 800 points. While this is a lower-value HIA than others on the menu, it still promotes connection across NYSERDA programs, and NYSERDA staff have noted this as a strategy to increase awareness of Build Ready in New York State.<sup>15</sup>

## 2.3 Lessons Learned

This section explores insights and lessons learned that interviewees provided about the CEC Program structure and impacts, and highlights what can be improved for future implementation and what process innovations could be applied to benefit similar NYSERDA programs.

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<sup>15</sup> Anecdotal information from another NYSERDA Process Evaluation.

### 2.3.1 *What lessons can be learned for future CEC implementation?*

Three key lessons learned include: 1) the program offers an essential mix of technical assistance and financial support; 2) the need to account for variability across municipalities is a core challenge for the program; and 3) municipal “champions” for the program can make a substantial difference in municipalities’ success with the program.

- 1. The CEC Program offers an essential mix of technical assistance and financial support for municipal participants.** Municipal focus group participants emphasized that they would not be able to complete as many clean energy projects at the same rate without the CEC program. Many public commentors and all CEC Director interviewees noted that municipalities would more than likely not complete these projects without the technical assistance and match-free grants provided by the program.<sup>16</sup> As described in [Section 2.1.4](#), municipal CEC participants are driven by and drawn to the financial incentives of the program.
- 2. The need to account for the unique needs of municipalities across NYS is a core challenge of the CEC Program.**<sup>17</sup> Specific challenges mentioned by participants included local government resistance to clean energy, mistrust of state grant programs more broadly, or small population with respect to the large geographic size of a municipality can impact the ability, or desire, of municipal representatives to engage with the program.
- 3. Municipal “champions” for the program can improve municipalities’ success with the program.** Coordinators and Directors cited that having a community representative or “champion” to promote the CEC Program within the municipality and maintain momentum has been instrumental to push projects along.<sup>18</sup> These “champions” become powerful advocates who will commit to the time and effort needed to push the municipal government to move forward with participating in the CEC Program and often work together with the Coordinator.

Other lessons learned were more logistical in nature, focusing on CEC quarterly planning requirements, Salesforce, and NYSERDA communications.

**Different respondent groups disagree about the usefulness of the quarterly planning process.** Four Directors emphasized that quarterly reporting is simultaneously too frequent for

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<sup>16</sup> Public commentors (n=62), CEC Directors (n=4).

<sup>17</sup> Coordinators (n=3), Directors (n=2), and Program Staff (n=2).

<sup>18</sup> Coordinators (n=4), Directors (n=3).

such a cumbersome administrative activity, and too infrequent to capture the nimble planning changes required during some years. One NYSERDA Program Staff Explained that the quarterly planning process as a useful tool for NYSERDA to track community engagement strategies and understand how the program operations will unfold over the coming months.

Coordinators, Directors, and NYSERDA Program Staff also expressed mixed opinions about Salesforce as a tool to support various administrative activities of the CEC Program.<sup>19</sup> While two Directors found it easy to use and helpful as a reporting tool to NYSERDA on municipality progress, the other two Directors described it as difficult to use, a “convoluted process” when submitting materials.

**Three CEC Coordinators emphasized the challenges they faced regarding upward and downward communication with NYSERDA on behalf of municipal participants.** One Coordinator explained that the guidance from NYSERDA’s Program Staff is not always clear, and Coordinators are occasionally left to deal with explaining the Program’s justifications or stipulations to frustrated municipalities on behalf of NYSERDA (e.g., why some HIAs are worth more than others, why grant funds can be used for specific projects, etc.). Three Directors and one Coordinator even pointed out that some guidelines and information are only communicated to Directors, which Directors are asked explicitly to not share with Coordinators. Though such a policy is likely designed to prevent miscommunication from NYSERDA, it also creates a communication bottleneck, which some Directors have decided to circumvent to serve the needs of their Coordinator teams and municipalities. In the words of a Director, “there is a disconnect between how NYSERDA runs programs and how the people on the ground implement them.” This suggests that more transparent communication is needed from NYSERDA to prevent information bottlenecks.

