

# Rural Realities:

## An Environmental Justice Needs Assessment of Rural Illinois

**For a technical assistance center to provide support for securing state and federal funding to fuel the clean energy transition**

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## Executive Summary

The National Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and the Illinois Climate and Equitable Jobs Act (CEJA) are among the new pieces of climate legislation that create grant opportunities to invest in rural communities. While funding is critical to bring about a renewable energy transition, rural communities have limited capacity and resources to apply for these new grant opportunities. To bridge this gap, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) created the Environmental Justice Thriving Technical Assistance Centers (EJ TCTACs) to help communities apply for grants. Illinois Extension is part of the Great Lakes TCTAC serving rural communities that are impacted by coal power plant and mine closures.

To better understand the unique challenges and barriers these communities face, the Illinois TCTAC project team conducted an environmental justice needs assessment. Fifteen practitioners from across the state were interviewed to determine how Illinois Extension can best leverage existing efforts and fill gaps. These interviews served as the basis to inform our recommendations on how best to deliver technical assistance to rural communities throughout Illinois. Four key lessons emerged.

### Teach by Example

Environmental Justice communities need to see themselves reflected in case studies and materials. We need to ensure that the opportunities we discuss are applicable to the communities we are working with. This will help them envision how their community can optimize opportunities.

### Plan for Success

Planning was the most common recommendation our informants identified. When communities have a solid plan and vision for the future, they can identify relevant grant opportunities. This helps them to be competitive in the application process and demonstrate how investments are consistent with plans.

### Amplify Regional Partnerships

There are dedicated organizations and professionals across the state working toward the coal-to-renewables transition. Many of these organizations provide technical assistance and capacity building services such as grant navigation, leadership training, or planning. By working with these organizations, we can amplify existing efforts.

Cover photo credit: Karsten Wurth and Markus Spiske

## Cultivate Community Trust

Rural communities are facing a period of unprecedented change as they navigate the coal transition. Through this transition, it is important to cultivate trust and build relationships.

To bring these recommendations to life, we created a five-step planning framework. This process will prepare communities for grant opportunities:

- Assess Community Needs
- Engage with the Community
- Follow Planning Process
- Support Project Proposals
- Share Progress

The purpose of the technical assistance center is to amplify efforts to assist communities impacted by the energy transition. The planning framework will create a cohort of communities that will work in tandem to develop their own plans that meet community goals. Upon completion of the planning process, communities will have increased community capacity, be prepared for grant opportunities, and be ready for the next step of the energy transition.

**The Climate and Equitable Jobs Act creates a pathway for Illinois to have 50% renewable energy by 2040. CEJA invests \$82M a year in workforce development and contractor equity programs, \$41M a year in former fossil fuels communities, and \$380M a year in new renewable energy, with 40% of the benefits and investments going to equity investment eligible communities and persons.**

## Project Context

This report is the result of an environmental justice needs assessment conducted in 2023 to inform priorities for the Illinois Extension portion of the Great Lakes TCTAC. The Thriving Communities Initiative Team (the “team”) within Illinois Extension will provide technical assistance. The needs assessment identified challenges faced by practitioners engaging in economic development and environmental justice work in rural areas. It also collected data on existing and needed services in the area. The needs assessment helped the team determine the most effective way to provide technical assistance to rural communities without replicating efforts. In addition to the needs assessment results and recommendations, background research and a literature review was conducted to provide further context.

## Background

Rural Illinois has the potential to be a leader in the clean energy transition. As coal plants are retired, there are opportunities to introduce renewable energy infrastructure. Over the past decade, rural Illinois has experienced significant population loss. Since 2010, most rural counties in Illinois have lost population (U.S Census, 2020). The mechanization of agriculture, outsourcing of manufacturing jobs, declining birth rates, loss of anchor institutions, and exodus of young people to cities have all contributed to these losses (Pintado, 2021). Rural communities are exploring ways to build back their workforce and to attract younger people.

The coal transition is changing the economic landscape of rural Illinois. Between 2010 and the summer of 2021, closures were announced for 18 coal plants in Illinois. The decision to retire these plants was largely driven by market pressure and the weakening economics of coal-fired power (Kibbey, 2022). CEJA requires all coal plants to be retired by 2045, unless they can capture and sequester emissions. However, as seen by previous announcements, most of the coal plants in Illinois will be retired at that point.

The coal mine workforce in Illinois has been shrinking over the past 90 years, with 50,000 employed in 1930 and only 3,000 employed in 2022 (Lydersen, 2022). There is a cultural identification with coal, especially in Southern Illinois, borne out of generations that were employed and supported by this industry. This has made it difficult to generate support for renewable energy, because it is often seen as battling against the coal industry. As coal plants retire, the tax revenue for local jurisdictions is reduced. Because of this, counties in Southern Illinois have identified the shrinking tax base and opportunities for younger generations as important issues, since fewer are now employed by the coal plant (Lydersen, 2023). The energy transition is less about individual job placements for coal workers and more about revitalizing entire communities, fostering growth, and building a foundation for long-term prosperity.

