

Building the Implementation Pathway for Scalable Landscape Transformation Outreach and Technical Assistance

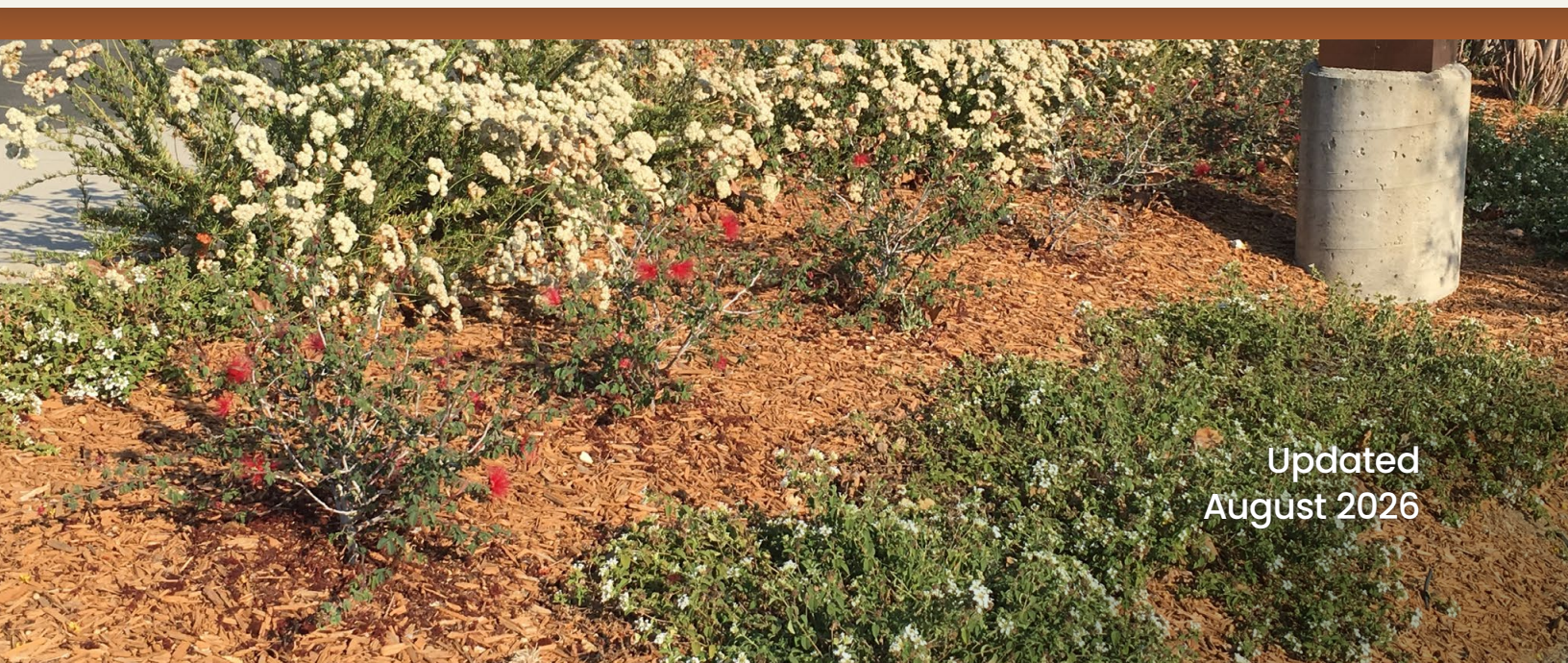


CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF
WATER RESOURCES

Case Study: Building Community Capacity Through Utility Partnership

**A Practical Case Study for
Water Agency Staff Exploring Direct Install
& Landscape Transformation Programs**

Developed by



Updated
August 2026

Building the Implementation Pathway for Scalable Landscape Transformation Outreach and Technical Assistance

Case Study: Building Community Capacity Through Utility Partnership

A practical case study for water agency staff exploring direct install and landscape transformation programs

Developed by California Water Efficiency Partnership, Watershed Progressive and Land Resilience Partnership

with support from the California Department of Water Resources

August 2026

Acknowledgments

CalWEP extends its appreciation to Watershed Progressive for leading the research and preparation of this publication. This project was made possible through funding provided by the California Department of Water Resources (DWR), whose support helps advance scalable turf transformation programs and provides practical resources for California water agencies.

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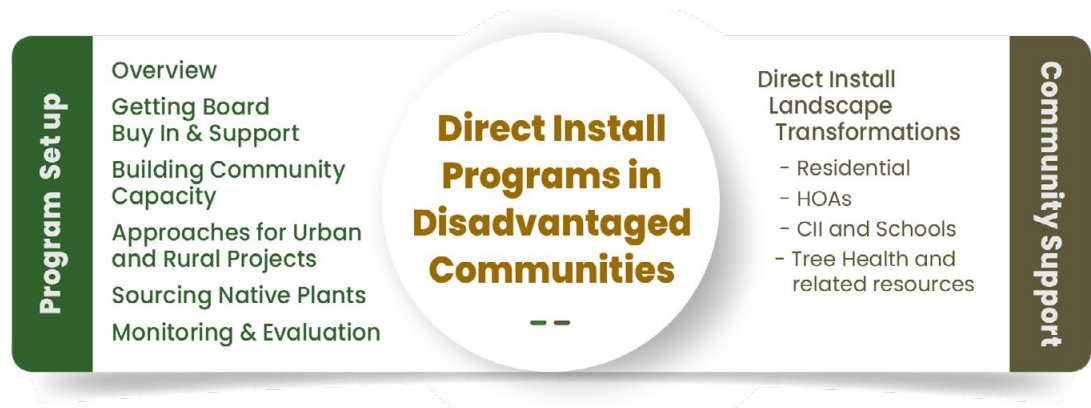
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Building the Implementation Pathway for Scalable Landscape Transformation Outreach and Technical Assistance

Direct Install and Landscape Transformation (DI / LT) Series

This case study is part of a California Water Efficiency Partnership (CalWEP) series on Direct Install and Landscape Transformation (DI / LT) programs that explore the elements required to successfully design, implement, and scale these efforts across California. Each case study in the series is intended to stand on its own, while also contributing to a broader picture of how DI / LT programs can be designed, delivered, and scaled across California. Together, these case studies draw on insights gathered through surveys, interviews, and meetings with practitioners who have successfully implemented these programs across diverse contexts. Across the series, readers will find practical guidance, lessons learned, common challenges, and actionable recommendations, supported by real-world examples, to inform the development and refinement of their own direct installation programs.

