

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Second Phase of Program to Provide Reduced-cost Solar Generators to Low Income Families Launches in St. Thomas, St. John

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Low-income families on St. Thomas and St. John, beginning this week, have another opportunity to receive subsidized solar power generators, as the Share the Sun program begins Phase 2.

Community Action Now, a Georgia-based organization, is a nonprofit which in 2022 assisted over 55 families purchase solar generators at a reduced cost.

This year, the program has been expanded to low-income families on St. John. Eligible purchasers will receive a 100-watt solar panel on wheels that connects to a 60Ah sealed lead-acid battery, which is also on wheels, making the system fully portable. The battery unit also contains an 1800-watt pure sine wave inverter, so as to output AC power (110V). There is also a DC outlet and a USB port for more power options.

For greater output, a second solar panel and up to 4 battery/inverter units can be connected together.

The single panel and battery retail for \$1200, but those eligible for the subsidized price will pay “no more than \$350”, according to Iffat Walker, Executive Director of

Community Action Now. For that price, households will be able to sustainably generate their own source of power, thereby reducing their reliance on the grid and providing resilience in the face of potential natural disasters.

Units are also available at full price for interested persons whose incomes do not allow them to qualify for the subsidized price. Funds from retail sales in this regard are used to expand access to the Share the Sun program, “helping more families to gain access to solar,” according to a press release from Community Action Now.

Additionally, money “received from income eligible participants is reinvested into the program to build program capacity,” said Ms. Walker. “Private donors provide additional funding to build capacity in this program,” she continued.

Given the level of interest that Phase 1 attracted from the public, and on the verge of launching Phase 2 of the mission to provide sustainable power to families in the USVI, Ms. Walker says that now, efforts are focused on securing more support to expand the reduced-cost program to St. Croix.

“This year we’ve expanded to St. John because we were able to find an on-island partner,” Ms. Walker explained. To do the same thing on the Big Island, “we must find an on-island partner and funding sources to sustain the initial program development to include storage of devices and intake.”

With program support already coming from several partners such as the Rotary Club of St. Thomas, the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands, the Virgin Islands Conservation Society, and Island Green Living, Ms. Walker is now looking to build their coalition.

“We would love to work with another agency that is willing to partner with us to make this happen. We also need a funder to help with upfront costs to purchase devices at cost, find an on-island device assembler and distribution of devices once they arrive. There’s a lot of logistics that must be covered with both committed partners and funders,” Ms. Walker explained.

Additionally, Community Action Now says it is looking to develop a training program for solar installers and repair technicians so that people who receive units from Share the Sun can maintain them for ongoing effective operation. “Right now, the talent is scarce but the need is great which makes this a huge opportunity” for human development in the territory, according to Ms. Walker.

Planet Green Force: “Seeds of Security” Program

“Seeds of Security” is a food security/sovereignty program that is conceived to be part of Planet Green Force (PGF), a new initiative for school-aged youth that connects children to global environmental issues through community-level, local engagement. Key aspects of all PGF programming are age-appropriate curriculum, hands-on activities that make a real difference towards solving sustainability issues, and volunteerism/community service that allow students to earn badges, collaborate, and have fun.

An agricultural-based program, “Seeds of Security” addresses the importance of increasing food security/sovereignty and reducing food waste. In the US Virgin Islands (USVI) for example, 97% of the food supply is imported, leaving the territory vulnerable to shortages, decreased freshness/nutritional value, and increased costs. The level of importation also creates a substantial carbon footprint and causes pollution, such as an increased incidence of marine debris resulting from single-use plastic waste. Increased local food production is not only cleaner and healthier, it also encourages and supports local farmers and local business owners.

“Seeds of Security” will provide an example of a circular, self-sustaining program, teaching waste reduction while cultivating food security, combating hunger, and encouraging good nutrition/healthy eating. It will not only provide a valuable learning platform but also real-world food production, allowing children to eat, share, and sell what they grow.

Applying aspects of the US Department of Agriculture’s Agriculture in the Classroom programming, which incorporates authentic, agricultural-based content to teach core curriculum concepts in science, social studies, language arts and nutrition.

“Seeds of Security” would involve:

- Offering field trips to local farms to see and experience authentic, traditional farming and understand its importance and place in society
- Providing each student with fabric grow bags, taking them through the steps of planting and caring for their “crop” with corresponding

curriculum on the science behind it (prizes will be given for the best “crops” at each stage of gestation)

- Supplying each participating school with a hydroponics or aquaponics system
- Allowing students to track the amount of water, daily growth, weight/volume of crops, etc.
- Collecting seeds from crops to start the next generation of plantings
- Studying nutritional aspects of fresh produce, and creating related posters/artwork
- Introducing composting and hands-on creation and maintenance of school composting piles, with corresponding age-appropriate curriculum on the science behind the composting process
- Working with cafeteria’s to create lunch menu items incorporating “Seeds of Security” produce (and measuring the percentage of school lunch sustained through the program)
- Having PGF participants help prepare cafeteria menu items (if allowed) and/or have students create dishes using produce, with a contest for best tasting results
- Sharing recipes / creating a recipe book (considering selling recipe book with proceeds going back to the program)
- Creating student-run school marketplace days where excess crops are sold, with proceeds going back into the program
- Tracking metrics/percentages on where all crops were used (students will create final age-appropriate projects/presentations to fellow students/families at an end of year school event)
- Creating the opportunity similar to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization’s “Global Chef Challenge” (a Junior Global Chef Challenge)
- Tracking the volume reduction of food purchased due to students own gardening efforts

Bill number 35-0003 was introduced in the USVI Legislature by Senator Donna Frett-Gregory and others. It was signed into law on December 29, 2021 by Governor Albert Bryan. This bill was crafted and submitted by the USVI Agricultural Plan Task Force, of which Island Green Living

Association President, Harith Wickrema is a member. Island Green Living Association is a local nonprofit located in the USVI.

A main feature of the law includes a direct relationship to Planet Green Force food-security related activities. A pilot program envisioned in the USVI will be for the USVI Department of Education to develop a curriculum and training program — in conjunction with Island Green Living Association — to secure a sustainable local food production system in the territory to include pre-K through high school. A PGF “Seeds of Security” pilot program in the USVI can be a collaboration that will enhance the success of this new law with measurable results. The next step would be to collaborate with the departments of education in each state.