Listening Sessions with ESJ Communities

Key Findings & Market Transformation Recommendations

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CalMTA is a program of the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) and is administered by Resource Innovations

Introduction

California's ambitious energy goals extend beyond empowering customers to reduce energy use, cutting greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and improving the energy performance of new and existing buildings. The state is also making significant steps towards ensuring that communities facing a disproportionate energy burden and historical inequities of efficiency investment enjoy the benefits of energy efficiency. To this end, the California Public Utility Commission (CPUC) created a new Equity segment[1] within program administrators' energy efficiency portfolios ($507 million in 2024-2027 funding) as well as unprecedented investments in programs yet to launch, such as $922 million in funding for the California Energy Commission (CEC) Equitable Building Decarbonization Program and $30 million in Equity and Access Grant Program funding to enable participation from Tribes and community-based organizations (CBOs) in program design and feedback.

In support of these statewide goals, the California Market Transformation Administrator (CalMTA) is working to apply an "equity lens" in development of the state's first portfolio of energy efficiency market transformation initiatives (MTIs). Because market transformation typically focuses on upstream interventions to engage manufacturers, supply and distribution channels, building operations staff, and other market actors, initiatives rarely target specific end-use customer segments. Therefore, instead of prioritizing specific equity considerations, market transformation has relied on efforts to increase market availability of and influence enhanced codes and standards for better-performing, higher-efficiency products and practices that will yield increased benefits to *all* customers.

CalMTA seeks to build on these efforts by incorporating strategies that improve access to energy efficiency among environmental and social justice (ESJ) communities within a market transformation framework. The resulting equity lens informs strategies like embedding equity considerations in scoring criteria for MTI concepts, developing a market understanding of existing equity-oriented organizations and other stakeholders for potential coordination, and an evaluation process that will include market transformation-aligned metrics for tracking and reporting on CalMTA's equity impact.

Our Team

Two expert consultants on energy equity led listening session development and facilitation: The Ortiz Group and Unrooz Solutions. Those firms are part of the overall implementation of CalMTA's equity workstream along with CalMTA staff from Resource Innovations and The Cadmus Group.

[1] https://docs.cpuc.ca.gov/PublishedDocs/Published/G000/M385/K864/385864616.PDF

The Ortiz Group is a mission-driven program management and training services company that specializes in providing innovative and practical solutions that improve low-income customers' experience in the clean energy sector.

Unrooz Solutions is a woman-owned firm providing services in strategy development, program management, participatory program design, and facilitation.

Resource Innovations, awarded the role of the California Market Transformation Administrator, offers software-enabled clean energy services for utilities and their customers. The company's majority-women board of directors shares its commitment to accelerating energy innovation and making clean and sustainable energy more available, accessible, and affordable.

Cadmus is a strategic and technical consultancy compelled to help solve the world's most challenging problems. From energy, water, and transportation to safety, security, and resilience, Cadmus's expert services strengthen society and the natural world.

Note on Definitions

While the terminology used to describe historically marginalized communities in California varies widely, the CPUC[2] established a definition of "Environmental and Social Justice (ESJ) Communities" for the purposes of CPUC policy and programs: "predominantly communities of color or low-income communities that are underrepresented in the policy setting or decision-making process, subject to a disproportionate impact from one or more environmental hazards, and are likely to experience disparate implementation of environmental regulations and socioeconomic investments in their communities." As a CPUC program, CalMTA uses ESJ to describe its efforts to enhance equity outcomes. CalMTA understands this term to include the following populations, among others:

- Low- and moderate-income customers
- Communities of color
- Tribal communities
- Nonnative English speakers
- Rural communities

[2] https://www.cpuc.ca.gov/-/media/cpuc-website/divisions/news-and-outreach/documents/news-office/key-issues/esj/esj-action-plan-v2jw.pdf

- Disadvantaged communities pursuant to SB535
- Priority Populations as defined under AB1550
- "Underserved" and "hard to reach" communities as defined by the CPUC, and with their definitions explored through the Equity Metrics Working Group (EMWG) hosted by the California Energy Efficiency Coordinating Committee (CAEECC).

To engage diverse communities in the early stages of market transformation portfolio design, CalMTA conducted a series of listening sessions with CBOs, workforce education and training (WE&T) entities, and independent consultants focused on energy equity. This report describes the methodology and facilitation approach used by CalMTA, key findings from participants' responses to session prompts, and actionable recommendations that will inform future MTI development.

