



# Opportunities for Climate Action by Regulatory Agencies:

## Notes from the Rhode Island Virtual Stakeholder Workshop

### OVERVIEW

On October 13, 2022, representatives from the Brown University Climate and Development Lab, Synapse Energy Economics, and Climable.org convened a virtual stakeholder workshop on Zoom. This Rhode Island workshop was the eighth of 12 that will be conducted around New England in 2022. The purpose of the workshop was to crowdsource insights and discuss ideas from stakeholders in Rhode Island—especially those representing environmental justice communities—regarding the climate actions of the utilities, the regulatory structures that the Rhode Island Public Utility Commission has in place to mitigate climate change and the opportunities and challenges for implementing lasting and equitable climate and energy solutions.

The insights from each workshop are summarized, distributed to all participants, and posted publicly here: <https://climable.org/brown>. In early 2023, a summary report will present a variety of options that state regulatory agencies could pursue to meet climate goals based upon the workshops.

We are incredibly grateful to those who were able to attend and appreciate all of the ideas and feedback we received. The following notes are from the Rhode Island workshop and include PUC actions and actions by other stakeholders.

### PUC ACTIONS

- The PUC should be on the Climate Council and the advisory and science committees.
- The PUC needs to improve accessibility:
  - continue virtual participation in proceedings,
  - expand online and print public notice of PUC hearings beyond Providence Journal and secretary of state's website. Leverage CRMC and DEM listservs to inform people about meetings. Service lists are generally organized by docket,

but there should be a general service list so the public can learn about new dockets.

- improve state and PUC website's navigation and accessibility and simplify and condense content.
- The PUC should conduct more dockets like the value of distributed energy resources docket. The docket was special because it utilized a facilitator and technical advisor. The facilitator made sure that intervenors were included and their voices were heard. The docket was both successful and expensive, so this model may only be able to be applied in certain cases (broader dockets).
- There are programs (e.g. weatherization, energy efficiency) that are designed for income-eligible customers that are well-intentioned. In reality, there are still barriers (e.g. cost, access) to delivering the benefits of the programs and the PUC should work to remove those barriers.

## ACTIONS BY OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

- The Michigan model for intervenor funding can be a useful model for RI as it takes the decision-making out of the PUC's hands. Money is raised from utilities. Intervenors can make proposals to the advisory council and governor appointees who are tasked with allocating the funds ([https://www.michigan.gov/mpsc/-/media/Project/Websites/mpsc/workgroups/eaac/NARUC\\_State\\_Approaches\\_to\\_Intervenor\\_Compensation.pdf?rev=f2ba93a5a8c64e27b3c2bf7425158906&hash=5CF9DDF32D9ADCD72389A572D9EDD690](https://www.michigan.gov/mpsc/-/media/Project/Websites/mpsc/workgroups/eaac/NARUC_State_Approaches_to_Intervenor_Compensation.pdf?rev=f2ba93a5a8c64e27b3c2bf7425158906&hash=5CF9DDF32D9ADCD72389A572D9EDD690), state summary on page 17).
- Another interesting model is the Superfund Program at EPA which educates and translates for the public. The Superfund Program uses the 'tag program' where communities can get together and ask for federal assistance to hire a technical advisor to help read and translate materials into plain language ([https://www.epa.gov/superfund/technical-assistance-grant-tag-program#:~:text=A%20Technical%20Assistance%20Grant%20\(TAG,proposed%20cleanu p%20proposals%20and%20decisions\)](https://www.epa.gov/superfund/technical-assistance-grant-tag-program#:~:text=A%20Technical%20Assistance%20Grant%20(TAG,proposed%20cleanu p%20proposals%20and%20decisions))).
- The State government needs to play a more active role in governing the scope of the PUC's mandates.
- The way the law is written, the utility will always have an outsized influence. This could be addressed if Rhode Island had a public advocate. The Division of Public Utilities and Carriers does not really act as a public advocate, although they are supposed to represent ratepayers. It was unclear whether the Attorney General could increase its role in this regard.

- One interesting idea is to have municipalities be the bridge to residents. The capacity to engage with the PUC is limited now, but this could be changed.
- Groups can work to demystify the role of the PUC through educational materials; the public needs to understand what the PUC is and is not mandated to do. Furthermore, providing spaces for people to get involved is not enough, people need to understand what role the PUC has in addressing climate change and WHY they should be involved (that their involvement can effect change).