



# As it looks to solar, Los Angeles targets an inclusive green shift

BY AVI ASHER-SCHAPIRO · 18 JUNE 2021

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In the six months since former gang member Ramon Ramos was released from prison, he has worked as a landscaper in Los Angeles – another minimum-wage job in a string of them.

But the 30-year-old Los Angeles native is hoping that will change when he finishes a 12-week training course in solar panel installation, opening the door to jobs that pay well over \$20 an hour, compared to the \$15 he's used to making.

"I hear people are trying to go green. So I thought there must be money in this if I work hard," Ramos said, unfurling the set of tools he is learning to use in his mother's small North Hollywood apartment.

"I'm trying to move up in the world," he added.



Ex-gang member Ramon Ramos displays the tools he uses to install solar panel systems at his mother's apartment in North Hollywood, California, May 20, 2021. Thomson Reuters Foundation/Aude Guerrucci

The free training program, arranged by nonprofit group GRID Alternatives, aims to launch people like Ramos into California's booming solar power industry and get solar panels installed in more low-income neighborhoods.

It's part of a broader effort by the Los Angeles government, community groups and businesses to help California's largest city achieve its climate change and social aims at the same time.

Los Angeles, the core of a metropolitan area of more than 12 million people, is part of the [C40 Cities network](#), a group of nearly 100 major cities around the world working to drive faster action on climate change.

The cities have each committed to delivering climate action plans designed to spur uptake of clean energy, boost adaptation to climate threats and turn the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change into an on-the-ground reality.



Under Mayor Eric Garcetti, the chair of C40 Cities, Los Angeles has pledged to sharply curb its greenhouse gas emissions, aiming for a 45% reduction by 2025 and net zero by 2050, through measures ranging from decarbonizing the energy grid to promoting electric vehicles.

Many of the C40 city plans also seek to harness recovery efforts from the global coronavirus pandemic, including massive new government spending, to drive a swifter green transition.

Garcetti announced earlier this year that Los Angeles would launch its own "Green New Deal" to create over 300,000 climate-smart jobs by 2035.

Leaders are trying to ensure the shift benefits all residents – and gives a leg-up in particular to those left behind, like Ramos.



Ex-gang member Ramon Ramos stands outside his mother's apartment in North Hollywood, California, May 20, 2021. Thomson Reuters Foundation/Aude Guerrucci

"L.A. is trying to demonstrate how climate action is also a road to racial and economic justice and equity," said Lauren Faber O'Connor, the city's chief sustainability officer.

That is a big challenge in a region racked by inequality, famous for its car culture and crisscrossed by 88 separate cities within L.A. county.

It requires coordination between many actors, from business and community organizations to city and county agencies.

"It's going to be a long haul to meet our carbon-neutrality mandates," O'Connor admitted. "And we are only as strong as the partnerships we can build."

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## Clean tech's new face

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Matt Petersen, CEO of the Los Angeles Clean Tech Incubator (LACI), poses at his offices in Los Angeles, May 20, 2021. Thomson Reuters Foundation/Aude Guerrucci

Tucked in the center of the city's trendy Arts District, the Los Angeles Clean Tech Incubator (LACI) is a non-profit that aims to mimic Silicon Valley start-up accelerators by investing in and nurturing green tech companies – especially those run by women and racial minorities.

“We want to change the face of clean tech,” said Matt Petersen, LACI’s CEO, sitting in its vast offices provided by the city's Department of Water and Power for a nominal \$1-a-year lease.

LACI has worked with more than 250 start-ups, helping them raise over half a billion dollars, and has backed a dizzying array of firms, from the inventor of a new water filtration system to a company selling pavement that repels the sun's heat.

The goal, Petersen said, is to push forward green technology firms that could struggle to find traditional investors, perhaps because their product will take longer to get to market or because the founders are not well-connected.

LACI provides not only money but mentoring, office space, and access to a range of labs and fabrication facilities to help startups test their products.

It takes a small stake in the companies it backs, and any profits are then plowed back into the incubator, Petersen said.



