

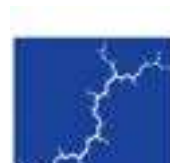
# POWER PLAY PLAYBOOK

March 2023

Actions for New  
England's Equitable  
Energy Transition



**CUMABLE**



**Synapse**  
Energy Economics, Inc.

## AUTHORS

### Synapse Energy Economics, Inc.:

Jennifer Kallay  
Lamia Hossain  
Tim Woolf

### Climable:

Jen Stevenson Zepeda  
Sophie Kelly

### Brown University Climate and Development Lab:

Timmons Roberts  
Grace Austin  
Jared Heern  
Pilar McDonald  
Juliana Merullo  
Callie Rabinovitz  
Susan Tang  
Emma Vernarde

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Note From the Team.....1**

**Background.....2**

What is a Public Utilities Commission (PUC)?

Why we did this study

**How to Read this Report.....4**

**Key Terms.....5**

## *Actions for:*

**Legislators.....6**

Create authority & accountability

Amp up equity

Create community agency

Fight fake news

**Governors.....11**

Coordinate communications

Cooperate regionally

**PUCs.....14**

Improve stakeholders' experience

Phase out gas

Realign utility goals

**All of Us.....18**

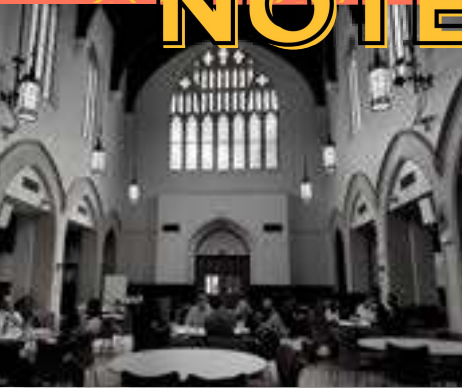
Organize around appointments

Expand the stakeholder network

Activate the stakeholder network

**Now what? .....22**

# NOTE FROM THE TEAM



Welcome to the study by Brown University Climate & Development Lab, Synapse Energy Economics, and Climable! Our team has been on a fact-finding mission since Fall of 2021 to explore what can be done to help New England states meet their established climate goals. Please note! There is a longer, more technical companion document to this one and it is available at [Climable.org/brown](https://climable.org/brown). *This* document is aimed at condensing the ideas we collected through a series of workshops and interviews with people in each state. In it, you will find some general information about what a Public Utility Commission is, why we did this study, and how it is relevant to climate goals and policies. You will then find a breakdown of actions we heard people recommend. The actions are divided by *who* takes the action: legislators, governors, PUCs, and all of us. Each action includes existing examples or ideas for how to put the action into practice. We hope you find it helpful and welcome your ideas!

**Thank you to all of the stakeholders** that were so generous with their time and ideas as we traveled around



# WHAT IS A PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION?

Each state has a Public Utility Commission (PUC), though it may go by a different name like the Department of Public Utilities (DPU) in Massachusetts, or the Public Utilities Regulatory Authority (PURA) in Connecticut. **The role of a PUC is to oversee investor-owned utilities within their state.** This mainly applies to electricity and gas but can include water, cable TV, broadband internet, and even transportation. In New England, each state's PUC has three commissioners—most of whom are appointed by the Governor—and supportive staff.

Each state's PUC has varying mandates and authorities, but one thing they all do is oversee rate cases. This means they can allow or prevent a utility from increasing rates for a ratepayer (anyone who pays a utility bill). To describe what this might look like, utility companies like Eversource or National Grid submit plans to spend money on repairs and upgrades to existing infrastructure like poles and wires, investing in new infrastructure, or modernizing the grid through automation and controls. The PUC opens a docket for these plans and hosts a proceeding to hear from the utility why the investments are needed and expenses should be approved. They also gather input and thoughts from formal intervenors, like the Consumer's Advocate or Attorney General, as well as individuals and representatives of other groups.

