



Home, Interrupted

Building a Green Chicago

In 2023, Illinois' governor signed the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act to phase out fossil fuels by 2050 and renovate the state with green infrastructure. Chicago is one of the cities offering communities of color and those most impacted by pollution the chance to lead this energy revolution.

Reporter Wendy Wei speaks with Ghanaian American Senyo Ador about how he is bringing his insights from working on energy projects in Ghana to make Chicago a more energy-equitable city for communities of color.

Iggy Monda: Those solar panels that you see popping up on rooftops around the country are part of a shift in how people get their electricity. Less dependence on big power plants, more reliance on small, locally produced power. But progress has been slower than many people would like to see. Part of the problem is financial—not enough money to support the shift to solar energy. But another part of this is a lack of equity. Not everyone is sharing equally in the clean energy transition. And the solution to that problem is not coming from the government or the tech industry. It might just come from lessons learned in rural west Africa.

From Feet in 2 Worlds, this is Home, Interrupted, a series that explores the connection between immigrants and climate change. I'm Iggy Monda.

Recently, the Biden Administration sped up the nationwide push for clean energy—directing federal agencies to approve permits more quickly for renewables-focused projects. Today, we hear from reporter and producer Wendy Wei about the start of a clean energy transition in Illinois, and the vision of an engineer—the son of immigrant parents—who is working to bring the lessons he learned in rural Ghana to the residents of Chicago's Black neighborhoods.

Wendy Wei: It's one of those iconic late-March early spring days in Chicago. At 8:00am, the sun peeks here and there through the clouds. But the wind cuts through your jacket. An invisible chill burrows into your bones. In other words, not the ideal time to be selling someone on solar panels. But Senyo Ador speaks with good humor and an assuredness so steady. It's as if we were basking on a Miami beach.

Senyo Ador: So excited. I love your hat, by the way. I meant to say that.

Farm Client: You talk to me, man.

Senyo: Absolutely.

Wendy: This community garden is just one of several site assessments Senyo is conducting today with the company he founded, Sesenergi. He helps clients interested in renewable systems scope out what's possible for their site. And he also runs a clean energy job training program with a focus on underserved neighborhoods. Today he's in East Garfield Park, on the west side.

Farm Client: Farm Client: Do you all want to take a look around real quick?

Senyo: Yeah, let's take a look around.

Farm Client 2: So we're um, just starting the growing season....

Wendy: As Senyo and the group stroll on top of the still-frozen ground, he doesn't stop jotting notes:

Senyo: If you add anything more, then we have to do the requirements exercise all over again. So I'm used to clients like you.

Farm Client: I don't know what you're talking about.

Wendy: They're standing in the middle of a 2.7 acre plot just behind the tracks of the historic Union Pacific - West railroad. These train cars carry an assortment of cargo and passengers through Chicago. Commuters from the suburbs, iron from Michigan mines, and since the 1850s, coal from downstate.

Illinois is the fourth largest coal-producing state in the nation. For over a century, coal mines and workers in Southern Illinois made their small towns rich, shipping the stuff north to power Chicago's burgeoning industry.

To clarify, it made white Illinoisans rich. Very few mines and power plants hired any Black workers. Much of coal's legacy for Black folks is the poison and chemical waste that plants leaked into the land on which they lived due to segregation. This is still a severe health issue for Chicago's Black and Brown communities today.

But Illinois is trying to change that. In 2021, state legislators decided that producing electricity by burning coal will largely be banned by 2030.

CBS Chicago: New at 11, just within the hour, Governor JB Pritzker signed some new legislation.

WQAD News 8: Together, we are making history today to establish the most aggressive clean energy standards in the Midwest supporting the creation of thousands of clean energy jobs right here in Illinois.

Wendy: When Governor J.B. Pritzker signed the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act, he promised it would bring all citizens of Illinois on a path towards a greener future with economic benefits. But so far, few are seeing those promises come to fruition.

23 coal plants have already closed. Experts project that 2,500 people will be laid off as a result. And the state is refusing to fix aging natural gas lines to incentivize the transition.

The Climate and Equitable Jobs Act promises to create thousands of new jobs in clean energy for Black and Latino residents. But according to the The Chicago Sun-Times, as of late September 2023, the state hasn't trained or placed even a single new worker in green development.

