

SEPTEMBER 2026



Theory of Change

RISING SUN

CENTER FOR OPPORTUNITY



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Venture Leadership
COLLECTIVE

Theory of Change



HYPOTHESIS FOR IMPACT

IF Rising Sun's programs and policy reinforce each other to break barriers and open pathways for low-income Californians to green, High Road jobs and clean, affordable energy,

THEN priority communities will build economic equity, climate resilience, and power.

MISSION

Building career pathways for economic equity and climate resilience.

VISION

A just and sustainable future for all people and our planet.

TARGET AUDIENCE

- Low-income workers and jobseekers
- Geographic areas *in California* that have a concentration of underserved, marginalized, disadvantaged, or historically underinvested residents.

Problem: Climate Change and Systemic Racism

Climate change is happening now, and communities most burdened by this environmental and economic harm have also been excluded from good jobs, wealth building, and clean, affordable energy—compounding inequity.

Our Response

Rising Sun combines workforce development, climate action, and policy advocacy to address immediate barriers and advance systemic change through **five interconnected core components**.

CORE PROGRAM COMPONENTS



Outreach & Partnerships



Direct Experience



Barrier Removal



High Road Pathways



Practice to Policy

Long-Term Outcomes



ECONOMIC EQUITY



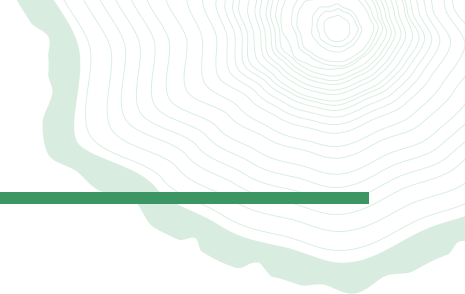
INCREASED POWER



CLIMATE RESILIENCE

Rising Sun addresses climate change and systemic racism through a unique intersection of workforce development & climate resilience—resulting in economic equity, increased power, and climate resilience.

Introduction



Rising Sun Center for Opportunity knows that good, green jobs are one of the best tools we have to meaningfully move the needle on the most pressing issues of our time: climate and poverty. We help people from Sonoma to Fresno build careers in the green economy—the building trades, energy efficiency, the clean economy, and beyond. We’ve spent 30 years connecting people to this work who’ve been locked out by background, circumstance, or a system that wasn’t designed with them in mind: people who are looking for a pathway out of poverty.

Rising Sun began as a renewable energy education center in Santa Cruz, CA in 1994, and has since evolved into a leading green workforce development organization working across the Bay Area and Central California, helping youth and adult jobseekers with low-to-no incomes access and launch successful climate and infrastructure careers that build a livable future. **To date, Rising Sun has trained more than 2,000 youth and 1,200 adults, and made nearly 65,000 households more energy efficient.**

Rising Sun’s programs are designed to address the need for accessible, High Road career pathways for low-income job seekers while breaking down compounding barriers such as limited access to training, justice system involvement, energy burden, and financial instability. Rising Sun recruits from and works with communities that have historically been shut out of the union trades, the green economy, and stable employment, offering holistic workforce

training and direct employment experience that leads to improved employment rates, family-sustaining wages, and meaningful, sustainable careers. Rising Sun uniquely operates at the intersection of workforce development, economic equity, and climate resilience.

At our core, Rising Sun is a direct service organization supporting workers, jobseekers, and their communities to build economic equity and climate resilience. Over time, that has expanded to include addressing the systems of inequity that make Rising Sun’s work necessary. Our policy efforts drive positive change at the intersection of equity, climate, affordability, and good jobs, confronting the root causes and disparate impacts of poverty and climate change in our region. Rising Sun’s practice-to-policy framework runs throughout the core components of our program model: participant experience and program needs strengthen the case for systemic change, and policy wins expand the conditions under which program participants can succeed. Staff and participants play an active role in both shaping and participating in our policy work.

