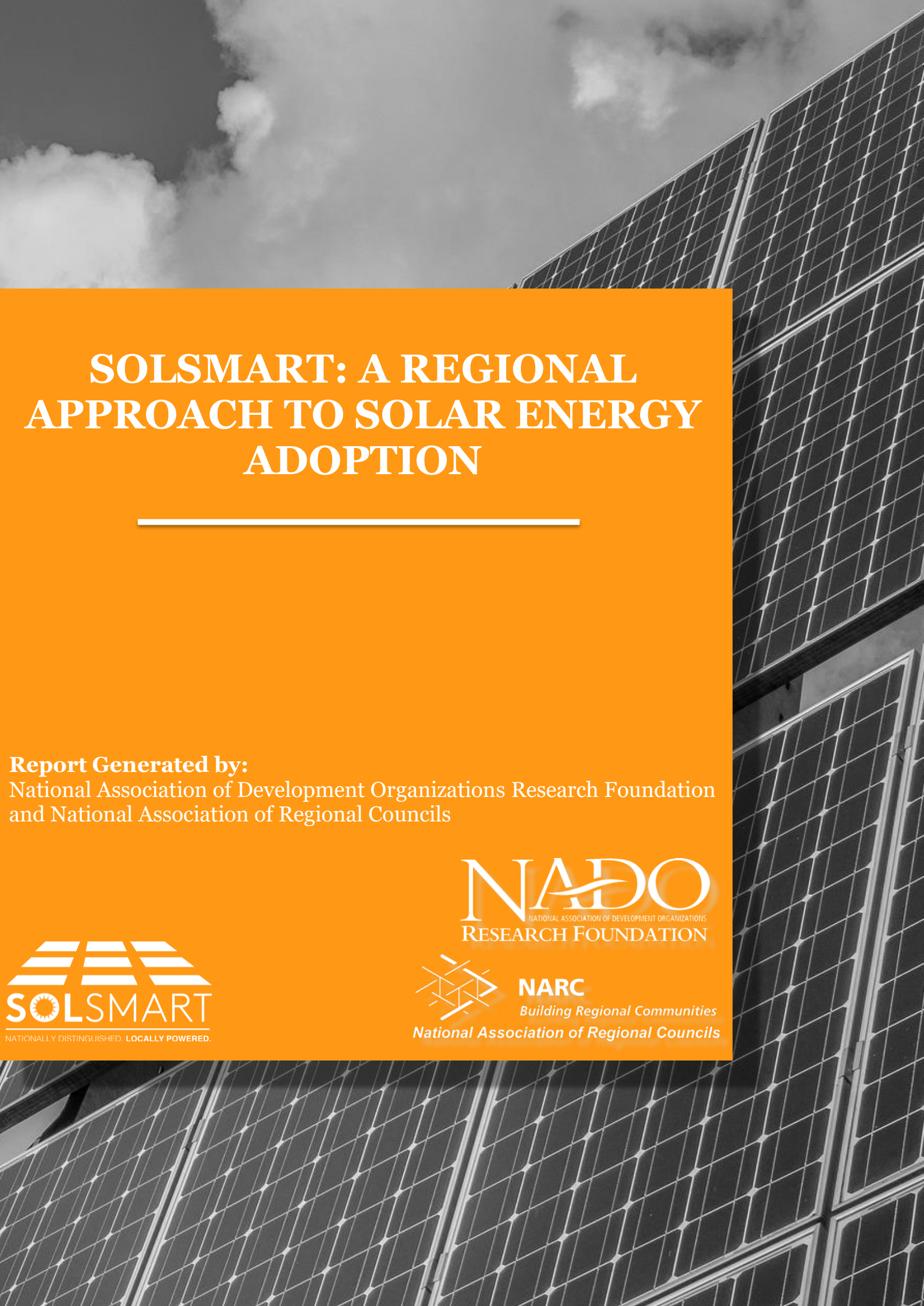

SOLSMART: A REGIONAL APPROACH TO SOLAR ENERGY ADOPTION

Report Generated by:
National Association of Development Organizations Research Foundation and National Association of Regional Councils

SOLSMART
NATIONALLY DISTINGUISHED. LOCALLY POWERED.