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Kameale C. Terry, one of the founders of electric vehicle startup ChargeHelp! joins a video-conference at the offices of the Los Angeles Clean Tech Incubator (LACI), May 20, 2021. Thomson Reuters Foundation/Aude Guerrucci

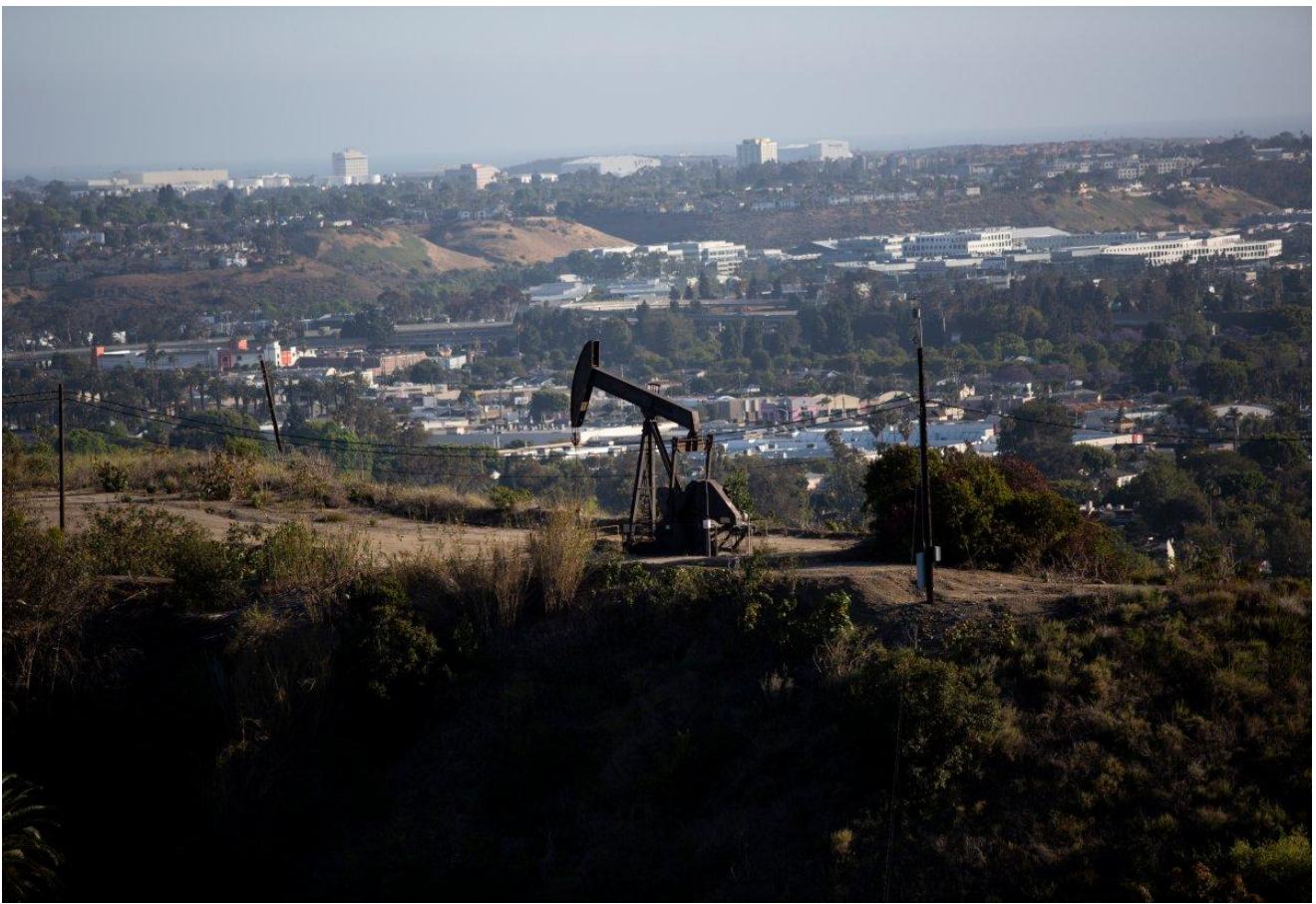
Kameale C. Terry, one of the founders of ChargeHelp!, a start-up with an app that matches electric vehicle charger technicians with jobs, said the incubator was key to helping line up a recent \$2.75 million investment in her product.

"As a start-up with two black female founders, it's been critical to have LACI help guide us, mentor us, and help find investors," she said.

Petersen said the Los Angeles facility was unique, but "we want this to be a replicable model for other cities for how to build a green economy".

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## Left behind



An oil pump stands in the Inglewood Oil Field in Culver City in Los Angeles County, California, May 23, 2021. Thomson Reuters Foundation/Aude Guerrucci

In South Los Angeles, where swaths of neighborhoods are dominated by industrial sites in various states of abandonment, the new green economy can still feel far off to many people.