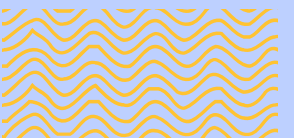


# WHY WE DID THIS STUDY

As we work towards addressing climate change through decarbonization and electrification, a necessary part of ending fossil fuel use, we will all come to rely on electricity and the electricity grid even more. This means we will increasingly be dependent on an electric grid, and as this reliance on electricity grows, the role of the PUC will also become even more critical. Their decisions will impact more people in bigger ways. However, PUCs may not be ready for their evolving role.

We wanted to shed some light on the importance of PUCs, what options people have to get involved in the energy transition we need, and ways decision-making can be improved. We did some initial background research on successes and challenges that is in a report that is available at [www.climable.org/brown](http://www.climable.org/brown). From March through November of 2022, we met with stakeholders of all kinds, from PUC Commissioners to state representatives to utility employees to Tribal Nations, advocates, activists, and community-based organizations. We hosted in-person and virtual workshops in each state and offered follow-up one-on-one debriefs. This process allowed us to gather many ideas from a wide variety of experiences and perspectives. We heard many people wanting to have more input in PUC decision-making and that participating in PUC processes is time-consuming, costly, intimidating, overwhelming, and hard to understand.

The following pages are meant to summarize some of the actions people in each state recommended for how we can achieve our climate goals in an equitable way. We hope this document helps!



# How to read this report

Stakeholders identified four categories of actors and the actions each can take to act boldly on climate action. They appear in the report in this order:

1. State Legislators
2. Governors
3. Public Utility Commissions
4. All of Us

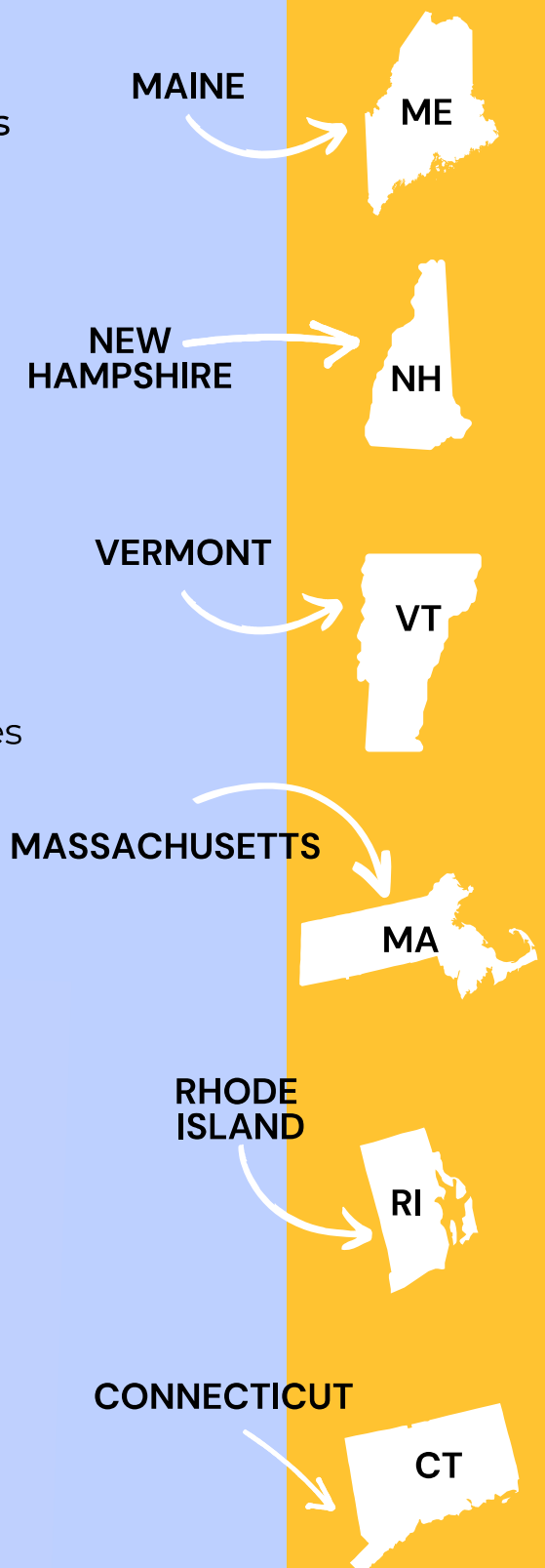
Each page has a different action these actors can take. We highlight states with examples of these actions in practice in the panel on the right side of the page. →

States with a ★ are those states with examples of what to do.