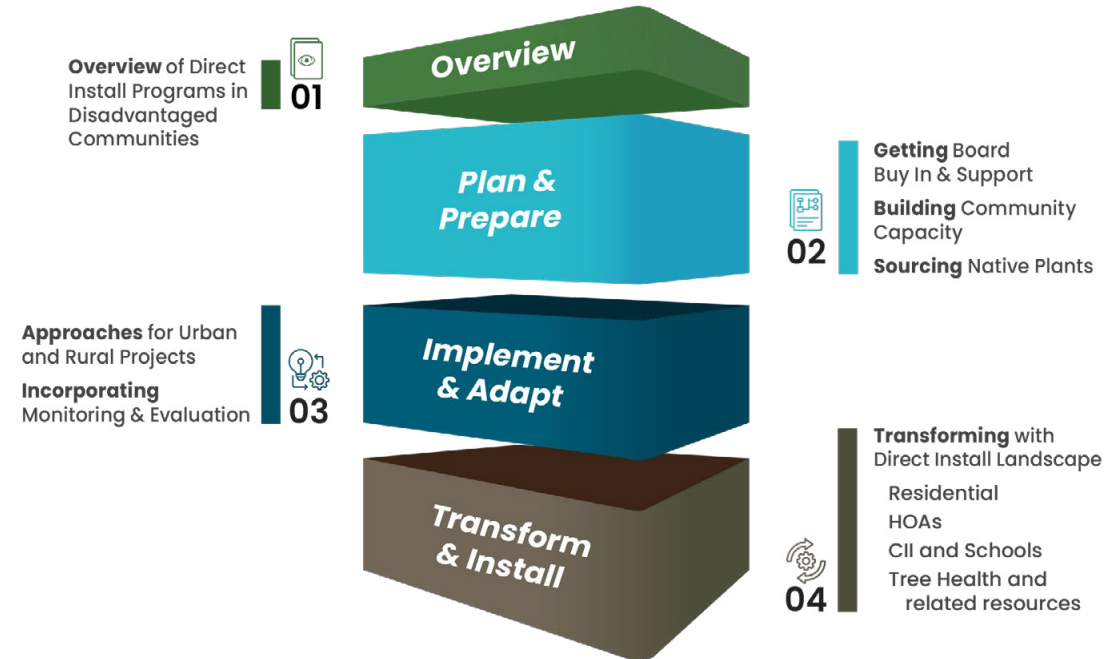
Other case studies in this series include:



As illustrated in the graphic, a successful direct installation turf replacement program follows a lifecycle that extends well beyond the landscape installation itself. Lasting success begins by building a strong foundation through planning and preparation, including securing organizational support, engaging communities, building local capacity, selecting appropriate native plants, tailoring approaches to local conditions, and establishing monitoring and evaluation processes. These foundational elements enable successful implementation of direct installation projects across residential, HOA, commercial, institutional, and school landscapes while allowing programs to adapt based on lessons learned and participant feedback. By progressing from planning and preparation to

implementation and adaptation, and ultimately to sustaining and growing successful landscapes, agencies can transform individual projects into resilient, water-efficient spaces that create lasting environmental, community, and water conservation benefits.

How to Develop a Direct Turf Install Program



The Thriving Communities graphic illustrates that successful direct installation turf replacement programs are not individual projects—they are interconnected improvement processes. Programs begin by listening, engaging, and planning, then move into implementation while adapting to lessons learned from participants, partners, and on-the-ground experience. Those insights strengthen future outreach, program design, plant selection, maintenance practices, and evaluation efforts, creating a cycle of continuous refinement. By regularly evaluating outcomes and applying those lessons to the next generation of projects, agencies can build stronger programs, achieve more resilient landscapes, and multiply their long-term community and water conservation impacts.

Every completed project becomes the foundation for a stronger, more effective program—creating a continuous cycle of learning, adaptation, and lasting community impact.



1. How to Use This Case Study

This case study focuses specifically on community capacity and partnership.

It is written for water agencies interested in launching, evolving, or strengthening Direct Install or Landscape Transformation programs and want to better understand the potential for partnerships and the community capacity needed to support successful implementation.

Many California water agencies are already delivering successful landscape transformation programs. This case study is meant to build on that progress and create conditions for other agencies to join them.

Community Capacity is the local people, partners, skills and systems required to design, deliver, maintain, and sustain landscape transformation projects over time.

Partnerships refer to the intentional working relationships between utilities and community-based organizations (CBOs), Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs), Resource Conservation Districts (RCDs) workforce groups, and other local entities, where roles, responsibilities, and accountability are shared to support Direct Install and Landscape Transformation programs.

The central idea is **Direct Install and Landscape Transformation programs require significant community capacity to succeed - and utilities do not need to build or hold that capacity alone.**

Across California, NGOs, CBOs, RCDs, and other community partners have aligned interests, capacity, and enthusiasm to help carry this work forward. Agencies that focus on being a good partner, rather than the sole driver, tend to go further, reach more customers, and deliver better outcomes.

This case study highlights:

- The types of community capacity needed to execute successful programs
- Different ways utilities can participate - as program leads, partners, or supporters
- How community organizations and partners can help carry the complexity of implementation

The goal is to help agencies identify clear, realistic entry points for partnering in this work and to feel more confident taking the next step, whatever that step may be.



2. Why This Case Study Exists: Community Capacity is Essential and Shared

Robb Hirsch Photography

When well-designed, DI / LT programs are one of the clearest opportunities to address multiple priorities at once: reduce outdoor water use, support regulatory compliance, and deliver a host of broader community benefits.