NADO
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS
RESEARCH FOUNDATION

NARC
Building Regional Communities
National Association of Regional Councils

CONTENTS

I. Introduction....2
II. Regional Organization Pathway Program....2
III. Insights from Regional Organizations....5
- a. Why Do Regional Organizations Decide to Participate in the Program....5
- b. How to Successfully Prepare for SolSmart Designation....6
- c. Successful Outreach Strategies and Partnerships....6
- d. How SolSmart Can Benefit Your Community....6
- e. Recommendations from Designated Regional Organizations....7

IV. Additional Information and Resources....8
V. Contact Information....9

SOLSMART: A REGIONAL APPROACH TO SOLAR ENERGY ADOPTION

Given the right resources and information, your region can make an enormous difference in helping local communities expand the use of solar energy and achieve their economic and sustainability goals. In turn, these actions will help the entire nation make a rapid transition toward 100 percent clean energy use. One way this can be achieved is through the SolSmart program, led by the Interstate Renewable Energy Council (IREC) and the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) and funded by the U.S. Department of Energy Solar Energy Technologies Office.

Since the program began in 2016, SolSmart and its team of technical assistance providers, national solar energy experts, and state and local government partners have helped hundreds of jurisdictions—large and small, urban and rural—implement best practices and take decisive action to encourage the expansion of solar energy. The program offers free technical assistance to help any municipality, county, or regional organization remove local barriers to going solar.

Today, more than 450 communities in 42 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands have achieved designation as SolSmart Gold, Silver, or Bronze. Communities earn SolSmart designation by adopting best practices for streamlining solar processes and taking steps to encourage solar development. There are many different pathways that communities can take toward earning designation. When the program first launched, the designation pathways were only available to cities, towns, and counties. However, in the spring of 2019, the SolSmart program expanded its outreach to include the Regional Organization Pathway, a process specifically tailored to meet the goals and needs of regional organizations.

> *"Joining at the regional level means that our member counties, especially rural ones for whom pursuing designation would be more difficult or time consuming, can have access to solar-related technical assistance through us. This also expands our capacity as an RDO and thereby enhances our relevance to member counties."*
>
> —Apalachee Regional Council

REGIONAL ORGANIZATION PATHWAY PROGRAM

SolSmart recognizes the important role regional organizations can play in influencing their constituent communities and coordinating regional policies to align with best practices. The Regional Organization Pathway is a set of criteria that regional organizations complete to achieve designation and

develop solar-friendly regions. Eligible regional organizations include but are not limited to councils of governments (COGs), metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), regional councils, economic development districts, and other regional development organizations.

The goal of this designation pathway for regional organizations to help make the SolSmart program accessible to more localities in their jurisdiction. This encourages engagement and dissemination of best practices for solar market development. For example, regional organizations can help local communities streamline permitting requirements for residential solar projects or revise their planning and zoning codes to reduce impediments to solar market growth—all while continuing to meet other development goals for the community and region. SolSmart provides participating communities with the training and resources to achieve designation and implement policies that better position their region for solar deployment.

Participating in SolSmart allows regional organizations to:

- Create a cohesive plan for the entire region
- Bring a local perspective to the adoption of best practices
- Provide a platform for communities to share ideas and solve problems
- Build economies of scale with respect to training sessions and engagement with utilities and the community

Through SolSmart, regional organizations and their associated communities are eligible for no-cost technical assistance from SolSmart's team of national experts. Some communities may also have the opportunity work with SoSmart Advocates, who are program-funded and program-trained staff who help communities in a particular region achieve designation.

SolSmart Technical Assistance has a number of benefits to regional organizations:

- Access no-cost technical assistance and training to better serve your local communities
    - SolSmart's team of national solar experts have decades of combined experience in solar energy, along with thousands of hours of previous technical assistance provision to municipal and county governments
- Support your region in becoming more competitive and open new doors to business growth, workforce development, and wider economic prosperity

- Enhance your region's solar market and signal to solar installers and developers that it's "open for solar business"
- Strengthen the regional resources across SolSmart's five special focus categories:
    - Planning, Zoning, & Development Regulations
    - Solar Rights
    - Utility Engagement
    - Community Engagement
    - Market Development & Finance

As of March 2022, twelve Regional Organizations across the country have been designated through the SolSmart Regional Organization Pathway program. These organizations are listed below.

