

# Groundswell SharePower™ : Community Solar Subscription Service

Program Profile

## Sharing the Benefits of Solar Energy Across Communities

[Groundswell](#) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that leads clean energy programs and projects for low- and moderate-income households in the District of Columbia (D.C.), Maryland, Illinois, North Carolina, and Georgia. In November 2015, Groundswell launched its community solar program, which pioneers new models for delivering energy equity to local communities.

[SharePower™](#) by Groundswell, launched in 2019, is a subscription service in which residents (currently only in D.C. and Maryland) purchase clean energy from a local community solar project and share the solar power, as well as the associated energy cost savings, with their income-qualified neighbors (i.e., those with an annual income less than 80 percent of the area median income (AMI)).

The SharePower model is a mutually beneficial community solar framework that incentivizes participants with financial means to help connect energy-burdened households with clean power generated within their own communities. It works by leveraging community solar subscriptions from households that do not have high energy burdens (i.e., “market rate” households) to provide subscriptions at no cost to low- and moderate-income households that do have high energy burdens (i.e., “empowered” households). The premium that market rate households pay to subsidize empowered ones is considered a tax-deductible donation. In turn, these donations help empowered households receive up to \$500 a year in electricity bill savings.

SharePower currently provides community solar to over 200 subscribers in D.C. and Maryland, 25 percent of which are income qualified. Participating Groundswell community solar projects include the Paddington Square Apartments in Silver Spring, Maryland, which has a 273 kW solar array that provides solar electricity for 91 households in Montgomery County, including 28 empowered households, each of which save up to \$500 annually.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Groundswell, 2022. [Paddington Square Apartments in Silver Spring](#).

### Fast Facts

**Program scope:** Community solar subscription service offering free subscriptions and energy savings to low- and moderate-income households facing high energy burdens.

**Communities served:** Households with an annual income equal to or less than 80 percent of AMI.

**Funding:** SunLight General Capital (community solar project installation and maintenance), market rate subscribers (free subscriptions for low- and moderate-income households).

**Key partners:** SunLight General Capital, D.C. Department of Energy and Environment, faith-based organizations.

**Promising practices:** Mutually beneficial subscription-based model, prioritizing customer experience, building trust through partnerships.



## Community History

The SharePower community solar subscription model was launched in D.C. in 2015, building on Groundswell’s success with selling wind power.<sup>2</sup> It now operates in Maryland as well. In D.C., which is home to around 670,000 people,<sup>3</sup> 14 percent of households have a high energy burden (i.e., more than 6 percent of gross household income going to energy costs), while 21 percent of Black households and 19 percent of Hispanic households in the greater metropolitan area experience a high energy burden. In Maryland, 18 percent of households face a high energy burden.<sup>4</sup>

Ultimately, Groundswell’s SharePower community solar subscription service was created to not only make community solar more accessible and equitable but also to offer a platform that fosters meaningful community solar experiences for low- and moderate-income subscribers.

## Community Engagement

Groundswell strives to provide clear and concise communication, through both written (e.g., mail, email) and verbal (e.g., phone call) forms, to SharePower subscribers so that they understand how the program benefits them and where to find information about their energy savings. Groundswell also leverages community and stakeholder feedback to better understand subscriber experiences, including any challenges they face.

For example, Groundswell sends an initial survey when participants first enroll to ask about their enrollment experience, which gives participants a chance to ask questions and directs them to the online SharePower platform to find program information. Then, the program sends a survey three months after enrollment to determine whether subscribers understand how to view energy savings on their monthly energy bills and to encourage participants to call the program for help if they do not. As of January 2024, the initial “Welcome to the Program” survey had received 538 responses and the follow up “First Bill Credit” survey had received 171 responses.<sup>5</sup> Through the survey results, the program learned that around 75 percent of customers did not use email and thus, were missing the program’s monthly e-newsletters. To address this, the program now sends a seasonal mailer, using a postcard format that includes artistic illustrations to capture the recipient’s attention and provide relevant information about their subscription.

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<sup>2</sup> Rashad Williams, Director of Subscriber Services, Groundswell Inc., 2023. Personal Communication.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. [Quick Facts: District of Columbia](#).

<sup>4</sup> PSE, 2023. [Energy Affordability in Maryland](#).

<sup>5</sup> Rashad Williams, Director of Subscriber Services, Groundswell Inc., 2024. Personal Communication.



Through these efforts, Groundswell discovered three effective ways to build trust and gain buy-in from subscribers and community organizations: identify community leaders, solicit feedback and then provide responses, and customize engagement strategies around the community's unique needs.