Rising Sun is scaling our impact regionally and poised to deliver deeper, longer-term outcomes for program participants, graduates, and communities. By centering and integrating a comprehensive program model with in-house policy expertise, Rising Sun is amplifying its impact as a leader in equitable workforce development and climate resilience, actively advancing our vision of a just and sustainable future for all people and our planet.

Problem Statement

Systemic Racism

Systemic racism is a root cause of disparities in wealth, employment, and climate impact, further compounded by factors such as gender and income. Compounded systemic racism is why Rising Sun's direct services are necessary, and it drives who our programs and policy teams work with. In 2025, Rising Sun's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice (DEIJ) Committee finalized the organization's [Racial Equity Framework](#). In this Framework, we recognize that while Rising Sun's programs counteract the symptoms of inequity caused by systemic racism and support change at the individual and community levels, training, employment, and outreach alone will not end poverty or root out inequity. This fact is a key driver of Rising Sun's entry into policy advocacy work, mutually reinforced and informed by programs.

Additionally, we acknowledge that racism shapes the industries and sectors that Rising Sun is part of: nonprofits, construction, energy and environment, and workforce development. Overt interpersonal racism—and sexism—are still present in the construction industry, presenting barriers to women and BIPOC workers. While BIPOC workers, especially Black communities, were pivotal in shaping the labor movement, Black workers have historically been excluded from union pathways,

and while discrimination is no longer codified in official policies, there is a legacy of exclusion that some workers still feel to this day. Yet, the union construction industry offers rare and valuable career pathways to economic mobility and worker voice.

Similarly, we observe limited early career exposure and opportunities within the K-12 education system for green industries, and even deeper disinvestment when it comes to schools in BIPOC communities. Green careers and environmental nonprofit jobs have historically been held in majority by White, college-educated employees.

Further, systemic racism intersects with climate and energy: hazardous waste sites and facilities are located closer to BIPOC communities, which, on average, bear a higher energy burden. Yet those who are served by energy efficiency programs are disproportionately White, educated, and affluent. Energy efficiency programs typically present barriers to participation to those who could benefit most.

Identifying and understanding these systemic failures are the first steps in dismantling them. Rising Sun's Racial Equity Framework is core to its mission, vision, and Theory of Change.



Climate change

Climate change is not a future or scientific problem for most Californians. It is a right-now, everyday life problem.

But we don't always treat it that way, particularly for the low-income communities of color—priority communities—hit first and worst by climate change. The people most impacted by heat waves, fires, flooding, pollution, and unaffordable energy are largely the same communities that have been excluded from good jobs and shaped by decades of disinvestment, redlining, and proximity to industrial harm.

Too often in the climate movement, we talk about polar bears and politics and greenhouse gas emissions, when people just want reliable power, air that's safe to breathe, and a comfortable place to live that they can afford. As a result, the climate movement has not always brought enough people along with it. In Rising Sun's 30+ years of work, we've seen this play out in three key ways:

- **First**, we—as a movement—don't always do a great job of centering the people most impacted by problems, trusting them as decision makers, or making the work make sense for what they experience in their daily lives. We talk about rebates and ROI and technology when what matters to people is health, safety, and affordability.
- **Second**, we haven't always made green jobs accessible—and we've defined them pretty narrowly. Installing solar panels is a green job, but so is construction, architecture, project management, research, policy, and public health. Whatever we choose to call it—the climate sector, or the green or clean economy—it touches everything. We have to make that case better and more holistically to more people.
- **Third**, green jobs, especially those in the residential sector (the sector that accounts for 10% of GHG emissions in California) have not paid well enough for people to build a life on or offered essential benefits like healthcare. When we create green jobs that workers can't afford to take, that's neither a climate strategy nor an economic strategy.

When we take all of these things together, it doesn't work. Not at the scale we need it to.



But Rising Sun believes that good, green jobs can move the needle.