In the 1800s, coal economically transformed the state. But Black communities weren't allowed to share in the harvest. Are they getting left out of yet another energy revival?

Here's Senyo Ador again.

Senyo: Ador is the way we say it in Ghana.

Wendy: You'll hear it's a little noisy. We recorded this interview at his co-working space. There was an A/C unit humming in the background.

Senyo says for him, it's about looking at members of the Black community as not just potential consumers but as engineers, designers, and leaders.

Senyo: Once the education comes, once access is provided, you start to see the proverbial wheels spinning.

Wendy: Senyo is applying lessons developed and tested in rural West Africa.

His parents are both from Ghana. They met when they both immigrated to Chicago in the '70s. They fell in love, gave birth to Senyo and settled on the South Side of Chicago in Englewood. But then pretty quickly...

Senyo: My parents immediately, like around two, three, sent me back to Ghana, to learn, like, language and customs and culture.

Wendy: And like many bi-cultural kids, he resisted.

Senyo: It was forced. [laugh] I didn't have any say in the matter.

Wendy: During his stays there as a kid, Senyo learned it was his responsibility to care for the environment. He even shared his baths with his cousins, with water collected from the river. To this day, Senyo still starts his showers with a cool splash from a bucket.

Senyo: If we're not mindful, we could deplete the resources in our planet to everyone's deficit. So long as you're living on this earth, I think it's all of our duty to be good stewards.

Wendy: Engineering runs in Senyo's family. His grandfather was trained as a civil engineer in Germany. His father worked as a welder on Ghana's first hydroelectric dam. After serving in the US Armed Forces, Senyo built gas-powered plants for General Electric. Eventually, he found his way back to his roots by working at a family-owned business in Ghana.

Working in rural West Africa taught Senyo a lot. The Ghanaian government knew people couldn't afford electricity on their own. But the government was also hesitant to bring electricity to a population that was new to it, and might not use it. So...

Senyo: The government made kind of a pact with the community that whatever they could provide, right? That's a self help component, in the scope of the development of energy access in their area // they are responsible for the logistics and the installation.

Wendy: Instead of giving away a new service for free, the government got the community to take the lead.

It wasn't easy, though. And Senyo didn't blame folks for not immediately being on board. Many of the rural people in Ghana that he worked with felt like they were forgotten.

Senyo: That's what we see ourselves as is, you know, a bridge. I mean, the environment is a human problem.

Wendy: Senyo began sourcing parts from U.S. factories to build electrification projects in Ghana. Like extending the grid to rural areas.

Senyo: Meaning, the traditional poles, wires, transformers you see running through cities in certain parts of our world um, you folks don't have access to that.

Wendy: Senyo's work in Ghana got him noticed by the US Agency for International Development. They even featured him in one of their videos. Along with some corny-sounding music.

In the promotional video, you can see many feet of cable strung to the top of wooden poles. The cables run across agricultural plots. And cluster on tin roofs that dot the vast landscape. At the foot of rugged, majestic hills, a network of metal scaffolding and generators rises from packed dirt. Here's Senyo in the video.

Senyo: It sometimes tugs at my soul to see the development woes because I know what is there in terms of human capital and talent. We want to move past an era of aid.

Wendy: We see Ghanaian workers hooking up laptops. Feeding grain into the mouth of a machine. Peering into a microscope—all actions made possible by access to electricity.

Wendy Wei: When Senyo was a kid, less than a quarter of Ghana's population had access to electricity.

But by 2014, 80% of people had it. With that came improved household lighting, better refrigeration, and access to information through TV or radio. Senyo calls these energy networks "the arteries of a country" from which life can flow.

Senyo: I see that access as a human right. You see parallels in certain communities here, in the states that, they don't have access the way everyone else has access. So they feel marginalized.

Wendy: Armed with these lessons from Ghana, Senyo eventually came back to the neighborhood he grew up in: Englewood. And he began to do what he calls "evangelizing" for clean energy access. He started his own company in 2021.

Senyo: The name of the company is Sēsēnergi. In our native language, which is Ewe, Sessan is like strong, resilient.

Wendy: Senyo's timing was good. He was a couple years ahead of Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson's 2023 commitment of 15 million dollars to aid in the transition away from fossil fuels. This funding was for the South and West Side of Chicago, where the majority of Black and Brown communities live.