## Key Partners

As a subscription service, SharePower itself does not have direct partners. However, Groundswell [partners with many organizations](#) to implement its broader community solar work. The following are just a few:

- [SunLight General Capital](#) – A tax equity investment firm that develops, finances, owns, and operates renewable energy projects.
- [District of Columbia Department of Energy and Environment](#) – A government authority that seeks to improve quality of life for the residents and natural inhabitants of the nation's capital.
- Local community organizations – A variety of nonprofit organizations, including faith-based organizations, that serve Washington, D.C. communities.

SunLight General Capital finances the planning, installation, and maintenance of Groundswell's community solar projects. As of late 2023, the two organizations had collaborated to develop six community solar projects in Washington D.C., Maryland, and Illinois.<sup>6</sup> Groundswell credits the success of the partnership to mission alignment, as both organizations prioritize the acceleration of energy equity through locally generated clean power over project profitability.

Additionally, Groundswell formed both formal and informal partnerships with faith-based community organizations, D.C.'s Department of Energy and Environment, and other local community organizations to identify community solar project opportunities that offer longstanding benefits to low- and moderate-income households and host communities.

## Funding Mechanism

The Groundswell SharePower program is financed directly by market rate subscriptions. To enable this clean energy subscription model, the program is dependent on community solar installations, which are financed through tax equity partnerships with organizations such as SunLight General Capital. In return for covering costs associated with planning, installation,

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<sup>6</sup> Rashad Williams, 2023. Personal Communication.





operation, and maintenance of the community solar site, the project's tax equity partner maintains ownership of the site and captures tax credits for Renewable Energy Certificates (RECs) distributed to SharePower's empowered subscribers throughout the project's life.

Market rate SharePower subscribers, who help offset the costs of free subscriptions offered to empowered participants, are aware that a tax deductible premium is built into their subscription fee to make clean energy accessible to low- to moderate- income neighbors. To maintain cost-effectiveness and ensure a 100 percent offset of empowered subscriptions, each project is held to a 3:1 market rate to empowered subscriber ratio.

### Program Impact

SharePower participation has grown over time, consistent with Groundswell's community solar expansion into new markets. Currently, SharePower provides community solar to more than 200 subscribers in D.C. and Maryland, 25 percent of whom are income qualified.<sup>7</sup> The program will also begin serving DC Solar for All subscribers in July 2024. Together, all of Groundswell's programs have served more than 6,500 income-qualified customers with more than \$6.8 million in energy savings to date across D.C., Maryland, and Illinois.<sup>8</sup>

"I am thankful for the SharePower program, as it was a generous way to directly introduce me to sustainable solar energy benefits through Groundswell's Paddington Square program. This program was introduced to my family when we needed it most."

- **Darryl**, Empowered Subscriber in D.C.

Groundswell shares several examples of projects on its website to illustrate the impact of the SharePower model. For example, in addition to the Paddington Square Apartments, a community solar installation located on the campus of the Monastery of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel in Washington, D.C., has been providing the benefits of locally generated clean energy to D.C. households since the spring of 2020. This 151 kW community solar array produces solar electricity for 50 local households, including 12 empowered households, which each receive up to \$500 annually in clean energy savings.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Rashad Williams, 2023. Personal Communication.

<sup>8</sup> Groundswell, 2023. [Groundswell Selected for U.S. Department of Energy RACER Grant Funding for Development of Replicable Resilience Hub Model.](#)

<sup>9</sup> Groundswell. [Monastery of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel in Ward 5.](#)



## Barriers and Challenges

Groundswell has navigated a variety of challenges related to site planning and installation for community solar projects. Due to these challenges, many of the projects took longer than anticipated to construct. Some of these barriers included delays related to zoning and permitting, limited availability of contractors, and supply chain issues. In developing additional projects, Groundswell learned to anticipate these types of issues and address them proactively. Groundswell acknowledges that each project site is unique and comes with its own set of challenges that are often difficult to anticipate in their entirety. However, understanding the specifics of each site helps the organization better anticipate future barriers.

## Recommendations from the Field

- **Building trust should be the core focus of program outreach to effectively engage low- and moderate-income households.** Groundswell partners with community members and local organizations, enlisting them to spread the word on the benefits and credibility of SharePower's community solar subscription service. This has helped Groundswell overcome community distrust of the SharePower program and expand its network of stakeholders and partners.
- **Maintain consistent communication with program participants.** After participants have subscribed, frequent communication helps build trust and recognition in the community. This could mean, for example, following up with a letter at a milestone (e.g., six months in) that shows how much money the participant has saved since enrolling.
- **Prioritize customer experience.** Groundswell focuses on improving customer experience as much as the delivery of energy savings to empowered subscribers. For instance, subscribers can self-attest their income each year to reverify, which eases the administrative burden of resubmitting proof of eligibility.

## For More Information

- [SharePower website](#)
- ["Groundswell Launches SharePower"](#)
- [Groundswell programs](#)