“Our community has been in disrepair for the better part of four decades,” said Edgar Campos, the executive director of T.R.U.S.T. South-L.A., a community land trust operating in the area.

“You can’t imagine the kinds of pollution, the lack of access to green spaces,” he added. “We are the Detroit that never gets talked about.”



Edgar Campos, the executive direct of T.R.U.S.T. South-L.A., a south Los Angeles community land trust, stands in front of an affordable housing residential development in Los Angeles, May 19, 2021.

His organization is part of the South L.A. Climate Commons, a coalition of local groups pushing for changes such as more green space and transit-adjacent housing while fighting gentrification and displacement.

Los Angeles has seen worsening climate change threats close up, from deadlier and more volatile wildfire seasons that endanger homes and power supplies to worsening erosion as higher sea levels eat away at its coastline.

Increasingly extreme heatwaves – the United States' biggest weather-related killer – also are hiking health risks for many residents, particularly in poorer areas with less cash to pay for adequate cooling.



One flagship initiative of the South L.A. Climate Commons is building a new green transport corridor to help locals walk and bike safely to businesses and public transport hubs in an area with few bike lanes, pedestrian crossings or shady places to walk.

South Los Angeles has an outsize share of the city's pedestrian fatalities, said Eli Lipman, director of development and programming with MoveLA, a transit advocacy group, calling the lack of safe travel options "an issue of violence in this community".

But progress on the new green transport corridor, due to have been in place by 2019, has been slow, Campos said, standing beside an abandoned railroad track slated to become the corridor.

"They still need like \$150 million to finish it... and we don't know yet where that money is going to come from," he added.



A view of an affordable housing residential development financed with state funds from a carbon tax and built next to a train station in Los Angeles, May 19, 2021. Thomson Reuters Foundation/Aude Guerrucci

A spokesperson for the L.A. County Metro Authority, which owns the land, said the project was still moving forward but that its complexity – it traverses 5 miles and crosses over 20 intersections – had increased the cost by more than \$40 million.

A contract to build the corridor was expected to be awarded in January, with construction expected to take 32 months, they said.

But there are other emerging bright spots in South Los Angeles too.

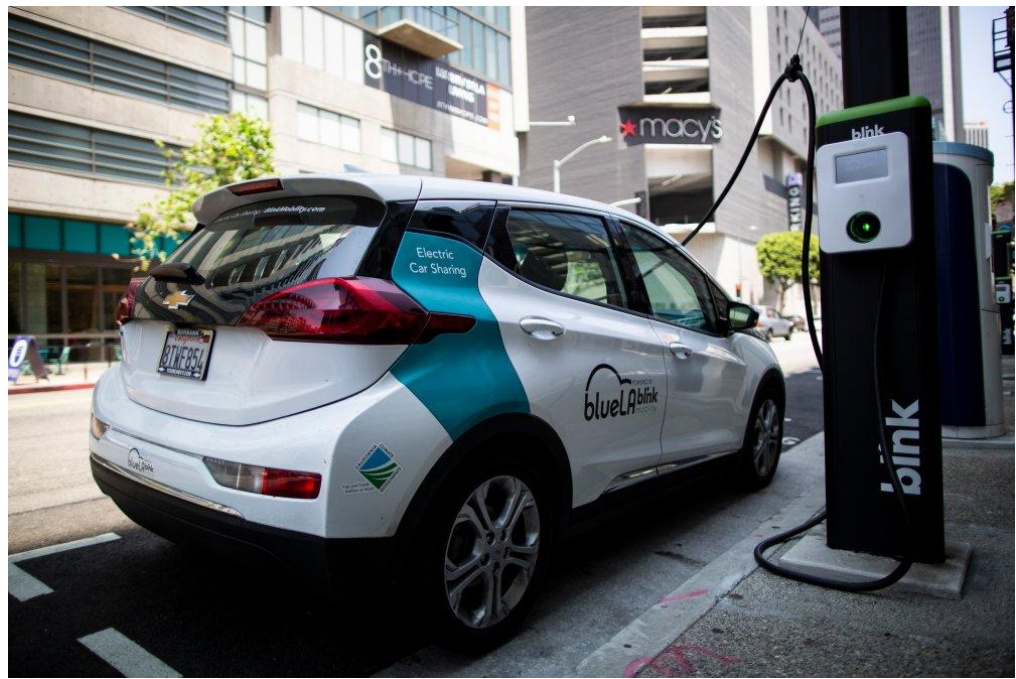
A few miles away, Campos shows off what a greener future might look like: an affordable housing development, financed in part by state funds from a carbon tax, built right next to a new train station.