When we can hire local people and offer them good wages and benefits in sustainable careers, something shifts. Contractors can hire and retain great talent. Energy savings increase and persist. Individuals build economic power. The local economy grows. The racial wage gap disappears. The work gets done at the scale and quality we actually need. People build careers—lives—out of building a more livable planet.

Rising Sun believes that the most important question in the building of the clean economy is “Who builds it?” An economy built without priority communities at the center threatens to reproduce the same inequities that are present today, keeping low-income jobseekers and workers from securing meaningful employment, building wealth, and accessing clean, affordable energy.

At Rising Sun, we choose to center and prioritize the people most impacted by climate change across the Bay Area and Central California, and to solve for the things that impact their daily lives. We advocate for the jobs that make all of this possible to be ones people can actually live on, in the communities they live in. We believe that the climate economy belongs to everyone.



Mission, Vision & Values

Rising Sun's mission and vision were updated in 2020 and affirmed through the 2026 Theory of Change process:

MISSION

Building career pathways for economic equity and climate resilience.

VISION

A just and sustainable future for all people and our planet.

VALUES

Resilience

We focus on and start with the inherent value and strengths of individuals, communities, and our environment.

Appreciation

We foster a culture of gratitude and acknowledgment. We celebrate our personal and professional successes together and work actively to build each other up.

Transparency

We communicate openly and authentically, actively seek and incorporate feedback, and build in accountability.

Learning

We are a learning organization. We seek to continuously improve, demonstrate agility, and are flexible to meet shifting needs while staying true to our mission.

Equity

We believe that all individuals and communities should have the respect, opportunities, and material resources necessary to thrive. We strive to produce and sustain racial and gender equity in our programs, policies, and organizational culture.

Diversity, Inclusion, Justice, and Belonging

We know that diverse, equitable, just, and inclusive workplaces, where people from all backgrounds experience belonging, are inherently stronger, and that our team and leadership must be both talented and representative of the communities we serve. Our commitment to inclusion extends to all aspects of our programs.