Each action includes ideas  and examples 

A Key Terms section appears on the next page. Key terms throughout the document are underlined.



# Key Terms

Navigating the world of energy can be tricky! The following are terms you may come across in this report.



**Community Choice Aggregation:** When municipalities buy power in bulk, often at a lower rate than the utility and often from cleaner sources.

**Electrification:** The process of switching to all-electric appliances instead of those that use fossil fuels.

**Environmental justice:** The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people when developing, implementing, and enforcing environmental laws, regulations, and policies.

**Heat Pumps:** An efficient way to heat or cool your home; it runs on electricity. AKA mini-split.

**Intervenors:** The formal status you must receive in order to take part in official PUC proceedings.

**Municipalization:** When a city or town operates its own utility.

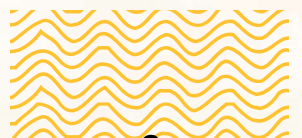
**Net Metering:** When buildings connected to the grid have solar panels and are allowed to sell excess energy back to the utility.

**Renewable Portfolio Standards:** These are state-level mandates that require utilities to source a certain percentage of their electric energy from renewable sources like wind or solar.

**Third-Party Residential Retail Energy Suppliers:** In Massachusetts, rather than paying the electric company to supply you with energy, you can pay a competitive supplier. The electric company still delivers the electricity.



# **ACTIONS** **for** **LEGISLATORS**



# 1 Create authority & accountability

State legislatures determine who has the power to take action on climate issues. Greenhouse gas reduction (GHG) *goals* aren't enough to address the regulation of the electric, heating, and transportation sectors; meeting goals requires accountability measures. Most New England states now have “Renewable Portfolio Standards” (RPS) that require specific GHG reductions for the electric sector and specify how to enforce them. The RPS model provides a framework that is being applied to the heating sector and a similar regulation should be created for the transportation sector.

Legislators also have the authority to create and fund specific Climate Councils that work with different agencies to advance the state's climate goals. Even where they exist, they're often underfunded and don't have the authority to create or enforce regulations. It is important that these councils not only have the power to do their job, but that they be made up of a diverse group of people, including community organizations, agency heads, and members of the PUC.

*Significantly* more funding is key to reaching the necessary scale of change. To make sure equitable practices are developed, local planning boards, energy committees, and Climate Councils all need compensation. Legislators can help by providing sufficient funding for new staff at PUCs and new, clearly defined responsibilities for PUCs and Climate Councils.

## Ideas & Examples

-  In 2022, VT was the first New England state to propose a Clean Heat Standard, with specific reductions and enforcement for all fuels. The Governor vetoed it.
-  The ME Climate Council has 39 members and five working groups that focus on topics like transportation, energy, and housing. The Council has funding and can accept philanthropic donations.
-  Increase the PUC budget to support enhanced outreach efforts, translation and interpretation, equity training, intervenor compensation, and offer childcare for hearing attendees.

*Highlighted states:*



# 2 Amp up equity

States need to define environmental justice and include language around equity in all legislation. Legislation needs clear and consistent definitions, goals, and metrics and it must apply to all government agencies.

Climate Councils need to have equity as part of their mandate. They also should make special efforts to include regulators, equity experts, and environmental justice groups on their roster. Representation is key.

Not focusing on equity has led to the historical underfunding of low-income and environmental justice communities. It has also led to lower participation rates in things like energy efficiency programs and the installation of heat pumps within these same groups. To flip this narrative, incentives need to be fully redesigned to make participation easier to navigate and financially feasible.

Lastly, there is a major shortage of clean energy workers ranging from installers to engineers and beyond. Language-accessible training, career buyouts, and paying prevailing wages should be specified in legislation. A commitment to youth workforce development by funding green trade schools and apprenticeships and partnering with community groups to publicize these opportunities will grow the pipeline.