Broader Community Needs

- Shade and urban heat reduction
- Stormwater capture and water quality
- Habitat and biodiversity
- Healthy soils and erosion control
- Fire resilience
- Reduced flooding
- Workforce and local economic development

Water Agency Priorities

- Reduced outdoor potable water demand
- Urban Water Use Objective compliance
- AB 1572 non-functional turf elimination
- Water supply reliability
- Source water protection
- Customer equity and access
- Long-term program sustainability

Not all turf replacement delivers the same long-term outcomes. Water savings alone don't lead to healthy, resilient landscapes.

Early turf replacement programs that focused primarily or exclusively on water savings often missed the opportunity to design landscapes that delivered additional benefits. Turf replaced by gravel saved water but also increased heat, limited ecological function, and increased runoff. Since the 2014–2016 drought, many water agencies in California have made real progress evolving these programs to reflect multi-benefit goals. In some regions, programs now include requirements or incentives related to trees, stormwater capture, native plants, and long-term landscape performance. This represents real progress, and this case study is part of that evolution.

Today, agencies implementing these more comprehensive programs are encountering a shared challenge: **Successful DI / LT programs require more than just funding and a willing utility lead.** These programs depend on **community capacity** that exists beyond the traditional scope of utility programs, including:

- Trusted local partners to support outreach and engagement with culturally relevant education and communication
- Designers, installers, and nurseries with appropriate training and native plant availability
- Customer / land steward participation and long-term education and maintenance
- Coordination across organizations, programs, and funding sources

Who is a Land Steward? Everyone. Customers, business owners, school staff, building managers. Stewardship belongs to everyone and there is something meaningful each of us can do from exactly where we are.

Building and sustaining this capacity takes time, relationships, and local knowledge. For many agencies, especially those with limited staff, increasing program complexity, or multiple competing priorities, developing and managing all of this is not realistic, but it also isn't necessary.

A core insight emerging from programs across the state: **Utilities do not need to do all this work alone for Direct Install and Landscape Transformation programs to be successful.**

In fact, many of the most effective programs rely on **partnerships with community-based organizations, NGOs, RCDs, workforce groups, and other local stakeholders** who bring trusted relationships, specialized expertise, and on-the-ground capacity.

When utilities engage as partners rather than sole implementers, programs can:

- Grow program reach - more participants, better results, and stronger community trust
- Improve landscape outcomes - delivering water, climate, and community benefits across multiple properties rather than one site at a time
- Reduce long-term administrative strain
- Still meet regulatory, reporting, and accountability requirements

The sections that follow explore **what community capacity looks like in practice**, how utilities can engage at different levels, and lessons learned from early implementation efforts.



3. What We're Learning Statewide: Capacity Is the Limiting Factor

Across California, there is significant and growing interest in Direct Install and Landscape Transformation programs. Communities want healthier, cooler, more resilient landscapes, and agencies increasingly recognize the multiple benefits these programs can deliver.

Capacity consistently emerges as the key challenge.

The Department of Water Resources (DWR) is currently piloting this DI / LT approach through the California Landscape Transformation Pilot Program, which is focused on five distinctive communities across the state. The pilot uses a direct install model - providing hands-on technical assistance and professional installation at no cost to participants - with a focus on frontline and underserved communities that face both the greatest climate exposure and the greatest barriers to participating in traditional LT and rebate programs. The program also prioritizes community engagement and tailored program design, putting the unique needs of each community at the forefront. Findings from this pilot are informing a clearer picture of what it takes to make these programs work.

What is “Community Capacity?” The local people, partners, skills and systems required to design, deliver, maintain, and sustain landscape transformation projects over time.

Through the Pilot Program and other related efforts, partners like CalWEP and Watershed Progressive have observed that successful DI / LT programs depend on a set of capabilities that extend beyond traditional utility programs. In addition to funding and technical standards, the **people, relationships, and systems** needed to move projects from concept through to long-term success are critical.

Common capacity gaps identified across regions include:

- **Trusted community relationships** needed to reach participants, particularly in communities historically underserved by rebate-style programs
- **Workforce and partner readiness**, including designers, installers, and nurseries with appropriate training, materials, and availability
- **Coordination capacity** to align multiple partners, scopes of work, and timelines
- **Follow-through after installation**, including maintenance support, troubleshooting, and continued engagement
- **Data and reporting capacity** to track outcomes, document benefits, and support accountability

These gaps are a reflection of the reality: **multi-benefit landscape programs are inherently more complex** than single-objective conservation programs. They are not the result of a lack of effort or interest by agencies.

As programs expand to address heat, habitat, stormwater, soil health, and equity alongside water savings, more partners are involved. While this brings valuable expertise and reach, it also increases coordination, contracting, and reporting demands. Without dedicated capacity to manage these relationships and workflows, even well-funded programs can struggle to scale.

This dynamic helps explain why some DI / LT efforts stall or remain small, even when the underlying demand is present, and technical solutions are well understood. It also points to an important opportunity: **capacity does not need to sit entirely within a utility for programs to succeed.**

In practice, many effective programs distribute capacity across a network of organizations, with utilities playing an important but not exclusive role. Understanding how that capacity is shared, and what role utilities play within it, is the focus of the next section.

A monarch butterfly with orange and black wings is perched on a cluster of small, pink, star-shaped flowers. The background is a soft-focus green.

4. Reframing Community Capacity: What Utilities Can (and Can't) Do

A common barrier to launching a DI / LT program is the assumption that the utility needs to own and manage every element of it. This can feel overwhelming, particularly for water agencies already managing multiple programs, meeting regulatory requirements, and doing it all with limited staff capacity. In practice, the most effective programs spread responsibility across a network of organizations with utilities playing a focused role.

What We Mean by Community Capacity

In practice, **community capacity refers to the local people, partners, skills and systems required to design, deliver, maintain, and sustain landscape transformation projects over time.** This includes, but is not limited to:

- Trusted organizations and individuals who can engage residents and land stewards
- Designers, installers, and nurseries with appropriate training, materials, and availability
- Local knowledge about community priorities, constraints, and opportunities
- Ongoing support for maintenance, troubleshooting, and adaptation over time
- Coordination across partners, programs, and funding sources

This type of capacity is essential for Direct Install and LT programs to succeed, particularly in communities that have historically been underserved by rebate-based approaches or where more hands-on support and trust-building is required.

