



Hello, my name is Robert Hazen, and I am from the most remote and rural part of the state and country—Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, where poverty rates are high and so are food prices and utility rates. UPPCO, the electric utility that services most of the western Upper Peninsula, has increased rates over the last two decades so that we now pay more for electricity than almost anywhere in the United States (67% more than the Michigan average). No one should have to choose between paying their electric bill and buying food or medicine, but this is the unfortunate aspect of living here where incomes are often low, housing is old and inefficient, and electric costs are so high. Especially for elders and small children this endangers health, and sometimes becomes a matter of life and death. Such high rates are especially unfair when utilities do not allow solutions like community solar.

Community solar allows customers to purchase shares or panels in a community solar array and receive credits on their monthly bill for the power these panels produce. It’s a way of offsetting monthly electric costs. Community projects open solar access to lower income people and renters by reducing buy-in costs, increasing economies of scale, and choosing a good location. At the same time, community solar encourages customers to be energy efficient; reduces greenhouse gas emissions; and lowers the number of late payments and accounts in delinquency.

I am a member of the Lac Vieux Desert Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians. Being an Indigenous American, I was taught to be a good steward of the environment and practice sustainability. However, being an Indigenous American comes at a price. The historical and ongoing abuse and discrimination our people have suffered limits social mobility and means that poverty rates are disproportionately high. My father is a good example. He was taken from his family at five years old and placed in a Catholic boarding school in Harbor Springs where he was physically, verbally, and sexually abused. After graduating, he was drafted into the Vietnam War. When he returned, my father—like many Indigenous Americans—felt disconnected from his tribe, his home, and other people. In the halls of that boarding school and on the battlefields of Vietnam, he left behind his language, his culture, and his spirit. My father let his post-traumatic stress disorder consume his life and the lives of his family. He turned to alcohol to numb the pains of his trauma, drowning out his family and his responsibilities. Eventually a PTSD flashback forced him to retire early, and our income became very limited. My mother was forced to put a proverbial bandage over everything and make sure my brother and I were taken care of. With bank accounts sometimes drained to feed an addiction, we struggled to make ends meet.

My father eventually sought treatment and got healthy. He is the most powerful person I know because he uses his story and the tools he was taught to help others. He is a veteran representative in our community helping people struggling with alcoholism and substance abuse. He created a healing group to tell his story as a survivor of the boarding school system. I, like my father, want to use my voice to make change, and a good place to start is addressing problems in our energy system.

Community solar would allow Michiganders to invest in green energy and save money on electric bills at the same time. It could help families like mine. On October 27th, I gave testimony before the Michigan House Energy Committee in support of House Bills 4715 and 4716 which would pass community solar enabling policy to give consumers the freedom to choose how they get their energy, the ability to lower their utility bills, and to build a more sustainable future. I did this because I remember where I came from, and just how bad my family struggled. It would not have been possible for a family like mine to build our own solar array, but we could have found a way to invest in shares in a community system so that we could earn credits on electric bills, and this would have helped to alleviate the financial burden of unaffordable electricity. That is why it is so important that we pass these bills and open access to community solar for all Michiganders, and I will do everything in my power to make it happen. Now is the time. The Energy Committee is serious about these bills now, and they need to hear from all of us to give them that final nudge to move the bills forward.

Federally-recognized tribes will be ready to use their autonomy to develop community solar projects. But we need communities and organizations across Michigan to work together to make this more widely accessible. Will you join our team to make community solar available to families like mine?