Methodology and Approach

Goals and Objectives

Between Nov. 1-8, 2023, CalMTA conducted five 90-minute listening sessions with three sessions focused on Innovation & Technology and two focused on Workforce Development. Overarching objectives of the listening sessions included:

1) **Building trust among ESJ communities** through proactive early engagement and respect for attendees' expertise. Participants feel positive about their engagement with CalMTA as we work to build ongoing, long-lasting relationships with communities facing the highest energy burden.

2) **Deepening our team's understanding** of barriers and opportunities specific to ESJ communities, which will help inform MTI design, including:

a. Insight into how **technological development and innovation** can focus on the needs of the ESJ communities to bring equitable value, and

b. How market interventions can pave the road to **higher quality job creation in ESJ communities**.

3) **Identifying statewide opportunities to support California's equity goals** and, when possible, maximize benefits and mitigate negative impacts to ESJ communities.

Session Logistics

Participant Recruitment

The Ortiz Group conducted direct outreach to identified stakeholders supporting ESJ communities across California, particularly those representing the following areas of expertise:

- Low-income communities
- Communities of color
- Tribal lands
- Veterans
- Elders
- Workforce development
- Affordable housing
- Community resiliency
- Environmental health impacts
- Social justice and public policy

CalMTA segmented outreach lists by the two topic areas (Innovation & Technology and Workforce Development), with select individuals invited to participate in both session types. Recruitment focused on ensuring representation of diverse groups as well as geographical representation across the state. CalMTA compensated all participants' organizations for their time, which totaled $345 per 90-minute session.

Session Participants

25 individuals working with ESJ communities on energy-related topics and WE&T attended these listening sessions, with several individuals who possessed relevant experience in both topic areas participating in each session type. Representatives of the following organizations, as well as multiple independent consultants, attended at least one CalMTA listening session:

- Association of California Community and Energy Services
- Chicana Latina Foundation
- Climate Resilient Communities
- Community Action Partnership of San Luis Obispo County, Inc.
- Community Development, Inc.
- Community Housing Opportunities Corporation
- Community Resource Project
- Council of Asian American Business Associations
- Los Angeles Brotherhood Crusade
- Los Angeles Cleantech Incubator
- MAROMA Energy Services, Inc.
- Project GO, Inc.
- Proteus, Inc.
- Rising Sun Center for Opportunity
- Self-Help Enterprises
- Suscol Intertribal Council
- The East Los Angeles Community Union
- West Coast Green Builders

Figure 1. Select Listening Session Participant Logos

Session Format and Contents

CalMTA conducted sessions virtually using Zoom, facilitated by Sepideh Rezania of Unrooz Solutions and Melinda Lopez of the Ortiz Group. Session facilitators appeared on camera and encouraged all participants to do the same. Session facilitators secured participant permission to use the Zoom transcription tool before recording and communicated ground rules for creating a safe space in the session, including:

- **"Listen actively:** We are here to be curious, open, and respectful. We are listening to understand."
- **"Take space, make space:** Balance speaking and listening to others speak. Recognize that no one knows everything, but together we know a lot."
- **"Maintain confidentiality**; share what's in public domain."

> **"One of the things that we fear [is] going on right now is gentrification of environmental issues in this area, meaning that affluent communities are getting all the benefits of energy efficiency and poor communities must be on the waiting list."**

Tables 1 and 2 document the learning objectives and discussion questions developed by CalMTA for each session. Facilitation plans included specific prompts geared to each of the two focus areas, structured to facilitate open dialogue.

Learning Objectives and Discussion Questions

The planning team mapped learning objectives to the questions asked during the listening session to ensure the feedback was relevant and actionable. Discussion questions are prompts shared with listening session attendees.

