REACH CODE NEWS BRIEF: SEPTEMBER 2026

UP CLOSE! A LOOK AT THE CIVICSPARK PROGRAM

An Incubator for the Next Generation of Local Sustainability Leaders

CivicSpark is an award-winning and evidence-based Fellowship program that builds local workforce capacity to advance community planning priorities while launching the careers of young professionals. Over the past 13 years, the CivicSpark Program has delivered more than one and a half million hours of service to communities in three states (California, Colorado, and Washington). In California alone, the program partners with 100+ jurisdictions from across the state, attracting collaborations with cities, counties, RENs (Regional Energy Networks), and COGs (Councils of Government).

The program typically places more than 100 Fellows each year with local entities, who then serve for an 11-month program cycle. This year's cohort, which just concluded on September 4th, is made up of 124 individuals. “The CivicSpark Fellows are not interns,” stresses Bill Sadler, Executive Director. “They have specific scopes of work, typically produce at least one substantive project during their tenure and receive a salary or stipend for living expenses.” Fellows may work in a wide range of areas with local communities, from sustainability- or energy policy-focused programs to critical community issues such as affordable housing and mobility. “The cycle typically runs from October through Labor Day each year,” explains Sadler. “Partner recruitment takes place in the spring while Fellow recruitment begins in late spring and over the summer. And while many Fellows depart the program after their 11-month placement, the opportunity for a second placement does exist.”

The program, funded and supported by AmeriCorps and the project partners, builds capacity at the local level, enabling communities to develop and implement initiatives that would not be possible otherwise due to capacity gaps and lack of bandwidth. In

addition, the program provides valuable professional development experience for participating Fellows, many of whom continue on in public service long after their Fellowship program concludes.

For jurisdictions interested in finding out more about partnering with CivicSpark, contact info@civicsparkfellowship.org or visit their website.

CIVICSPARK FELLOWS CONTRIBUTE THEIR PERSPECTIVES

The perspectives below offer insight into the program from three individual Fellows' viewpoints: two from the current cohort and one alumnus from a recent cohort. The Local Energy Codes team is grateful for their collaboration and contributions of these guest profiles.

About Ryan

Ryan served as a CivicSpark Fellow during the 2023-2024 service term, after which he took on a fulltime role with the City of Encinitas. He currently serves as Sustainability Planner for the City of Coronado.

After I finished my undergraduate degree at Cal State L.A., I went straight into a master's degree program at Arizona State University. Throughout my year of grad school, I was applying to full-time roles in the environmental space with no success. I submitted countless applications, had numerous interviews, and a lot of rejections. Eventually, I found the CivicSpark program and was selected to serve as a Fellow at the City of Encinitas for the 2023-2024 service term.

While I was excited to have this opportunity, I had lost some confidence in myself, after a year of rejections, as a professional who was deserving and capable of performing this role. However, those feelings changed very quickly. I can talk about the relevant career trainings hosted by the CivicSpark program, or the great onboarding activities they've developed, or the space they give you to learn and ask questions, but to me, what really makes CivicSpark a great experience for Fellows is the site supervisors.

My site supervisor gave me such a positive Fellowship experience. Although I was entering the Fellowship with little confidence in myself, my supervisor believed in and supported me as a professional.

Throughout the 11-month service term, I was able to do amazing work, some of which I never would have expected to be able to do, because my supervisor trusted me to do so. At the end of my service term, I presented the 2023 Climate Action Plan Annual Monitoring Report, my main deliverable as a Fellow, to the City's Environmental Commission and spoke with confidence and pride in what I had accomplished. Above all the skills and knowledge CivicSpark gave me, the Fellowship gave me confidence in myself that I belong in the climate space, and I can do great things.

After CivicSpark, I was incredibly fortunate to be hired on full-time at the City of Encinitas as a Sustainability Analyst where I got involved in the Local Energy Codes program by implementing and readopting the City's reach codes.

At the beginning of this month, I started a new position at the City of Coronado where I am overseeing the City's sustainability program. The Fellowship gave me the skills, understanding, and confidence I needed to take this leap to a new role where I need to learn a new agency and be the only sustainability staff person.

The CivicSpark Fellowship is not just focused on delivering results for the host-site and community being served but holistically fosters emerging professionals in a way that sets them up for life-long success.

A VIEW FROM SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY: SAMANTHA TORRES

About Samantha

A graduate of the University of California, Davis, with a B.A. in Political Science, Samantha Torres joined CivicSpark in October 2025 as an 11-month Fellow.

I developed a strong interest in public service, community development, and creating greater access to opportunities for underserved communities, which began during my undergraduate studies, when I interned with Sacramento City Councilmember Rick Jennings. I worked directly with constituents, attended City Council meetings, conducted district visits, and engaged community stakeholders to better understand local concerns. That experience showed me how local government can respond to community needs and encouraged me to pursue work focused on creating meaningful public impact.

Soon after graduating, I started my CivicSpark Fellowship with the San Bernardino County Workforce Development Department, which allowed me to continue that work while addressing a regional need: preparing Inland Empire residents for opportunities in the clean energy economy.

My placement with the Inland Regional Energy Network (I-REN) revealed the behind-the-scenes partnership among the San Bernardino Council of Governments, Western Riverside Council of Governments, and Coachella Valley Association of Governments. The three agencies began developing I-REN in 2018, and the California Public Utilities Commission approved it as a Regional Energy Network in November 2021.