CEJA allocates \$40 million per year through 2045 from the Energy Transition Community Grant Program to provide grants to communities within 30 miles of coal plants or mines that have closed within the past six years or are slated to close within six years. The first round of funding in 2023 awarded projects that expanded mental health services, restored local budgets, and expanded workforce training opportunities. Park districts, school districts, and local governments were among the awardees. However, many smaller communities do not

have the capacity to apply or implement these programs. Technical assistance in the form of outreach, grant training, and strategic planning workshops can support them and enable them to secure grant funding,

## The Illinois Energy Transition

The coal industry in Illinois is in decline due to a decrease in economic competitiveness (Sattler et al., 2018). The industry lacks sufficient pollution controls, and is facing increased competition from cleaner, lower-cost renewable energy alternatives. Although the coal industry is declining, rural areas may resist renewable energy projects due to a strong historical reliance on coal as their primary energy source. Coal has cultural significance for rural areas, since it has been framed as a common bond that holds the community together (Carley et al., 2018). The coal transition is a cultural transition, in addition to political and economic. A successful transition requires understanding and respecting this cultural connection (Jermain et al., 2022).

Coal communities, due to their rural status, have limited capacity and weak ties to state and federal actors, which hinders transition planning (Roemer & Haggerty, 2021). Regional planning will be required to facilitate the coal transition. Building long-term capacity through regional planning supports community and regional resilience (Roemer & Haggerty, 2021).

The emergence of new renewable energy projects presents a potential avenue for rural communities undergoing significant structural and technological shifts within the agricultural sector. This agricultural shift, while posing challenges for some farmers, could also unlock new economic opportunities (Naumann & Rudolph, 2020). To understand the rural energy transition, Naumann & Rudolph (2020) created a framework of three pieces that equally work together: contestation, location, and emancipation. Rural areas have the land and are therefore the ideal *location* for new renewable energy infrastructure, however, these projects are often met with *contestation* by local communities. To relieve contestation, they encourage local participation which results in *emancipation*.

Local communities must be included in decision-making processes to ensure social acceptance of renewable energy projects to drive the rural energy transition (Shamsuzzoha et al., 2012). Those living near wind facilities want benefits to stay in the local community, which can be achieved through fair and participatory planning processes (Rand & Hoen, 2017). Workforce development is an area renewable energy can support, especially as jobs in traditional industries such as mining are lost. These new technologies will bring more jobs in construction and installation than in operation and maintenance (Moreno & Lopez, 2008).

The advantages of wind power that small rural counties receive, such as increased employment, farm income, and household income, will likely extend to neighboring counties that can offer suitable housing and retail services for workers (Shoeib et al., 2022). Therefore, to maximize benefits, rural counties with favorable wind resources should focus on enhancing their own attributes, such as developing a robust main street for local shopping and dining (Shoeib et al., 2022). This clearly demonstrates the relationship between economic development and renewable energy futures: both are needed for success. Furthermore, additional wind turbines can increase revenue for school districts through increased property values and a subsequent higher tax base (Castleberry & Scott Greene, 2017). Overall, wind

**“The coal transition is also a cultural transition, in addition to political and economic.**

**A successful transition requires understanding and respecting this cultural connection.”**

farms can provide, on average, a modest increase to local wages in rural counties (Mauritzen, 2020).

While there are many benefits of renewable energies for rural communities, they must be weighed against the negatives. With the coal transition specifically, workers transitioning out of the industry struggle to find new employment due to skill gaps, wage loss, and long-distance commutes, along with having to compromise on culture, community, identity and sense of place (Wang & Lo, 2021).

Another challenge is that fossil fuel industries support the local tax base. When these industries leave, it can affect public services that rely on their funding, such as transportation, education, and waste management. The absence of structures to stabilize and replace revenue losses incurred with the closure of local coal plants and mines is a major challenge for transitioning communities (Roemer & Haggerty, 2021). Existing transition assistance policies in the U.S. tend to focus on the immediate impacts of closure, however, long-term solutions are essential for a sustainable transition (Roemer & Haggerty, 2021).

Communities experience burdens with the implementation of renewable energies. Hydropower, wind, and biomass had the greatest variety of burdens associated with their implementation, with the burdens being exposure to pollution, negative impacts on wildlife, and loss of agricultural lands (Levenda et al., 2021).

When navigating the energy transition, energy justice is a central theme. Individuals should have access to energy that is affordable, safe, sustainable, and provides a resilient lifestyle, as well as have opportunities to participate in and lead energy-decision-making processes, with the authority to make change (Bazilian et al., 2014; Middlemiss & Gillard, 2015).

For environmental justice communities in particular, low-income communities and communities of color will be affected by the energy transition disproportionately, because it may increase energy insecurity and fail to extend opportunities for engagement and technological access to disadvantaged groups (Carley & Konisky, 2020). There are a variety of policy and business interventions that can help ensure a just transition and address disparities, including workforce and economic diversification programs, energy assistance and weatherization, expansion of energy technology access, collective action initiatives, and new business development (Carley et al., 2019).