Table 1. Innovation & Technology

Learning objective	Discussion question
What energy efficiency products/practices are ESJ communities already embracing/leading on?	Can you share any examples of how you've seen adoption of energy efficiency products or technologies positively impact the communities you work with? Are there any not-so-successful examples you can share?
What are barriers to adoption of new technologies?	We're interested in learning more about the barriers faced in the ESJ communities when it comes to adoption of energy efficiency technology. Let's take induction ranges/cooktops, which are an alternative to inefficient gas stoves, as an example. What potential challenges do you foresee in increasing adoption of these products in ESJ communities? Are there specific cultural or dietary considerations we should consider when promoting these appliances?
How can technology design and innovation target the needs of the ESJ communities?	If we stay with the induction cooktop example, how can we adapt to better meet the needs and preferences of ESJ communities? In your opinion, how could using induction cooktops benefit the communities you work with?
How can ESJ communities lead adoption of new energy efficiency products/practices?	Are there strategies you recommend that would help us ensure that adoption of high-efficiency technologies like induction cooktops do not inadvertently exacerbate existing inequalities or create unintended negative impacts?
What do the participants envision their engagement with CalMTA may look like? What do they envision collaboration looks like?	As CalMTA identifies and develops our market transformation initiatives, we would like to know how best to integrate the voice of ESJ communities. In your opinion, what would optimal collaboration between our team and your organizations look like?

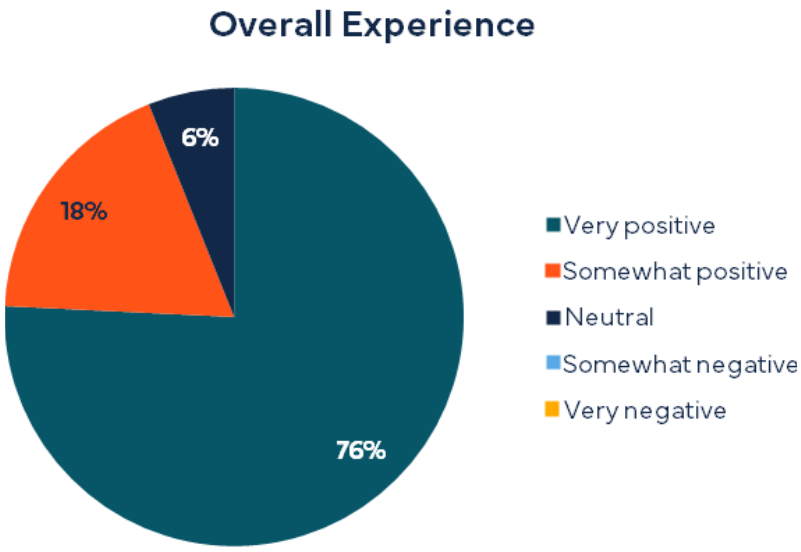
Table 2. Workforce Development

Learning Objective	Discussion Question
What energy efficiency products/practices are ESJ communities already embracing/leading on?	Can you share any examples of how you've seen energy efficiency workforce development or education & training programs positively impact the communities you work with? Are there any examples of these programs missing the mark?
What are the barriers for the ESJ communities to take on high paying jobs in energy efficiency?	We're interested in learning more about the barriers faced in these communities when it comes to pursuing "high road" clean

Learning Objective	Discussion Question
	energy or "green" jobs. What challenges may exclude ESJ communities from these career paths?
What are the best ways to support job creation in ESJ communities as a part of our MTIs?	What strategies have you seen help overcome these barriers?
What are some leverage points in the market to help build energy efficiency jobs/workforce capabilities in the ESJ communities in support of CalMTA's future MTI?	What partnerships or collaborations with local businesses, government agencies, or educational institutions that support workforce development in the energy efficiency sector might help us be successful in this area?
What do the participants envision their engagement with CalMTA may look like? What do they envision collaboration looks like?	As CalMTA identifies and develops our market transformation initiatives, we would like to know how best to integrate the voice of ESJ communities. In your opinion, what would optimal collaboration between our team and your organizations look like?

Participant Survey

CalMTA distributed an online survey to participants directly after each session inviting them to share feedback anonymously about their experience, the value of the session, and how we could improve in the future. About two-thirds of participants completed the survey. 75% rated their experience as "very positive" (vs. 18% "somewhat positive" and 6% "neutral") and 87% responded that they were "very interested" in participating in future sessions (vs. 12% "neutral").



Qualitative feedback was mostly positive, with participants citing as valuable the collaborative format, insight into electrification and related technologies, expertise of participants, and CalMTA's early engagement of community leaders. Areas of improvement identified by participants included:

- Clarifying the interactive nature of the sessions
- More discussion of existing policies and programs addressing similar issues
- An exploration of how specific MTIs might align with unique regions or market segments.

