



Economic Recovery Begins at Home: How to Create 1 Million Clean Energy Jobs by Retrofitting US Housing Stock

President Joe Biden campaigned and won on a sweeping climate plan that promised to deliver good jobs while advancing racial and economic justice. At the heart of his governing agenda lies his [promise](#) to create 1 million jobs by upgrading 4 million buildings and weatherizing 2 million homes.

As President Biden has acknowledged, efforts to modernize, decarbonize, and revitalize the US economy must literally begin at home—through major investments in clean, energy-efficient, and healthy housing. But Congress has yet to articulate a detailed plan to flesh out the mechanics of Biden’s commitments.

[Economic Recovery Begins at Home](#)—published by the Roosevelt Institute and Evergreen Collaborative—is a policy roadmap to turn President Biden’s ambitious retrofitting and home-upgrade agenda for American homes into a legislative reality.

Authored by Bracken Hendricks, Kara Saul Rinaldi, Mark Wolfe, Cassandra Lovejoy, and Wes Gobar, the report outlines clear, compelling, and detailed policies Congress can center as it crafts economic recovery packages and implements Biden’s “Build Back Better” plan: policies for pandemic response, low-income energy assistance, market rate rebates, and financing tools that would create good jobs and modernize the nation’s electricity grid—in urban and rural regions alike.

The [Economic Recovery Begins at Home](#) plan, which builds on existing programs, is achievable within a budget reconciliation package and should be a central component of any infrastructure and stimulus efforts.

The Climate, Economic, and Public Health Urgency of Housing Investments

In order to cut climate pollution, we need to equip millions of homes and appliances to use less energy. The buildings sector accounts for one-third of all US greenhouse gas emissions. This year’s winter storms also alerted millions of Americans to the need for a disaster-resilient and 100 percent clean electricity grid, which the new administration has pledged to achieve by 2035.

A national mobilization to better insulate homes, cut utility bills, and bring smart, clean energy technology online is a core part of reaching these wider goals. Such a plan is not only efficient climate policy; it is also an effective stimulus. Building retrofits create well-paying jobs and cut energy bills and housing costs for struggling families.

Such investment in US homes (which now double as workplaces for many) would also dramatically improve public health during the pandemic by reducing indoor air pollution and extreme weather exposure.

These efficient and healthy home retrofits also offer an opportunity to combat entrenched patterns of structural racial and economic injustice. Discriminatory housing markets systemically place Black and brown families into older housing units that are more likely to be energy-inefficient and riddled with environmental hazards. Thus, Black and brown families often face significantly higher utility bills and risk of utility shutoffs even as their overall energy usage remains the same or less than their wealthier white counterparts. Their homes are also more likely to have heightened levels of indoor air pollution and lead contamination, causing a well-documented spate of negative physical and mental health effects.

President Biden has pledged to allocate 40 percent of federal green investments to disadvantaged communities as part of his environmental justice commitments. Rebuilding our nation's housing stock therefore offers a powerful avenue to solve several interrelated problems at once.

To Rebuild US Housing Stock and Create 1 Million Jobs, Congressional Stimulus Must:

1. Ensure Safe and Healthy Housing during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

In 2020, the pandemic left an estimated one in five households behind on their utility bills, with more at risk of shutoffs as moratoriums expire. This winter's storm-induced blackouts have also demonstrated that working electricity and insulated homes are literally a matter of life or death. To help pay energy bills, Congress should take immediate action to:

- Increase funding and expand access for energy assistance and weatherization to ensure that impacted people aren't forced to lose access to lifesaving utility services during the pandemic;
- Establish flexibility in qualification criteria and spending for the Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP) and Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) during the COVID-19 pandemic; and
- Allow Medicaid resources to support building upgrades that create healthier home environments in order to reduce health care costs from preventable illness and eliminate environmental hazards.

2. Expand Housing Affordability through Low Income Weatherization.

In addition to lowering utility bills, energy efficiency improvements also make housing more affordable. These investments increase the value of homes and the purchasing power of working families. Congress can permanently make housing more affordable, upgrade health and safety, put money back in the pockets of low- and moderate-income families, and support President Biden's promise to invest in disadvantaged communities. To do this, Congress should:

- Permanently expand and modernize the LIHEAP program;

- Permanently expand and modernize WAP; and
- Fully fund the greening of public and multifamily affordable rental housing.

3. Upgrade Homes across the US—at Every Income Level and in Every Region.

To lower building sector emissions and broaden stimulus, everyone should be able to retrofit their homes to make them greener, healthier, more valuable, and more affordable. Congress should target middle-income households with a mix of rebates, tax credits, and access to subsidized loans. These incentives should:

- Establish consumer-facing, point-of-sale, performance-based rebates to offset the cost of retrofits;
- Build on existing tax incentives that have proven effective in influencing consumer behavior; and
- Expand access to capital through transparent and accountable grant and loan programs.

4. Create Good Jobs and Training Opportunities for a New Energy Workforce.

Building retrofits are an efficient stimulus policy because they create stable, long-term careers that cannot be outsourced. To unlock job creation, the government should build clear pathways into the industry, invest in the energy efficiency labor market, and expand the capacity of both small businesses and union contractors. To do this, the government should:

- Create high-paying and high-quality jobs with career ladders, job training, and certification;
- Broaden contractor networks capable of scaling with rapidly increasing market demand; and
- Launch a national Clean Energy Jobs Corps with pathways into long-term employment.

5. Modernize, Stabilize, and Decarbonize the Electricity Grid through Building Innovation.

Energy efficiency is critical to President Biden's goal of a 100 percent clean energy economy. The government can support a more resilient and cleaner grid by integrating investments in our homes ("behind the utility meter" technology) with investment in our grid infrastructure. This would drive innovation in building technologies and help mitigate blackouts caused by extreme weather. Increased investment in smart and resilient homes, and greater use of distributed electricity generation from solar and energy storage, can help harden our nation's grid networks and reduce the cost and toll of human suffering from disasters like those experienced across the South during the 2021 winter storms. Specifically, the government can:

- Establish policies to ensure data quality, access, and interoperability in partnership with utilities;

- Establish funding and pilot projects to demonstrate Grid-interactive Efficient Buildings (GEB); and
- Incorporate efficiency deeply within policies to advance national clean electricity standards.

Upgrading US housing stock is essential for the long term—and achievable in the near term. To build back better, we can and must begin at home.

ABOUT THE ROOSEVELT INSTITUTE

The Roosevelt Institute is a think tank, a student network, and the nonprofit partner to the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum that, together, are learning from the past and working to redefine the future of the American economy. Focusing on corporate and public power, labor and wages, and the economics of race and gender inequality, the Roosevelt Institute unifies experts, invests in young leaders, and advances progressive policies that bring the legacy of Franklin and Eleanor into the 21st century.

ABOUT EVERGREEN COLLABORATIVE

Evergreen Collaborative is leading the fight to put bold climate action at the top of America's agenda, implement an all-out mobilization to defeat climate change, and create millions of jobs in a clean energy economy. We empower climate and community leaders, and advocate for policymakers to adopt the urgent climate policies that science demands.