COG ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE TOOLKIT UPDATE

Community Listening Session #2

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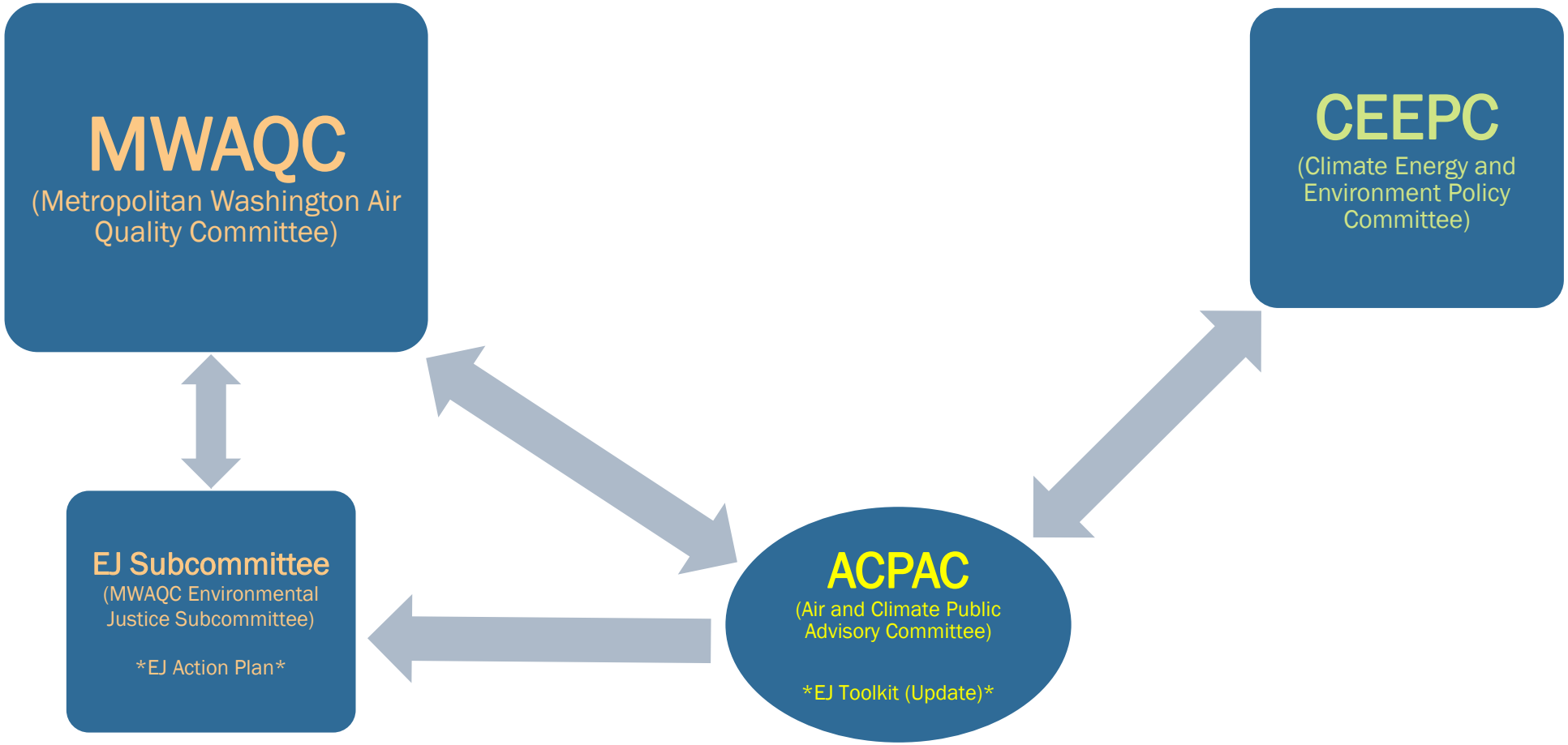
ACPAC EJ Toolkit Community Listening Session
May 19, 2025

About COG

- An independent, nonprofit association founded in 1957.
- Brings area leaders together to address regional issues and plan for the future.
- 300 elected officials from 24 local governments, the Maryland and Virginia state legislatures, and U.S. Congress, representing about 6 million residents.
- Home of the Transportation Planning Board, the region's Metropolitan Planning Organization.
- 125+ staff.

Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments

Committee Relationship Structure



Roles in the Region

- COG
  - Convening body with an important role in facilitating regional coordination for climate and energy, growth, housing, environment, public health and safety
    - Example: compile GHG inventory data
- Local Governments
  - Individual policy and goal setting
    - Example: local planning and zoning departments manage and regulate data center development, including updating policies and standards for data center uses

2017 Environmental Justice (EJ) Toolkit

Guidance to policymakers on incorporating social equity, cultural sensitivity, and community health considerations into air quality, climate, and energy planning:

- **Approach #1**: Identifying Potentially Vulnerable Populations
- **Approach #2**: Providing Meaningful Engagement Opportunities
- **Approach #3**: Assessing Community Impacts and Needs
- **Approach #4**: Developing Metrics
- **Approach #5**: Providing Data, Information, and Resources for Communities
- **Approach #6**: Using Citizen Science
- **Approach #7**: Developing Community Leadership
- **Approach #8**: Supporting Economic and Workforce Development
- **Approach #9**: Mainstreaming Environmental Justice into Public Planning and Programs

https://www.mwcog.org/documents/2017/07/27/environmental-justice-toolkit/

EJ Toolkit Update

- Purpose of Toolkit & Update Refresh
  - To provide recommendations or strategies for local governments to more effectively and appropriately engage vulnerable/disfavored communities on issues related to climate, energy and air quality
    - Update recommendations, best practices, and case studies for engagement.
    - Incorporate new research and EJ engagement tools

EJ Toolkit Update

- Two-pronged Approach
  - Local government workshops - COG held two sessions with local government staff that have EJ community engagement experience (February 14, and March 13).
  - Community engagement - Equnival hold workshops and in-person engagements with community-based organizations and grassroots communities
    - Develop recommendations based on the data gathered from those interviews and outreach events.
    - Present recommendations in May ACPAC meeting and in small focus groups
- Timeline
  - Draft EJ Toolkit COG Comment Period: November - December 2025
  - Final Toolkit: February 2026

Who Is Equnival Partners?

- Established in February 2020
- Washington, D.C.-based consultancy working locally and nationally to use the power of collaborative decision-making to enable strategic collective action
- Thirty years' experience working on environmental, equity and justice issues using a collaborative approach, including meeting facilitation and mediation

Engagement and Info Gathering Methodology

- Identify community and EJ leaders across the COG footprint:
  - Maryland, Virginia, and DC jurisdictions
  - Included conversations with 7-8 ACPAC members
  - Identified about 85 potential organizations for outreach across the DMV
- Craft interview questions to guide conversations
  - Conduct interviews with leaders
- Host small focus group discussions across the COG footprint on improving engagement strategies
- Attend 5-6 community events to hear from residents and leaders alike
  - Have spoken with about 40 people thus far across all conversations
- Will continue outreach through at least June 15