"I want to replicate this many, many times over," he said.

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## Going electric

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An electric car, part of a car-sharing network, charges in downtown Los Angeles, May 18, 2021. Thomson Reuters Foundation/Aude Guerrucci

Across Los Angeles, city officials see reducing the time Angelinos spend in their cars as a key part of the climate-change fight.

The city has set a goal to cut the average daily drive for residents from 15 miles a day now to 13 miles by 2025 and 9 miles by 2035.

To help with that, the city's Department of Transportation recently placed what it says is the largest-ever single order for an electric bus fleet – 155 buses at a cost of \$104 million.

It also is expanding 15 above-ground rail lines, a move the mayor's office called the largest expansion of transit in the United States right now.

"L.A. is where the notion of urban sprawl initially developed and now we have to reckon with that," said Colin Sweeney, the department's director of public information, as he surveyed the growing electric bus fleet in a depot downtown.

"We know the future cannot be everyone in cars – and this is our investment in that."

The city plans to have an all-electric bus fleet by 2040, with each vehicle eliminating the equivalent of the annual emissions of 350 cars each year, according to the Sierra Club.

For Angelinos who do drive, the city has become home to the largest concentration of private electric vehicle charging stations in the United States, in a city where more than 60,000 electric vehicles now operate, according to the mayor's office.



Albert Flores, a supervisor in charge of training new bus drivers, stands inside an electric bus – part of an expanding city fleet – at a depot in downtown Los Angeles, May 18, 2021. Thomson Reuters Foundation/Aude Guerrucci

But including low-income Angelinos in the switch can be a challenge, as electric cars are still significantly more expensive than gas-powered models.

To bridge the gap, the city has helped to roll out a pilot electric vehicle sharing program, called BlueLA, giving discounted membership to low-income residents.

It's a first of its kind in the United States – but so far it operates only about 100 vehicles and getting poorer neighborhoods to accept charging stations has been an uphill battle.

"When it first started, no one wanted much to do with it – they associated (electric car sharing) with gentrification," said Anita Tang, carshare manager at the transport department.

But eventually the scheme – with a cheap subscription fee of \$1 a month and costing 15 cents a minute for low-income users – drew people in, and the program is now hoping to add dozens more charging stations and hundreds more vehicles, Tang said.



Community environmental justice activists Jaquelyn Badejo (L) and her mother Linda Cleveland (R) stand in their Watts neighborhood in southern Los Angeles, California, May 17, 2021. Thomson Reuters Foundation/Aude Guerrucci

Across town, in the working class neighborhood of Watts, residents still find it hard to imagine electric vehicles will become the norm.

“Very few people have electric cars around here,” said Jacquelyn Badejo, who with her mother Linda Cleveland helps run the Watts Clean Air and Energy Committee, a community group dedicated to environmental justice issues.

She and her mother recently starred in a public awareness campaign, organized by the city and others, to promote the use of electric vehicles.



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Community activist Jaquelyn Badejo runs down a mound in a lot in her Watts neighbourhood in southern Los Angeles, California, May 17, 2021. Thomson Reuters Foundation/Aude Guerrucci

"Communities like ours are often left out when these big changes happen," Badejo said, standing beside a solar panel array she helped install on a local church.

Planned climate projects in Watts are not always followed through, she said, with government-funded tree planting initiatives sometimes lacking watering plans and disused oil wells still not properly capped.

“In Watts we’re treated like that stepchild of L.A.,” she said.

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## 'Cars are the enemy'

