



Engaging Low Income and Disadvantaged Populations in Maine Climate Planning

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A Report by the University of Maine



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Maine’s second 4-year climate action plan, *Maine Won’t Wait 2024*, aims to produce actionable strategies and goals that align with the needs of priority populations across the state. This report describes a series of engagements with priority populations¹³ to understand their preferences and awareness related to multiple aspects of the in-progress climate plan update process (Fig. 1). “Tribal communities” were originally on the list of priority populations. However, in consultation with Wabanaki leaders and Wabanaki scholars, it was deemed inappropriate for them to be listed this way among other priority populations due to their distinct history and status. Wabanaki leaders expressed a strong preference for government-to-government dialogue that respects tribal sovereignty, which aligns with the recommendations of the 2024 Annual Report of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Tribal Populations. Therefore, this report intentionally does not contain information about the climate planning concerns and goals of Wabanaki Nations because our Wabanaki partners expressed a clear preference for direct communication between the State and Wabanaki tribal government leadership (Tribal Council members, Chiefs) about that topic.

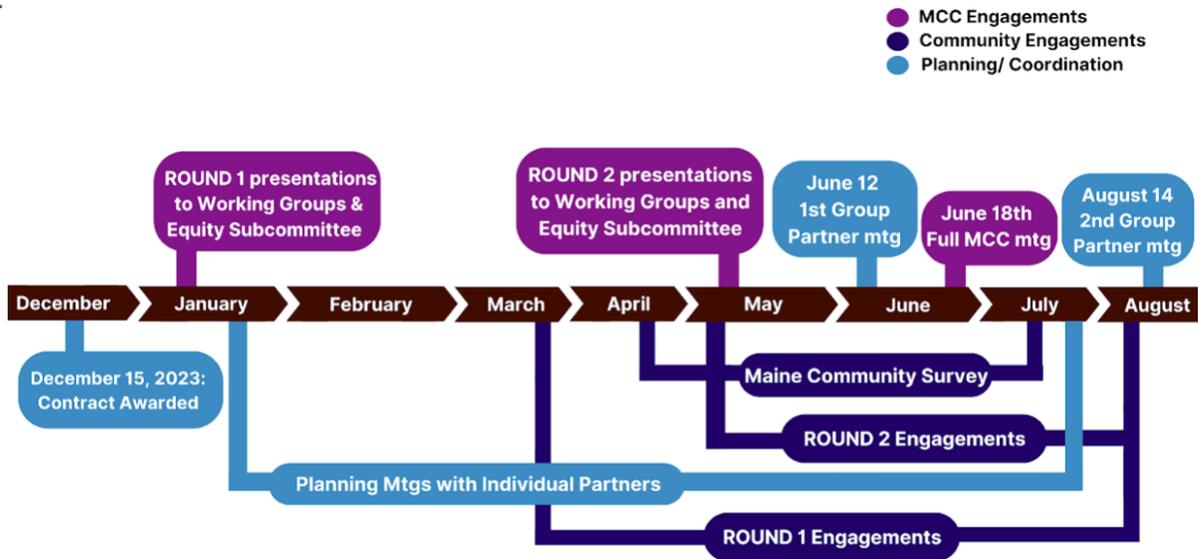


Figure 1. Project Timeline, December 2023 to August 2024

¹³ Priority populations as suggested by GOPIF in the request for proposals for this work: Low income households, including renters, home owners, and mobile home residents; Older adults and youth ; Black or POC communities; Low income communities; Disadvantaged communities; People with limited English proficiency, including New Mainers; Recipients of LIHEAP, LIAP, or other energy assistance benefits; People with mobility challenges; People without access to reliable transportation; Migrant farm workers and other outdoor workers; Businesses in the natural resource industries like agriculture, forestry, and fishing who are operating at the economic margin or suffer disproportionate climate risk; Un/underemployed people who are also representatives of a priority population or are transitioning from prison or recovery; Minority, women-owned or veteran owned business enterprises; Rural communities and small towns with limited staff or fiscal capacity; Climate-frontline communities

Key Takeaways

The full report includes detailed information about the approach, timeline, and findings with multiple appendices of even more detailed information, much of which is organized by MCC Working Group-specific topics and recommendations to match the overall framing of the work. In brief, this project involved 69 community engagements in 23 communities led by the Mitchell Center team and its partners (pp. iii-iv), two group conversations with community partners, iterative discussions with Wabanaki partners, and a statewide Maine Community Alternative Energy Survey (568 respondents). The following **Key Takeaways** emerged as top priorities across multiple working group topic areas:

