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# Consumer watchdog helps solar roof shoppers cut through the confusion



Jaime Zambrano, right, and Octavio Garcia install solar panels on top of the Plenge family home in Elmhurst on Aug. 13, 2024. (Stacey Wescott/Chicago Tribune)



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Chicago Tribune

PUBLISHED: September 3, 2024 at 5:00 a.m.

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Dawn Stockmo wanted solar panels for her Oak Park Victorian, but a funny thing happened when she and her husband started calling installers.

“When we talked to one, all of a sudden we started getting lots and lots of calls from other installers,” said the retired affordable housing director. “It just got to be absolutely overwhelming.”

At a time when customers complain about aggressive sales practices, confusing offers and lack of transparency, going solar can be daunting, but there are government-backed programs that smooth the way.

For Stockmo, help arrived in the form of an e-newsletter from her village.



Oak Park was spreading the word about Solar Switch Chicagoland, a group-buy program offered by a partnership that includes the nonprofit consumer

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The program — formerly known as Grow Solar Chicagoland — has helped more than 600 customers get solar roofs from vetted contractors in the past five years. For those signing up now, the group discount for an average solar roof is expected to be about \$4,600.



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[Solar Switch](#) customers interviewed by the Tribune said that the program simplified the purchase process, saved them money and offered the chance to work with entities they knew and trusted.

“The best thing was honestly the peace of mind,” said Dan Portincaso, an English professor who lives in Oak Park. “Because it was through this group that was affiliated with the government, because everything was vetted, I was like, ‘It’s all good. I’m not going to get scammed.’”

Chicagoan George Witcek said he and his wife were planning to get a solar roof for the 1910 stucco home in Old Irving Park where they live with their two young daughters, but Solar Switch probably accelerated the purchase by four or five years.

“The biggest reason was probably the savings,” he said. Solar Switch offered a discount of about \$4,000 at the time, and sure enough, when he had a big-name installer bid on the job, the Solar Switch offer “was almost spot-on \$4,000 cheaper.”

Witcek said he got about \$28,000 worth of solar panels for \$24,000, with an out-of-pocket cost of only about \$8,000, after federal and state incentives.

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"I'm going to pay (my investment) back and then for 20-plus years I'm going to have free energy, essentially, which is exciting," he said.

## Filling a need



Jaime Zambrano, right, and Octavio Garcia install solar panels on top of the Plenge family home in Elmhurst on Aug. 13, 2024. (Stacey Wescott/Chicago Tribune)

With federal and state solar tax credits and rebates reducing the price of rooftop panels for Illinois residents by up to about 60%, some customers are making the leap because they believe the financial incentives will never be better.

In fact, [one incentive is already set to decline](#): Starting in 2025, the state's investor-owned utilities, including ComEd, will offer smaller bill credits for households exporting solar energy to the grid, leaving new solar roof owners with potentially smaller electric bill savings than those who got their solar roofs by the end of 2024.

When the change goes into effect, the estimated electric-bill savings over the lifetime of a solar roof will decrease by up to 35%, depending on the size of a



At a time of record global temperatures, customers also cite climate change as a reason for going solar.

“It’s something that’s upon us and I can’t control what others do, but I can control what I do, and I want to, you know, ‘Be the change you want to see,’” Witcheck said.

But if there are incentives and motivations, there are also barriers.

Customers such as Tania Kadakia of the west Logan Square neighborhood have told the Tribune that getting a solar roof can be challenging and time-consuming.

“There’s lots of people who want to do this,” she said in December. “My gut tells me that part of the reason there aren’t more solar panels on peoples’ houses is people start to get into it and they’re like, ‘I don’t even know what this is. I don’t know what I’m signing. I don’t know how to approach this. I don’t even know if these are the right panels.’”

CUB has been flooded by questions from people who are interested in solar but overwhelmed by all the information that they are getting, according to Executive Director Sarah Moskowitz.



Barbara Rykaczewski and her husband, Dan Portincaso, at their Oak Park home on Aug. 13, 2024. The couple got solar panels installed on their roof for only \$3,000

“It’s tough out there,” Moskowitz said.

The Solar Switch program is unusual in that it does some of the work for consumers by vetting installers and securing a volume discount, via an auction in which approved candidates submit bids.

“CUB does not lend its name to a program or to a company or companies very often, and when we do, we need to be sure that the offer can live up to its promise,” Moskowitz said. “We’ve done a lot of work to ensure that this is worth us putting our name to.”

The group-buy program now known as Solar Switch Chicagoland traces its origins to 2018, when a state legislator invited CUB to talk to a group of senior citizens in the suburbs who were interested in going solar. At the end of the presentation, a man in the back of the room raised his hand.

“Well, we’ve got a whole bunch of neighbors here,” he said. “What if we all decided to go solar? Is there an installer that might give us a discount?”

The group-buy program, which began in 2019, has always included CUB, the nonprofit Midwest Renewable Energy Association in Custer, Wisconsin, and some local counties. Cook, DuPage, Kane, Lake and Will counties are currently partners, and last year the group brought in the Dutch company iChoose, a solar group-buying specialist.

Chicagoland residents can fill out a questionnaire to see if their roofs are good candidates for solar. Those who register for Solar Switch get access to educational webinars.

CUB offers [solar education sessions](#) as well.

“I really recommend that someone, if they can, come to one of CUB’s events in person or in real time, if it’s a virtual event, and ask your questions. We’re there. We’re ready to help,” Moskowitz said. “If you send us an email through our website, someone will get back to you.”

For those who meet income requirements, there’s also [Illinois Solar for All](#), a government program that helps you get residential rooftop solar, often with no upfront costs. The program guarantees savings on your electric bills.

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“That is a great program,” said Moskowitz. “If you’re eligible for Illinois Solar

The deadline to sign up for the current round of Solar Switch is Sept. 10. The next round will start in February or March.

## Jealous neighbors



Dan Portincaso displays an app on his phone on Aug. 13, 2024, that allows him to monitor the energy production of the solar panels at his Oak Park home. He got solar panels installed on his roof for only \$3,000 after rebates. (Terrence Antonio James/Chicago Tribune)

Stockmo was so pleased with the solar company that did her installation that she continues to display their sign in her yard, 10 months after she got her solar panels.

“The whole process was really seamless and quite pleasant,” she said.  
 “Everybody we interacted with — they were just great.”

For her, the process started with an online power-point presentation. When Solar Switch selected a solar installer for her, the installer gave another presentation. Stockmo and her husband, Perry Johnson, decided to move forward, so the installer did an inspection of her roof and electrical panel.

Installation on her steep Victorian roof was completed in one day.

“When the tornado went down Jackson — we’re only a block away — nothing

Portincaso said that he and his wife, Barbara Rykaczewski, haven't paid for electricity since their panels went up, and the neighbors had lots of questions at a recent block party.

"Everybody on the block was jealous," he said.

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One of Witchek's friends went solar, partly due to his encouragement: "When I believe in something, I'm a pusher," said the 35-year-old project manager for an industrial supply distributor.

Now he and his friend "nerd out" with apps that allow them to compare how much energy their solar panels are producing, and neighbors and co-workers rib Witchek about his enthusiasm.

"The joke is, I talk about my solar panels more than my kids," he said.

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