Since its launch, I-REN has worked to bring locally tailored energy-efficiency resources to Riverside and San Bernardino counties. It extends from public infrastructure to workforce development, including developing resilience roadmaps with assigned life coaches from our America's Job Center Offices, conducting energy audits, helping agencies secure federal funding, and supporting energy-efficiency projects. I-REN has also placed more than 50 paid energy Fellows with local agencies and partnered with the Riverside and San Bernardino County Workforce Development Boards to expand clean-energy career pathways.

As an I-REN Fellow, I contributed to this workforce mission by conducting outreach at high schools, colleges, and community events, educating residents about no-cost clean-energy training and career opportunities. I worked alongside America's Job Center of California, assisted residents with enrollment, evaluated eligibility, prepared justification files, and maintained participant records through an official government website known as CalJOBS.

As my Fellowship comes to an end, I can confidently say that it has shown me how regional partnerships can turn public investment into tangible opportunities for residents while teaching me how to effectively approach and navigate work within this field. By connecting people with training, certifications, career coaching, and employers, I-REN helps build a stronger workforce while supporting the Inland

Empire’s transition toward a more energy-efficient economy! Moving forward, I hope to continue working in public service, carrying with me the community-centered perspective and experience I gained through CivicSpark.

Please feel free to reach out to me through my email tsamantha605@gmail.com if you would like to further connect with me, and I would be happy to get back to you.

WORKING WITH THE CITY OF SACRAMENTO: YADIRA GALINDO-SALAZAR

About Yadira

Yadira is a CivicSpark Fellow from the 2025-2026 cohort and a first-generation college student with a background outside of urban planning.

Jurisdictions adopting CAAP require funding and capacity to advance planning goals, and many young professionals want to contribute but lack experience to be competitive applicants for public service roles. CivicSpark bridges that gap by connecting motivated emerging professionals with jurisdictions facing real resilience and capacity challenges.

This year I've been supporting two projects that connect directly to the City of Sacramento's sustainability and mobility goals: the Bike Parking Program and Active Transportation Education. Reading the CAAP during my first week, I saw the large portion of transportation emissions and realized how critical active transportation is to meeting the City's net-zero targets. The City's bike parking program and education classes lay the groundwork by removing barriers to active transportation, and increasing opportunity and access is the catalyst. When I stepped into this role, our team was in a moment of transition. A team of four was down to myself and my team manager. By circumstance, I became the person who knew the most about the daily processes of the projects while being completely new to city processes, department structure, and Sacramento's transportation ecosystem.

My degree in aquatic biology didn't mirror urban planning, but my research, leadership, and communication experiences provided the raw skills to stay curious, think critically and keep projects moving despite tight capacity. For the bike parking program, I organized project data, created standard operating procedures, advanced partnerships with business owners, and identified over a hundred potential installation sites. I developed outreach materials communicating the economic and wellness benefits of bike parking, and strategized outreach to disadvantaged communities. As our team grew again, I supported staff with community engagement through tabling, sharing active transportation information, and learning directly from resident experiences. I also expanded the Active Transportation Education program from online-only to in-person classes, coordinating summer sessions focused in disadvantaged communities. The marketing campaign I led about this City resource resulted in prominent features in the City Manager's News, the Sacramento Bee, and CBS News.

Before CivicSpark, I had no one who could provide guidance on how to navigate the professional world of local government. CivicSpark ensures each Fellow has a mentor/supervisor at their site who is invested in the growth of their Fellow. Support from my site supervisor, Nicole made all problems feel manageable. Outside of site projects, CivicSpark has leadership project groups that empower Fellows to practice professional and interpersonal skills, and strengthen cohort bonds. I served as the CivicSpark cohort's social media and internal newsletter lead.

This year taught me how to navigate uncertainty, how to translate goals into real-world steps, and how important it is to build relationships. Before CivicSpark, I didn't have the experience or degree to be a competitive applicant for even entry-level roles in urban planning. I knew through self-study of how urban planning was weaponized against communities of color, that I wanted to make the living world better for my communities. CivicSpark gave me the opportunity to gain direct professional experience, learning real strategies on how to fill gaps and build capacity. The project work was meaningful, the exposure to industry leaders invaluable, and the feeling of true public service fueled my purpose.

UPCOMING EVENTS

September 29: I-REN C&S Forum: California's Energy-Water Nexus: How the Building Energy Code is Shaping Water Efficiency

October 1: USGBC-CA webinar: Large Building Electrification: Strategies for Commercial Retrofits

October 1: Los Angeles Business Council: 20th Annual Sustainability Summit, Los Angeles.

October 5-6: Getting To Zero Forum, New York.

October 7: BayREN C&S Training: 2025 Code Updates - Multifamily

October 7: New Buildings Institute webinar: Heat Pump Water Heater (HPWH) Permitting.

October 7-8: Net Zero Conference, Los Angeles.

October 8: Sierra Nevada Alliance: 5th Annual Regional Sustainability Summit, Truckee.

October 14: CCR REN webinar: 2025 Energy Code Roundtable for Building Departments

October 15: 3C-REN Webinar: Energy Code Compliance Verification (formerly HERS) – HVAC, DHW, and IAQ.

October 19: California Energy Commission: Business Meeting

October 20-22: Resilient California Summit, Sacramento.

October 22: Sustain SoCal event: 17th Annual Energy Event, Irvine.

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