Engagement and Info Gathering Methodology

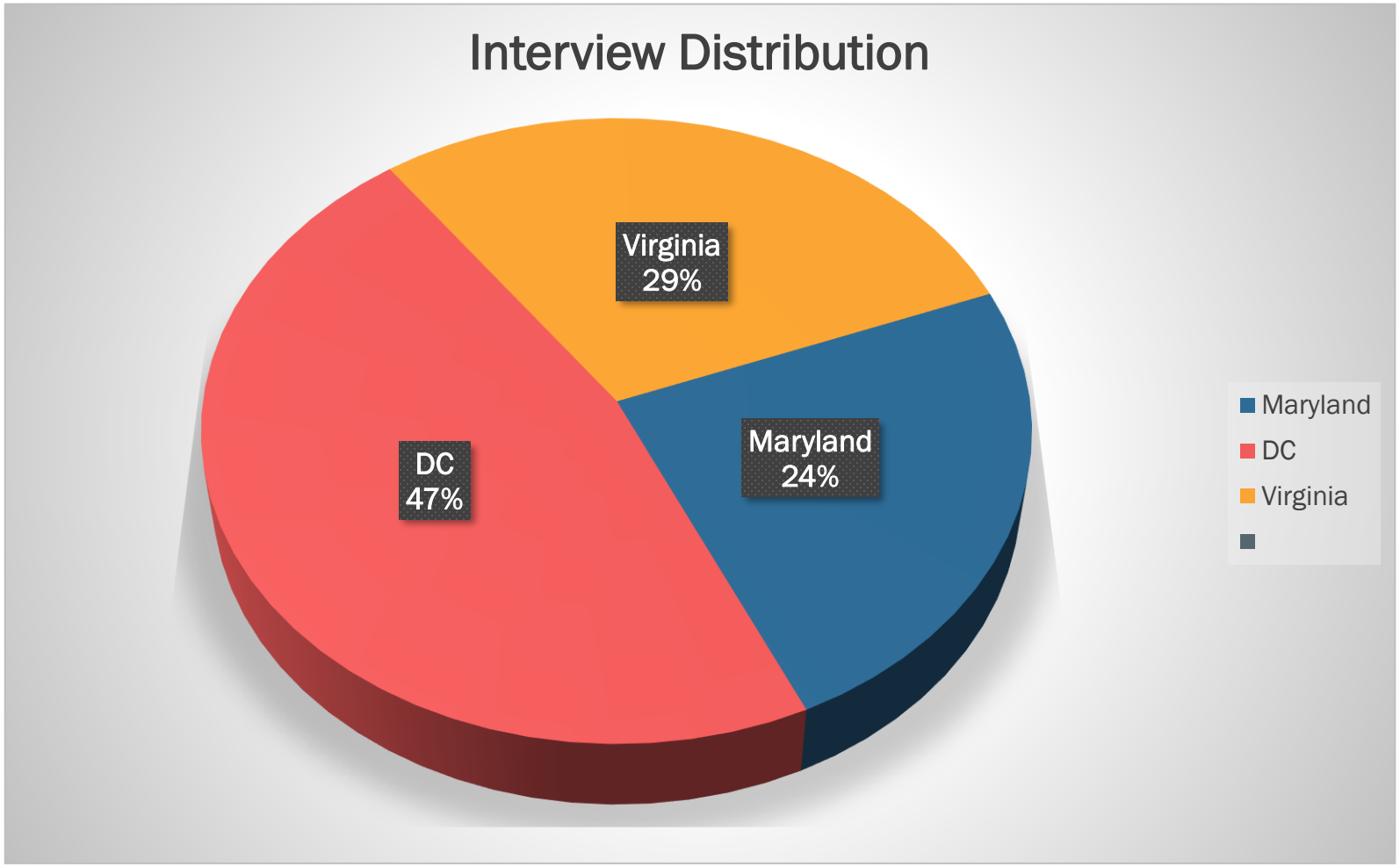
From the interviews thus far:

- Developed an interim report identifying trends in research thus far
- Begun to develop findings and initial recommendations

Next steps:

- Continue outreach on key questions
- Refine potential recommendations with additional outreach, review of local best practices
- Develop final recommendations for COG review (end of June)

Engagement and Info Gathering Methodology



Questions Guiding our Engagement

- **How would you describe the community (communities) that you are a member of or where you live?**
  - Mostly middle and working class neighborhoods
  - Often find it difficult to influence decision making beyond traditional public meetings
  - Some orgs find champions that can help get their ideas into policy discussions