Session Findings

Unrooz Solutions engaged The Cadmus Group staff on the CalMTA team to collaborate on analyzing session transcriptions to identify key takeaways and actionable recommendations. Using transcripts of data from the sessions, responses from participants were built into a matrix by question and participant; those responses were then coded by the following categories:

- **Response type**: Response data as either representing a strength, a best practice, a barrier, or a solution for resolution (of a given barrier). Strengths were primarily identified as comments on the existing state of programming or market conditions and therefore distinct from best practices.
- **Response topic**: Recurring topics based on response content (e.g., "include targeted outreach to seniors" or "engage CBOs in program design"), with all responses coded to one of three topics. These topic areas were then processed and aggregated as the key takeaways identified below.
- **Response stage**: Identification of specific feedback aligned with stages of CalMTA's MTI development process to inform actionable recommendations that best serve ESJ communities.

Processing listening session data drew out the following key takeaways.

Key Takeaway #1: Culturally appropriate, accessible, and credible outreach and education is needed.

Participants emphasized the importance of tailoring education to specific geographic regions and market segments, with particular attention to seniors, youth, indigenous communities, and communities with distinct cultural traditions and languages. Hands-on experience with a product or technology surfaced as an important step in building market confidence and interest, particularly having the opportunity to see a product in real-world situations that reflect familiar daily routines or traditions (e.g., chiles roasted on an induction cooktop instead of open flame).

> **"How can we reverse the trend that [uptake of new technologies] is only by those who can afford it? In my experience and from an academic perspective and empirical studies that I have been part of, everybody has a trigger point to change. Education is one of them."**

Others called out the need to identify the right channels for distributing educational information: for example, not all community members have television or Internet access; many young people prefer to receive information in short clips on cellphone apps; and schools, churches, and senior centers remain a trusted source of information. Participants shared that education should emphasize the health, safety, and environmental benefits of energy-efficient technology while also acknowledging any potential negative impacts clearly and transparently.

Multiple participants provided feedback that households are unpleasantly surprised by higher electrical bills from their utility after being told installing electrification measures will save energy. The need for program administrators to understand the bill impacts associated with recommended upgrades and technologies and clearly educate participants about what they should expect will be critical to supporting decarbonization in ESJ communities.

> **“So how do we leverage [environmental and EE organizations], to utilize them as sounding boards, and advocates in the community… I would say, bring them along.”**

Key Takeaway #2: Grid resiliency concerns are high.

Many participants raised concerns about grid reliability/capacity and power outages as a barrier to residential electrification. These concerns surfaced in discussions across the five sessions, including a technology-specific review of barriers to adoption of induction cooktops and heat pumps and conversation about existing California programs focused on promoting electrification in ESJ communities.

Session participants shared frustration from community members about a perceived lack of understanding from program administrators regarding the impacts of rolling blackouts and other outages, including significant safety concerns and the potentially life-threatening implications of multi-day outages. Representatives of rural communities described ongoing outages that lasted weeks – an experience shared by urban communities in the South Bay region, who were reliant on natural gas water heaters for warmth during a long winter outage. Participants noted that the unreliability of the electrical grid had led community members who received electrification upgrades to install supplemental non-electric products as backup or to use wood-burning stoves for their primary home heating system.

Key Takeaway #3: Information is best received from existing trusted sources.

Participants in all sessions, and in response to all prompts, reiterated the best practice of connecting with and leveraging the trusted existing outreach and education channels provided by CBOs and recognized community leaders. Discussions indicated a wide range of options for effectively engaging with and leveraging these trusted channels, including coordinating on community outreach and education, co-hosting technology demonstrations, and working with entities supporting existing program offerings to integrate new technologies. Beneficial strategies for leveraging trusted sources include:

- **CBO engagement must be conducted respectfully.** CBOs have limited resources and limited time, and implementers should be thoughtful in the requests made to CBOs and consider the impact those requests have on staff time and shared resources. Participants described the importance of stable program funding when CBOs are allocating resources to support that program, as well as acknowledging and giving credit (including compensation) for CBO contributions.
- **Implementers must establish community trust.** Participant feedback repeatedly highlighted the need to build community trust through existing trusted organizations, while emphasizing that program administrators must demonstrate to these organizations why they should be trusted. Participants called out early engagement during program launch, regular communication of organizational updates, and sponsoring or speaking at community events as valuable trust-building tactics.

> **“When you're implementing a new project, there still is a “dating,” when you're having to justify this new opportunity to the community that you're trying to service, and that involves trust building and relationship building which rarely gets funded.”**

- **Identify natural early adopters and potential “ambassadors.”** Multiple participants suggested that word-of-mouth from community members was important to building trust in a new technology or practice. One participant discussed the importance of identifying what segments of an ESJ community may be natural early adopters of a technology, if cost were not a barrier. Several participants suggested working with early adopter “ambassadors” to host public demonstrations that would allow community members to see and learn about the technology in a real-world setting.

