

Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities 2025 Request for Letters of Interest



Overview

Communities across the United States are exploring Smart Growth, and other environmentally sustainable approaches, to revitalize their economies, create jobs, protect clean air and water, prepare for climate change-related impacts, and improve quality of life. However, when trying to implement these approaches many communities run into barriers such as outdated zoning codes and other regulations, polluted sites that deter investment, and deteriorating public infrastructure. Moreover, many communities lack the technical expertise to implement smart growth strategies and the resources to educate local stakeholders about the environmental, economic, health, and quality of life benefits these approaches can bring.

The Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities Program provides quick, targeted technical assistance to selected communities using a variety of tools and a proven methodology. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) delivers the assistance using a team of technical experts who convene local, regional, and federal stakeholders for workshops in the selected communities to collaboratively develop a detailed and focused plan to address the community's needs and interests. The program is geared toward communities that are relatively new to environmentally sustainable approaches but have a basic understanding of smart growth principles and how they could apply locally.

This round, EPA will support partnerships between local government and a local grassroots organization representing a disproportionately affected neighborhood to reduce urban heat island impacts in that neighborhood. Some examples of these organizations include Community-Based Organizations, church groups, neighborhood associations, locally-focused nonprofits, etc.

Heat islands are urbanized areas that experience higher temperatures than outlying areas. Structures such as buildings and roads absorb and re-emit the sun's heat more than natural landscapes such as forests and water bodies. Urban areas, where these structures are highly concentrated and greenery is limited, become "islands" of higher temperatures relative to outlying areas. The effects of heat islands include heat-related death and illness, impaired water quality, increased air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, and increased energy consumption and costs. Smart growth is a key strategy for reducing urban heat islands, as well as other measures that counteract the impact of the built environment on urban temperatures. These include: 1) increasing tree and vegetative cover, 2) installing green roofs, 3) installing cool (reflective) roofs, and 4) using cool pavements (either reflective or permeable).

Research shows that urban heat islands are often linked to demographic factors such as income and race. Research shows some groups in the U.S., particularly those that are low-income and people of color, live in neighborhoods with higher temperatures relative to adjacent neighborhoods in the same city. The studies identify historic redlining as a contributing factor.

This round will also include a pilot youth engagement module that will supplement the assistance for up to three (3) communities. Youth are a key part of all communities but are often left out of meaningful planning discussions. Engaging youth in city planning can help address intergenerational equity and ensure that the needs of future generations is prioritized. To support youth engagement, the Building Blocks program will engage local secondary and/or higher education partners in the process. Each partner organization will work with EPA to develop an engagement opportunity to ensure that young people have a voice in shaping, and take a leadership role on implementing, the resulting action plan.

Key Information

- **Eligibility:** The applicant can be a local, county, territorial, or tribal government, or a nonprofit organization that has the support of the local government on whose behalf they are applying. As the purpose of this round is to focus on a disproportionately affected neighborhood, applicants must demonstrate a meaningful partnership between the local government and the residents of that neighborhood from the outset.
- **Deadline:** 5:00 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time on December 12, 2024
- **How to apply:** Submit a two-page letter of interest signed by a mayor, city manager, elected official, or other representative of the community (see “How to Apply”)
- **Timeframe:** EPA expects to select five (5) recipients by mid-January and intends to provide all technical assistance by the beginning of September 2025.

How the Program Works

1. Interested communities submit a letter of interest and specifically outline how the program applies to their development challenge.
2. EPA reviews the letters of interest and selects five (5) communities for assistance.
3. EPA engages the selected communities to schedule a workshop, discuss mutual expectations as well as roles and responsibilities, and review details about the program. During at least two conference calls before the workshop, direct consultation occurs between EPA staff and technical experts and a local steering committee of stakeholders related to the specific challenge and neighborhood for which the community is seeking assistance. The steering committee will vary by community but might include local government staff, elected officials, community representatives, youth leaders, and other local or area Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) or Community-Based Organizations (CBOs).
4. EPA will work with the community to identify and engage external partners for participation in the workshop. Including federal and state agencies and other NGOs increases the expertise and support for the development and implementation of the community’s action plan, resulting in broader and more sustainable progress in the community.
5. EPA headquarters and/or regional office staff, along with EPA’s contractors, conduct a two-day workshop in the community, including a public meeting, through which a collaborative process will yield a set of detailed short- to mid-term actions the community can take to address their challenges.
6. A “Next Steps Memo” detailing the engagement and outlining the collaboratively identified actions is delivered to the community.
7. The Office of Community Revitalization (OCR) team maintains contact with the community over the following year to celebrate successes and identify solutions to obstacles.

How to Apply

Submit a letter of interest—**no longer than two (2) pages**—that contains the following information. Please **do not** submit letters of support, maps, or other supplemental information.

1. **Describe the nature of the urban heat island challenge(s) facing your community**, including any relevant data to demonstrate the challenge. Describe how this challenge affects a specific low-income,

minority, tribal, and/or other neighborhood facing disproportionate environmental or health risks.