## Environmental Justice History and Framework

Environmental justice as a movement has developed over the past 40 years. It identifies and explains the disproportionate effects of environmental burdens on poor, racialized, and marginalized communities (Levenda et al., 2021). Grassroots protests in 1982, in response to the siting of a PCB landfill in a predominately African American community, spurred a public debate about environmental racism (Perez et al., 2015). Two studies founded the environmental justice movement (US General Accounting Office 1983, and United Church of Christ 1987). These studies confirmed that race was the single most important factor in predicting the location of hazardous waste facilities (Perez et al., 2015). In 1994, through an Executive Order by President Bill Clinton, environmental justice was institutionalized as a central priority for the federal government. Under the direction of this order, federal agencies

included environmental justice considerations in policy implementation and assessment processes (Perez et al., 2015).

Environmental justice continues to be a priority for the federal government. In 2021, President Joe Biden announced an Executive Order which created the Justice40 Initiative. Under this initiative, 40 percent of the overall benefits of certain federal investments will be allocated to communities that are marginalized, underserved, and overburdened by pollution. These investments include clean energy and energy efficiency, workforce development, remediation, and reduction of legacy pollution, among others.

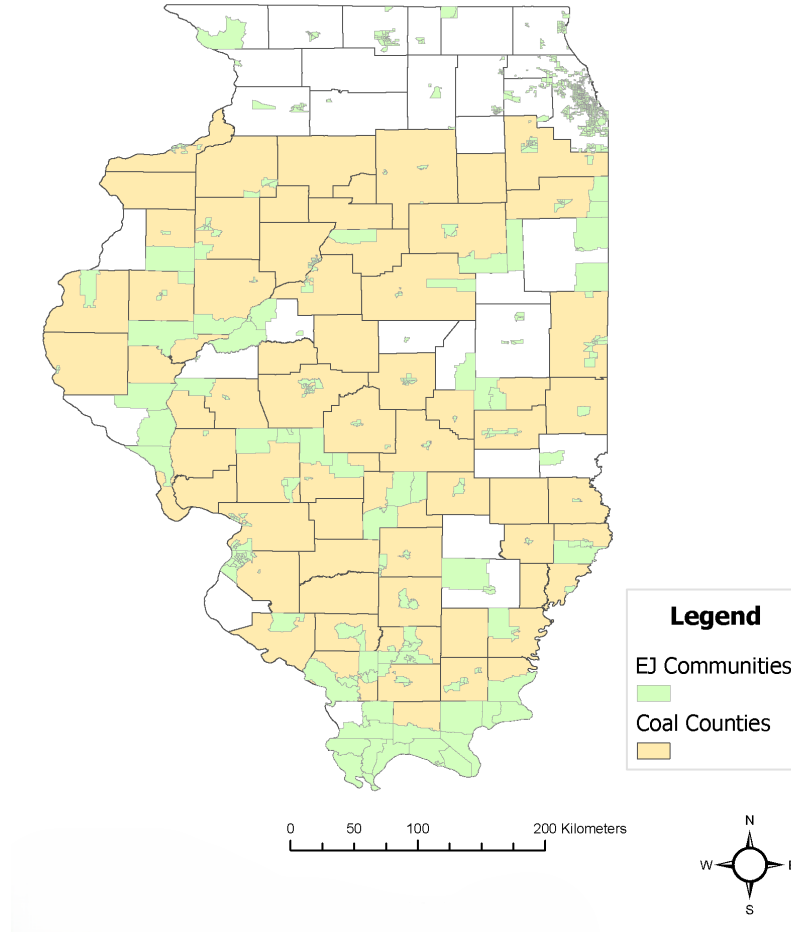
### Identifying Environmental Justice Communities

Environmental justice communities have been described as overburdened communities, disadvantaged communities, or EJ areas of concern (Baptista et al., 2021). These types of communities have experienced disinvestment, are climate-vulnerable, carry a legacy of systemic racism, are excluded from decision-making, and may be subject to a variety of disproportionate environmental burdens (Baptista et al., 2021). Federal agencies are encouraged to use the Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool (CEJST) to identify disadvantaged or environmental justice communities for the Justice40 initiative.

CEJST includes indicators of burdens in eight categories: climate change, energy, health, housing, legacy pollution, transportation, water and wastewater, and workforce development. The tool uses three key criteria to identify communities as disadvantaged and identifies disadvantaged communities in two ways. First, it considers census tracts that meet the threshold for at least one category of environmental, climate, or other burdens, or are located on land belonging to Federally Recognized Tribes. Second, it identifies communities within census tracts that exceed thresholds for both environmental burdens and associated socio-economic burdens. In addition, the tool considers proximity, identifying census tracts surrounded by disadvantaged communities and exceeding the 50th percentile for low income as disadvantaged themselves.



Figure 1: Map of Environmental Justice and Coal Counties in Illinois



*Map by Linda Derhak. Data Sources: IL Mines Wiki County Coal Data; Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool.*

While rural communities face distinct environmental challenges, they often hesitate to identify as "environmental justice communities" due to the term's historical association with urban communities. For the purposes of this report, environmental justice communities may also refer to coal transition communities. Coal has been mined in 77 out of the 102 counties in Illinois, with more than 7,400 coal mines being operated since commercial mining began in 1810. Coal counties are any county where coal was mined. As seen in Figure 1, coal activity is often correlated with environmental justice community status in rural Illinois.