Unlike rural West Africa, Chicago's residents who go without electricity aren't doing so because no lines reach their neighborhood. They're dealing with discriminatory "risk-based" disconnections. Fall behind on your gas or electricity bills, and companies will deem you "higher risk" and disconnect your utilities faster than those who are considered "less risky." But the "riskier" households are predominantly Black and Brown.

Switching from gas to electric can save you over time, but it can be expensive up front. It's out of budget for people struggling to meet even their monthly utility bill. Community leaders have often pointed this out. Here's one speaker at a rally against People's Gas in downtown Chicago in March 2023.

Protestor: We have to pick and choose if we pay our gas bill or pay for medication. In my community, in Englewood 47 percent of all residents are behind on their gas bill.

Wendy:

At the foot of a soaring white skyscraper, the speaker is bundled in a puffy jacket. Protesters hold signs that say, "People over Profit" and "We are not People's Gas' ATM."

Last October, Chicago's main electricity provider filed to hike its delivery rates by a record-setting \$1.5 billion over four years.

Advocates for consumer protection against rate hikes have spoken out against these harmful practices. Here are two representatives of the Citizens Utility Board in Chicago.

Citizens Utility Board President: This couldn't come at a worst possible time.... not only are People's Gas and Nicor Gas filing for rate increases, but ComEd is as well.

Citizens Utility Board Leader: And while People's Gas rakes in record profits, we're left with soaring utility bills and our city has been plunged into a heating affordability crisis

Wendy:

That rate hike failed to pass. But the possibility of even higher bills rattled Chicagoans struggling to pay, especially Black renters.

In January, when temperatures dipped to -10 degrees for days, the thought of losing heat was even scarier.

For many Black and Brown Chicagoans, installing renewable sources is easier said than done. And it reflects larger housing inequities. Many in marginalized neighborhoods still rely on outdated energy systems. They tend to live in older buildings with poor insulation. And as renters, they have less control.

This is where the dream of a Chicago powered by clean energy starts to falter. Many people simply can't afford the switch.

But Delmar Gillus says climate is something we all have to address as a collective...regardless of race or class.

Delmar Gillus: If we're all breathing the same air, drinking the same water and using the same energy, you can't fix those problems in affluent communities and then leave everybody else to figure it out. You're not going to meet your climate goal.

Wendy: Delmar is the chief operating officer at Elevate, one of Sesenergi's earliest partners. They're a Chicago-based clean energy non-profit. Delmar was a key figure in weaving racial equity into the 950+ page document that became the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act.

Delmar: Oftentimes you try to carve out like a small corner of a bill like this and say, Hey, this is the racial equity component. We did not do that. We worked to make sure there was equity built into every section of the bill. You know, are the programs focused on multi-family housing? Are they focused on communities of color, such that these communities can air seal and insulate their homes so that everybody in the building's utility bill goes down.

Wendy: Elevate and Sesenergi both focused on a key question — how do you incentivize a community to spend money they don't have on renewables?

The approach? How about turning consumers into producers?

Wendy: Elevate helped Sesenergi develop the curriculum for their signature training program.

To attract students, Senyo had just the approach. He's been thinking about this ever since he extended electric grids to rural communities in West Africa. He says it's about making this education accessible to the layman.

Senyo: If you're not, you know, an environmentalist, if you're not a contractor, if you're not a politician, if you're not, you know, a green financier, right, all the folks that you see commonly in the ecosystem? How do you make that? How do you make that plain?

Wendy: So — what does happen when people become contractors? When they learn how to build? What does it take for them to see the economic, personal, and social value of the green transition?

Iggy: We're gonna take a quick break. When we get back, reporter Wendy Wei meets some of the people Senyo hopes will lead the charge in Chicago's energy transition future.

This is Home, Interrupted from Feet in 2 Worlds. We'll be right back. Do not change that dial.

Ad Break

Iggy: Welcome back to Home, Interrupted from Feet in Two Worlds. Illinois is hoping to update its hundred-year old, inefficient electricity grid. But the state is off to a slow start. We return to reporter Wendy Wei, who follows engineer Senyo Ador as he tries to create interest in the energy transition within Black and Brown communities.