- **What are some topics or issues related to climate, energy, and air that are important to your community/communities/your organization/members?**
  - Impacts on air quality:
    - Data centers
    - Transportation choices
    - Industrial activity
  - Energy costs and reliability
  - Climate impacts:
    - Prolonged heat events and flooding

Questions Guiding our Engagement

- **How do you/your organization/members prefer to receive information on climate, energy, and air quality issues?**
  - Direct engagement between leaders and residents was an overwhelming desire
  - Canvassing could be particularly effective
  - Need the trusted messenger/community leader as a liaison
  - THEN you can use online tools to share information, provide avenues for input

- **What are the greatest challenges and barriers in building a sustained and productive relationship with local government staff in your city or county?**
  - Lack of trust that leaders will listen
  - Feeling among residents that they cannot impact decision making
  - Lack of actionable information that communities can use
  - Not confident in the sources of data and information used in decision making

Questions Guiding our Engagement

- **What are some examples in building a sustained relationship with local government staff in your city or county?**
  - South County Environmental Justice Coalition (Battery Energy Storage System)
  - Arlington Energy Masters and Office of Resiliency
  - Young Gifted Green (DC) Lead Initiative
  - Centro de Apoyo Familiar Latino Community Engagement for 2020 Census

- **How would successful or satisfying engagement with your local city or county look?**
  - Residents connect to policy and decision-making process through existing civic organizations and networks (requires some capacity-building and support)
  - Better information synthesis and dissemination to communities from a trusted source
  - Numerous ways to engage a diverse array of residents and to gather information

Questions Guiding our Engagement

- **What are the best ways for local governments to ensure that community members are directly involved in decision-making processes?**
  - Engagement over outreach – bridge formal and informal policy networks
  - Leverage existing organizations to create ongoing relationships with communities
  - Support information sharing through hubs, networks
  - Engage youth

- **Are there specific actions you believe local governments can take to build long-term trust and establish credibility with your community?**
  - COG can be more aggressive in leveraging three roles to support local jurisdictions AND communities to better engage with one another:
    - ***Convener:*** identify effective local organizations that can connect local governments to hard-to-reach communities
    - ***Informer:*** connect local leaders to information resources on key issues
    - ***Process Advocate:*** collect and share examples of high-quality engagement efforts

Initial Thoughts on Recommendations

- Share data and information on key issues with communities and leaders to help in decision making
  - Leverage existing organizations as hubs
- Provide best practices on engagement between communities and jurisdiction leaders to amplify
- Tap into existing community networks as liaisons between local governments and community organizations
- Deploy a diverse menu for engagement to ensure public comment is accessible to a diverse array of community members
- Work with communities to:
  - Design and produce actionable information for decision making.
  - Identify 3-5 key issues for increased focus on information dissemination, solution generation

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Metropolitan Washington
Council of Governments

Additional Information on COG

COG Boards and Policy Committees

National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board (TPB)

COG BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Metropolitan Washington Air Quality Committee (MWAQC)