### Environmental Justice Framework

There are three branches of environmental justice: distribution justice, recognition justice, and procedural justice (Wang & Lo, 2021).

- **Distribution justice** identifies the inequitable distributions of environmental risks and negative impacts.

- **Recognition justice** recognizes who is affected and in what ways.
- **Procedural justice** includes the decision-making processes and participation.

When all three of these are considered, environmental justice can be achieved. We must identify risk, redistribute in a fair way, and include affected communities in the decision-making processes. Furthermore, the inclusion of communities can foster social acceptance and equitable distribution (Levenda et al., 2021). Traditionally, environmental justice has focused on negative impacts, but is now moving toward “green” environmental justice, which focuses on including communities in green progress and as recipients of climate action (Anguelovski, 2013).

## Environmental Justice Needs Assessment Methodology

Research on environmental justice communities in rural Illinois, particularly their response to the coal transition, is limited. To address this gap, the project conducted an environmental justice needs assessment to identify the progress of the transition. This environmental justice needs assessment focuses on identifying current gaps and challenges that organizations and communities in rural Illinois are facing with respect to applying and administering this grant funding. Federal and state funding for community-level climate and environmental infrastructure projects are at an unprecedented level. The Great Lakes TCTAC has been established with funding from US EPA and DOE to support community-led efforts to secure and implement programs to carry out federal funding opportunities. Partners will work with existing efforts in the state to fill gaps and reduce barriers to participation.

Recruitment for expert interviews to inform this needs assessment began with a reputational process, where participants were contacted based on their positions in organizations working with environmental justice communities. A snowball sampling approach was used to identify a network of experts, and participant recruitment continued based on recommendations of interviews until saturation was met (Saunders et al., 2017). Interviews were conducted between July and August 2023. Interviews, which ranged from 50 to 70 minutes, were recorded, and automatically transcribed. Interviews were structured around four standard questions and follow-up prompts. The questions explored challenges and barriers, perspectives on the coal transition and environmental justice, services provided, and services needed.

Table 1: Number of Interviews by Organization Type

Organization Type	Number of Interviews
University (Illinois Extension)	6
Environmental Nonprofit	4
Regional Planning Agency	3
Federal Government	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>

Six Extension Community and Economic Development staff members who serve rural counties across the state were interviewed. These educators and specialists provided insights into the best practices for working with rural communities. The environmental nonprofits all focus on renewable energy from the local to statewide scale. Two of the regional planning agencies operate in Southern Illinois, and the other in Central Illinois. The federal government agencies we interviewed assist communities with interpreting regulations and administering grant funding.

Interview transcripts were analyzed using Nvivo Software. The coding process employed grounding theory to identify common themes across interviews (Charmaz, 2006). Code categories were created based on the interview questions. As interviews were coded, additional codes were created to aggregate common perspectives.

Once the interviews were coded, cross-case analysis and queries were conducted to identify key trends among the interviews. Two separate crosstab queries were conducted. The first compared interviews based on organization and the second on the region. These comparative analyses assisted with identifying gaps in existing services and how perspectives differ organizationally and geographically.

## Findings and Discussion

Although our informants had a diverse range of experiences and perspectives, there were common threads with their experiences delivering services to rural communities. Informant expertise included coal transition communities, hazard mitigation planning, and green infrastructure. Among our interviews, we learned that services across the state focus on capacity building and community outreach. However, these services are fragmented across the state. This demonstrated a significant need for regional collaboration and partnership to bolster these efforts.

## Challenges and Barriers

We asked key informants to share the challenges and barriers they faced when delivering services to rural environmental justice communities. The interviewees identified cultural attitudes, low community capacity, and unclear vision as the main barriers.

### Cultural Attitudes

Resistance to change among community members and leaders was a top concern for the key informants. Numerous interviewees acknowledged this resistance and desire “to go back to the way things were.” One key informant explained, “Probably the majority of the public just wants that coal mine to open back up where their dad and their uncle worked.” An extension educator echoed this sentiment, “Okay, they don't want any change...They're voting for someone that they think is going to bring the coal mines back. That's their solution to the problem.”

The coal industry provided economic stability to many of these communities for almost a century. There are generational ties to coal, which forms a cultural connection that makes the transition especially difficult. Rural communities have not faced the constant change that more urban areas are acclimated to. They also have fewer employers and other economic drivers than larger population centers have. It's important that we acknowledge this, and work with communities to identify what can be gained from the transition.

Many of the grants and funding for coal transition communities come from state and federal sources. Distrust of the government can prevent communities from seeking opportunities or trusting service providers from these governmental agencies. A community organizer in Southern Illinois explained how deep this sentiment goes, “They have a horrible opinion of the State. And so let's give them something to be happy about. We have to do something about the image of Illinois.” While the team cannot single-handedly change this perception of the government, we can help demonstrate the opportunities that are available to them.