## Ideas & Examples

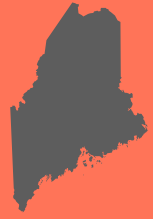
 Tax homeowners with multiple residences or only part-time state residency to funnel funding to new low-income incentives.

 RI's Percentage of Income Home Energy Affordability Act (PIPP) proposed for low-income ratepayers to pay a fixed 3% of income for those without electric heat and 6% for those with electric heat.

 CT's Green Bank is a source of state-level funding for workforce development.

 MA legislation funds Equity Workforce Training Grants and MWBE (Minority- and Women-Owned Business Enterprises)

*Highlighted states:*



# 3 Create community agency

A key to meeting climate goals is replacing fossil fuels with electricity. As we add more electric vehicles, electric heating and cooling, and more to the grid, our collective need for electricity will only increase. This means the Public Utility Commissions and utilities, the entities that make energy decisions, will grow in both responsibility and power (pun intended).

People are already quick to point out that the general public does not have equal opportunity to participate in energy decisions, so there is a need to shift power to the collective and away from utilities. There are multiple ways this can be done!

## Ideas & Examples

- ☒ Net-metering is when buildings connected to the grid have solar panels and are allowed to sell excess energy back to the utility, shifting ownership to individuals. ME, VT, MA, RI, and CT allow net-metering.
- ☒ Community Choice Aggregation (CCA) is when municipalities buy power in bulk, often at a lower rate than the utility, and from cleaner sources. This gives communities more control over their pricing and energy sources. CCA is allowed in MA, ME, NH, and RI.
- ☒ Building emissions reductions and disclosure ordinances (BERDO) require buildings of a certain size to report their emissions and plan for reductions. These ordinances create transparency. They also give communities the ability to apply pressure on the biggest polluters in their areas.
-  Allowing municipalities to ban fossil fuel infrastructure allows individual communities to lead by example.
-  Removing barriers to municipalization, which is when a city or town owns and operates its own utility, allows communities to define the policies, practices, and priorities of that utility.

*Highlighted states:*



# 4 Fight fake news

Climate misinformation is when bad actors create a false narrative around what is truly "green," "smart," and "clean," or downplay the negative effects of fossil fuels. The goal of these misinformation campaigns is to manipulate public perception and create doubt and confusion, which can lead to inaction on climate issues.

Currently, no legislation around climate misinformation exists in the U.S., so the lobbying groups, political action committees, and organizations that circulate false information are unchecked.

Creating and passing legislation that specifically prohibits climate misinformation would hold these groups accountable and reduce barriers to the public mobilizing around climate issues.

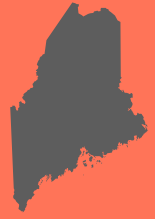
## Ideas & Examples

✓ The European Union's *Digital Services Act* states that both dis- and misinformation are harmful, regardless of intent. This 2022 legislation created accountability measures for online platforms and media outlets to address the threats associated with bad information online.

💡 The *Digital Services and Oversight Act of 2022* was introduced at the federal level by a Representative from MA. It has not moved forward in Congress yet. The Act intends to establish better transparency and oversight over the dissemination of information on social media.

💡 Stakeholders at the MA workshops expressed the need for legislation that creates more oversight and accountability over third-party residential retail energy suppliers. Some of these competitive electric suppliers are predatory and target low-income and non-English speakers in particular.

Highlighted  
states:



# **ACTIONS for GOVERNORS**



# 5 Coordinate communications

Currently, no centralized agency provides information about climate action, PUC proceedings, utility activities, etc. People would benefit from having one source for complete information.

Governors have the authority to create a centralized approach that prioritizes language equity. Language equity means that information is available in the most spoken languages and all information is accessible to a general audience. It is unlikely PUCs or other agencies have staff that are experts in making information easy to understand, so third-party organizations that specialize in this should be employed.

Governors can call for the information to be distributed electronically by using existing listservs and by strategically engaging the media. This will ensure information reaches a broader audience.