### *2.3.2 What process innovations can be applied to other NYSERDA programs?*

NYSERDA Program Staff offered comments about CEC’s program features and tools which could offer potential strategies and solutions that could be adopted by other NYSERDA programs aiming to achieve similar goals, including: gamification, free technical assistance, use of Microsoft Teams to support knowledge-sharing among program implementation teams, and a streamlined application process.

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<sup>19</sup> Coordinators (n=1), Directors (n=4), and NYSERDA Program Staff (n=3).

- **Gamification of earning points by completing more HIAs.** Participants were motivated by the “snowballing” effect that the CEC Program offered, and they appreciated that they were rewarded for their active participation and building the funding for one project to earn points for another.
- **Free technical assistance from local Coordinators.** As discussed in [Section 2.1.3](#), Coordinators are seen as trusted experts on the municipality’s history and past activities, program requirements clean energy projects, as well as external opportunities that can best match a municipality’s needs/capacity. Interested municipalities can access Coordinator services free of charge.
- **Microsoft Teams.** Coordinators, Directors, NYSERDA and Program Staff shared how useful the NYSERDA-hosted Microsoft Teams software was in helping streamline communication within and across territories.<sup>20</sup> NYSERDA Program Staff broadly viewed the Teams channel as a means for standardizing NYSERDA communications to Coordinators. Several Coordinators voiced appreciation for the transparency that the Teams channels brought to various questions that they had about the program. However, the evaluation contractor team received some mixed feedback on this item: Directors and Coordinators mentioned NYSERDA’s slow response rate to answer questions on the Teams channel reduced its value.
- **Pre-approved projects for a streamlined application process.** Two NYSERDA Program Staff members and two Directors explained that because many small municipalities struggle with capacity to participate, having a simplified application process with pre-approved project types helps municipalities quickly apply for grants.

### *2.3.3 How can NYSERDA improve the effectiveness of CEC in meeting the needs of its municipal customers?*

While Round 3.0 was described by all respondent groups as significantly evolved and improved from prior rounds of the CEC Program, they also offered suggestions for how the program might better align with their needs in the future. The three most salient findings include: 1) a desire for the CEC Program to remain a distinct program offering, 2) a need for improved communications from NYSERDA, 3) an interest from municipalities in understanding what other communities are doing to achieve success in the program.

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<sup>20</sup> Coordinators (n=1), Directors (n=4), and NYSERDA Program Staff (n=1).

**Keep the CEC Program distinct/separate from other programs.** Specifically, twenty-seven public commentors voiced that there were unique attributes of the CEC Program that would not allow a commensurate/equitable shift of staff and resources to offer the same technical assistance services and no-match funds to municipalities if the program were to be consolidated with other NYS programs, such as DEC's CSC Program. Municipal commentors emphasized that CSC is not a direct substitute for the CEC Program, as CSC grants require a 50% match, which could be difficult for municipalities to meet. Municipal focus group participants emphasized that match-free grants were one of the primary reasons for joining CEC Program.

**Improve NYSERDA communication on program deadlines, submissions instructions, data requirements, and other updates through the website.** Focus group participants expressed a consensus around the lack of clarity with the instructions regarding HIA submissions in Round 3.0.<sup>21</sup> In a specific example of this feedback, two focus group participants explained that the CEC website is clunky, and it is difficult to find the information that they need to answer submission questions or use the online portal. One focus group participant mentioned that they spent hours working with NYSERDA technical support because the CEC website did not specify which browser to use in the instructions, and they were not able to move forward with their HIA documentation submission using their usual browser.<sup>22</sup>

On the program implementation side, unclear instructions/guidelines from NYSERDA have resulted in Coordinators' Directors' frustration over the volume of applications rejected due to small errors in Excel sheets.<sup>23</sup> Coordinators and Directors explained that the tailored project applications in particular tend to require additional deliberation time and have a high rejection rate, making them a riskier option for municipalities. On this point, one Coordinator shared that the guidance from NYSERDA about custom projects is unclear and municipalities do not always have context for the program stipulations, which may result in frustration from municipalities. Another Coordinator explained that the responses from NYSERDA in answer to municipal questions via Teams chat are likewise incomplete or opaque, leaving Coordinators to interpret or follow up later, causing a delay for the municipality trying to meet rolling HIA submission deadlines.