Class: I carry more tools than I weigh. My upper body is amazing.

Wendy: On Chicago's West Side at the North Lawndale Employment Network, Senyo Ador is teaching a new class. It's week one of a Sesenergi training for solar energy jobs.

About twenty students in the room have their eyes glued to the presenter as he starts from the basics — proper use of a ladder.

Class: Used only as designed. Right? We talked about people using two A frames to make a scaffold. That's a very, very bad practice.

Wendy: Hour two. The effects of caffeine in the stale coffee and sugar rush from the blueberry scones have started to wear off. Several students get up to stretch their legs in the back of the room.

Class: Cause this is the conductor. So, if I don't want to be part of ground then I don't want to be.

Wendy: Hour three. Some heads start to turn toward the windows to gaze out on the great expanse that is North Lawndale. The neighborhood's peppered with greystones—houses made of rough-cut stone with whimsical additions like copper turrets and stained glass windows.

Prior to the 1950s, North Lawndale was a prosperous industrial and residential center filled with upwardly mobile Eastern European immigrants. Drawn to the job opportunities, Black Americans began moving into North Lawndale.

By the '60s, the neighborhood was majority Black. However, the surrounding factories refused to hire Black workers. They continued to employ whites, who they bussed in from other areas. Without jobs, North Lawndale became poorer and poorer, starting a cycle of poverty, crime, and violence.

In 1966, Martin Luther King Jr briefly lived in North Lawndale. He publicly spoke about the deplorable conditions and racial violence that Black Chicagoans endured.

Martin Luther King Jr.: I have never seen, even in Mississippi and Alabama, mobs as hostile and as hate-filled as I'm seeing in Chicago.

Wendy: After King's assassination in 1968, massive uprisings, fires, and violence erupted in North Lawndale. When the area's economic backbone was destroyed, the community quickly emptied out. Grocery stores were left in shambles and abandoned homes were left to rot.

Class: Noise, right? Temp extremes. Vibrations. Radiation. Right? All these things are things that we come across in construction.

Wendy: Banks still deny mortgage applications to Black Chicagoans. A lack of social services and the advent of mass incarceration haven't helped. In 2001, 70% of men in North Lawndale had a criminal record—a major barrier to employment.

Senyo: I don't think anyone's disposable.

Wendy: That's Senyo Ador again.

Senyo: You know, essentially, I feel like we're all here for a particular purpose and it just may take the right environment, the right amount of patience to turn that rough rock into a gem.

Wendy: Sesenergi is one of several organizations that work out of North Lawndale Employment Network's space, offering training and re-entry programs like this one.

Class: Let's face it. If we eliminate the use of the jackhammer, how well are you going to do your job? Right? So, we can't eliminate the hazard.

Wendy: During a break, I get to know some of the students in the room. One is originally from Minnesota. He was forced into early retirement after his local coal plant shut down.

Class Participant: I was a coal operator, then I went ahead and was a gas operator, and now they shut my units down. And, uh, and I seen the trend of where, solar was going. Illinois offered the best opportunity, and that's why I went ahead and came.

Wendy: For the most part, the training is filled with young Black men in their 20s and 30s who have always called Chicago home.

Class Participant: Kids grow up and say, I want to be a police officer, I want to be a firefighter. But solar panels, I feel like that's, that could be a skill that people would want to take on.

Class Participant #2: It's not too many things out there that people would throw at us, like opportunities like this.

Class Participant #3: Especially a black man.

Class Participant #2: So, and not only that, being a black man growing up in Chicago. It's not easy.

Wendy: A few years ago, Keenan Washington was in these students' shoes. Now, he's an early graduate of a Sesenergi solar course. And he's found his calling.

Keenan Washington: I am an electrical tech engineer at a company named LaMarche. And what we do is we manufacture battery chargers for generators.

Wendy: When Keenan joined Sesenergi, he was just out of high school and wasn't sure about his next step.

Keenan: I didn't know whether if I wanted a career or just work warehouse jobs.

Wendy: It didn't make sense to Keenan to drop a ton of money and years into a degree he wasn't sure he wanted. By taking part in Senyo's short-term, money-making curriculum, Keenan received a stipend to participate.

Here's Senyo.