## Ideas & Examples

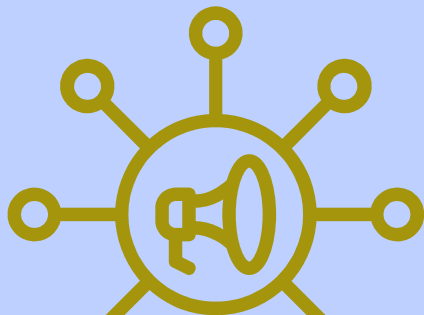


Companies and consulting firms that specialize in language equity exist! Hire them to translate the technical information in PUC proceedings, for example, so more people can understand the impact of a decision or ruling.



In RI, stakeholders recommended tapping into the Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC) and Department of Environmental Management (DEM) listservs to share out information to a wider audience.

*Highlighted states:*



# 6 Cooperate regionally

Stakeholders at most of the workshops were curious about what other states were doing and how they were doing it. There are many similarities between the challenges each state faces, which means there are many opportunities to learn from each other. Encouraging collaboration among states will enable them to move forward faster and smarter. Since the grid operator for the region, ISO New England, serves each of the New England states, it especially makes sense to consider electricity from a regional perspective.

There are already a few regional committees in the Northeast that are trying to serve this purpose. The Transportation and Climate Initiative (TCI) and the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI) are two examples that have met previously, with various levels of success. Issues like electricity, roads, and greenhouse gases aren't confined to a single state, which is why working with regional neighbors is so important. Participation in these committees is made up of individual states and governors, and increasing involvement and collaboration will help both states and the region as a whole meet their climate goals.

## Ideas & Examples



Regional cooperation can go beyond national borders too! The New England Governors and Eastern Canadian Premiers (NEG/ECP) group has subcommittees on the Environment, Transportation, and Energy, that collaborate on projects and research about their shared interests.



Right now, the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative works with 12 eastern states to cap-and-trade emissions from the electric power sector. This means power plants have to buy "allowances" to cover their emissions, and those proceeds go to states to fund their own policies. The program could serve as a model for thermal and transportation emissions.

*Highlighted states:*



# **ACTIONS for PUCs**

**(Public Utility Commissions)**



# 7 Improve stakeholders' experience

Current PUC processes, policies, and practices do not allow for equitable participation by all stakeholders. One barrier to more meaningful participation is language accessibility as materials and meetings are not translated or interpreted. Another barrier is the availability of easy-to-understand materials. Many PUC communications only appear in newspapers. To reach a wider audience, the PUC should create plain language summaries of notices and continue to share them in print, and also across social media, other websites, mailers, and listservs.

Participation can also improve by proactively inviting stakeholders to the table and then by the PUC demonstrating they take stakeholder input seriously and hold it in the same regard as input from the utility. This may require using a neutral third party to do outreach and check that the PUC has factored in stakeholder feedback.

The PUC should reconsider the requirements for stakeholders to participate formally as intervenors and provide compensation for intervenors from environmental justice communities. Similarly, energy facility siting boards, that decide where energy infrastructure can or can't be sited, should involve the community impacted by the project earlier on in the process. In-person and virtual involvement should be allowed. Lastly, the physical layout of a hearing room impacts power dynamics. Space should be configured to be conducive to two-way communication.

## Ideas & Examples

- ✓ In CT, the PUC has a YouTube channel and quarterly newsletter where they post public meetings and educational content in an effort to engage with more residents.
- ✓ The VT PUC's website has links to downloadable guides with information on evidentiary hearings, how to submit comments, and more. There is also contact information for the PUC Clerk.
- ✓ Grid planning in ME requires the PUC to collect stakeholder feedback before the planning starts and integrate it into plans. The PUC is also seeking feedback on how to improve the stakeholder process and has a comment form on its website.

*Highlighted states:*



# 8 Phase out gas

Stakeholders across many states are frustrated that there is no plan to phase out gas, which is key to meeting climate goals. In fact, PUCs are still allowing gas utilities to propose and proceed with gas infrastructure projects when more emphasis should be put on switching from gas to electric equipment and appliances. This switch, known as electrification, requires more electric grid planning and investment. Not enough attention is being given to preparing the grid for this increase in use and reliance. While some states have statewide energy plans for all fuels, some of these plans are dated and do not reflect the phase-out of gas that is in line with state climate goals.