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Hypothesis for Impact

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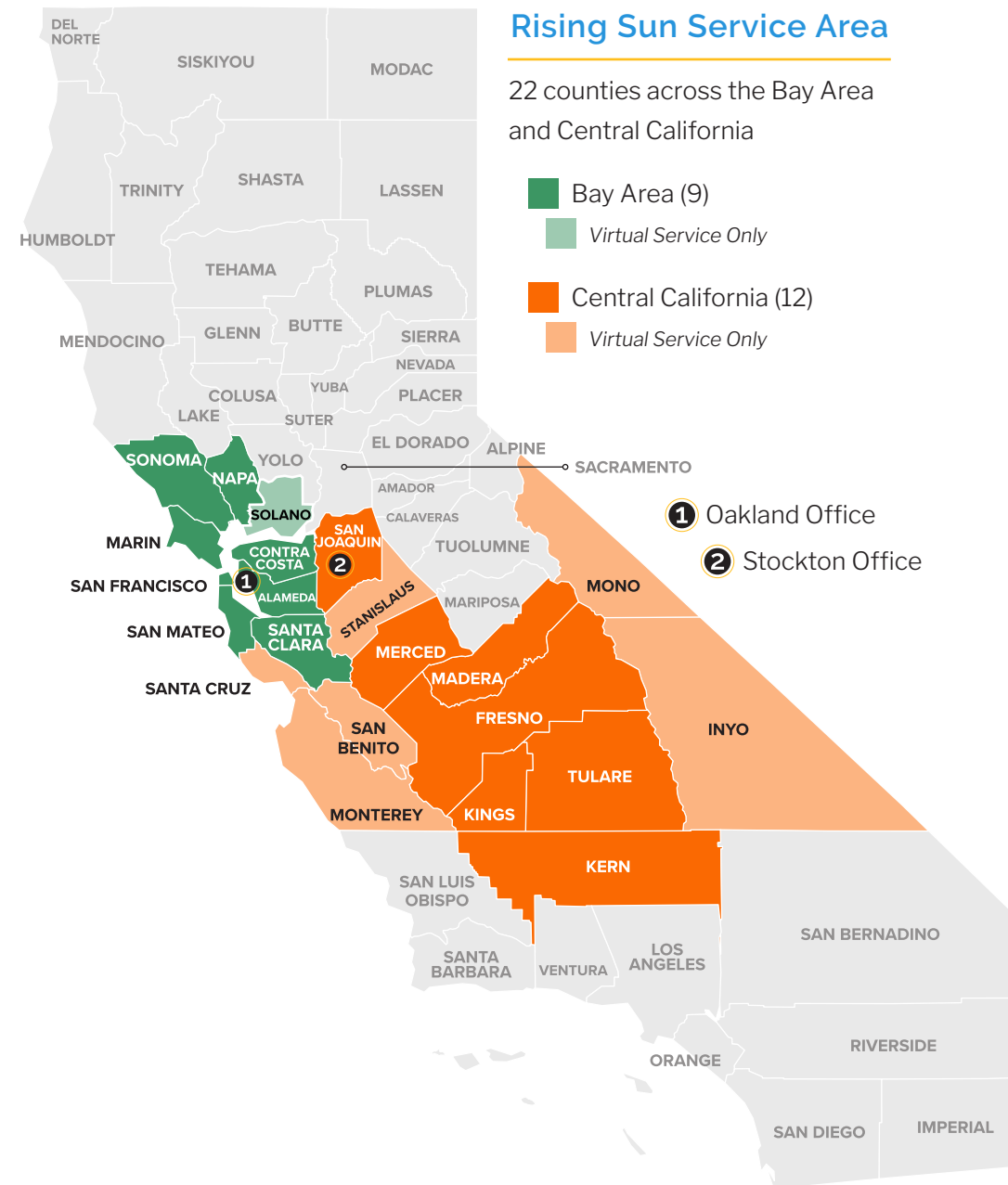
THEN priority communities will build economic equity, climate resilience, and power.

In the long term, Rising Sun's work is about **building power** with and for the low-income workers, jobseekers, residents, and communities Rising Sun works with: *the power* to build economic mobility and wealth, *the power* to resist and be resilient in the face of climate change, *the power* to generate and access affordable clean energy, *the power* to shape the safety and direction of the economy they contribute to, and *the power* to build and sustain a livable, equitable future.

Target Audience & Geography

While Rising Sun's individual programs and policy work serve and engage more specific audiences (service audience), as an organization, we prioritize low-income workers and jobseekers, as well as residents of **California's priority communities:** geographic areas that have a concentration of *underserved, marginalized, disadvantaged* (by environmental and/or economic factors), or *historically underinvested residents*, as our population of focus (target audience).

Rising Sun's geographic focus is California. Our programs operate in the Bay Area and Central California, and our policy work has local, regional, and statewide focus.



Program Overview

Today, Rising Sun operates two workforce development programs and one policy program. Climate Careers is a dual-impact youth development program that leverages direct employment, on-the-job training, experiential learning, and professional development interventions to both improve household and community climate resilience—through a service called a Green House Call—and prepare young people for careers in climate and beyond.

Opportunity Build is an apprenticeship readiness program that prepares low-income participants experiencing barriers to employment for careers in the union building trades and other High Road, training-aligned careers that build economic mobility and our region's climate infrastructure.

Finally, Rising Sun advocates for state and local policies and programs to equitably improve job quality, energy affordability, and climate resilience.

Our Policy Priorities are:

1. Affordable clean energy and good quality jobs should be accessible to everyone.
2. Workers in climate and infrastructure jobs should have the power to advocate for safe and healthy working and living conditions.
3. Advocating for High Road job quality advances equitable and sustainable outcomes for workers, employers, and communities.
4. All stakeholders have a role to play in collaboratively advancing climate resilience and access to high quality jobs.