2. **Explain the relevance of the program to the challenge(s), being as specific as possible.** Applicants must describe how the community's issues can be addressed through the technical assistance workshop, focusing on how the program can will help with a specific challenge.
3. **Describe the partnership between the local government and the neighborhood organization.** Is this a new partnership or the continuation of an existing one? Describe your experience collaborating.
4. **Indicate if you would like to be considered for the optional Youth Engagement Module.** If you'd like to participate, please indicate a core partner organization and point of contact. (e.g., teacher, faculty member, advisor). The organization may be a secondary school, community college/university, or another community-based youth services organization. The target audience is youth 14-22 years of age. The engagement will serve up to 25 youth, and a core group of up to 5 youth will support the design of the engagement.
5. **Identify your preferred timing for the workshop.** The proposed timeframe for these workshops is between May - August 2025. Please provide a preliminary idea of the best dates for your community, ensuring that key stakeholders will be available.
6. **Describe the community's expected capacity for implementation,** e.g., local policy change, additional consideration for physical improvements, new incentives, support from key leadership, etc. EPA generally looks to assist communities that are ready for implementation once the Building Blocks workshop and next steps memo are complete.
7. If applicable, **describe how this assistance would complement work being done in the community using other federal/state funding or programs** (e.g., EPA brownfields assistance, U.S. HUD Community Development Block Grants, U.S. DOT TIGER/BUILD grants) and/or how this workshop would align with a local or regional planning process.
8. **Affirm that the community can provide the information or materials listed in the "What the Community Provides" section of the tool description on page 4.**
9. **List the primary point of contact and other key stakeholders who would be involved in the technical assistance work, including title, address, email, and phone number of the primary contact.**

The letter must be signed by a representative of the local government and of the neighborhood organization. **These signatures represent the community's support and commitment to this program and assistance.**

The letter of interest must be submitted in an attachment (Microsoft Word or PDF file) by email to Chip Gurkin (Gurkin.Charles@epa.gov) no later than December, 12, 2024, **at 5:00 p.m. Eastern Time.**

If you have questions about this request for letters of interest, please see our Frequently Asked Questions webpage at <https://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/frequently-asked-questions-faqs-about-building-blocks-sustainable-communities>. If your question is not answered there, please contact Mr. Gurkin at Gurkin.Charles@epa.gov.

ADDRESSING URBAN HEAT ISLANDS

Urban heat islands arise as a result of modern development patterns, which means that their effects can be reduced by improving that development. Changes like the addition of green space and tree cover, retrofitting buildings with green and cool roofs, and incorporating cool pavements and walls can lower the temperatures in these areas and therefore the resulting health and environmental impacts. Unfortunately, many communities lack the understanding, resources, or community buy-in needed to take these steps. Amending local planning regulations and policies to incorporate the above measures, creating meaningful involvement of underserved residents, and building fruitful partnerships for support can all help overcome barriers to creating more livable communities.

Community Benefits

This workshop will support local governments and residents in understanding the necessary steps to mitigate heat islands and will increase the capacity of community members to meaningfully participate in the decision-making and implementation processes. Over the course of several months, EPA will support communities as they identify locally implementable and replicable solutions, strengthen relationships within the community, and create new partnerships to support ongoing improvements.

Areas of Focus

Typical solutions to mitigate urban heat islands include 1) increasing tree and vegetative cover, 2) installing green roofs, 3) installing cool (reflective) roofs, 4) using cool pavements (either reflective or permeable), and 5) smart growth development. The project will also work to increase the capacity of local residents to shape development decisions, strengthen existing partnerships and create new ones, and examine other public health strategies to address heat-related impacts.

Who Should Participate:

- / Community and neighborhood leaders and residents
- / City/county staff, including public works, parks, and planning staff
- / Local environmental justice and equitable development advocates
- / Public health officials
- / Elected officials, as appropriate
- / Other stakeholders with interest

How It Works:

- / Communities will participate in up to four workshop planning sessions,
- / The Community will host a two-day in-person workshop with EPA to include:
 - *A public meeting*
 - *An in-depth strategy discussion to review opportunities, discuss solutions, and develop next steps*
- / EPA will provide a Next Steps memo, detailing the community engagement and outlining the action plan developed at the workshop. The memo will guide community implementation of the agreed-upon actions.

What the Community Provides:

- / A lead organization and contact with adequate time and attention to ensure inclusive participation and program completion.
- / All local logistics, including organization of workshop and community tour.
- / Marketing and invitations to key stakeholders and residents to attend relevant sessions.
- / Attendance of local leadership from government and community.
- / Decision-makers' commitment to attend the workshop, as relevant.

Outcomes:

- / Meaningful participation of interested parties, building a broader coalition.
- / Enhanced understanding of community assets and opportunities.
- / Knowledge of principles and best practices for mitigating urban heat islands.
- / Concrete next steps to mitigate heat island impacts.