## Ideas & Examples



Both MA and RI PUCs have "future of gas" dockets to explore what a gas phase-out might look like. There have been efforts to do more outreach and collect input from stakeholders to incorporate public opinion.



In MA, stakeholders suggested forming a statewide energy planning commission with representatives from a wide variety of perspectives and experiences. This commission would look holistically at the state's energy needs and be in charge of developing an efficient, safe, affordable, and emissions-free energy system. Stakeholders also proposed the commission operate independently of and have authority over the PUC.



*Highlighted states:*



# 9 Realign utility goals

Stakeholders pointed out that the goals of utility companies are often different from the climate and equity goals of the states. Historically, PUCs have been most concerned with keeping rates low and making sure the power doesn't go out. But states have recently been setting climate goals and requiring the PUC to also consider equity and the environment in their decision-making.

Stakeholders commented that PUCs should create goals and associated rewards and penalties for the utilities to make sure they are following these new state guidelines. Utilities can make it easier to connect renewable energy to the grid and plan for future extreme weather events that are becoming more common.

Many utilities currently charge all of their residential customers the same amount, despite very different incomes. PUCs can work to establish low-income specific rates and set aside enough money for incentives for these low-income customers that cover the full cost of energy efficiency upgrades.

## Ideas & Examples

✓ The ME Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future met with environmental justice groups to develop ways for the PUC to better incorporate equity. Two proposed policies came out of this: one would provide more funding for intervenors who take part in PUC hearings, and another would increase the funding for a low-income rate program.

💡 Other ideas from those meetings include considering the environmental impacts of electricity wires and other infrastructure on low-income communities and improving the maintenance of water utility infrastructure so everyone has access to affordable, clean drinking water.

Highlighted  
states:



# **ACTIONS** **for** **All of Us**



# 10 Organize around appointments

Many key positions - like the role of a PUC commissioner, for example - are filled by people who have been appointed to the role. Often, these appointees are not necessarily experts in climate or equity issues. Many roles remain vacant for unreasonable amounts of time. Stakeholders observed that the people they consider to be good for the job are overlooked. Activists and other stakeholders should create lists of people they can recommend for certain roles. They can also work to get this list of preferred appointees in front of decision-makers by creating key messages and leveraging their connections who are in a position of power. Activists should organize around strategic appointments to create change from within the government and PUC.

## Ideas & Examples

- ✓ With the recent election of Democratic Gov. Maura Healy in MA, stakeholders from community organizations saw an opportunity to suggest candidates to fill openings at the PUC and state energy offices with people in regional and local planning boards and energy committees.
- ✓ In RI, the Energy Democracy Community Leader Program run by the City of Providence's Office of Sustainability and the Racial and Environmental Justice Committee relied on community leaders to help produce and advance their environmental and climate justice goals. The program required the participation of representatives from certain impacted neighborhoods and community leaders were paid a stipend for their efforts.

*Highlighted states:*



# 11 Expand the stakeholder network

Many groups work on intersectional issues related to energy and the environment in each state. Examples of these groups include regional planning boards, local energy committees, municipal sustainability managers, educational institutions, and schools. There are also many special interest groups related to wildlife, farming, agriculture, hunting, fishing, forests, fitness, health, and outdoor adventure. Identifying the range of groups that could rally around issues, campaigns, or policies, would give the collective more influence. Stakeholders recommended forming alliances and embracing uncommon alliances to work towards a common goal. Working together would require crafting a message that many can support and uplift to grab the attention of legislators and the PUC.

## Ideas & Examples



NH stakeholders recommended contacting organizations that could be supportive of certain initiatives and involving them in the conversation. Stakeholders saw the upcoming net metering proceeding as a chance to rally around a collective message.



VT stakeholders recommended collaborating with organizations like universities or the Vermont Clean and Resilient Energy Consortium that have access to funding that supports research. A topic of interest is an *energyshed*, which is like a watershed but explores energy systems.