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<sup>21</sup> Focus group participants were quick to point out that while the design of Round 3.0 was superior to prior rounds, they observed were many shortcomings of the guidance documentation, which they critiqued for its lack of clarity and reported abundance of proofreading errors.

<sup>22</sup> While this relates to the technological challenges issue described in Section 2.1.1, this particular participant felt confident that the whole situation could have been avoided with some additional guidance on which browser to use.

<sup>23</sup> Coordinators (n=4), Directors (n=3).

Related to an interest in greater transparency from NYSERDA, four focus group participants discussed that they want to know more about what other municipalities are achieving in the program (and, more specifically, *how*). Though NYSERDA maintains a publicly available website with an interactive Clean Energy Communities map that highlights each municipality's points and projects, focus group participants explained that they want to see other people's submissions and learn how others have combined grants to complete more HIAs. During the focus groups, participants even exchanged contact information for this express purpose. In a variation on the topic of sharing successes, one suggestion offered by a public commentor stated that "CEC Round 4.0 should include additional ways to highlight local government progress," such as engaging with local media outlets to communicate ongoing and upcoming projects that will provide energy and financial savings for the community.

Finally, public commentors, as well as CEC Director and Coordinator interviewees, explained that **the CEC Program should have a longer planning horizon to ensure more predictable and continuous funding**. Directors, Coordinators, agreed that Round 3.0 of the program achieved a successful design in terms of match-free grant amounts and points accrual thresholds (both higher than in Round 2.0), but continuity was needed.<sup>24</sup> Coordinators observed that the short cycle of the CEC program impacts the more impactful actions, which require more planning and investment from municipalities. Three public commentors pointed out that this program these frequent changes make it difficult for municipalities to take advantage of the full offerings of the CEC Program before the something is altered in another round. One public commentor remarked that "this ever-changing landscape creates uncertainty that undoubtedly has harmed NYSERDA's ability to make strategic, long-term investments and achieve its goals."

### 3 Findings and Potential Action Items

The evaluation contractor team developed the following list of findings and potential recommendations for NYSERDA's CEC Program.

**Finding 1. Smaller municipalities may be at a disadvantage compared to larger municipalities because of their staff size and financial resources.** Municipal participants expressed that the support and motivation from Coordinators, who provide expertise and additional capacity, is essential to their ability to successfully participate in the program. Despite the staffing support that Coordinators provide, participating municipalities may still face a combination of resource and technical barriers that make it harder for them to implement clean

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<sup>24</sup> Directors (n=3), Coordinators (n=2).

energy solutions at the same pace as others. The financial and digital divide between under-resourced municipalities and other municipalities may exacerbate their disadvantage. Municipalities with smaller budgets and part-time or volunteer-supported staff are tackling very different issues than municipalities with larger budgets and full-time staff, and have a different range of HIAs realistically open to them at any one time. Municipalities requiring more technological support (e.g., accessing web portals or other digital resources) require a higher-touch approach from Coordinators than municipalities with more comfort in digital spaces, and may be slower to apply for HIAs as a result.