Approach

The Rising Sun Theory of Change is anchored by five interconnected program components that inform how the organization operates across the Bay Area and Central California, regardless of program: Outreach and Partnerships, Direct Experience, Barrier Removal, High Road Pathways, and a Practice-to-Policy Framework. These five components are core to Rising Sun's unique approach of operating at the convergence of workforce, climate, and equity. They are informed by learnings from program delivery and direct participant feedback and experience, as well as grounded in industry best practice. All future programs will include these components as well: these are the core elements of our program model.

CORE COMPONENT #1: OUTREACH AND PARTNERSHIPS

Outreach and engagement to and with priority communities, as well as local partnerships, are defining characteristics of Rising Sun's work and approach. Rising Sun conducts targeted recruitment in and with low-income communities to find eligible participants for its training and employment programs, and grassroots outreach to residents to receive energy and water efficiency services. Partnerships with local governments, community-based organizations, advocacy coalitions, and employers are essential aspects of outreach and recruitment, as well as sources of future opportunities for program participants.

This work is grounded in equity: centering priority communities; dismantling barriers like language, transportation, childcare, and access; building and maintaining trust; and maintaining deep, ongoing local partnerships and relationships that are transformational rather than transactional. It's not "for"—it's with.

- **Climate Careers:** Youth and Seasonal Staff Recruitment; Externship Host Engagement, Green House Calls Outreach
- **Opportunity Build:** Participant Recruitment and Employer Engagement
- **Policy:** Coalitions; Staff and Participant Engagement

CORE COMPONENT #2: DIRECT EXPERIENCE

Direct, hands-on experience and experiential learning accelerates workforce readiness and builds confidence. Participants gain practical experience and professional networks that translate directly into stronger career prospects and increased confidence, while employers cultivate talent with real-world skills.

- **Climate Careers:** Earn-and-Learn Work Experience
- **Opportunity Build:** Hands-On Training
- **Policy:** Advocacy from Experience
- **Rising Sun:** Lived Experience

CORE COMPONENT #3: BARRIER REMOVAL

The participants in Rising Sun’s programs all have things in their lives that make it difficult to get a job and keep a job, known commonly as “barriers to employment.” Insufficient income is one of these barriers, limiting ability to access key resources, including those necessary for a job search (transportation, stable housing, childcare, training). In Climate Careers, barriers may also include lack of work experience and career exposure due to young age. In Opportunity Build, they may include justice-system impact, substance use disorder, lack of work history, and more. Systemically, participants may face barriers like employer bias or unwelcoming work environments. Program participation itself—investing time in training or being able to get there—can be a barrier. Rising Sun uses a trauma-informed, whole-person approach to work in partnership with each participant to meet them where they are and address and remove compounding barriers. Barriers also exist for Rising Sun’s target audience when it comes to accessing affordable, clean energy: lack of information, lack of contractor or program availability, issues of ineligibility, overly complicated applications, out-of-language materials, lack of trust, cost, and more. These barriers are also addressed through program design and policy.

- **Climate Careers:** Employment, Professional Development, Career Exposure, Mentoring, and Supportive Services, Green House Call Eligibility
- **Opportunity Build:** Case Management and Supportive Services
- **Policy:** Access



CORE COMPONENT #4: HIGH ROAD PATHWAYS

Rising Sun believes that good green jobs can advance both economic equity and climate resilience; this is the High Road. California labor code defines “High Road” as the following: *“A set of economic and workforce development strategies to achieve economic growth, economic equity, shared prosperity and a clean environment. The strategies include, but are not limited to, interventions that:*

- *Improve job quality and job access, including for women and people from underserved and underrepresented populations.*
- *Meet the skill and profitability needs of employers.*
- *Meet the economic, social, and environmental needs of the community.”*

Elements of a good quality job include livable wages, employer-provided benefits, a safe working environment, and opportunities for worker voice. A High Road job includes these elements, supports the needs of employers, and advances a clean, sustainable environment: true High Road work is climate work. The emphasis on High Road pathways that include all of these elements is a differentiator for Rising Sun, and climate remains a foundational element of everything we do across programs and policy, now and in the future.