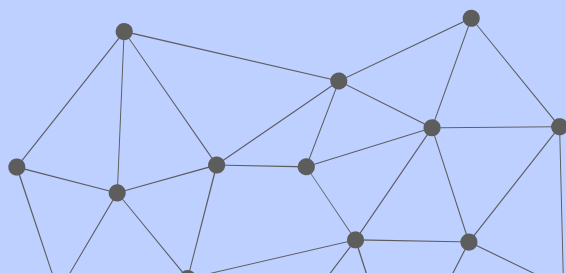


Map out stakeholders to identify opportunities for collaboration. An example was published by the UMass Sustainable Solutions Lab in 2022.



Networks and coalitions that unite around a common cause or campaign can seek funding from values-aligned foundations.

Highlighted states:



# 12 Activate the stakeholder network

*Highlighted states:*



Outreach is going to be key to advancing climate goals and fighting climate change. Once a strong stakeholder network is created there are multiple approaches the network can use to educate residents, attract new supporters, and fight back against misinformation campaigns. Individuals know what their community needs and how to inspire action better than anyone. That could mean organizing support for specific policies, working to counter "Not-In-My-Backyard" (NIMBY-ism) mentalities for renewable energy sites, and encouraging greater use of renewable technology.

Different states also have resources available to help support and fund community organizations hoping to inspire climate action locally. There is an opportunity to look to initiatives in other states for ideas and learn about what might work in a community.

## Ideas & Examples



Leverage experienced leaders to get the word out! Acton, MA has an electrification effort where Abode Energy Management will go block by block and speak to residents about the benefits of heat pumps.



In VT, the Climate Catalyst Innovation Fund gives out small grants to help community organizations, schools, businesses, cities, and towns develop innovative approaches to climate action. Recipients included education campaigns and projects to help with weatherization and energy efficiency.



Use community forums like Nextdoor and FrontPorchForum to spread the word about climate and energy initiatives.



Combat misinformation through investigative reporting, school curriculum, and circulating easy-to-understand educational materials on climate and energy issues.



Take a bottom-up approach to climate action! In NH, climate action is often seen as too political. Stakeholders noted that they had more success when they organized action around what their

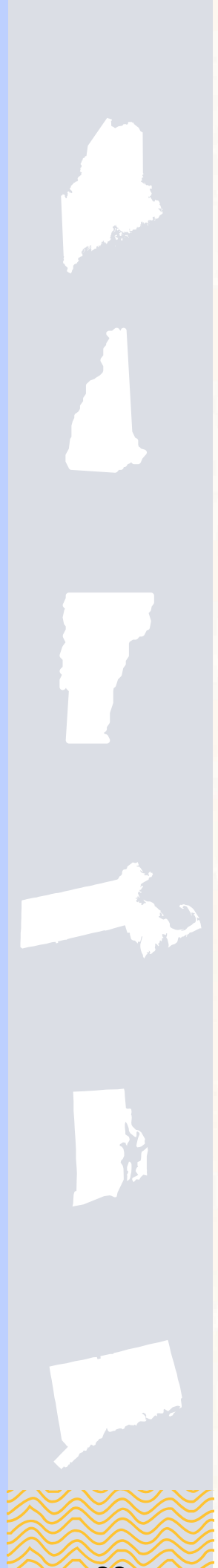
# Now what?

We hope you've found these actions and ideas to be helpful! We fully support you taking on these actions at home. If you do, please keep us posted. We can track your successes on social media if you use the hashtag #PowerPlayNE.

Also, if you read these reports and are interested in learning more, please get in touch. Members of our team would be more than happy to come and speak to your groups or present at conferences. You can email [info@climable.org](mailto:info@climable.org) to get the ball rolling.

Again, big, humongous thanks to all the stakeholders who attended our workshops and were so sharing of their time and ideas that formed the basis of this work. Your commitment to the cause is appreciated and celebrated. Thank you!

**#PowerPlayNE**





For the full report, please visit  
[www.climable.org/brown](http://www.climable.org/brown)

**#PowerPlayNE**



Synapse