Current Regional Organization SolSmart Designees:

- SolSmart Bronze
    - Atlanta Regional Commission, GA
    - Delaware Valley RPC (DVRPC), PA
    - Michiana Area COG, IN
    - New River Valley Regional Commission, VA
    - North Central Texas Council of Governments, TX
- SolSmart Silver
    - Mid-Ohio RPC (MORPC), OH
    - Ohio Kentucky Indiana (OKI) COG
    - Region Nine Development Commission, MN
    - South Central Regional Council of Governments, CT
- SolSmart Gold
    - Metropolitan (Met) Council, MN
    - Northern Virginia Regional Commission, VA
    - South Bay Cities COG, CA

> *"NCTCOG worked to educate staff from over 20 cities and counties about solar through webinars, trainings and meetings so that they may be equipped to address solar-related issues. Each community sets an example for other cities considering joining the solar movement, which can result in a wide range of benefits."*
>
> —North Central Texas Council of Governments

INSIGHTS FROM REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

In order to support SolSmart efforts around the Regional Organization Pathway and to bring this important information to the over 500 national members from both organizations, the National Association of Development Organizations Research Foundation (NADO RF) and the National Association of Regional Councils (NARC) began working with national and regional partners to educate and inform regional organizations across the country about solar programs designed specifically for them. NADO and NARC spoke with staff at designated organizations in the fall of 2021 to learn more about their involvement in the program and gather recommendations for other regional organizations considering pursuing designation.

Why Regional Organizations Decide to Participate in the Program

Regional Organizations that have participated in the designation program identified several reasons why they chose to participate, including:

- The opportunity to take the lead at a regional level
- Access to free technical assistance to prepare communities for future conflicts and competition that might arise over different land uses
- Tools, webinars, and assistance provided by the program that were useful both during the designation process and after
- Alignment of SolSmart with existing regional sustainability goals
- A regional organization's annual budget already included time for code assistance, solar permitting, etc., which paid for staff time needed for the program
- Prevention of over-permitting and ability for communities to proactively integrate this new wave of development into their code

How to Successfully Prepare for SolSmart Designation

Before committing to the designation process, arrange an introductory meeting with SolSmart staff and your key personnel, during which SolSmart staff can explain the process and requirements, share success stories, and answer any questions so you gain familiarity with the program. It may be helpful to meet with another regional organization that recently pursued SolSmart designation and get an overview of how they approached the process.

Before presenting the program to your board and senior staff, summarize potential program benefits, evaluate internally, review potential designation criteria, and be sure to understand local community planning and zoning responsibilities. The required staff commitment will depend on the amount of progress already made related to energy and solar and the designation level

being sought. One regional organization recommended creating a subcommittee including staff, a local solar developer, and legal counsel/lawyer. Conversations with designated regional organizations revealed that even smaller regional organizations with limited staff time and capacity and without an existing solar energy plan can still benefit from participating in the program

Successful Outreach Strategies and Partnerships

One of the primary goals of the SolSmart Regional Pathway is to increase solar adoption at the regional level. This requires effective and tailored communication to different communities and interest groups. When conducting regional outreach about the program, regional organizations should:

- Identify issues that are most relevant to the intended audience. These could include protecting the environment, streamlining processes, increasing government efficiency, expanding the tax base with large scale installations, creating jobs, and preventing over-regulation.
- Use existing regional planning meetings to discuss the SolSmart program.
- Work with nearby communities, cities, and counties to provide them valuable resources including model ordinances.
- Anticipate and engage interested citizen groups in different communities
- Identify communities that would be willing to 'go first' and work with their local leadership.
- Offer continuing education credits to individuals who participate in training.