- **Recommendation 1. Prioritize additional CEC Program funding and extended program timelines to sustain the availability of match-free grants for a longer period. As part of this program extension, implement funding caps for municipalities of different sizes to provide increased access to resources across participating municipalities.** While the CEC Program has successfully maintained general continuity over a 10-year period, NYSERDA has still updated the program design three times within that period. Rather than launch a renewal/redesign effort every few years, continue to capitalize on the gains earned in designing Round 3.0 to achieve longer-term sustainability of the program, including maintaining or increasing the level of funding available to municipalities in Round 3.0. NYSERDA could adjust incentives to account for community size, as different-sized municipalities require different entry points (i.e., some municipalities need to achieve points by completing feasible low- or no-cost HIAs). NYSERDA could align this with the “Community Size” metric already used for the Clean Energy Communities Map on the CEC program website, with designated “Large Communities” (population greater than 40,000) and “Small Communities” (population of 39,999 or fewer). Adjusted incentives or a funding cap for large communities can ensure equitable access to match-free grants for smaller municipalities, who may take longer to achieve the same kind of momentum as larger municipalities within the program. Designing for longer-term funding availability will strengthen the program and capitalize on the trust that Coordinators have built over the years, while building capacity and equipping municipalities with the tools and knowledge to meet their own needs.
  - **Response to Recommendation 1: Pending.** NYSERDA acknowledges the challenges municipalities face, particularly in managing budget constraints and limited staff capacity. These realities have been central to the design of the Clean Energy Communities (CEC) Program, which was created to help overcome such

barriers and support meaningful participation. One of the primary strategies of the program is the deployment of Clean Energy Community Coordinators. These highly trained professionals are strategically placed in regions where they either have established relationships or possess a deep understanding of local challenges. Their services are offered at no cost to municipalities across New York State, providing critical support for planning and implementation.

The CEC Program also tailors its incentive structure based on municipal size, recognizing that the needs and capacities of smaller and larger communities differ significantly. Larger communities often require more substantial incentives to initiate action, while smaller communities may benefit more from targeted support and require smaller funding levels. This differentiated approach has proven effective in fostering engagement in the program. Additionally, the program's High Impact Action Items (HIAIs) are intentionally weighted to reflect their relative complexity and potential benefits as well as greenhouse gas emission reduction potential. This points-based system ensures that funding levels align with the scope of work and impact achieved by each municipality.

While NYSERDA strives to maintain continuity in program offerings over time, program evolution is sometimes necessary. As new High Impact Items are identified or market needs change, new solicitations may be issued to reflect these updates. NYSERDA has introduced enhancements such as the streamlined, pre-approved grant process aimed to significantly reduce the administrative burden on municipalities and expedite the delivery of funding.

Going forward, NYSERDA plans to continue the program and incorporate improvements that minimize uncertainty and avoid imposing additional burdens on our municipal partners.

**Finding 2. CEC Coordinators are confronted with challenges in serving municipal participants due to a lack of transparent communication from NYSERDA.** In particular, Coordinators emphasized that NYSERDA's inconsistent messaging about program/application requirements and possible flexibilities not widely communicated in bundling grants for initiating more expensive clean energy projects has frustrated municipal participants. Conflicting

information from Coordinators or from the website on things like application steps and deadlines sometimes hindered municipalities from achieving the “snowball effect” that allows them to gain points on the projects implemented with NYSERDA grant money. The evaluation contractor team conducted interviews as CEC Program funding for match-free grants dwindled and then ran out, so some of the feedback the evaluation contractor team received was directly focused on the lack of information about when grant funding would no longer be available.