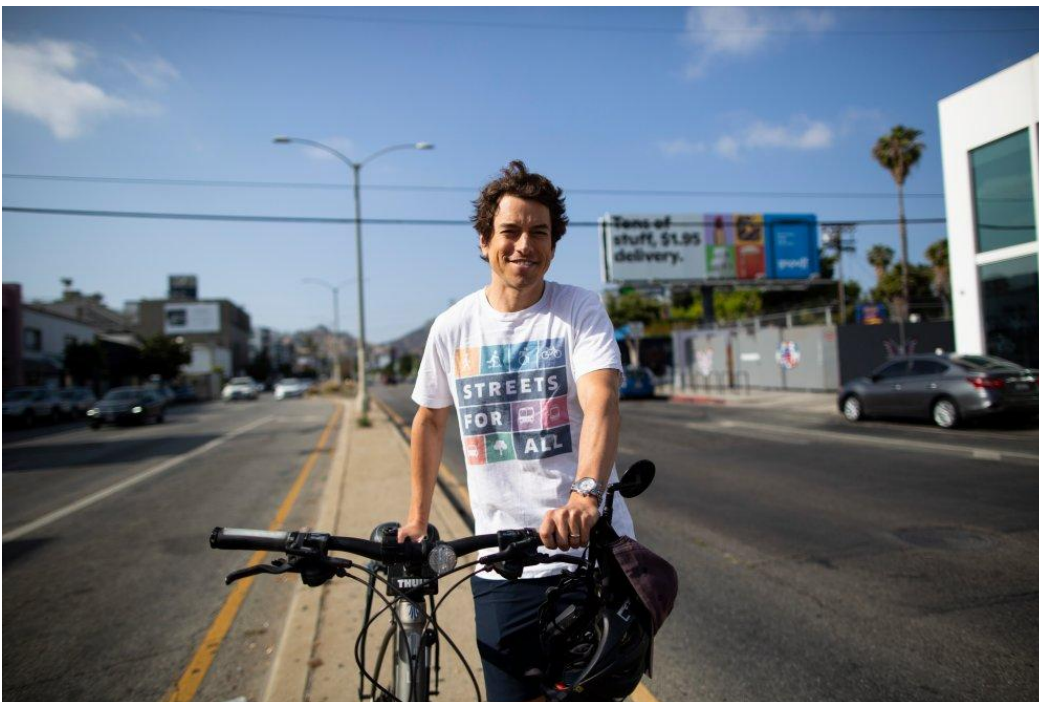


Richer residents also have frustrations with the drive for a greener Los Angeles.

Standing at the intersection of Melrose and Fairfax, in West Hollywood, exasperated former tech entrepreneur Michael Schneider pointed out a bike lane that abruptly ended as the street narrowed – even though parking spaces have been retained.

“This is everything wrong with how L.A. designs bike lanes,” said Schneider, now a community activist who sits on the city's Bicycle Advisory Committee and who founded the transport advocacy group Streets for All.

“In L.A., all too often people say they want to fight climate change from the seat of an SUV,” he added.




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Michael Schneider, a cycling activist and founder of Streets for All, stops his bicycle along a median in West Hollywood, Los Angeles, May 19, 2021. Thomson Reuters Foundation/Aude Guerrucci

With emissions from cars and trucks accounting for more than a third of the city's greenhouse gas emissions, radically redesigning Los Angeles to curb car use is crucial to achieving its long-term climate aims, he said.

From congestion to pollution, “cars are the enemy of a livable city,” Schneider said.

But construction of bike lanes has leveled off in recent years, for reasons ranging from the veto power city councilors hold to resistance from businesses that value parking.



Los Angeles resident Ron Rogers boards a train with his bicycle at Union Station, as part of Bike to Work Week in Los Angeles, California, May 18, 2021. Thomson Reuters Foundation/Aude Guerrucci

In 2012, the city added 250 miles of bike lanes – but last year, just 27 miles of new lanes were put in place.

Schneider says the city still lacks the basic networks that would allow people to safely replace driving with cycling.

He regularly bikes with his two children and fears for their safety on the city's stop-and-start cycling network. Improving it has become a personal crusade on behalf of his family and others.

“I want this to be safe for them – safe for everyone,” he said.

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## 'Solar city'



Solar panels cover the rooftop of the Convention Center in downtown Los Angeles, California, May 28, 2021. Thomson Reuters Foundation/Aude Guerrucci

Cutting climate changing emissions and risks has become a personal battle for Pacific Palisades high school senior Nathalia Wyss too.

Two years ago, a massive wildfire engulfed her wealthy neighborhood in the middle of the school day, for a time creating a wall of fire separating her from her parents at their home.

That launched her into Los Angeles' increasingly vibrant youth climate activist network. In 2019 she marched in a rally downtown led by Greta Thunberg, alongside other students who had walked out of class to raise awareness about climate risks.



Young climate change activists Madison Liberman (L), Isabel Gill (C) and Nathalia Wyss (R) pose in front of Palisades High School in Los Angeles, California, June 3, 2021. Thomson Reuters Foundation/Aude Guerrucci

After the fire, "I knew that posting about (climate change) on Instagram wasn't enough," she said.

This spring, she and a group of students at her high school persuaded the school board to install solar panels on the building's roof and commit more broadly to reducing the school's carbon footprint.

"We are a very large school with really high energy usage, so if we could transition to renewable energy that would be a real, concrete impact," she said.