Interviewees listed communication as another crucial aspect. The language used with communities forms the basis of trust and relationship-building. Many noted that it's important to be careful about the language one uses, and to apologize when mistakes happen. One community organizer explained the backlash over a clean energy event, “How to talk to people, and what to say and what not to say. You've always had to be really careful about it. When I had an event in 2019, I couldn't host it because it was about clean energy. And they're like ‘we're about coal.’ And that was only in 2019, and they were already transitioning away from coal. But they wouldn't say that because it would upset people.”

The coal transition is a sensitive subject for rural communities. It is a monumental change that, until recently, has largely negatively affected communities as jobs were lost and people displaced. Although coal plant closures were happening before CEJA, and CEJA is largely designed to help coal transition communities, many communities view renewable energy negatively and distrust the motivations for this transition. It is important that as facilitators, the team is responsive to these realities. We must validate community concerns, and

demonstrate through proven examples, how to navigate this transition for the benefit of the communities.

### Limited Community Capacity

Many communities in rural Illinois do not have formal planning staff, or a full-time mayor. These communities often have part-time mayors or clerks who organize and implement projects. They are often focused on the day-to-day operations and do not have the time or expertise to plan for or apply for grants. A regional planner in Southern Illinois explained that most of the communities they work with do not have administrators, grant writers, or city managers. These communities rely on regional planning agencies, consulting firms, and in some cases, volunteers, to apply for grants.

One of our informants explained the capacity of these communities, “Some of the counties you're talking about are villages. Henderson County only has villages. They don't even have a city in their county. You have a Village board president and some village aldermen, so to speak. Nobody's out there looking for grants. It's a very foreign concept to them.” The type of funding available is new for these communities. Oftentimes, they are more focused on maintaining what they currently have, instead of starting something new.

**“Right now, the local government is just inundated with these state and federal requirements because they've got such an influx of funding that they're trying to manage.”**

– Extension Staff

One informant explained this from a community member's perspective, “We don't need to start something new, let's just fix our buildings.” The informant added, “They are more focused on fixing up than getting broadband for everyone. They need a place to come pay their taxes.”

The funding available could increase capacity, but it is difficult for communities to find the capacity to pursue these new opportunities. An informant explained, “Right now, the local government is just inundated with these state and federal requirements because they've got such an influx of funding that they're trying to manage. Whether they have the internal capacity to deal with this, I'm not going to say, but they're overwhelmed right now and they really needed that kind of support and assistance to pull this together.”

The team can offer support and assistance to build community capacity. This can be done through supporting communities through a participatory planning process, connecting them with experts, or offering educational webinars.

### Unclear Vision

Individuals addressed that there are significant barriers to overcome prior to the grant writing process. As previously discussed, these communities have limited staff, who cannot conduct substantial community planning. Many of the communities are focused on day-to-day operations. This leaves little space for long range planning.

One Extension staff member articulated how difficult it is for small communities to think about and plan for the future, “And justifiably, they keep thinking, well, we don't have any money. So it's really hard for them to envision, okay, if we do get hit by a tornado...what would we like to see? Because they're just not used to thinking in those terms. You know, everybody wants things to go back to the way it was. And they're not. They're not really

prepared. I don't think any of us are quite prepared for all this extreme weather that we're getting and so really thinking through what that means in the long run for their communities.”

The main vision that these communities hold is one of a thriving past with coal. However, many of the upcoming grant opportunities support a different future - one with renewable energy. New legislation, such as CEJA, brings opportunity to areas that have been neglected. This presents two key issues; firstly, that communities are scrambling to apply because they don't know if these opportunities will continue, and secondly, they don't know what to do with the money.

A regional planner from Southern Illinois explained this dilemma, “They want to apply anyway, no matter what... I think there's so much money being thrown out there right now to be honest that it's even making our head spin because we're like every day you get another opportunity and it's like we don't even know what to do with that.”

It's difficult for these communities to envision what the grant would be used for. The energy transition is new for these communities. Until now, they have not been faced with a change at this level. The team can play a pivotal role as a hub, facilitating and supporting these communities in navigating through this transformative process.

## Key Lessons Learned

Our initial impression was that grant writing would be the biggest need for rural communities. However, the combined challenges of cultural attitudes, unclear vision, and limited community capacity point to a greater need for planning. Planning support can help communities build capacity, form regional partnerships, create a vision, and, ultimately, prepare for grant applications if interested. The team can support existing organizations by supporting or facilitating community planning processes that are driven by a participatory planning framework.

## Teach by Example

Rural communities need to see themselves represented in outreach materials and case examples. Many interviewees mentioned that case studies that demonstrate what similar communities have done would be beneficial. Communities would see examples of what is possible.

One individual described a community leader's perspective as, “He [said] none of the case studies even happened in our state, and so the programs that those states were offering were very different from anything offered here. And then two, the resources that they had available to them in their states were very different than resources here... When you're taking stock of your community assets... how do you then look at that to say here are some real tangible feasible ideas about what we could do to help generate jobs, taxes, money... they just need help starting that conversation.”

For the team, this could mean using Illinois examples, or coal counties from other states. The examples must include programs that either exist in Illinois (state or federal) or are available

in Illinois. Examples could show how grant funding can be used to create a resilient future for the community.