At the same time, **much of this capacity does not naturally sit within a water utility.**

What Utilities Are Not Being Asked to Do

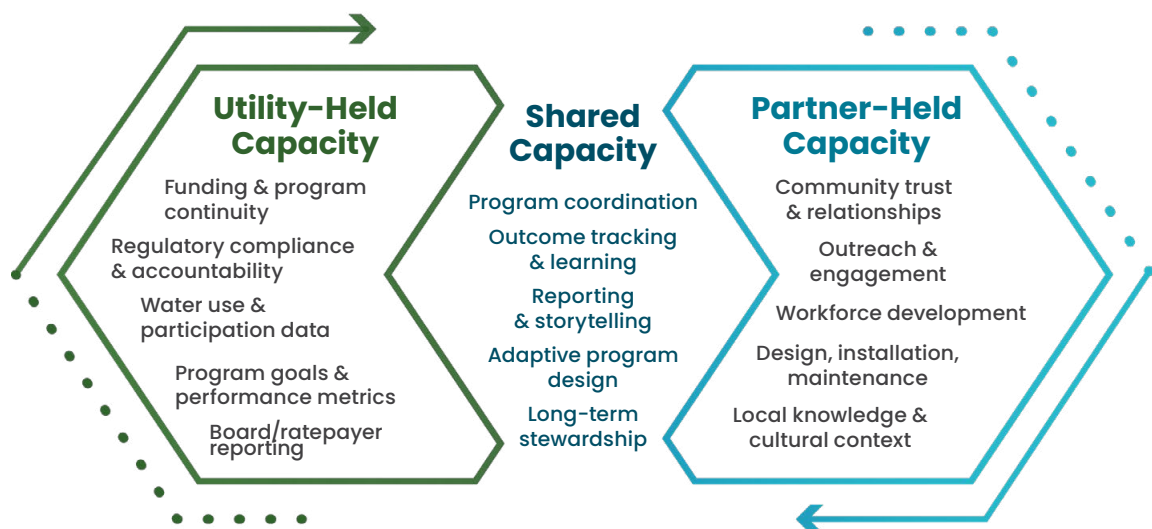
A key insight emerging from recent programs is that utilities are **not expected to carry all aspects of community capacity on their own**.

Utilities are not being asked to:

- Become landscape designers or installation managers
- Serve as community organizers
- Fund the entire program
- Manage long-term relationships with every participant
- Build and sustain workforce pipelines on their own
- Replicate what community organizations do well

Attempting to fill these roles is not realistic for a water agency, practically nor in the face of competing demands and priorities. Recognizing these limits is a positive step toward designing programs that are both effective and sustainable.

Community Capacity



What Utilities Do Well – and Why Their Role Still Matters

While utilities do not need to hold all community capacity, their role remains **essential**.

Water agencies bring key strengths to Direct Install and Landscape Transformation programs, including the ability to:

- **Fund, legitimize, and anchor long-term continuity** – utility involvement signals program credibility and unlocks funding that community organizations may not be able to access independently

4. Reframing Community Capacity

- **Set goals, success metrics, and accountability** – utilities are best positioned to define water savings targets, equity objectives, and reporting requirements that align programs with regulatory and reporting requirements
- **Provide access to data needed to measure outcomes and document benefits** – customer data, billing records, and service area knowledge help partners target outreach, avoid duplication, and document outcomes
- **Develop demonstration sites** – agency-owned or controlled properties can serve as visible opportunities to spark community interest and build partner confidence

When utilities are meaningfully involved, even if they are not leading day-to-day implementation, programs are more likely to achieve durable outcomes and to be recognized as valuable to the community, supported more broadly, and scaled over time.

A Shared Approach to Capacity

The most effective Direct Install and Landscape Transformation programs distribute capacity **across a network of partners**, rather than concentrating it within a single organization. For example:

- **Community organizations** may lead outreach, engagement, and on-the-ground coordination, e.g. environmental groups, garden clubs
- **Technical partners** can support design, installation, and workforce development, e.g. Design Build Landscape Firms, Aligned consultants, RCD's
- **Utilities support** the program through funding, data, oversight, and alignment



This shared approach allows each partner to contribute their strengths while reducing duplication.

Ask: What role should the utility play at this stage, given its goals, resources, capacity, and the broader community context?

The answer to this question will look different across regions and may change over time.

The next section introduces a **spectrum of utility involvement**, illustrating several ways agencies are successfully engaging in Direct Install and Landscape Transformation programs today.

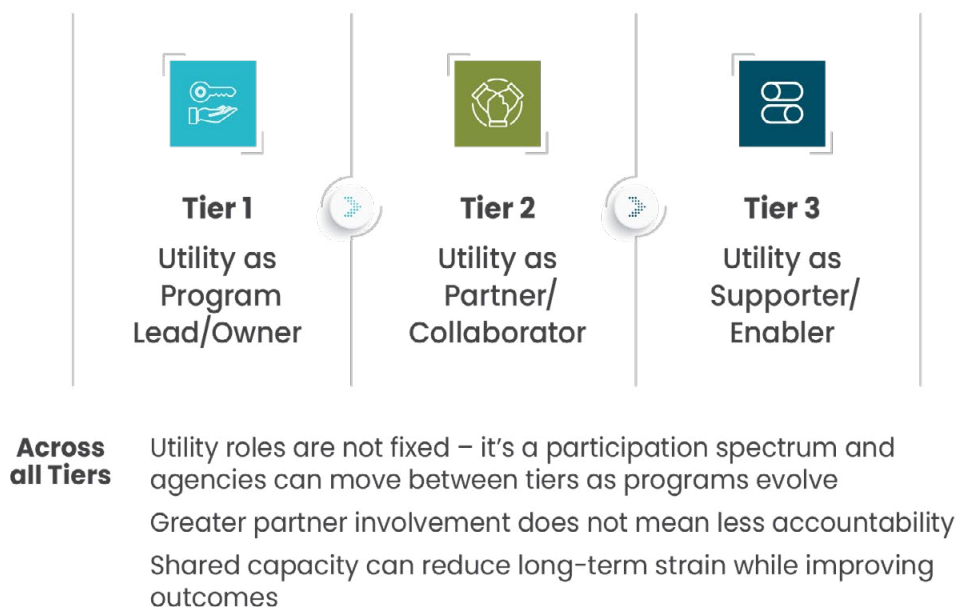
5. Three Ways Utilities Engage Successfully in Direct Install and Landscape Transformation Programs

Robb Hirsch Photography

There is no single right way for a water agency to participate in Direct Install or Landscape Transformation programs. Across California, agencies are engaging in different ways depending on their internal capacity, available funding, existing community relationships, and program or community goals.