1. Procedural equity in state climate planning needs to be improved.

The MCC has made great strides towards equity in its planning, from forming the first Equity Subcommittee to issuing the request for proposals for this project and funding members of priority populations to serve as MCC working group members. These are first steps in an iterative long-term process of centering equity in Maine's climate planning. Procedural equity requires not only listening to priority populations but ensuring they have access and power in decision-making processes. Planning must allocate enough time and resources to build relationships with people from priority populations (see Key Takeaway #2 below), meet them where they are at, and learn how to support them in positions of decision-making power in this space. This means that the next *Maine Won't Wait* revision process must also begin earlier, to provide adequate time for relationship building and meaningful contributions from priority populations. In fact, multiple partners and participants agreed that **for these issues to truly be at the center of climate planning, the 2028 climate plan update process must begin now.**

2. Authentic engagement requires relationship-building and time.

Building on Key Takeaway #1, to achieve procedural equity, relationships and trust have to be built and maintained over time. Community partners are crucial to meeting priority populations where they are at. While the timeline for priority population engagement in this project may not have been ideal for providing as much meaningful influence on working group recommendations as many partners and participants would have liked, it has laid much groundwork for building and maintaining relationships going forward to help the next iteration of the climate plan include meaningful participation with decision-making power by priority populations and Wabanaki Nations. There is also an opportunity for the *implementation* of this 2024 climate plan update to include actions that prioritize building and fostering relationships and trust over time that help prioritize procedural equity.

3. Poverty considerations must be a CENTRAL focus of climate planning, not a box to be checked or an add-on.

Poverty considerations need to be integrated into and at the forefront of each climate plan strategy, action, and process from the start. High energy costs and high upfront costs for energy-reducing options (e.g., renewable energy, energy efficient appliances, etc.) remain a major barrier for low-income households and many other priority populations. For many, basic needs (e.g., food, shelter, jobs) are not being met, and the connection between energy/climate solutions and meeting basic needs is not clear. As relationships with community organizations and priority populations are strengthened, iterative discussions between the State and these entities over time should focus on how to ensure poverty is centered in climate planning going forward - how to design the next update process and how to implement the current update in a way that centers poverty concerns.

4. Public transportation needs to be prioritized over electric passenger vehicles.

Priority population feedback consistently pointed to the need for more accessible and more convenient public transportation. Although the Transportation working group's "reduce vehicle miles traveled" recommendation includes public transportation, participants felt the topic was hidden and should be more of a central focus of the climate plan. Whereas most priority population participants identified public transportation and safer biking & walking as their primary transportation concerns, they felt the climate plan was putting more of an emphasis on advancing electric passenger vehicles than their priorities.

"Offering financial incentives to purchase an electric vehicle is a challenging way to address the climate change challenge. Poor community members struggle to make ends meet, so taking out a loan for an electric car that costs several thousand dollars isn't the best option. Electronic public transportation is the most equitable way to combat climate change and lessen mental health issues in places as some people are already experiencing hardship. Giving away free electric automobiles is another option, but that is not likely to happen."

- BIPOC, youth respondent to the Community Organizing Alliance survey (7/25/24)

5. More education about climate change is needed, particularly to make complex information more accessible and to train local leaders to understand the Maine Climate Council working group recommendations.

Education must be culturally sensitive, community driven, empowering, and meet people where they are (particularly in rural areas). Many communities have never talked about these issues in the context of climate change. Supporting this need for education, participants expressed a desire for clearer guidance on navigating the complexities of energy-related decisions. This sentiment points to the critical role that **energy navigators** could play in providing tailored, accessible information to community members, helping them understand the benefits and challenges of adopting renewable energy solutions.

“Where do we go for information? Who do we talk to? Who can we count on for facts?”
- Sunrise County Economic Council Focus Group Participant (7/12/2024)

6. A poverty-centered funding and capacity-building plan is needed to guarantee that the strategies and actions outlined in the Maine Climate Council working group recommendations benefit the most vulnerable.

Many members of priority populations expressed challenges with accessing funding assistance or understanding funding programs related to alternative heating options. Multiple participants noted that even with funding, many individuals and communities do not have the capacity to pay attention to the opportunities much less figure out where to

“Rebates and incentive programs are awesome! I'd love to have access to more information, like breakdowns of the difference between energy cost and consumption would be most impacted by transitioning to clean energy. I'm very interested in supplementing with solar panels, but it seems potentially difficult and cost prohibitive. Also, information about what solutions are available in my area.”