Beyond case studies, many shared the need for awareness and education. There is misinformation about renewable energy programs and technology that will act as a barrier if it is not addressed. Community organizers mentioned that communities have referenced rolling blackouts in Texas and California as a sign that alternatives to coal are unreliable. While the circumstances for those rolling blackouts are not applicable to Illinois, that perception informs reactions to renewable energy projects that need to be considered.

Multiple interviewees mentioned narrative building as a remedy. They want to change the narrative surrounding the coal transition, to show communities how they can benefit. One community organizer explained, “How do we educate the public, create a narrative across Illinois...that this transition is happening, that there are benefits to be gained aside from cleaner water.”

Environmental nonprofits throughout the state are on the front lines of changing narratives. The focus has shifted from fighting negatives, to instead, working toward a new future. A community organizer explained how this shift is happening in her organization, “It's just a shift for the environmental community where we've always been fighting things. And now, with all these, we need to build a new economy, carbon-free, renewable energy. We have several State and Federal policies in place to help us do that. It's a shift for groups like ours, activists that are used to working with us. We're always fighting something. Now we need to build, and we need to empower communities to take the reins of their clean energy future and be innovative thinkers.”

## Plan for Success

A successful grant application requires planning before, during, and after. As communities are struggling to form clear visions of their future among the uncertainties of the energy transition, they will require planning assistance to prepare for the grant application process. Some interviewees noted that if planning is not undertaken correctly, then communities will not qualify for the grants. Planning activities could include creating a community vision and goals, engaging with partners, and having a strategy for managing the grant. A regional planner explained, “So there's a real challenge in learning curves, and even if they were to get a grant, being able to administer it, understanding all the guidelines and that kind of thing, they need a Regional Council or someone to help them really write the grant, manage the grant, those kinds of things.”

Planning prior to applying for a grant makes a difference. An extension educator explained, “I think initially the planning is important because if you don't have the planning set up right, it's not going to qualify for the grants.” Communities will need help prior to the grant application process to ensure they are qualified and prepared.

**“Now we need to build, and we need to empower communities to take the reins of their clean energy future and be innovative thinkers.”**

*– Environmental Organizer*

## Amplify Regional Partnerships

The team could bring communities from across the region together. Environmental nonprofits, planning agencies, and extension educators all work with communities on the coal transition and could help to bridge the gaps between these organizations and amplify their efforts. Most of our interviews echoed this sentiment and mentioned regional collaboration as a helpful strategy. One extension educator explained, “If you were to build collaborations with the community colleges, the Regional Planning Councils and the Community Action agencies, that would go a long, long way toward providing the kind of assistance that’s needed.”

The 17 regional planning councils in the state could foster collaboration among public and private sector organizations. These councils, which are members of the [Illinois Association of Regional Councils](#), provide planning support, local government services, and technical assistance.

## Cultivate Community Trust

Cultural attitudes and beliefs were one of the top challenges practitioners identified. When asked how to address community pushback, many mentioned relationship-building and building trust as a significant strategy. One community organizer put it succinctly, “work moves at the speed of trust.” Environmental Justice communities often have a history of negative interactions from outside organizations that is either borne out of neglect or direct disempowerment.

To build trust, we can work with trusted partners, and ensure that our language and approach is culturally appropriate. In many cases, in-person meetings could help establish strong relationships. Extension has dedicated staff and expertise in working with rural communities that can be tapped into to inform the team’s approach.

## Perceptions of Environmental Justice

All key informants were asked to define environmental justice and how it applies to their work. A notable gap between environmental justice service providers and Extension staff on their interpretations of environmental justice were observed. Extension staff tended to perceive environmental justice as distinct from their involvement in community and economic development. In contrast, environmental justice practitioners perceived it as an intrinsic and inseparable aspect of community and economic development.

An interviewee from an environmental justice nonprofit said, “[environmental justice] It’s the people that have been left behind in previous efforts to lift society through economic activity. A lot of times these people don’t know what’s going on or don’t get access to those resources. It’s about linking into communities... Talking to individual people through grassroots organizations in those communities.”

Among environmental organizations, there was a shared perspective that people are focused on providing for the basic needs, leaving little bandwidth to focus on environmental justice.



They also mentioned pushback from communities who may view being classified as an environmental justice community as “a scarlet letter.” Although environmental justice is an important term for practitioners, it has not been widely adopted by rural communities.