The three models below represent a spectrum of utility involvement; it's not a hierarchy. Each is an effective approach, and agencies may move between these roles over time as programs mature or conditions change.

Spectrum of Utility Involvement



Tier 1: Utility as Program Lead / Owner

The utility designs, administers, and holds primary accountability for the program. Community partners support specific components such as outreach, workforce development, or installation.

This approach is most common when:

- The agency's internal capacity is strong and dedicated staff are available
- There is a strong need for direct control over program design or delivery
- The program is closely tied to existing conservation or rebate structures
- Agency is larger and has established WUE programs and existing contractor relationships

Typical utility roles include:

- Program design and administration
- Contracting and procurement
- Funding and reporting
- Performance tracking and compliance

Typical partner roles include:

- Community outreach
- Design and installation services

Considerations:: While this model offers a high level of control, it can place significant demands on agency staff. As programs grow more complex or expand into underserved communities, utilities often seek ways to share responsibility over time.

Tier 2: Utility as Partner / Collaborator

In a partner or co-owner model, responsibility for the program is **shared** between the utility and one or more trusted organizations. Utilities remain actively involved and provide funding, but day-to-day implementation is often led by a CBO, NGO, or RCD (see definitions on page x).

This approach works well when:

- Agencies want to expand program reach without expanding internal staffing
- Trusted partners already have strong community relationships
- Programs require more hands-on engagement or coordination

Typical utility roles include:

- Providing funding and strategic direction
- Setting performance expectations and success metrics
- Supporting data access and reporting
- Participating in governance or oversight

Typical partner roles include:

- Outreach and participant engagement
- Program coordination and delivery
- Managing installation workflows
- Supporting follow-up and maintenance

Considerations: Clear roles, communication, and shared expectations are important. When done well, this model allows agencies to remain accountable while relying on partners to carry implementation complexity.

Tier 3: Utility as Supporter / Enabler

In this model, the utility plays an important enabling role, providing funding and supporting community-led efforts that are aligned with agency goals.

This approach is often effective when:

- Strong community programs already exist
- Agency capacity is limited
- The utility wants to support innovation or pilot efforts

Typical utility roles include:

- Providing funding or co-funding, often unlocking funds not otherwise available to the community partners
- Sharing data or technical guidance
- Supporting community outreach efforts
- Lending legitimacy and visibility
- Aligning efforts with agency priorities, e.g. ensuring water savings from community-led projects are measured, documented, and credited toward agency conservation and reporting requirements

Typical partner roles include:

- Program leadership and coordination
- Outreach, design, installation, and maintenance
- Workforce development and training

Considerations: Even at this level, utility involvement matters. When agencies stay connected, outcomes are more likely to be measured, credited, and sustained over time.

Key Takeaways Across All Tiers

- Utility roles are **not fixed** – it’s a participation spectrum and agencies can move between tiers as programs evolve
- Greater partner involvement does not mean less accountability
- Shared capacity can reduce long-term strain while improving outcomes

The next section explores **what these roles look like in practice**, using examples from Direct Install and Landscape Transformation efforts across the state.

6. Three Examples of Utility Involvement in DI / LT Programs

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CASE EXAMPLE: Long Beach – Utility-Led with Community Partners

Community Context

- Urban, coastal Southern California community with water supply reliability and climate pressures (heat, drought, coastal impacts)
- Long history of conservation programming
- Interest in expanding reach to underserved communities and meeting emerging regulatory requirements

Utility Role: Tier 1 – Utility as Program Lead

- Program design, funding, coordination, and accountability held by Long Beach Utilities Department (LBUD)
- Partners supported implementation and community engagement

Partners Involved

- Surfrider Foundation – community engagement, volunteers, environmental messaging
- City of Long Beach Marine Bureau – maintain transformed space, provide access to coastal and public-facing spaces
- MWD / USBR – funding support (including signage and community partnership grants)

Project Snapshot

Program Element	What It Looked Like in Long Beach
Project Type	Turf removal and climate-appropriate landscape conversion
Sites	Highly visible, community-serving public spaces
Design Elements	CA native & climate-appropriate plants (CAP), soil improvements, mulch
Co-Benefits	Water savings, coastal resilience, community stewardship

Engagement Approach

- Engagement led through trusted community partners, not utility-only outreach
- Surfrider connected water conservation to ocean health and stewardship
- Marine Bureau grounded projects in familiar, place-based public spaces

What Worked

Clear role alignment between utility and partners
Trusted community messengers increased participation
Place-based framing built visibility and buy-in

What Was Challenging

Utility procurement and contracting processes
Adapting traditional processes for community-based delivery
Coordination across multiple funding sources

Key Takeaways

When utilities lead Direct Install programs, community partners are still essential for trust, engagement, and activation. Clear role definition allowed LBUD to maintain accountability while relying on partners to carry community-based capacity.



CASE EXAMPLE: Ventura River Water District VRWD – Utility as a Partner / Co-Owner

Broader Context

In Ventura County, a regional Land Resilience Partnership (LRP) operates across multiple communities. Within this broader framework, Ventura River Water District (VRWD) holds a nested version of the program, allowing the utility to share responsibility with regional and community partners while maintaining alignment with its service-area goals.

Utility Role: Tier 2 – Utility as a Partner

In this model:

- The regional LRP supports coordination, shared partners, and learning across communities
- VRWD participates as an active partner, providing funding, oversight, and alignment
- Day-to-day engagement and implementation are supported through partner capacity rather than utility-only staffing

This structure allows the utility to remain closely involved without needing to hold all aspects of program delivery internally.

Community Context

Ventura River Water District (VRWD) is a small water district serving approximately 6,100 residents and businesses within the Ventura River Watershed. The district relies primarily on local groundwater directly connected to streamflow in the Ventura River, creating a strong link between private land management and downstream ecological health. The service area includes a mix of residential, semi-rural, and small business properties, making it well suited for place-based landscape resilience efforts.