- Aroostook County Action Program survey response
(7/23/24)

start and how to proceed, underscoring again the need for **navigators** to help people and communities through the process from start to finish. In addition, communities need support to build long-term capacity in energy solutions and climate adaptation broadly but also in specific areas. For example, participants noted that there is

a shortage of code enforcement officers, especially in rural areas and expressed interest in the state funding LD 1929, which created a licensing system for contractors, but does not include funding provisions.

Recommended Cross-Cutting Strategies

The following **Cross-Cutting Strategies** emerged as top priorities across multiple priority populations, working groups, and engagements (linked to Key Takeaways discussed in more detail above):

1. Elevate priority populations' needs within the Maine Climate Council (MCC) recommendation and action hierarchy (Key Takeaway #3: Centering Poverty)
2. Work directly with the leaders (Chiefs and Tribal Councils) of tribal governments in each of the four Wabanaki Nations to develop a process for each nation to engage in state climate planning in a way that is equitable, meaningful and salient for all parties (Key Takeaway #1: Procedural Equity)
3. Strengthen the language of "equitable" program and project goals to state that funding and benefits must prioritize low-income and disadvantaged populations (Key Takeaway #6: Funding and Capacity Building)
4. Strongly invest in long-lasting education, outreach and communication channels, including energy and climate navigators who are trained to assist communities and their individual members (Key Takeaway #5: Education).
5. Develop metrics to track funding and capacity needs to ensure that the strategies recommended by the Maine Climate Council are implemented equitably (Key Takeaway #6: Funding and Capacity Building).
6. Implement the Equity Subcommittee's recommendations on equity metrics, to ensure (1) processes and outcomes *do not* increase burdens on vulnerable groups and (2) proposed benefits *do* accrue to these priority populations (Key Takeaways #3: Centering Poverty)
7. Commit time and resources to including and engaging with diverse populations in the planning and implementation process from the start (years before the plan is needed). Prioritize methods for appropriate engagement and involvement that empower and do not overburden underserved populations (Key Takeaways #1: Procedural Equity and #6: Capacity Building).
8. Integrate planning of climate strategies with affordable housing, public transportation, and other ways of addressing root causes of vulnerability (Key Takeaways #3: Centering Poverty and #4: Public Transport)

Working Group-Specific Takeaways

In addition to these cross-cutting takeaways, engagements revealed multiple themes that specifically relate to the recommendations of the 6 MCC working groups (click on each working group name for a link to the recommendations they submitted to the MCC in June 2024):

Buildings, Infrastructure & Housing and Energy

Many participants expressed concerns about affordable housing and cost of living impacting quality of life - most places do not have enough housing and space for new people coming to Maine. They also expressed concerns about inadequate infrastructure and services, including lack of staffing for code enforcement and planning boards, which are barriers to sustainable growth. Priority populations have limited interest in new construction, compared to high interest in renovating existing buildings.

Participants expressed much concern about existing and future high energy costs,

“More funding is needed for weatherization, heat pumps, and home repair for people to assist people who need these programs”

- Older adult participant in a Maine Council on Aging listening session
(8/6/24)

which forces difficult choices that impact quality of life. There is a perception that solutions to reduce energy costs are inaccessible due to high installation and operation costs and lack of landlord accountability. There is strong interest in energy efficient solutions like heat pumps, weatherization, and solar for their buildings,

coupled with cost concerns, and lack of understanding of how the options work.

Participants expressed concern about the safety and practicality of rooftop solar panels in rental housing, underscoring the need for tailored energy solutions, education, and more efficient energy use. They also expressed a strong desire to expand financial assistance and implement community-led energy navigator programs to help residents understand and effectively use energy efficient technologies, especially for older adults.

There is a need for more education about decarbonization and efficient technologies, although these topics are rarely at the forefront of problems experienced by priority populations. There is also a need to prioritize housing access and hold landlords accountable for achieving energy efficiency targets in rental buildings across the state. There is strong interest in community-based solutions such as community solar, especially those that allow for local ownership and community involvement in small-scale renewable energy projects, recognizing potential opposition including political barriers, particularly in rural towns. There is also strong interest in early and meaningful

community involvement, combined with personalized support, to advance equitable access to clean energy across the state.