Key Takeaway #4: WE&T effort must navigate structural barriers to successful training.

Participants in the Workforce Development listening sessions identified multiple barriers that make training and educational programming difficult for ESJ community members to access. More extensive outreach and awareness-building can help increase participation in training opportunities. Participants also communicated the need to raise awareness of clean energy career tracks in general, as community members frequently have no direct experience with these jobs and therefore do not know about or understand the value of related training opportunities.

Multiple individuals also discussed logistical barriers, such as inaccessible training locations, lack of reliable transportation, and the need for childcare, which training organizers seeking to maximize ESJ community participation should consider. Session participants suggested the best practice of providing wraparound services, in the form of training stipends, childcare, mental health services, and case management – potentially in partnership with other community organizations or services.

> **"...there are actually jobs out there that they never knew of – it's not just auto mechanics or electrical, there's energy efficiency, heat pumps, weatherization that they can create [a] living off of."**

Key Takeaway #5: Training and education must connect ESJ participants to long-term, quality jobs.

In addition to strategies for enhancing training and educational offerings, listening session conversations repeatedly called out the need to link these trainings with "high road" jobs that are well-paid and offer benefits and paths for advancement. Participants communicated that they see a limited number of such jobs in the clean energy industry and wanted to see more direct connections between training and job placement. They also identified opportunities to increase the number of desirable jobs, including:

- **More rigorous workforce standards and higher wages in contracts issued through energy efficiency programs.** Participants described existing publicly funded energy efficiency programming as lacking consideration for these needs, with a proliferation of lower wage contracting terms in the residential sector – in part because this sector has historically had a less robust union presence. Use of contracting guidelines and supplier

diversity requirements was also mentioned as critical; participants commented that, given the significant funding for energy efficiency programs in California, improvements in equitable contracting could be a powerful lever for wealth-building and skills development in ESJ communities.

- **Employer education and ongoing engagement/support.** Participants shared the need for employers to increase their understanding of common barriers faced by community members, including non-traditional resumes or criminal backgrounds, and to be prepared to offer employee training that will build job-specific skills. Session attendees spoke positively of positioning both employers and potential employees for success through internships, pre-apprenticeships, and apprenticeships prior to permanent job placement. Some individuals stressed the goal of job retention and long-term employment and recommended staying in contact with employers and employees for up to three years following job placement to provide support.
- **Collaboration with unions and independent contractors.** Participants celebrated unions for their contributions to quality jobs and called for collaboration with unions, but also contended that unionization was not possible for all jobs. As such, energy efficiency programs should also collaborate with independent contractors and other employers, with an emphasis on increasing the wages and benefits for non-union jobs.

Key Takeaway #6: Suboptimal conditions of homes are a key barrier.

In discussions of residential electrification, session participants repeatedly noted that many homes in ESJ communities do not have the capacity for an increased electrical load without significant upgrades to panels, wiring, or other equipment rarely covered by program funding. These issues led to a broader discussion of housing stock in ESJ communities, with poor insulation, single-pane windows, and old and/or compromised wiring cited as common conditions, as well as a lack of three-pronged outlets and safety risks associated with wiring equipment into the right location with extension cords. Feedback also included recognition that introducing electrification measures like heat pumps to homes that have not been optimized for this technology could result in unintended negative bill impacts.

Participants said that due to suboptimal conditions, the households most in need of energy improvements are often excluded from or deemed ineligible for energy efficiency program participation due to project complexity and/or cost. Participants warned that some energy assumptions and baselines may be incorrect due to nonfunctioning equipment, resulting in estimated energy/bill savings that ESJ community members cannot achieve. The discussion identified a need for implementers to understand these barriers and factor them into program design if energy efficiency/electrification upgrades are to effectively serve ESJ communities.

Key Takeaway #7: Engage ESJ community members in research, design, and evaluation.

Just as education for ESJ communities was a common theme shared in sessions, participants described education *from* ESJ communities as equally critical. Community voices must be heard to confirm technologies and interventions appropriately respond to community needs and achieve energy equity goals of an MTI. As mentioned above, session participants approved of early engagement through listening sessions in the initial stages of MTI development and communicated the importance of bringing community voices to the table throughout implementation. Participants in several sessions spoke about using co-creation to help ensure energy efficiency technologies are accessible to and serve the existing needs of ESJ community members. Questions raised by participants around portable heat pumps and induction cooktops signaled that they would benefit from more information about how these products could deliver benefits community members care about, with certainty and without undesired effects.