- **Climate Careers:** Green Career Exposure and Experience; Climate Education
- **Opportunity Build:** Training and Placement for High Road Careers in Construction
- **Policy:** Labor Standard and High Road Advocacy
- **Rising Sun:** Workplace Excellence

CORE COMPONENT #5: PRACTICE-TO-POLICY FRAMEWORK

The practice-to-policy framework represents the clearest evolution of Rising Sun’s work since its 2013 Theory of Change: we envision programs and policy at Rising Sun as one, integrated strategy embedded across the other four core components. Programs deliver effective services for participants and priority communities, while policy secures and sustains the financial resources and equity protections that make mission impact possible. Programs offer the conditions for change and opportunity for individual participants and their communities, while policy advances the systems change needed to make programs like Rising Sun’s ultimately unnecessary. This framework depends on a deliberate feedback loop and a systems-level understanding of change. Programs provide the outcomes data, lived expertise, and trusted relationships that make Rising Sun’s advocacy persuasive; policy in turn protects the public investments that not only fund and sustain Rising Sun’s programs and those like them, but also the regulations, laws, and protections that address and ultimately reverse the root causes of inequality, poverty, and disproportionate climate impact. This comes back to building power with priority communities: the power to generate economic mobility and wealth, the power to be resilient to climate change, and the power to build and sustain a livable, equitable future.

- **Climate Careers:** Equitable Energy Efficiency Programs
- **Opportunity Build:** Women in Construction
- **Policy:** Policy Priority Advocacy, Staff and Participant Engagement

Evolution

Our 2026 Theory of Change reflects over 30 years of work, impact, and learning since Rising Sun's inception, and builds on that strong foundation to prepare the organization for what comes next. It incorporates changes in Rising Sun's focus and purpose since our 2013 Theory of Change, most notably the establishment of Rising Sun as a workforce (people)-first organization, our commitment to racial equity, an updated mission and vision (2020) and the practice-to-policy framework.

Through the Theory of Change process, Rising Sun staff identified multiple opportunities to both

increase the impact and reach of existing programs and explore new programs that drive our Theory of Change and leverage the five components of our program model. For instance: **Climate Careers** can explore credentials and college credit for its participants and better differentiate curriculum and responsibilities for returners/alumni; **Opportunity Build** can explore longer-term case management and job retention services, supported by increased staffing, for graduates; **policy** can mobilize participants and staff as community organizers and support voter engagement; and opportunities exist to develop pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship pathways for other High Road industries.

Outcomes

Overview

Rising Sun's Theory of Change delivers outcomes across three areas of long-term impact: **Economic Equity, Increased Power, and Climate Resilience**. Collectively, these categories are a measurable and durable expression of Rising Sun's mission to build career pathways for economic equity and climate resilience with priority communities across California.

Outcomes in these three impact areas are produced by the five core components of Rising Sun's model: *Outreach and Partnerships, Direct Experience, Barrier Removal, High Road Pathways*, and a *Practice-to-Policy Framework*.

Economic Equity is about individual and community prosperity—family-sustaining wages and wealth-building for participants, and more equitable access to High Road jobs for priority communities. **Increased Power** is about both individual agency—voice, dignity, self-determination, and the confidence to advocate—and collective, community power built through networks, coalitions, and a stronger seat at the policy table. **Climate Resilience** is about addressing the needs of priority communities as they relate to climate and social injustice—energy affordability, healthier homes, and access to clean energy for those who bear the heaviest burdens—while also contributing to the larger work of saving our planet.





Conclusion

As Rising Sun works towards our vision of a just and sustainable future for all people and our planet, this Theory of Change will act as an anchor, evolving with our work to guide future strategy, new program development, and evaluation of our impact.



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