- Despite some complaints from municipalities about changing program structure and lack of transparent communication from NYSERDA, this evaluation provides a positive demonstration that the relative continuity of the CEC Coordinators and the relationships they have built are a core factor in the program success, *particularly for resource-limited communities.*
- **Recommendation 2. Improve the CEC Program documentation across the program and communicate updates routinely to ensure clarity, accessibility, and transparency for all applicants, especially regarding funding availability.** Program documents (e.g., factsheets, toolkits, etc.) should be clear, concise, and easy to follow, offering step-by-step instructions that provide clarity on topics like combining grants, meeting important deadlines, or what internet browser(s) to use when attempting to submit HIAs. Additionally, NYSERDA should consider making the Salesforce interface more user-friendly and accessible for low-tech municipal staff or volunteers. Many participants have varying levels of digital literacy, and certain submission requirements may be harder to complete than others for municipal staff. Related, NYSERDA could consider allowing participants to post their grant submissions/HIA documentation to a SharePoint folder (or other shared folder) to serve as examples. These submissions could even serve as templates for other municipalities, further increasing program transparency and improving support for under-resourced municipalities.
- **Response to Recommendation 2: Implemented.** NYSERDA is committed to improving the Clean Energy Communities (CEC) Program experience for municipal partners and will be taking several steps in response to the suggestions received. Website enhancements will be considered to improve overall navigation and ensure that key guidance documents including those related to grant bundling and deliverable submittals to ensure they are more accessible and easier to find. NYSERDA will explore the creation of a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document to address common inquiries related to High Impact Action Item requirements and submittal documents.

The Clean Energy Community Coordinators will continue to be an essential resource, and NYSERDA strive to equip them with the most current and relevant information to effectively support municipalities. To further assist with program navigation, NYSERDA will explore improvements to Salesforce which aim to enhance the customer experience.

**Finding 3. Gamification, recognition, and sustainability inspire ongoing municipal participation in the program, but money is still an essential driver, even for long-term participants.** Municipal participants indicated that they would have difficulty implementing clean energy projects without the match-free funding for HIAs available through the program. Smaller municipalities often do not have the budget to implement clean energy initiatives, so Coordinators help identify the HIAs that can help them maximize low- or no-cost activities to achieve momentum with the program. For champions or volunteers that have municipal authorization (but no budget) to participate in the program, securing the first grant is an essential step to additional CEC participation.

**This finding strongly aligned with the program’s own findings from the review of municipal comments in response to the November 1, 2023, proposed change to the CEC Program that would reduce the availability of match-free funding for HIAs and consolidate technical support across the CEC and CSC programs.<sup>25, 26</sup> NYSERDA’s first quarter 2025 decision to maintain the current structure of the program and match-free HIA funding is consistent with this finding.** Throughout this report, the evaluation contractor describes the feedback from municipal participants that match-free grant funding for completed HIAs is essential to their participation in the program. Despite many participants citing the compatibility of actions in both the CEC and CSC programs, the CSC requirement for a public statement acknowledging climate change prevents municipalities from participating in the program. CEC, which engages municipalities regardless of their position on climate change and clean energy, ensures participation even from more conservative municipalities because the focus of the program is on

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<sup>25</sup> At the time of this evaluation, NYSERDA had published a Non-Low- to Moderate-Income Energy Efficiency/Building Electrification Portfolio Proposal, published November 1, 2023: <https://documents.dps.ny.gov/public/Common/ViewDoc.aspx?DocRefId={306C8C8B-0000-C218-9F5D-F254A9D1158D}>. This 2024 evaluation centered the municipal participants’ responses to the Nov. 1 proposal, including public comments and focus group discussion.

<sup>26</sup> At the time of the 2024 evaluation effort, NYSERDA had requested public comment in response to a Non-Low- to Moderate-Income Energy Efficiency/Building Electrification Portfolio Proposal, which outlined a future for the CEC program in which CEC Coordinator technical support would be consolidated with technical support for Climate Smart Communities. Additionally, NYSERDA proposed that CEC funding would shift to support broader decarbonization strategies for local municipalities, leaving the HIA format behind. In early 2025, NYSERDA determined that the next version of the CEC program will continue in a format similar to the existing model under a different funding source (RGGI funding).

energy savings. This difference is meaningful to municipal participants, and the proposed consolidation with CSC may challenge the ability of the CEC program to continue to engage with their more conservative participating municipalities. Additionally, the CEC Coordinators have built trust with municipalities and are familiar with their individual advantages, and challenges, ongoing technical support from CEC Coordinators is essential to the increasing level of participation that the CEC Program has seen since the start of the program in 2016.