Region Forward Coalition

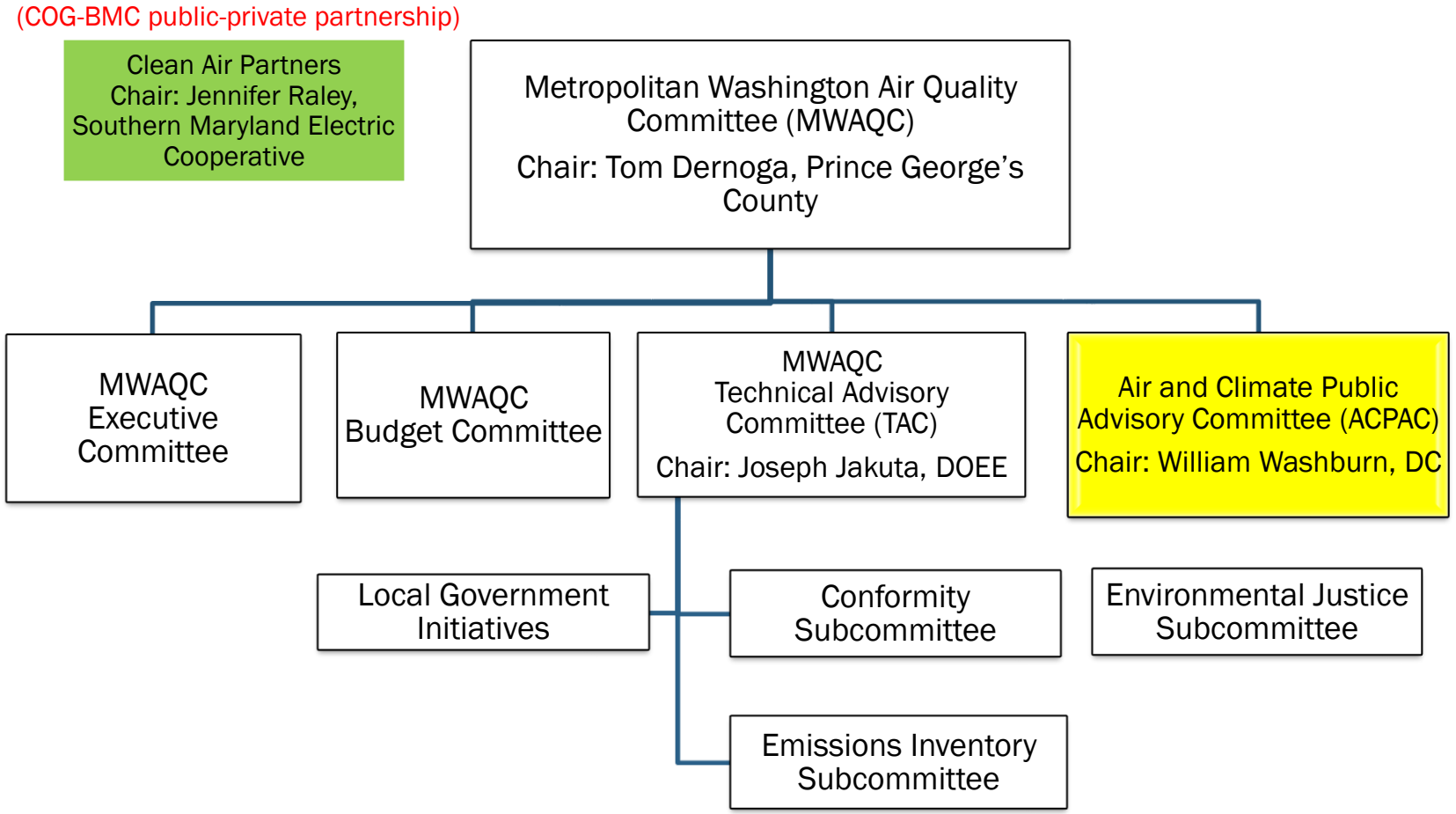
Human Resources Policy Committee

Climate, Energy and Environment Policy Committee (CEEPC)

