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June 4, 2021

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS: Communicating a Just, Equitable and Democratic Clean Energy Transition in the South

Summary

A network of energy democracy and energy justice organizations in the South seek to partner with strategic communications experts to evaluate current terminology, develop and test messages and create a communications plan tailored for southern audiences in order to advance an equitable and inclusive transition to a clean energy economy in our region.

Background

A network of environmental justice organizations and clean energy advocates in North Carolina, Tennessee and neighboring states are seeking to strengthen our communications infrastructure to grow the movement for an equitable and inclusive transition to a clean energy economy (i.e. energy democracy) in the South. This grant-funded project is part of an integrated grassroots organizing, policy advocacy, and communications effort aimed at accelerating the clean energy transition in Tennessee, North Carolina, and the broader South in a manner that centers on-the-ground community leadership, environmental justice, and democratic control of energy systems.

The goals of the overall effort are to:

1. Provide information resources, networks and organizing capacity to support underserved communities — particularly low-wealth, on-the ground, and Black, Indigenous and communities of color — in envisioning and advocating for a clean energy transition that centers their needs.
2. Work with strategic communications experts to evaluate current terminology, develop messages, narratives, and a communications plan that are effective for southern audiences and advance the values of energy democracy on which our coalitions and work are built.
3. Redesign the EnergyDemocracyYall.org website and social media accounts to serve as a regional movement hub, in addition to creating compelling communications resources like short videos that teach, inspire, and offer equitable energy solutions for our region.



Within the context of this larger effort, **our network seeks to partner with a professional communications firm to accomplish the second goal**, including audience mapping, message development and testing, and a communications plan tailored to southern audiences. We are simultaneously releasing an RFP to accomplish the third goal; respondents that believe they are well-positioned to take on both projects in a manner that maximizes efficiencies and synergies are welcome to respond with a combined proposal.

In close collaboration with network partners, Appalachian Voices will serve as primary contact, fiscal agent and project manager for this project. The networks with which we are collaborating include the Tennessee Valley Energy Democracy Movement, Energy Justice North Carolina, and the Advancing Equity and Opportunity collaborative.

Appalachian Voices is a nonprofit advocacy organization that works to achieve an Appalachia with healthy, intact ecosystems and advance a just transition to a generative and equitable clean energy economy. We have 30 staff members located in offices in Boone, N.C., Charlottesville, Va., Norton, Va., Knoxville, Tenn., and Durham, N.C.

Scope of Services

All proposals should describe a scope of services that is consistent with the \$35,000 budget (see Budget section below) that has already been raised for this project. Because there may be an opportunity to leverage additional funds for more comprehensive services and more sophisticated message testing (e.g., use of additional polling, focus groups, etc...), we invite respondents to provide a “Tier 2” scope of services that goes beyond what is feasible within a \$35,000 budget.

There is no budget limit for the “Tier 2” scope of services, although respondents should be mindful that our network is comprised of non-profit organizations that face very real fundraising challenges. Nevertheless, we would like to hear respondents’ honest assessment of what services an optimal communications plan would entail. Proposals should clearly identify the “Tier 1” scope of services (those that are possible within the \$35,000 budget) and provide a rationale and itemized budget for any additional “Tier 2” services that the respondent recommends.

All proposals should, at a minimum, include the following services (or a clear rationale for alternative services if the respondent believes there are more effective solutions)

1. **Strategic audit** of regional energy democracy practitioners and stakeholders to identify shared goals, priorities, target audiences, opponents, obstacles and communications challenges. This audit should include both regional and national stakeholders that we will assist in identifying and may involve one or more workshops hosted by our network to facilitate dialogue and information gathering. The goal would be to establish clarity on the “Why” (goals and priorities of regional actors’ work in the arena of energy democracy/justice), “Who” (mapping the key audiences needed to accomplish those goals), and “What” (actions we need those audiences to take).
2. **Messaging audit** of language and terminology used by proponents of an equitable clean energy transition such as: energy democracy, energy justice, energy choice, energy burden, energy security/insecurity, just transition, affordable energy as a human right, and a race-class narrative as it applies to energy. What language is (and is not) working to generate favorable stories in the media and social media engagement? What language

- does the consulting team believe is underutilized based on their research, insights and experience in the field?
3. **Message testing** of key messages and narratives to evaluate their effectiveness in inspiring members of identified target audiences to support local action for an equitable and inclusive clean energy transition. While we invite proposals that recommend traditional methods such as focus groups and polling to evaluate the effectiveness of different messages with various target audiences, we also encourage the use of existing market research and creative alternative approaches where feasible to provide useful message testing within the more restrictive “Tier 1” budget.
 4. **Communications plan** that includes:
 1. A basic “language toolbox” for use with mainstream and social media, decision makers and general audiences that includes both “problem” and “solution” components, as well as key vocabulary to use or avoid. This should also include recommended language for a general “call to action” for energy democracy in the South.
 2. An overall message for communicating about energy democracy in the South. This should include evaluating the phrase “energy democracy” itself, in terms of its impact on movement-building as well as general recommendations on message language and framing that is most effective and/or least alienating for target audiences, decision-makers and southerners as a whole.
 3. Message recommendations for key target audiences that were identified in Goal #1 above. What values should we connect to for each of these audiences in order to move them into action? What are some specific language examples that would be effective in connecting with those audiences?

Anticipated Selection Schedule

Release of RFP: **June 4, 2021**
Optional Conference and Q&A Session: **June 22, 2021**
Deadline for Submission: **July 9, 2021**
Applicant Interviews: **July 19-21, 2021**
Anticipated Decision Date: **July 30, 2021**

Submission of Proposals

The RFP will be posted at appvoices.org/energydemocracy/message-rfp/ and can be downloaded directly as of June 4. Respondents to this RFP should send a PDF via email, and may submit supplemental material in any format, to matt@appvoices.org by July 9, 2021.

Timeline

Deadline for messaging toolkit (based on a “Tier 1” scope of services): **October 30, 2021**. If respondents believe an extended timeline is required for a “Tier 2” scope of services, please propose an alternative timeline that includes key benchmarks and deadlines.



Elements of Proposal

- Description of the firm that includes a general overview, names and credentials of the team and number and demographic composition of employees
- A summary of the firm's strengths and experience as they relate to story-based narrative development, message research and development in the areas of energy and climate, economic equity and/or racial justice
- Case studies of similar message development projects, along with at least two references
- A "Tier 1" work plan that outlines critical tasks, milestones and deadlines, including the number and general characteristics of stakeholders to be included in the strategic audit
- A suggested "Tier 2" work plan that outlines any additional message testing and other project components with associated deadlines that respondents would recommend
- What will be required from Appalachian Voices and our network partners
- Itemized budget and list of deliverables

Evaluation Criteria

The successful respondent will:

- Have been continuously operating as an agency for a minimum of 24 months
- Possess the necessary experience, knowledge, skills, and diversity of team members' identities and experiences to provide these services
- Be competitive in their cost of services
- Have experience working with diverse coalitions and managing multiple perspectives and priorities. Be able to demonstrate sensitivity to the racial, socioeconomic, and gender diversity of our networks
- Understand climate, energy, and economic and racial justice issues generally
- Is either located in North Carolina, Tennessee or a neighboring state or can demonstrate experience with and understanding of the culture of the South

Budget (inclusive of both direct and indirect costs)

Tier 1 (message development only): Approximately \$35,000

Tier 2 (including message testing, etc): Undetermined (see scope of work)