Partners Involved

- Ventura River Water District (VRWD) – outreach, alignment, participation
- Ventura County Resource Conservation District (VCRCD) – regional partner and primary grant sponsor
- Watershed Progressive (WP) – technical assistance, site assessment, design, and some installation support
- Other Local contractors – landscape installation and implementation

About the Land Resilience Partnership (LRP)

Several of the Direct Install and Landscape Transformation efforts featured in this case study operate within a LRP framework.

LRP is a community-based partnership model developed to support landscape transformation at the neighborhood, watershed, and regional scale. Rather than functioning as a single program, LRP provides a shared structure that helps utilities, community-based organizations, and technical partners coordinate outreach, implementation, and long-term stewardship.

At its core, LRP is designed to:

- **Support multi-benefit landscape outcomes**
- **Reduce duplication across programs and partners**
- **Distribute capacity across organizations rather than concentrating it within a single entity**

LRP is one way - but not the only way - communities are organizing Direct Install and Landscape Transformation work. The examples below illustrate how different organizations hold and adapt the LRP framework based on local context and capacity.

Project Snapshot

Program Element	What It Looked Like in Ventura
Project Type	Site assessment, landscape design, and selective direct install
Sites	Primarily residential and semi-rural private properties
Design Elements	Trees, CA native plants, rain gardens, bioswales, greywater systems, efficient irrigation
Co-Benefits	Water savings, improved streamflow conditions, habitat, shade, and land steward capacity

Engagement Approach

- Engagement led in close coordination with the district
- Relied on familiar, community-based channels such as bill inserts, email outreach, flyers, tabling at local events, and word of mouth.
- Messaging emphasized voluntary participation and the practical benefits offered to land stewards, including assessments, design support, and, installation funding (when available).

What Worked Strong district involvement built trust and participation
Funded assessments and design lowered barriers to entry
Technical support of funded assessments incentivized land stewards to install projects with their own funding, which accelerated and catalyzed broader interest

What Was Challenging Maintaining momentum when installation funding was not consistently available
Communicating watershed-scale benefits alongside site-specific actions
Clarification of what funding could pay for, and not pay for

Key Takeaway

As a nested LRP model, VRWD demonstrates how smaller utilities can engage deeply as partners: building trust, supporting learning, and advancing on-the-ground projects, without needing to hold all aspects of program delivery internally.



CASE EXAMPLE: Sonoma County – Community-Led LRP with a Local Pilot in Petaluma

Broader & Community Context

The region faces intersecting challenges related to drought, flooding, groundwater depletion, sea-level rise, wildfire, and other climate impacts. The County and many of its jurisdictions have set goals around engaging underserved and under-resourced communities to better understand their climate resilience priorities and provide accessible solutions. These conditions created an opportunity to pursue a 1) Regional Sonoma county-wide, community-led approach to landscape transformation, paired with a 2) Petaluma focused local pilot to test direct install strategies.

Utility Role: Tier 3 – Utility as Supporter / Enabler

Across Sonoma County, utilities primarily participated as supporters and enablers, providing funding, alignment, and participation while community organizations led program design, coordination, and implementation.

Daily Acts Organization (DAO) serves as the primary community-based organization holding and managing the Direct Install / Landscape Transformation program and acting as the local LRP sponsor.

In this model:

- Daily Acts leads program coordination, community engagement, and implementation
- The LRP framework provides structure for coordinating partners and tracking outcomes

This approach demonstrates how community organizations can hold significant program capacity, while utilities remain engaged in ways that support accountability, learning, and long-term impact without administering the program directly.

► Regional Sonoma County Effort: Building Capacity Through LRP

What This Is

A regional, multi-year Landscape Transformation effort operating across Sonoma County watersheds, organized through a LRP framework. This effort was informed by the Petaluma Pilot and focuses on building the partnerships, tools, community capacity, and flexible funding pathways needed to support Direct Install and Landscape Transformation work over time.

Partners Involved:

- DAO – primary community-based organization and LRP sponsor
- Watershed Progressive (WP) – technical assistance, Opportunity Analysis, and design tools
- Utilities and agencies – supporters and enablers aligned through funding, data, and participation
- Santa Rosa Plains Groundwater Sustainability Agency – grant sponsor and administration
- CAFF, UC Coop Extension, RCD's – Supported rebate analysis, workshop content, WUE model site evaluation

What the Regional Effort Includes

- Community engagement and listening sessions
- Site assessments and opportunity analysis
- Workforce training and education
- Program design to support groundwater sustainability and WUE goals
- Development of a pipeline of potential projects across multiple communities

Within this regional framework, the Petaluma Pilot served as a focused implementation site.

► Petaluma Pilot Project: Place-Based Direct Install in Practice

What This Is

The first pilot project within the regional Sonoma County effort, focused on testing direct install, community engagement, and partnership models in a specific place. Results of this pilot informed the broader regional effort.

Project Snapshot

Program Element	What It Looked Like in Petaluma
Project Types	Site Assessments (125); Direct install and landscape transformation
Sites	Homes (56), schools (3 complete, 3 in progress), parks (3), and community-serving spaces
Installations	Turf conversion to climate appropriate plants (25), greywater systems (29), rain gardens (8), rain tanks (10), trees
Focus Areas	Disadvantaged Community (DAC) neighborhoods, schools, and visible public spaces
Co-Benefits	Water savings, flood mitigation, shade, habitat, workforce training

Partners Involved

- Daily Acts (DAO) – Project Lead and Administrator
- Watershed Progressive - Design and Technical Support
- City Of Petaluma – Supporter and Enabler
- Sonoma RCD – Engineering and Construction Oversight
- Petaluma Releaf – Tree Planting
- Petaluma Peoples Services Center – community outreach and translation support
- Conservation Corps North Bay & Rebuilding Together – Workforce Training and Implementation
- Local Contractors – Installation Support - specialized firms for greywater, rainwater, permaculture etc

Engagement Approach

Engagement was led through trusted community organizations using bilingual outreach, listening sessions, school partnerships, and neighborhood-based engagement. Projects were clustered geographically to build visibility and momentum, with a strong emphasis on voluntary participation and direct support rather than reimbursement.