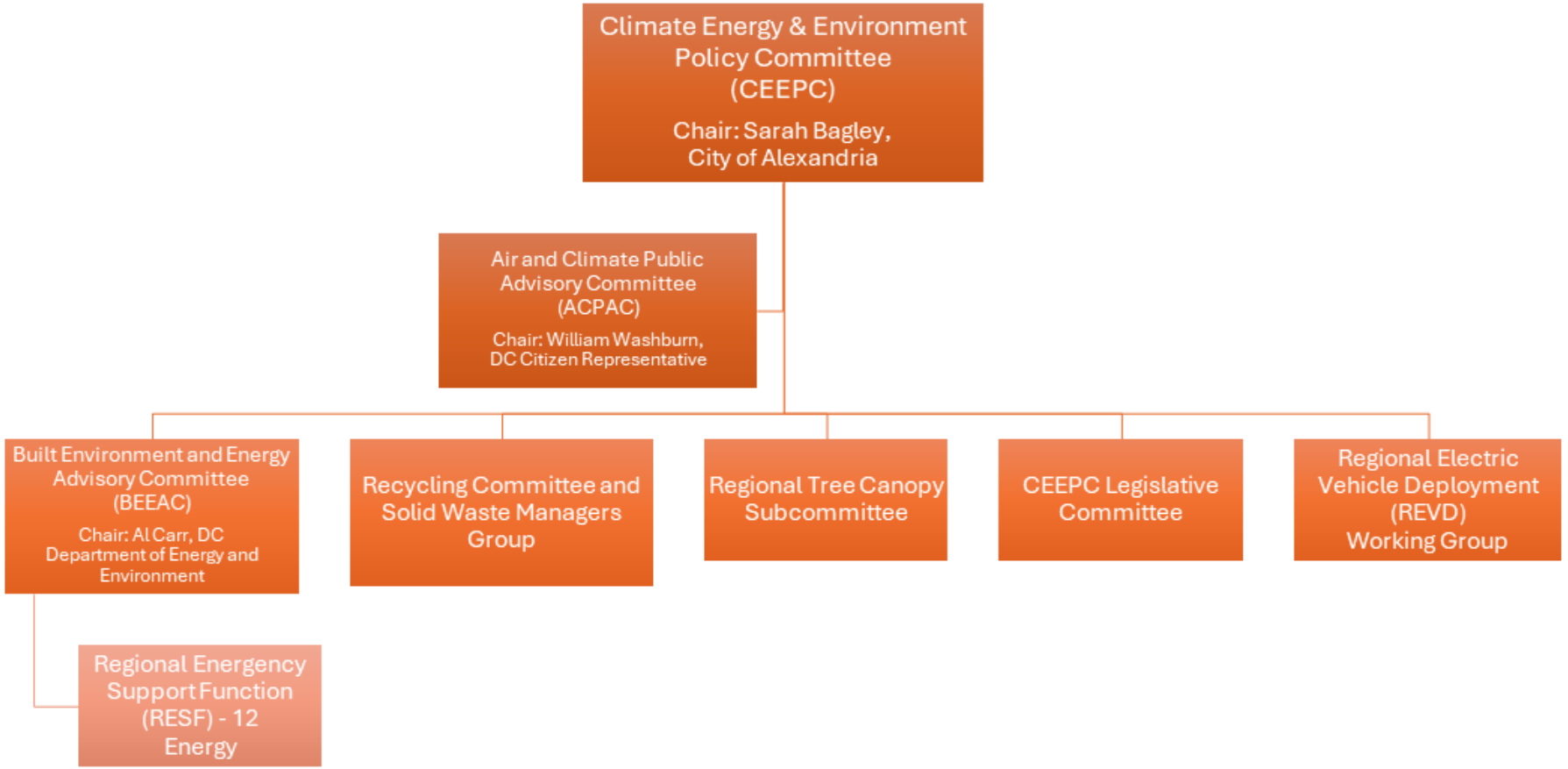
Chesapeake Bay and Water Resources Policy Committee

Food and Agriculture Regional Member Policy Committee

MWAQC Committee Structure



CEEPC Committee Structure



ACPAC Oversight, Mission, and Members

Oversight
- Established in 1993
- Serves as an advisor to MWAQC and CEEPC

Mission
- Act as a mechanism for facilitating a dialogue among diverse interest groups, the community at large, CEEPC, and MWAQC
- Comment on the air quality aspects of climate change issues; and to assume such other responsibilities as MWAQC or CEEPC shall determine

18 Members: 6 each from DC/MD/VA
- Citizens/community members apply
- MWAQC appoints