

CASE STUDY: EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES

NextEnergy's Path to Inclusive Innovation

INTRODUCTION

NextEnergy, a Detroit-based non-profit organization based in Detroit that works with innovators to try to accelerate smarter, cleaner, and more accessible green solutions, has been at the forefront of driving sustainable mobility initiatives within the region.

Partnered with the Office of Future Mobility and Electrification (OFME) in the GEM Coalition, NextEnergy is dedicated to integrating equitable practices into their work to ensure that advancements benefit all communities.



NEXTENERGY'S EQUITABLE INTENTIONS

In December, 2023, NextEnergy team members participated in an introductory Equity Sequence[®] workshop convened by the GEM Coalition's DEIJ Officer, Jeannine Gant, and facilitated by Tidal Equality's Dr. Kristen Liesch.

Prior to that, NextEnergy had a strong commitment to equitable outcomes, reflected in their mission. However, they recognized the need for improvement, especially in engaging smaller or disadvantaged communities, or, historically excluded communities (HECs).

Projects like the Michigan Next Cities aimed to address this gap by investing in infrastructure improvements based on community needs.



CASE STUDY: EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES

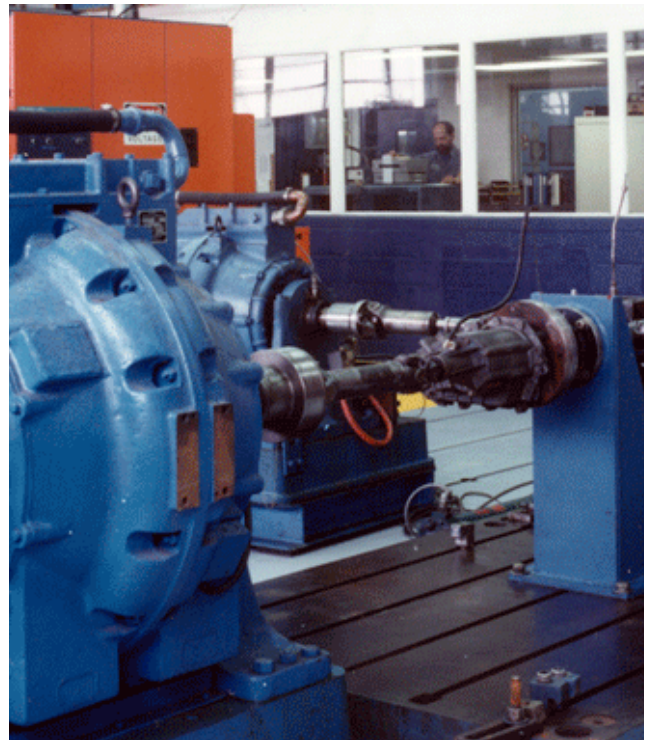
NextEnergy's Path to Inclusive Innovation

IMPORTANCE OF EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Lauren Mattar, a program manager at NextEnergy, emphasized the significance of advancing equity and inclusion, citing the disproportionate impact of climate issues on disadvantaged communities. She underscored the importance of bridging gaps to prevent widening disparities:

“Disadvantaged communities bear the brunt of environmental harm while contributing the least to it. Conversely, more affluent communities generate the most pollution but face fewer consequences. Take electric vehicles, for instance. Many can't afford them, perpetuating inequality. We must halt this trend, ensuring equitable access to clean solutions. It's imperative we include all communities on the journey to a sustainable future.”

Lauren Mattar (she/her)
Technical Program Manager, PMP



CASE STUDY: EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES

NextEnergy's Path to Inclusive Innovation

APPLICATION OF EQUITY SEQUENCE®

During the introduction to Equity Sequence® workshop, Lauren and her colleague Ryan Michael (at the Office of Future Mobility and Electrification) applied the framework to their existing test sites and infrastructure improvement plans and needs assessments. They realized the need to broaden their engagement beyond existing stakeholders and involve local communities in decision-making processes.

In particular, they noted that the needs assessments - like many consultation vehicles - had been designed and informed by the perspectives, opinions, and insights of senior leaders and already-connected industry stakeholders.

However, the objective of the improvement of the test sites is so that they can meet the needs of a diversity of stakeholders, both regionally and beyond, solidifying the region's reputation as the go-to for electrification technology and innovation testing.

In particular, the test sites should serve innovators, small businesses, entrepreneurs, creatives and industry stakeholders who aren't already connected in the testing network.



CASE STUDY: EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES

NextEnergy's Path to Inclusive Innovation

INSIGHTS AND PLANS FOR CHANGE

Through the Equity Sequence® exercise, NextEnergy uncovered that the needs and perspectives of these diverse target users hadn't necessarily informed the needs assessment to-date, and this presented an opportunity to engage with local communities, establish trust, and solicit their perspectives. Immanently, there are plans for pillar lead OFME to onboard new employees whose roles will include the mandate to develop an equity-focused approach to diversify engagement.

“Through implementing the Equity Sequence®, we realized that we may not be engaging with all the necessary stakeholders. While we receive feedback from those already involved with the test sites, we're missing input from those unaware of or excluded from the process. This oversight could mean that the technology favored by established players differs from what smaller startups or historically excluded communities require.”

One idea that emerged was to find ways to partner with organizations or groups who already have network connections in areas where there is a greater concentration of HECs:

“We need to explore alternative approaches instead of solely relying on feedback from current test site users. This could involve initiating new surveys or communication channels to engage with local communities surrounding the test sites. For instance, considering Kettering University in Flint, Michigan - we should actively engage with existing community in groups in Flint as a historically excluded community (HEC).”

Additional ideas included:

- Collecting data about the test site users and tracking them over time, ensuring the data collection includes demographic information that could indicate to what extent HECs are gaining access.
- Taking a closer look at various criteria sets, including criteria for additional funding from the Office of Future Mobility and Electrification team (which has a separate Grant program that they can provide grants to applicants who would like to utilize those test sites but need financial support.)

CASE STUDY: EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES

NextEnergy's Path to Inclusive Innovation

IMPACT AND LESSONS LEARNED

Implementing these ideas could lead to more diverse engagement at test sites and foster creative innovations:

“Engaging potential test site users from historically excluded communities (HECs) and understanding their needs will help us identify any existing gaps in the current services and offerings, as well as opportunities for these communities. By investing in addressing these gaps, we aim to foster more diverse engagement at the test sites, leading to the emergence of more unique and creative ideas. Providing space for these individuals and organizations to test, ideate, prototype, and validate their ideas can lead to more innovative solutions for global mobility and environmental challenges.”

The experience of applying the Equity Sequence® reinforced to Lauren and Ryan the importance of intentional, equitable decision-making and highlighted the potential for real transformation within the Detroit region.

“Using the Equity Sequence® was a valuable reminder that our intentions don't always align with our actions or outcomes, even in a mission-driven organization. While most people aren't intentionally excluding historically marginalized communities, good intentions alone aren't enough. It underscores the importance of being intentional and questioning ‘was this designed with equity in mind?’”



CONCLUSION

NextEnergy's journey toward equitable innovation exemplifies their commitment to driving positive change. By embracing the principles of the Equity Sequence®, NextEnergy and the coalition as a whole has the opportunity to create a more inclusive and sustainable future for all:

“Implementing Equity Sequence® across the coalition would significantly enhance our ability to fulfill our mission. It has the potential to bring about real transformation in the region.”

RESOURCES

[NextEnergy](#)
[Lauren Mattar](#)
[GEM Coalition](#)
[Tidal Equality](#)
[Equity Sequence®](#)