What Worked

Strong community leadership and trust
Direct install lowered participation barriers
Clustering projects built momentum

What Was Challenging

Navigating permitting and maintenance capacity
Coordinating across multiple agencies and sites
Limited funding for long-term maintenance

Key Takeaway

Sonoma County demonstrates how community-led programs can hold substantial capacity for Direct Install and Landscape Transformation work, with utilities participating as supporters and enablers. The Petaluma Pilot illustrates how regional capacity-building can be paired with place-based implementation to deliver visible results and inform future scaling.



7. Replicable Best Practices for Utilities Exploring DI / LT Programs

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The examples in this case study show that there is no single model for Direct Install or Landscape Transformation programs. Programs succeed when leaders intentionally align partners, participation, funding, and accountability.

These practices are starting points, not requirements, that agencies can adapt based on local context, capacity, and goals.

A. Finding the Right Partners

Direct Install and Landscape Transformation programs rely on partners that bring capacity and expertise that utilities typically do not hold internally. Identifying the right partners early is one of the most important success factors.

Where to Look

Utilities often find strong partners among organizations already working at the community or watershed scale, including:

- **RCDs** – technical assistance, land stewardship, watershed coordination
- **CBOs and NGOs** – outreach, trust-building, education, volunteer mobilization
- **Workforce development organizations** – training, job pathways, installer capacity
- **Parks, open space, and outdoor recreation departments** – access to public-facing sites and demonstration locations
- **Regional collaboratives or coalitions (e.g., watershed groups, LRP partners)** – coordination across jurisdictions and programs
- **Community Development Department** – often have lists of organizations active in the community

Utilities can lead the charge here – put out a call for partnerships and see who responds.

Signals of Readiness

Communities are often well positioned for DI / LT programs when some of the following conditions are present:

- Active environmental, parks, or outdoor recreation organizations
- Ongoing climate resilience, heat mitigation, or watershed planning efforts
- Existing conservation, stormwater, or greening programs that could align
- Participation in regional coordination efforts (e.g., an existing LRP or similar network)

Strong partners often already exist in the community.

Questions to Ask Early

- Do we have (or can we leverage) a **community needs assessment**?
- Where do **agency goals and community priorities align**?
- Who already has trusted relationships with residents and land stewards?

What Counts as a Community Needs Assessment?

This does not need to be a new or formal study. Many communities already have planning documents or data sources that can inform DI / LT program design.

These may include:

- **Climate Action Plans or Climate Resilience Plans** (heat, drought, flooding, equity priorities)
- **Urban Water Management Plans (UWMPs)** or Water Shortage Contingency Plans
- **Stormwater or Green Infrastructure Master Plans**
- **General Plans or Sustainability / Equity Plans**
- **Parks, urban forestry, or open space plans**
- **Community Health Assessments** or Heat Vulnerability Assessments
- **Previous community engagement or survey efforts**
- **Program participation** data from existing conservation or rebate programs

Even informal inputs—such as conversations with trusted community organizations or existing partner feedback—can help clarify priorities, barriers, and opportunities.

B. Designing for Participation

Participation does not happen automatically, especially in Direct Install programs intended to reach underserved or historically excluded communities.

Effective programs:

- Use **messaging grounded in local conditions and priorities**, informed by community needs assessments
- Address **upfront cost barriers** by providing direct installation, materials, or technical assistance
- Create **clear pathways to entry**, including:
 - How residents get involved
 - How partners participate
 - How projects move from interest to installation

Partner-led outreach is often more effective than utility-only communication, particularly when engagement is values-based and culturally relevant.

C. Paying for DI / LT Programs

Most DI / LT programs rely on **multiple funding sources**, rather than a single budget line.

Common funding sources include:

- **Utility Conservation Budgets**
- **California State Funding**, including DWR programs and Proposition 4 and other climate or resilience bond funds
- **Wholesaler Funding To Retail Agencies** (e.g., MWD programs and grants)
- **Federal Funding**, including Bureau of Reclamation WaterSMART grants
- **Water Budget Rate Structures** that support conservation investment

Programs are often strongest when funding is **stacked intentionally** to support outreach, installation, coordination, and follow-through.

D. Stacking Programs (and Funding) Without Overlapping Effort

Complimentary efforts are often already happening through parks departments, public works, stormwater programs, climate initiatives, or community organizations. Utilities do not need to start from scratch to participate.

A practical first step is to identify:

- Projects already planned or underway
- Who is leading them
- What outcomes are already being targeted

Utilities can then ask where **water savings or landscape transformation goals can be added** to strengthen those efforts.

What This Looks Like in Practice

For example:

- A city parks department is planning a park renovation
- A public works project includes landscape improvements
- A school or public facility is upgrading outdoor spaces

Rather than creating a new program, a utility might:

- Add funding for **additional turf removal**
- Support upgrades to **climate-appropriate planting**
- Provide resources for **irrigation improvements or soil health**
- Help measure and document **water savings outcomes**

In this way, utilities augment existing projects while aligning them with conservation goals.

How Utilities Can Identify Opportunities

Utilities often find opportunities to plug into existing efforts by:

- **Coordinating** with parks, public works, planning, or sustainability departments
- **Reviewing** capital improvement plans, parks master plans, or climate action plans
- **Talking** with community-based organizations active in priority neighborhoods
- **Participating** in regional or watershed-scale partnerships and planning efforts

These efforts often already have momentum, relationships, and partial funding; utility participation helps extend their impact.

Putting These Practices to Work

Utilities do not need to adopt all of these practices at once. Many successful DI / LT efforts begin by strengthening one or two areas – such as partner alignment or funding coordination – and evolve over time.

The consistent lesson across programs is this: Direct Install and Landscape Transformation programs work best when capacity is shared, roles are clear, and partnerships are intentional.



8. How Agencies Can Get Started

Utilities interested in Direct Install and Landscape Transformation programs do not need to launch a comprehensive new program to begin. Across California, agencies often start small, test approaches, and build confidence over time.