Transportation

Participants expressed very strong interest in more accessible public transportation (including electric buses and trains broadly, and ferries and barges for island communities), especially in rural areas and for aging populations. Many people expressed they did not feel the current Transportation Working Group recommendations put enough emphasis on improving public transportation compared to encouraging electric passenger vehicles. However, they did express some interest in increased education and funding related to EVs and vastly improved charging infrastructure. At the same time, feedback about EVs was often negative, especially around the cost, convenience, and environmental sustainability. Existing financial incentives were not seen as sufficient to make the switch, especially when people are facing multiple concerns related to basic needs, and people doubted the environmental benefits of EVs. Infrastructure needs to be addressed first; both for charging vehicles but also the electric grid. Alternatives (e.g., plug-in hybrid electric vehicles) may need to be considered as a way to address the lack of sufficient range in existing all-electric vehicles coupled with Maine's large rural areas with little charging infrastructure.

Multiple people expressed inaccuracies in their concerns about EVs, underscoring the need for education; for example: they are not good for the environment because the electricity comes from fossil fuels; they are not available in all-wheel drive; they don't work in the heat or cold; the fire department cannot contain EV fires. While participants identified many challenges associated with electrifying passenger vehicles, electrifying bus fleets was generally more accepted as long as it addresses increasing access to public transportation at the same time. Car culture is deeply ingrained in Maine, yet there is widespread interest in safer roads for biking and walking, improved broadband to support telehealth and remote work, and more integrated transit systems. Multiple respondents recommended looking to European and Scandinavian transportation systems for examples of how to move forward.

GoMaine does not appear to be on the radar for people from priority populations. For the few who have used the service, they appreciate its features like carpool matching, emergency ride home, ease of use, and availability of information. For the few who have thought about using it and didn't, their decisions were based on inconvenience, living outside the service area, and difficulty figuring out the system. Most people just had not heard of the service.

Community Resilience

There is a strong need to address the high cost of living for food, housing, healthcare, and childcare before community resilience to climate change can be achieved. There is strong interest in more economic development and job opportunities in renewable energy and natural resource management, as well as a strong demand for increased education and awareness to make climate-related information more accessible and actionable, alongside greater involvement of diverse individuals from priority populations in policy-planning and decision-making processes. Barriers to participation in policy-planning and decision-making processes were revealed: feelings of disenfranchisement, lack of access to clear and trustworthy information, lack of capacity to commit to this type of involvement. Opportunities to improve resilience include targeted funding initiatives, enhanced education and outreach, and more collaborative and inclusive planning efforts over the long term. More attention is needed on the mental health impacts of climate change, particularly climate anxiety (distress about climate change and its impacts). There is a need for a concerted effort to build trust, increase transparency, and develop new communication strategies that reach a broader audience, ensuring that all communities, especially the most vulnerable, are prepared to face the changing climate landscape.

Natural & Working Lands and Coastal & Marine

There is a need for land use policies that focus on green spaces and land conservation and expanded education and awareness about protected areas, with clear enforceable rules around how and when these areas can be accessed. There is an immediate need for under-resourced, rural communities and climate frontline communities to receive funding and technical assistance for adaptation projects and post-storm rebuilding, including developing reserve funds. Participants are interested in these communities benefiting directly from the state's conservation plan. Non-Wabanaki participants overwhelmingly support the recognition of Wabanaki sovereignty, which would ensure equitable access to traditional territories and means of sustenance.

Local food needs to be more accessible and affordable. Praise for existing programs that try to meet this need, such as Harvest Bucks, was shared. Participants expressed a desire to increase financial and organizational support for training programs and recruitment in natural resource jobs and more accessible outreach about job opportunities. Affordable workforce housing that accounts for the rising cost of home insurance in coastal regions is essential to plans for diversifying industries and the workforce, improving inclusion of underserved and younger families, and therefore building coastal community resilience. Coastal workers are already adapting, but aging populations need immediate assistance in both public and private adaptation efforts.

New industry entrants who seek to diversify local industries have to respect the needs of the communities as they engage with existing working waterfront populations.

Materials Management Task Force

People need more education about materials management. Many people are unsure or have not thought about reducing emissions in their own lives; those that have considered this topic are aware of the need for composting and recycling, but do not know how to access those services in their communities or what the best practices would be for them to do these activities themselves. There is an opportunity for more partnerships with businesses and organizations to make waste reduction more accessible. There is a need for increased funding and training programs to address concerns throughout an entire lifecycle; developer, packagers, contractors and builders, businesses and organizations, consumers, transfer station employees. Questions about reduction and capture of methane emissions yielded few responses from priority populations; rather, carbon emissions reductions and recycling of physical waste were considered higher priorities.

The Maine Climate Council has the opportunity to amplify the voices of priority populations in the 2024 climate plan update by integrating this report's key takeaways and themes of interest directly into the updated Strategy language and by recommending the planning for the 2028 climate plan update begin in January of 2025.