Wyss' goal is in line with the city's own renewable energy strategy, as city officials try to brand Los Angeles as "the solar city".



A view of a photovoltaic power station run by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power in the northwest Mojave desert, California, May 26, 2021. Thomson Reuters Foundation/Aude Guerrucci

According to the latest data from 2019, Los Angeles now produces more than 480 megawatts (MW) of solar power, a 15% increase from 2020, and enough to power around 134,000 homes.

That's a result of everything from smaller projects like Wyss' school panels to massive installations on commercial buildings and a city-operated 250 MW facility in the Mojave desert completed in 2018.

Building and maintaining that new solar capacity is creating new jobs, said Danny Hom, a strategy officer with GRID Alternatives, the project running Ramos' training.

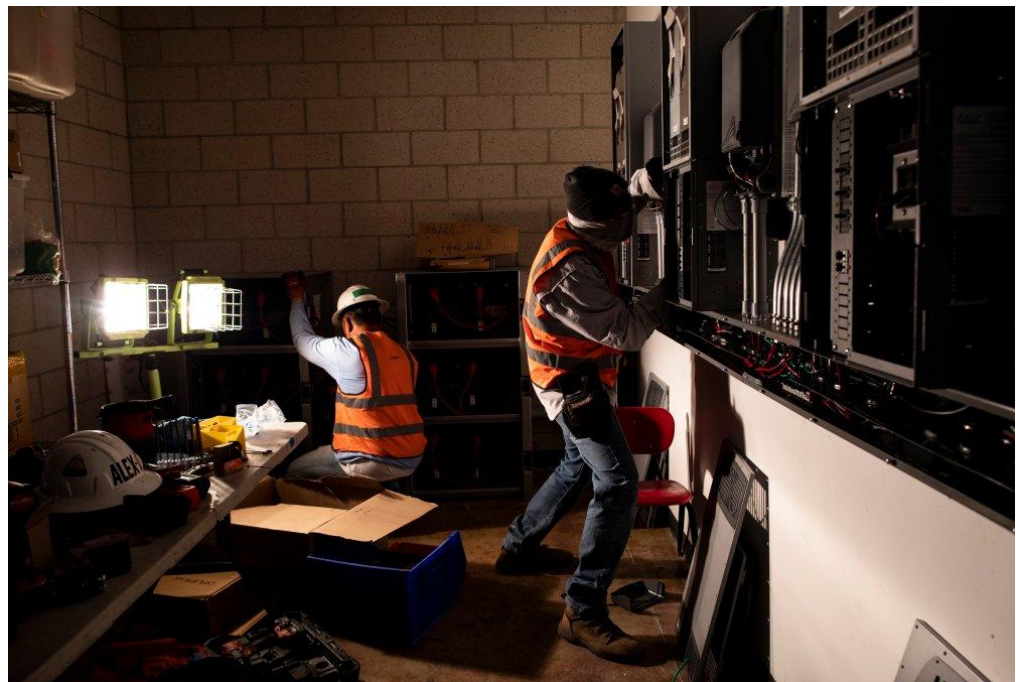


Danny Hom wears a hard hat while working at the Audubon Center, where his team is installing solar panels, in Los Angeles, California, May 21, 2021. Thomson Reuters Foundation/Aude Guerrucci

"We've helped more than 200 formerly incarcerated people get jobs in this sector," he said, as he showed off a new battery of solar panels built by one of his crews at the L.A. Audubon Society offices.

Much of Grid Alternatives' work, Hom explained, involves installing solar panels on the roofs of low-income households, taking advantage of a California program that sets aside a small portion of utility revenue to subsidize such projects.

Like Ramos, Darean Nguyen, one of the workers carrying out the Audubon installation, also spent time behind bars.



Darean Nguyen and Alejandro DeLeon work on an electrical installation to process energy produced by solar panels on the rooftop of the Audubon Center in Los Angeles, California, May 21, 2021. Thomson Reuters Foundation/Aude Guerrucci

But over the last few years he's risen up the organization's ranks to become a supervisor and has now worked on over 350 solar installations across the city, he estimated.

"I help lower people's electricity bills so they have some money to provide for their families," he said. "That feels good."

The city's green energy shift has also been good for him personally, he admitted.

In prison, he made 25 cents a day working menial jobs, he said. But "now look at me: I am a supervisor on a solar crew, and I am saving to buy a house."

Reporting for this story was supported by [C40](#), a network of the world's large cities committed to addressing climate change.

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