## Recommendations

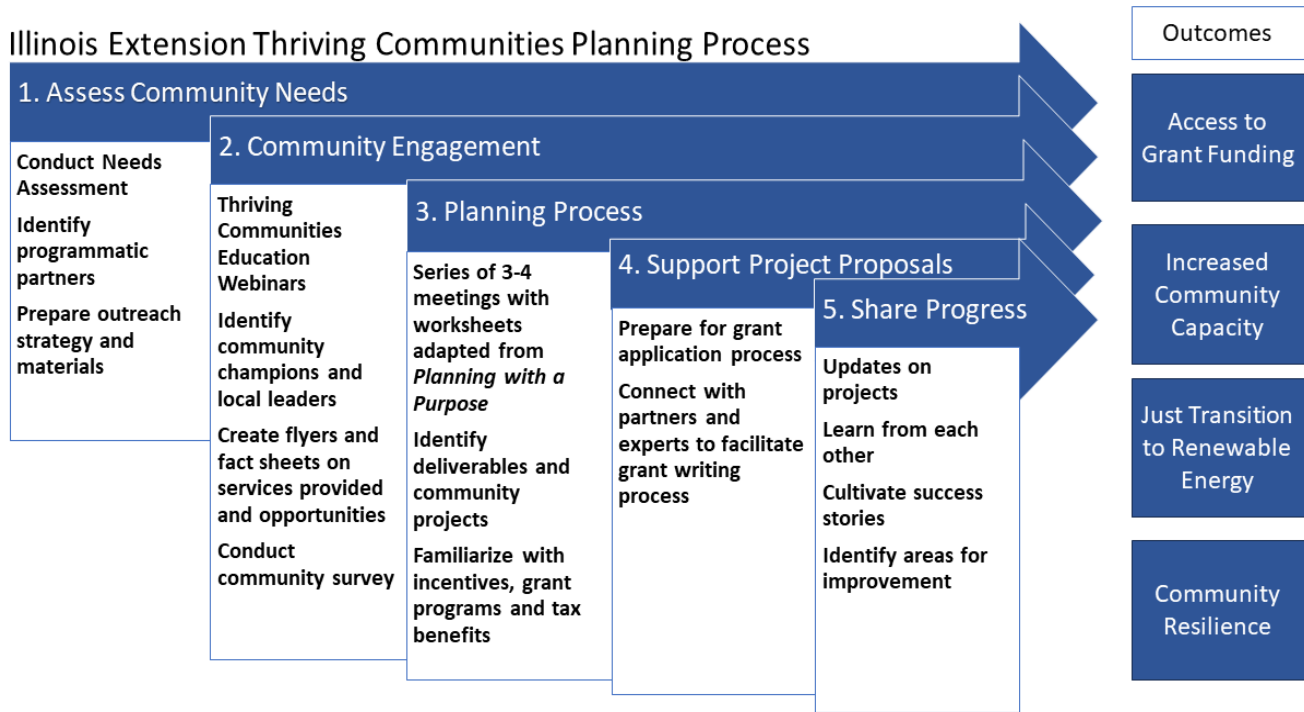
The team’s goal is to amplify existing efforts to support environmental justice communities through the coal transition. The Extension network includes community partners at all levels, and these trusted relationships can be the foundation for helping communities work toward the state’s renewable energy goals. In 2021, the University of Illinois Community and Economic Development team improved leadership skills for 2,000 public officials, business owners, and other residents; helped 1,100 professionals gain skills to meet the needs of vulnerable populations; and helped almost 4,000 people improve their understanding of economic and financial stability.

Using these existing networks and programmatic frameworks, the Illinois team should engage communities in a dynamic planning process that will allow them to be grant-ready as funding opportunities become available. The *Planning with a Purpose* community planning framework, see Figure 2 below, provides a model for a planning process that could be used in this project. Using *Planning with a Purpose* as a starting point, the Thriving Communities team goals and strategies should:

1. Help communities prepare for grant writing.
2. Create a cohort of communities interested in securing funding.
3. Formalize a network of existing local partners.
4. Help communities establish a vision and implementation plan.
5. Provide educational opportunities.

All the planning materials should be delivered with appropriate cultural sensitivity. The team should understand the capacity and interests of the communities and find ways to meet people where they are, rather than presupposing what communities might aspire to.

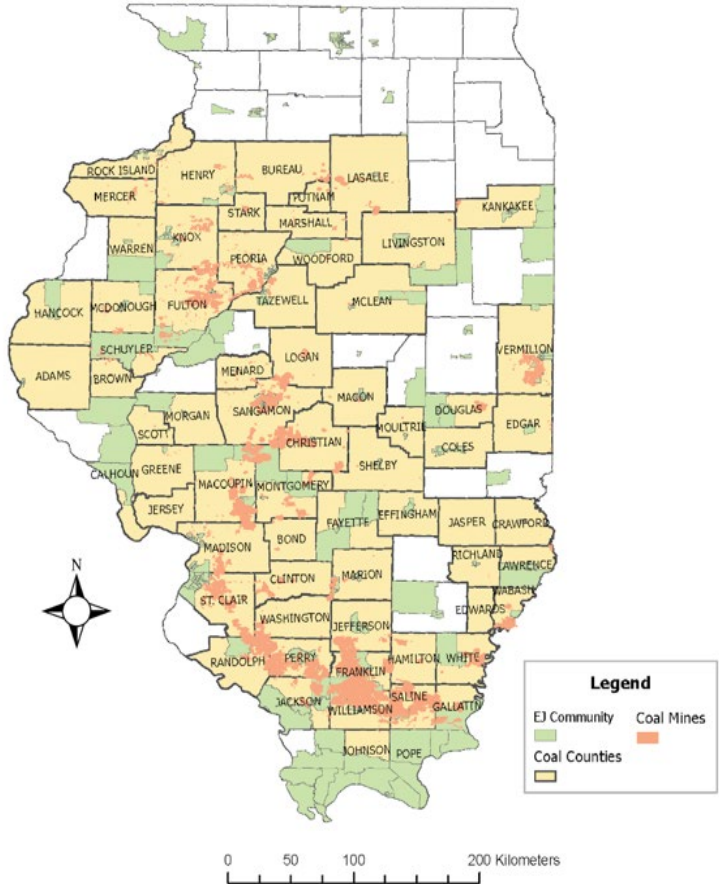
Figure 2: Thriving Communities Planning With a Purpose Framework



