

Program gets solar power to residents in struggling Fresno neighborhoods

By Andrea Castillo and Mark Grossi



Salvador and Ricarda Mendoza, a Fresno couple, have received a solar system for free, as part of a state program to help low-income people living in poor areas. JOHN WALKER — THE FRESNO BEE | [Buy Photo](#)

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- *New program uses cap-and-trade money to fund energy efficiency home upgrades*
- *California Environmental Protection Agency ranks many Fresno neighborhoods among the riskiest places to live*
- *Savings will put Salvador Mendoza of southeast Fresno closer to affording expensive medication*



Southeast Fresno resident Salvador Mendoza can't afford the \$2,000-a-month medication for his lung disease, but starting Thursday he will be closer to relief.

Mendoza's family is one of 20 in Fresno expected to receive a rooftop solar panel system courtesy of a pilot program aimed at helping poor, vulnerable communities save money on electricity costs while combating climate change. The silver panels reflected under the Wednesday morning sun, shining brightly on the rooftop. The installation will be completed today.

[Fresno Economic Opportunities Commission](#) is managing the program statewide through the [California Department of Community Services and Development](#). The pilot aims to install more than 100 SunPower Corporation solar panel systems in Fresno, Sacramento, Merced, Madera, Tulare and Los Angeles counties.

The California Environmental Protection Agency ranks the Mendozas' neighborhood among the riskiest places in the state to live, making it eligible for money to install greenhouse gas reduction measures, such as solar panels.

Fresno alone has more than a dozen of the worst 20 places, primarily downtown, south and west. Other San Joaquin Valley hot spots include neighborhoods in Madera, Merced and Tulare counties.

Broken down by census tracts, Cal-EPA analyzed environmental risks throughout California. The analysis, called [CalEnviro Screen](#), looks at more than 20 risk factors, including poverty, education, unemployment, air pollution and drinking water.

The lowest-ranking areas are called disadvantaged communities — places where life expectancy is often much lower than in more affluent areas. The state will spend \$75 million for solar panels and energy efficiencies in these areas this year.

Officials say 1,780 low-income homes statewide are expected to receive rooftop solar panel systems through this funding. Those homes make up a portion of the 17,700 homes in disadvantaged communities receiving energy efficient upgrades, such as insulation, low-flow shower heads and energy-efficient lighting. Another 90 homes in Fresno and 800 statewide will get solar hot water heaters, piloted through a separately funded program last year.

"This is a real, tangible benefit for disadvantaged communities," said Arsenio Mataka, Cal-EPA assistant secretary for environmental justice and tribal affairs.

The money comes from the state's [cap-and trade-program](#) to reduce greenhouse gases. The state sets a cap for emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. Businesses that can't achieve the cap must buy credits from businesses that have made more than enough reductions.

The state now has more than \$800 million to invest in energy efficiency, public transit, affordable housing and other greenhouse gas-cutting measures. At least 25% of it must be used to help the most disadvantaged communities.

"These investments will help power a brighter, healthier and more prosperous future for Fresno and for cities like it across California," said Senate President Pro Tem Kevin de Leon, D-Los Angeles, who was scheduled to attend a public unveiling of the project today.

Wednesday morning in one of Fresno's most pollution-burdened communities, Mendoza sat in his living room clad in a cowboy hat and jeans. The 66-year-old spent most of his life as a farmworker before getting a job at a metal recycling plant in Fresno around eight years ago.

He didn't expect to end up jobless and suffering from idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, a life-threatening disease that impedes his ability to breathe. He also has a fungal infection in his lungs.

Reyna Mendoza worries about her father's disease and how they will afford the medication to extend his life.

"If this illness progresses, there will come a time when he cannot breathe anymore," she said in Spanish.

Until late last year, there was no treatment for the disease. The Federal Drug Administration [recently approved two](#)

[drugs](#) shown to significantly slow its progression.

But the combo costs \$90,000 per year. Insurance will cover all but \$2,000 a month for one. Mendoza can't afford even that. He lives on about \$1,800 per month from Social Security and unemployment benefits after losing his job when the disease progressed.

Mendoza lives with his wife Ricarda and her 85-year-old mother. Ricarda Mendoza, 61, works at a packinghouse, making about \$7,000 for the season. The family's income stretches enough to pay for necessities. They are applying for assistance to cover Salvador Mendoza's medication through a chronic illness support organization.

The Mendozas applied for the solar panel program after hearing about it through a friend of their son who works for Pacific Gas & Electric Co.

The family expects to save about 75% on their electricity bills — more than \$1,000 per year. The savings won't cover Salvador Mendoza's medications, but they are a start.

"I am glad," Ricarda Mendoza said in Spanish, "because now we will have more money for my husband's medical expenses."

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