Senyo: I'm going to stay in a eight week course, with a stipend that's going to, teach me how to, get on a roof and make a living in that day because I have mouths to feed and I have a roof that I need to keep over my head.

Wendy: Chicago's clean energy dream has yet to be realized. The promises of the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act — the law that helps invest in projects like Senyo's — are delayed. Training hasn't ramped up yet to full scale. Sesenergi and other job pipeline programs are still operating from older, non-related funding. And some companies have complained about the Act's diversity requirements. They say they can't find anyone qualified.

But Senyo? He's not worried.

Senyo: I think there's a little bit of impatience on everyone's side because we're used to requiring results right away. So it's like, where are the jobs and where are the competent folks? But that's just not the way markets work.

Wendy: Utility price spikes are still annoying. But they have sparked a big appetite for renewables. More frustrated Chicagoans are now seriously considering the benefits of going solar. And this includes Sesenergi's students.

Class Participant: I pay a light bill. And Con Ed is, yes, since the 38 years I've been here, yeah, it's been around. So, this doesn't just help me professionally, it's going to help me personally as well. I am going to put solar panels in my home. Myself, save that money as well as get away from Con Ed.

Wendy: Many students are motivated to start a company themselves. Or to build renewable energy for their families and others on their block.

Delmar, the main architect of the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act, believes this is crucial for an all-inclusive energy transition.

Delmar: It's the old adage, if you give a person a fish, they'll eat for a day. If you teach them or partner with them to fish, then they can eat for a lifetime. And Senyo is eating for a lifetime.

Senyo: My dream is to be able to be a, almost like a one stop shop for, somebody's entire trajectory, from whether you want to be in sales, or you want to be a surveyor that, y'know becomes a geotech engineer. One day, we want to be there with you every step of the way. I think doing that here is fantastic. I think doing that globally would be, would be more than perfect.

Class: Okay. We talked about people using two A frames to make a scaffolding. That's a very, very bad practice.

Wendy: The training that afternoon started and ended with a discussion of workplace safety, especially when it comes to electricity. Like—don't electrocute yourself. Don't leave loose things laying around. Wear protective equipment. All of these guidelines are helpful when working with a transformer. That's a device that transfers electric currents from one line to another. Transformers ensure that the voltage on one side is compatible with the voltage on the other so that a smooth, consistent stream of electricity can flow.

The more I speak with the students in Sesenergi's training, the more it becomes clear that Senyo is that transformer—taking the latent potential and energy of folks from his community and funneling that passion into different directions.

Since the 1800s, Chicago has been the storied “city of broad shoulders.” A working-class hub of industry and innovation. Chicago is also a city of deep-rooted segregation and inequality. After over a century of fighting for their rights, Black Chicagoans remain suspicious of top-down initiatives, including the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act. Senyo's clean energy message for the Black communities in rural Ghana and urban Chicago hits at the heart of what's missing in some appeals to go green.

But it remains to be seen if Senyo's vision can help guide Chicago's renewables revolution, making it a path to self-determination, equity, and prosperity for the city's Black residents.

Iggy:

This story was written and produced for Feet in 2 Worlds by Wendy Wei. It was mixed and mastered by our technical director Jocelyn Gonzales. Quincy Surasmith is our managing editor and Julie Schwietert Collazo was our fact checker. Alejandro Salazar Dyer is our director of marketing, and Shreya Agrawal is our intern. The Managing Director of Feet in 2 Worlds is Mia Warren. John Rudolph is Feet in 2 Worlds' founder and is Executive Producer of this series.

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Home, Interrupted comes to you from Feet in 2 Worlds. Since 2004, Feet in 2 Worlds has been telling the stories of today's immigrants and training immigrant journalists. The Feet in 2 Worlds network includes hundreds of reporters and editors. Some, like me, have been Feet in 2 Worlds fellows. Others have attended our workshops and contributed to our podcast and website. Together, we're making American journalism more reflective of the diverse communities that we serve.

You can find links to additional stories in the series in our episode notes. To listen to earlier episodes of Home, Interrupted, visit [F i 2 W.org](http://fi2w.org). That's F, i, the number 2, W.org.

I'm Iggy Monda, Editorial Fellow with Feet in 2 Worlds. If you like the show, thank you. Please keep listening and please leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen to your stories.

Quincy Surasmith:

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