How are CESA members communicating about clean energy affordability?

CESA interviewed communications staff at 11 CESA member agencies in the summer of 2026 to learn how they communicate about clean energy affordability. This document summarizes information related to key messages, barriers / constraints, and best practices.

What are your organization's key messages related to clean energy affordability?

- One organization's current two main messages are: **(1) the cheapest kilowatt is the one you don't generate**, and **(2) renewable energy is the fastest and cheapest way to get more energy on the grid right now**. This organization used to focus their messaging more on *clean* than *affordable*. But with rising energy bills over the last few years, their new narrative is: **"clean energy can also be affordable energy."**
- One organization's current key messages are: **(1) Volatile gas prices are driving up energy costs in our state,** and **(2) Clean energy investments will lower costs**.
- One person said they see affordability as part of a larger umbrella of **quality-of-life messaging**, which also includes health, good jobs, safety, and reliability. They are working to communicate the connection between *health and wellness*, with messages like: **renewables and efficiency can reduce pollution, reduce health impacts, and reduce costs associated with health impacts.** For example, the key message about their green school initiative is **creating a safer, more comfortable environment** for students and teachers. This organization has worked with local public health experts and universities for support with health communications.
- One person said they are focusing on **efficiency and comfort**. For example, heat pumps can provide heating and cooling. They are in a state where many households do not have air conditioning or central air.
- Several people expressed that they want to / are working to better explain how their organization's work helps bring energy costs down.

Other organizations are <u>not</u> explicitly communicating about clean energy affordability right now.

- Several organizations are focusing their efforts on **communicating the affordability benefits of *energy efficiency*, rather than renewable energy**.

Reasons for this included: the cost savings from efficiency are more definite and / or easier to explain than those from renewables.

- Some organizations are only focused on **advertising their programs and incentives**, rather than messaging about clean energy more broadly.

What are the barriers and constraints to communicating effectively about clean energy affordability?

Three big themes came up in the interviews.

- **(1) Combating misinformation.** For instance: renewables are causing higher utility bills and grid outages.
- **(2) Energy topics are complicated** and hard to explain/understand (economics, technologies, regulatory processes, market factors, etc.). Here are some things interviewees said:
    - "Technical content, diverse audience"
    - Getting media coverage on complicated topics is hard.
    - People struggle to understand their own energy bills – understanding the energy system, economics, technologies, etc., is even harder.
    - Getting energy prices to be lower is very complicated.
    - Communicating long-term clean energy economics is particularly hard. Specifically, it's hard to explain how higher upfront costs can lead to long-term cost savings.
    - Several people said that one of their core communications focuses is making energy topics more comprehensible and accessible.
- **(3) Jargon**
    - Several described a relatively recent culture shift towards reducing jargon and using plain language.
    - Several organizations described a collaborative content creation process, where the communications team is responsible for reviewing content and flagging jargon.
    - Many people said they are actively and constantly working to tackle jargon and explain their work in a less technical way.
    - However, some organizations said they haven't done much in terms of trying to demystify jargon.

Organization-specific barriers and challenges mentioned include the following:

- Public benefit surcharge issue: For one organization, their messaging positioning is challenging because their primary funding comes from a surcharge on utility bills. It's a small percentage, but it's very visible. People see this number and don't want the public benefit charge. People especially don't want to pay for other people's utility bills. So, this organization doesn't do a lot of outward messaging about affordability because of the public benefit surcharge issue.
- Another organization is a quasi-regulatory body, so they don't do much proactive external communications or messaging. Much of what this person does is explain how a Public Service Department works, and much of their focus is on thinking about how to reach people and make participation accessible.
- Another organization noted they are not the rate-setting commission, so they don't have direct control over rates. They need to align their messaging with the rate-setting agency (the PUC) to avoid conflict. The PUC can increase rates, so this agency plays it safe with affordability messaging to account for that.
- Another organization is charged with ensuring affordability for the ratepayers, so they are cautious about promoting renewable energy for cost-savings and they use more nuanced messaging – "it depends." Clean energy isn't always the most affordable energy; there are situations in which it can save people money, and other times when it does not. The state's renewable electricity policies have driven up costs for customers and there is a general awareness of this reality.

Other barriers and challenges include:

- Limited communications staff capacity (we spoke with 2 teams of 1).
- Limited / no budget for paid advertising, creating multilingual content, etc.
- One person said it was difficult to get stories from consumers and program participants, even when they offered compensation such as gift cards.
- One person said it is hard to get people to attend in-person events in general, vs. online being easier for folks.
- Red tape: one person said that even though a lot of their communications efforts center around social media, they don't pay to promote any posts because the process to get even small amounts of funding for this is too cumbersome.
- Another organization does not use social media very much, because there isn't much they can post on social media as they are a regulatory body.

Several people said they rely on other groups in their state to do public messaging about clean energy and affordability, as these groups are better suited and/or less constrained.

What are some best practices for communicating clean energy affordability? How do you get these messages to the right people?

- Home in on and **repeat key messages**.
- Attention spans are short, so **keep content short and engaging.** It's more important to highlight takeaways and benefits rather than more comprehensive program details.
- **Talk about impacts, not outputs.** Explain the benefits of your organization's work, not just the money you spent.
- **Pair messaging with data** -- tell a story and quantify it! For instance, to address the fact that long-term cost savings from clean energy may require higher upfront costs, you need to quantify and calculate costs and payback.
- **Partner** with a credible and relevant organization to reach a wider audience and to learn from their expertise.
- To communicate the short-term benefits of clean energy, **connect it back to people's energy bills, using real stories** from real people or use common scenario examples.
- A person on a communications team of one, who was at capacity for taking on other work, said that they try to **include short summaries in each document** or piece of content, so that if you don't have capacity to read the whole thing, you can get the gist.
- **Meet people where they are at** – literally (in terms of where you advertise), and figuratively (in terms of accessible language).
    - **Literally – location**
        - ♣ To reach a wider audience, use a wide range of communications mediums (websites, social media, newsletters, webinars, blogs, office hours, earned and paid media, going on background with reporters, tabling at community events, hosting community events…)
        - ♣ Importance of non-digital advertising – not everyone is online, and in many cases, the people who aren't tech savvy are most in need of energy cost savings, assistance, etc.
        - ♣ Interesting paid advertising locations: movie theaters, billboards (especially in rural areas), radio and streaming services, sports arenas, TV, buses…

- Efforts to advertise across the entire state, not just in the capital city – billboards in rural areas, attending events across the state, actively reaching out to news outlets that cover different regions.

- **Figuratively – accessible language**
  - Multilingual / translated content (mostly Spanish)
  - Outreach to non-English news outlets
  - Avoiding jargon and acronyms
  - Creating and/or sharing 101-level educational content, to help make energy topics (rates, system, affordability) more understandable.
  - Use community outreach events as a two-way learning opportunity. Nearly every group said that going to in-person events and talking with people helped them understand their communities' perceptions and level of understanding on clean energy topics.