How SolSmart Can Benefit Your Community

SolSmart is for all communities, whether or not they are currently experiencing a demand for solar development. SolSmart allows regional organizations to 'get ahead' of solar companies, initiate conversations, and determine for themselves where solar can benefit their communities. The technical assistance provided through SolSmart allows regional organizations to understand the possibilities that solar energy provides for their region and develop usable guidance and policies, including technical advice and permitting training for local building inspectors. Among the regional organizations interviewed, SolSmart helped them with the following:

- Provided resources for regional solar mapping to help identify the best places for solar.

- Generated actionable goals and identification of accurate data for future solar installations.
- Brought together county and local government to conduct regional training sessions.
- Provided valuable resources for communities that had already made progress updating their code to incorporate solar development and introduced their elected officials to the formal designation program.

Recommendations from Designated Regional Organizations:

- Take advantage of the free assistance!
- Engage local leaders and include them in your work - for example, on a regional sustainability committee.
- Use the technical assistance to develop your own unique strategy as a regional organization.
- Survey member communities once the SolSmart program is complete.
- Many planners don't have formal training on energy issues—use this as an opportunity to educate regional organization staff and planners in cities and counties in the region.
- Talk with another organization that has successfully received SolSmart designation prior to getting started.

We have much more work ahead as the nation transitions to a clean energy economy. SolSmart plays a vital role by providing you with valuable, free resources and information to get your communities ready for solar implementation. We invite you to join the SolSmart team and achieve your goals for sustainable energy use and economic growth.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

With the right resources, local governments can make solar energy adoption easier and more affordable for homes and businesses alike. Below you will find additional SolSmart resources, landing pages, and community resources.

NADO Research Foundation Webinar Recording: An Introduction to SolSmart's Regional Organization Pathway Webinar
https://www.nado.org/webinar-recording-an-introduction-to-solsmarts-regional-organization-pathway/&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1643300954311678&usg=AOvVaw2shIVLe_fi_tpr3e_ePsEa

SolSmart Regional Organization Pathway Landing Page
https://solsmart.org/apply-for-designation-legacy/regional-organizations-pathway/

SolSmart Regional Organization Application Form
https://solsmart.org/wp-content/uploads/SolSmart-RO-Pathway-Application_2020.pdf

Consultation Request Form for a Technical Advisor
https://solsmart.org/get-started/request-a-consultation/

SolSmart Evaluation of the Impact of SolSmart on Communities
https://solsmart.org/resources/solsmart-evaluation-research-insights/

SolSmart (General) Program Guide
https://solsmart.org/wp-content/uploads/SolSmart-Program-Guide-2021.pdf

SolSmart Local Government Toolkit
https://solsmart.org/solar-energy-a-toolkit-for-local-governments/

SolSmart Regional Organization Pathway Flyer
https://narc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/SolSmart-Regional-Organization-Flyer.png

CONTACT INFORMATION

If your community or region has questions about the Regional Organization Pathway Program or would like more information about the SolSmart program generally, please feel free to contact any of the following individuals.

Interstate Renewable Energy Council (IREC)
Theresa Perry, Program Director theresap@irecusa.org

International City/County Management Association (ICMA)
Scott Annis, Program Manager sannis@icma.org

National Association of Development Organizations - Research Foundation (NADORF)
Ciara Ristig, Senior Program Manager cristig@nado.org

National Association of Regional Councils (NARC)
Jessica Rouztzahn, Program Manager jessica@narc.org

Acknowledgment: This material is based upon work the supported by the Department of Energy and Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy (EERE), under Award Number DEEE0007155.

Disclaimer: This report was prepared as an account of work sponsored by an agency of the United States Government. Neither the United States Government nor any agency thereof, nor any of their employees, makes any warranty, express or implied, or assumes any legal liability or responsibility for the accuracy, completeness, or usefulness of any information, apparatus, product, or process disclosed, or represents that its use would not infringe privately owned rights. Reference herein to any specific commercial product, process, or service by trade name, trademark, manufacturer, or otherwise does not necessarily constitute or imply its endorsement, recommendation, or favoring by the United States Government or any agency thereof. The views and opinions of authors expressed herein do not necessarily state or reflect those of the United States Government or any agency thereof.

SOLSMART
NATIONALLY DISTINGUISHED. LOCALLY POWERED.

NADO
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS
RESEARCH FOUNDATION

NARC
Building Regional Communities
National Association of Regional Councils