The entry points below reflect **practical ways agencies are getting started today**, regardless of whether a formal partnership structure like an LRP is already in place.

Clear, Actionable Entry Points

Start with one neighborhood or a small set of demonstration sites. Rather than rolling out district-wide, agencies can begin with:

- One priority neighborhood
- A handful of highly visible demonstration sites
- Public or community-serving spaces (parks, schools, libraries, civic facilities)

This approach allows agencies to test design standards, engagement strategies, and reporting processes, while building visibility, exploring partnerships, and assessing community interest and capacity before scaling up.

Start with one partner. Many successful efforts begin by working closely with a single trusted partner, such as:

- A RCD
- A CBO or NGO
- A parks or public works department

Starting with one partner helps clarify roles, simplify coordination, and build trust before expanding to additional collaborators.

Start with one installation type. Agencies do not need to offer every possible intervention at once. Common starting points include:

- Site Assessment
- Turf removal and replacement with native climate-appropriate planting
- Irrigation upgrades

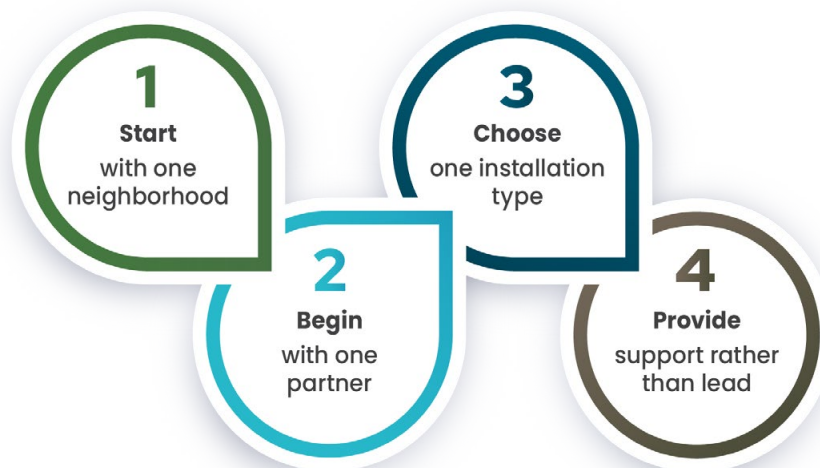
Focusing on one installation type helps streamline implementation and evaluation.

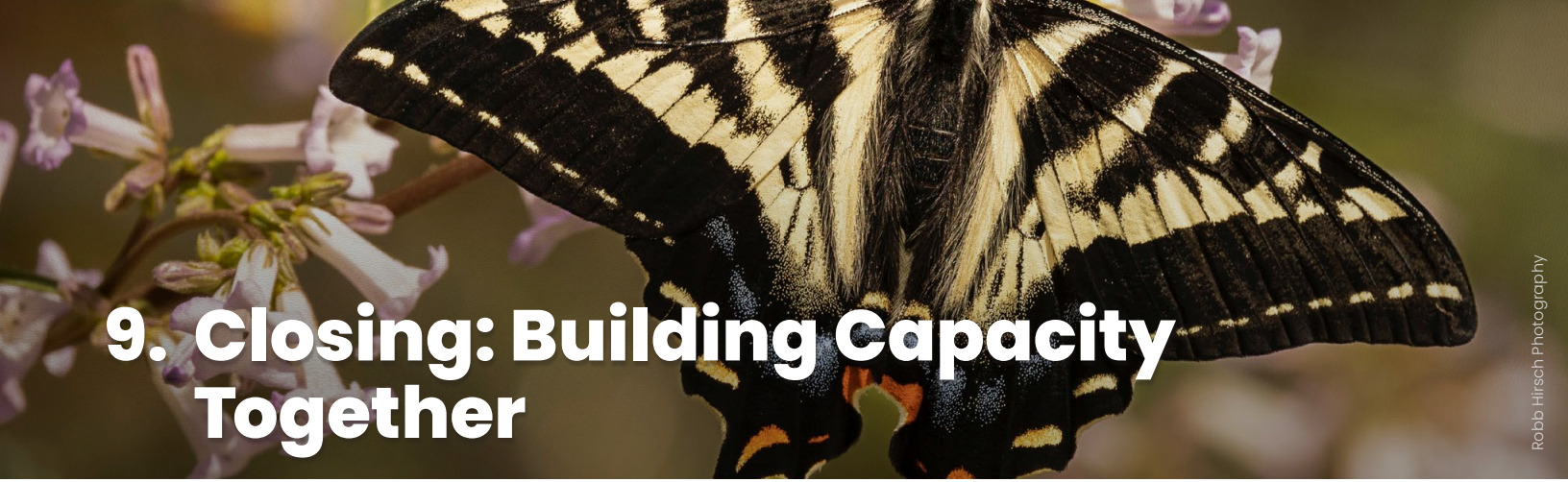
Start as a supporter, not a lead. Agencies can participate meaningfully by taking on a limited, supportive role, such as:

- Contributing funding or conservation goals to a project already led by a partner
- Supporting a specific component (e.g., turf removal, irrigation upgrades, or planting) rather than administering the full project
- Staying engaged through outcome tracking and learning, without managing day-to-day implementation

Starting as a supporter allows agencies to deliver water savings, build partnerships, and learn what works without taking on full administrative responsibility.

Entry Points to Building DI / LT Programs





9. Closing: Building Capacity Together

Robb Hirsch Photography

Direct Install and Landscape Transformation programs offer an important opportunity for utilities to deliver meaningful water savings while supporting healthier, more resilient landscapes. As these programs become more ambitious and multi-benefit, success increasingly depends on **community capacity, partnership, and coordination**.

The experiences highlighted in this case study show that:

- **Effective programs do not require utilities to do everything themselves**
- **Community partners bring essential capacity that utilities can support and amplify**
- **Clear roles and shared responsibility reduce strain while improving outcomes**

Whether engaging as a program lead, partner, or supporter, utilities can play a critical role by aligning funding, goals, and accountability with the people and organizations already working on the ground.

For agencies interested in getting started, the most important step is often the simplest one: **identify an entry point, engage intentionally, and build from there.**

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for Scalable Landscape Transformation
Outreach and Technical Assistance**

Case Study Series



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