> **"So how do we leverage everybody that's involved in [energy equity] to utilize them as sounding boards and advocates in the communities? How do we utilize funding from all these different sources to make sure that those organizations are at the forefront and helping communicate the messages that we're trying to get across?"**

Participants flagged multiple issues with the historical lack of community input into energy efficiency program design, including unintended outcomes such as predatory lending in the financing of energy projects. They also stressed the importance of engaging trustworthy partners in program implementation. Multiple participants proposed formalizing the community engagement supporting such efforts through development of committees of residents and CBO partnerships. Several individuals suggested these groups could be regional, and/or stressed the need for regionally diverse representation from the community.

Recommendations

Applying listening session takeaways to the unique structure of CalMTA's market transformation framework, we propose the following recommendations for addressing equity in this work.

Recommendation #1

During MTI development, identify trusted CBOs and other entities with established community connections to help integrate the voices of ESJ communities into research and strategy development and support co-creation of culturally appropriate messaging and education. For instance, rather than simply engaging a CBO to enroll community members in a pilot program, early engagement can enable collaboration on pilot design, including a review of included technologies to ensure they will be well-received and mitigate potential concerns upfront.

> **"I've spent 20 years working in disadvantaged communities, small communities, and I've seen that when you bring community residents alongside with you as you develop the project, they are more likely to buy into it when it's time to implement."**

Recommendation #2

When promoting less proven energy efficiency technologies, or those the market is less able to support, to ESJ communities, ensure that market transformation initiatives include strategies designed to minimize potential risk or unintended negative impacts. For instance, offerings focused on electrification measures like portable heat pumps could include a stipend to offset any potential increase in utility bills while those targeting adoption of newer technologies could offer extended warranties in case of underperformance or negative end-user experience.

Recommendation #3

Leverage upstream market interventions to share insights from ESJ communities with key market actors, demonstrating the potential for increased market share by making technologies more accessible to the communities that will benefit most from increased energy efficiency. When piloting a technology such as portable heat pumps, working with culturally competent CBOs and trusted allies can yield critical feedback regarding features or benefits that will increase or inhibit adoption among those they serve. We can then recommend product modifications to manufacturers that will better meet ESJ community needs, leading to greater overall uptake.

Recommendation #4

Design residential initiatives targeting ESJ communities with an understanding of specific housing stock characteristics and needs, including partnerships with existing programs to support upgrades that will ready homes for more advanced energy efficiency and electrification measures. Engaging local weatherization programs that can implement no-cost envelope upgrades to supplement pilot efforts focused on portable heat pumps in low-income zip codes, for example, will ensure the product performs optimally and does not create unintended negative impacts.

Recommendation #5

In components of market transformation initiatives targeting ESJ community member participation (e.g., workforce development), ensure strong partnerships and collaboration with existing programs and support systems to leverage existing infrastructure and work to incorporate wraparound services like childcare or transportation assistance. For example, if CalMTA identifies lack of a skilled workforce as a barrier to adoption of efficient rooftop HVAC units (ERTUs), education and training efforts could include strategies like offering free public transit passes to participants or compensating a local licensed service provider to watch children on-site.

Recommendation #6

As much as possible, embed equity considerations and create mechanisms to prioritize the needs of diverse participants in procurement protocols. Evaluation criteria used to select project implementers should include "points" for certified diverse business enterprises, defined by the CPUC Supplier Clearinghouse as those owned by women; minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals; disabled veterans; and persons with disabilities. CalMTA should also consider an established target spend for these diverse businesses across all initiatives. Additionally, professional contracts should be structured to offer prevailing/union-level wages rather than a selection process that favors the lowest overall bid.

About CalMTA

CalMTA is a program of the California Public Utilities Commission and is administered by Resource Innovations. We work to deliver cost-effective energy efficiency and decarbonization benefits to Californians through a unique approach called market transformation. Market transformation is the strategic process of intervening in a market to create lasting change by removing market barriers or exploiting opportunities, accelerating the adoption of identified technologies or practices. CalMTA-developed market transformation initiatives also aim to advance state goals on demand flexibility, workforce development and equity. Learn more at www.calmta.org.