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As Baltimore develops a low-income solar program, residents could see more benefits from the sun

Baltimore, MD – Solar panels provide pollution free energy that delivers far reaching benefits to the environment, the electric grid and all ratepayers, said a new report released today by Environment Maryland Research & Policy Center. The report outlines how solar panels on homes, schools and businesses often provide more benefits than they receive through programs like net metering from utilities.

“Solar power provides tremendous benefits to Maryland’s environment and all electric customers,” said Anna Hofmann with Environment Maryland. “We should be encouraging even more solar, in order to reduce pollution and lower energy costs.”

The Environment Maryland Research & Policy Center report, *Shining Rewards: The Value of Rooftop Solar Power for Consumers and Society (2016 edition)*, comes as Baltimore develops a financing model to make solar more accessible to low-income customers. Baltimore signed an agreement to create the low-income solar program in July with the U.S. Department of Energy and the Maryland Clean Energy Center.

Nicole Steele from GRID Alternatives, Jon Rosa from Fuel Fund of Maryland, and Mirrel Simms the solar homeowner joined Environment Maryland to release the report’s findings at a home solar installation done by GRID Alternatives, a non-profit working to make solar practical and accessible for low income communities.

"States and localities throughout the nation are pioneering successful low-income solar programs; each addressing local needs and considerations making solar accessible everywhere. Right here in Baltimore, GRID Alternatives continues to collaborate and help implement new models to provide financial relief, jobs, and healthier neighborhoods through the development of solar energy," said Nicole Steele from GRID Alternatives.

Solar energy on rooftops can help communities to avoid greenhouse gas emissions, reduce air pollution harmful to public health and create local jobs, the report shows. Net metering programs credit solar panel owners when they generate more power than they use, providing electricity for other customers. Utilities then credit solar panel owners a fixed rate – often the retail price of electricity – for providing excess power to the grid, similar to rollover minutes on a cell phone plan.

The arrangements have helped solar energy grow significantly, with the US installing its 1 millionth solar installation in May of this year. In Baltimore, net metering has helped low-income residents go solar and lower their energy bills, earning credit for the extra energy they send back to the utility each month.

“With energy bills on the rise, it's becoming more and more difficult for many communities to afford the monthly cost of utilities, and no one feels that pressure more than the low-income community,” said Jon

Rosa, Executive Director, Fuel Fund of Maryland. “Historically, solar energy has been inaccessible to most low-income households, but with new initiatives and partnerships, such as the one showcased today, the cost of accessing solar energy is decreasing, and making it more affordable for everyone. These solar projects will allow homeowners to reduce their energy burden significantly,” added Rosa. “Together, we are bringing lasting home energy solutions that offer self-sustainability and dignity to Baltimore City residents.”

Environment America’s report examines 16 studies on the value of solar energy. The studies show that the dollar and cents value of solar is often higher than the credit utilities provide to customers, despite claims from some utilities that the arrangement represents a subsidy from non-solar users.

Of the 16 studies reviewed, 12 found that the value of solar energy was higher than the average local residential retail electricity rate. The median value of solar power across all 16 studies was around 16 cents per unit, compared to the nation’s average retail electricity rate of about 13 cents per unit.

In other words: solar customers often provided more benefits than they received in credits.

“Rooftop solar users are givers, not takers, when it comes to the value they provide to society and the electric system.” said Hofmann. “In many cases it appears that solar programs are a bargain for utilities, not a burden.”

All 16 studies found that solar panel users offered the electric system net benefits.

Solar advocates hoped today’s report would shed new light on the way net metering and low income solar programs can benefit communities in Baltimore and all throughout the state of Maryland.

"Solar is a very good thing because we need to try to save this planet,” said Mirrel Simms, solar homeowner. “It can help stop air pollution and air pollution causes asthma, and our community really doesn't need those problems."

As Baltimore’s low-income solar program grows, solar policies like net metering will continue to impact how all Marylanders can access and benefit from solar energy. Currently, the Maryland Public Service Commission is taking stakeholder comments on how to value costs and benefits of distributed energy resources, including solar and provisions for low income customers.

“There’s so much to gain by going big on solar,” said Hofmann. “Let’s make sure we take full advantage of all the benefits by allowing solar continue to grow here in Baltimore and all across the country.”

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Environment Maryland Research & Policy Center is a statewide advocacy organization bringing people together for a cleaner, greener, healthier future. www.EnvironmentMaryland.org