### 1. Assess Community Needs

Prior to reaching out to communities, the team must understand the landscape. The goal of any work with communities is to amplify existing efforts, be they local, regional, or statewide, and foster coherent and mutually beneficial partnerships within and among communities. Through this environmental justice needs assessment, we have identified programmatic partners at the regional, state, and federal levels, such as the Prairie Rivers Network and the Illinois EPA Office of Energy, that are familiar with the coal-to-renewables energy transition and are already working in local communities or have programs to serve our target communities. Figure 3, below, demonstrates the primary service areas for the Thriving Communities Technical Assistance Center, with the focus being on rural communities that are either undergoing the coal transition or that are facing environmental justice challenges. Many of these are in the lower two-thirds of Illinois. We will prepare our outreach materials and strategies to effectively engage with communities.

Figure 3: Map of Illinois Thriving Communities Initiative Service Areas



Map by Linda Derhak. Data Sources: IL Mines Wiki County Coal Data; Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool.

## 2. Community Engagement

Through the Thriving Communities Education Webinars and participation in meetings, the team will become familiar with the communities in Illinois that are ready and interested in submitting grants. This can happen through direct invitations from the team, interactions with local extension educators or other partners, or when the communities reach out to us. As we consider engaging with a community, many of our interviewees from Extension suggested seeking community champions before embarking on economic development efforts. Community champions are people who hold leadership positions, either formal or informal, and who are interested in working to help their community thrive.

Before community engagement begins, the team will identify community champions and supportive leaders. We will work with them to inform outreach materials such as fact sheets and a website to inform and engage with a cross-section of the population. Our goal will be to include members from diverse sectors of the population to ensure many voices in the community are heard. Community surveys may be conducted in this phase to gather information about values, goals, and readiness for a planning process.

### 3. Planning Process

To leverage limited Extension resources, we will conduct the planning process at scale by engaging multiple communities at a time. We will present information and guidance with up to five communities simultaneously. Communities will then work independently with an Extension facilitator as they move through the planning process. This cohort will also share ideas, progress, and barriers with each other so that resources can be shared, and challenges can be collectively addressed. Communities will be able to do the work individually and as part of a larger effort, integrating what they've learned.

Participants will have access to local government education and webinars that will cover grant and funding opportunities, leadership, and the energy transition. This is in response to our interviewees identifying a need for general education and awareness. During this phase, we will include case studies and examples from similar communities. The planning process will also use comprehensive plans, watershed plans, and community economic development plans, or hazard mitigation plans as a starting point.

We will hold three or four planning workshops based on the [\*Planning with a Purpose Framework\*](#). The meeting schedule is as follows:

- **Create a preferred future or vision:** Develop a draft vision statement.
- **Identify Community Assets:** Engage in various exercises to pinpoint resources, including SWOT analysis and asset mapping.
- **Bridge the Gaps:** Establish goals and construct diagrams to highlight actionable items or projects.
- **Write Action Plans:** Pinpoint goals and strategies, culminating in the creation and presentation of the plan.

The completed plan will outline community needs and goals and potential partners and will inform future grant applications. During this phase, communities will also receive education on applicable grant programs, tax benefits, and incentives that they can utilize for their projects.

### 4. Support Project Proposals

After completing the planning process, the team will keep communities informed of funding opportunities. The team will connect communities interested in submitting grants to Great Lakes TCTAC partners who provide grant-writing technical assistance. Depending on need and capacity, the team may hold grant writing webinars or customized training sessions for communities. Unless additional funding is identified, the team will not write grants. However, as needed and as we have capacity, we will provide feedback, guidance, and review grant applications.

## 5. Share Progress

The cohort of communities will function as a learning network throughout the planning and grant-writing process. Communities will be able to learn from one another and support each other throughout the process. Although they will embark on their work individually, the team will facilitate the sharing of best practices, barriers, and opportunities. Depending on the outcomes from this step, success stories will be cultivated to serve as examples for future communities. This step will help the team identify areas of improvement for future programming and serve as an evaluation tool to measure program impact.

## 6. Outcomes

Our goal is that communities will complete this process and be empowered to envision and implement a transition from coal that benefits their community. Their community capacity will be increased from joining our planning cohort and receiving referrals to other regional experts. They will be able to access grant funding and plan for a renewable energy future.

## Conclusion

Over the next five years, the Thriving Communities Initiative can provide rural communities with resources, education, and partnerships to prepare for an energy transition. After the planning process, communities will be prepared to apply for grants, and if interested, engage in infrastructure planning. Communities will be empowered to pursue renewable energy projects that support them throughout and beyond the coal transition.

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