

Region 2 Focus Group 2025

**Ishkoday | First Nation Energy Sustainability
Association**

December 16, 2025



ishkoday.ca

Introduction

A fundamental part of the human experience is our relationship to energy. Our relationship to energy has changed everything about how humans live. Every culture around the world has a unique and foundational connection to fire and how they came to understand and use it. Fire has changed the way we live; it has changed the way we eat, it has changed the way we interact with the rest of the natural world. Fire and energy are fundamental to human existence.

Ishkoday wants to give agency back to people and assist in a movement towards energy efficiency for all. It is important as an indigenous grassroots organization to know where to focus our efforts. By working with First Nations social services employees, Ishkoday is able to gain insight into the lives of some of the most vulnerable population in Ontario.

Acknowledgements

Miigwech (thank you – *anishnaabemowin*) to our tireless leader – Jessica Nadjiwon, without her guidance none of this is possible.

Miigwech to Kelsey Leblanc and Staci Williams for hosting ONWAA regional sessions and assisting in logistics to make the focus groups a reality. Their hard work, knowledge, and facilitation skills are unmatched.

Miigwech to Nick Puran and Sheldon Adams for their assistance and willingness to assist whenever needed.

Chi-miigwech (great thanks – *anishnaabemowin*) to our ONWAA/Ishkoday members, their experience, observations, contributions and connection to their clients; the work would not be possible without them.

Summary

Ishkoday's Focus Groups are annual data collection and educational exercises to determine the needs and gaps in support for First Nations Ontario Works Administrators and case workers.

Data is collected to reveal the conditions and burdens of energy poverty on low- and fixed-income as well as the Ontario Works and Social Service Departments throughout First Nation communities in Ontario.

This report contains comparisons from the previous 2024 Ishkoday focus group, a first step in measuring trends and changes to the state of energy poverty in First Nations in Ontario.

About Ishkoday

Ishkoday | First Nation Energy Sustainability Association (Ishkoday) is a sister organization to Ontario Native Welfare Administrators' Association (ONWAA). Ishkoday was formed in 2023 by the board of directors of ONWAA with the mandate to:

- Deliver energy efficiency training that benefit First Nations peoples residing on reserves who are of fixed income or in need.
- Provide insight to First Nations Leadership that assist them in bettering their energy resources and communities in the future.
- Promoting uniform, culturally appropriate training and delivery of cultural competency, energy programs, policy, and practices.
- Assisting in providing the basic necessities, tools, and resources of climate control which promotes safe and comfortable living conditions for First Nations peoples living on reserve who are of fixed income or in need.

Ishkoday is the Oji-cree word meaning: “flame” or “fire”. Fire is energy; Indigenous people have always understood the power and respect that fire commands. Throughout Canada's history; Indigenous people have unequally experienced the benefits and the dangers of energy generation, transmission and use.



About the Authors

Adam McLaren (*he/him*) is Marten and McLaren Clan from the Chippewas of Nawash First Nation in Saugeen Ojibway Nation Territory. Adam has been with ONWAA/Ishkoday since August 2023. He has a community-based approach to his work professionally and in his personal life. Adam loves to go hiking, facilitate educational and cultural exercises, land-based learning and volunteering for his community.

Chelsea Brunelle (*she/her*) of the Bear clan is Ojibwe from Batchewana First Nation. Chelsea is the policy specialist with ONWAA and has been with the organization for almost four years.

Nicholas Puran (*he/him*) is a Data Manager at Ishkoday and has been with the organization since October 2024. Nicholas has a background in environmental biology and years of experience working for First Nation communities.

Region 2 Focus Group Details

Date: June 10, 2025

Location: Wyndham Garden, Winnipeg Manitoba

Facilitator: Adam McLaren - Ishkoday

Host : Staci Williams

All communities in ONWAA's Region 2:

- Anishnaabeg of Naongashiing (Big Island) First Nation
- Asubpeeschoseewagong Netum Anishinabak
- Big Grassy First Nation
- Couchiching First Nation
- Eagle Lake First Nation
- Grassy Narrows First Nation
- Iskatewizaagegan #39 First Nation
- Lac La Croix First Nation
- Lac Seul First Nation
- Mitaanjigamiing First Nation



- Naicatchewenin First Nation
- Naotkamegwanning (Whitefish Bay) First Nation
- Nigigoonsiminikaaning Band
- Niisaachewan Anishnaabe Nation
- Northwest Angle #33 First Nation
- Northwest Angle #37 First Nation (Animakee Wa Zhing #37)
- Obashkaandagaang, (Washagamis Bay), First Nation
- Ojibways of Onigaming First Nation
- Rainy River First Nation
- Seine River First Nation
- Shoal Lake #40 First Nation
- Wabaseemoong Independent First Nation
- Wabauskang First Nation
- Wabigoon Lake Ojibway Nation
- Wauzhushk Onigum Nation

Region 2 communities represented in Focus Group: (7/25)

- Nigigoonsiminikaaning First Nation
- Animakee Wa Zhing First Nation #37
- Ojibways of Onigaming First Nation
- Naotkamegwanning First Nation
- Seine River First Nation
- Rainy River Nation
- Lac La Croix First Nation

Positions held by participants in Focus Group:

(8) Ontario Works Administrators

(4) Executive Assistant

(1) Councillor

Purpose

Ishkoday's purpose for this study is as follows:

- 1) Gather a base data set to inform Ishkoday in its organizational research and direction to achieve its mandate.
- 2) Provide aggregate data on the state of Energy Poverty in First Nations and the impact to low- and fixed-income people and their social services departments to aide First Nations in advocacy and policy.

Methodology

Gathering people together for a common purpose across a landmass as great as Ontario's is no easy feat. The 2025 focus group was designed to be facilitated in-person through ONWAA's annual regional spring/summer gatherings.

Mentimeter.com was chosen to present and gather data during these facilitated focus groups. It is an interactive and intuitive online software that utilizes live responses input by the participant with their personal device.

Each focus group session was designed to be 1.5 hours to ensure the discussion of various subjects and allow participants to share stories and experiences. Our 13 participants consisted of (8) Ontario Works administrators, (4) Executive Assistants, and (1) Councillor.

Participants were notified early about the session and given a few preview questions that may take some prior preparation, specifically in questions 7, 8 and 9 about the costs of "bill relief" to their program.

Many of the questions in this focus group were the same as the 2024 Ishkoday Focus Groups with some minor changes and a few additions. The questions that were asked to the focus group participants utilized and built upon and content of the 2024 Ishkoday Focus Group Project.

Considerations for Analysis

A main consideration for analysis and comparisons between the previous 2024 Region 2 Focus Group and current 2025 Region 2 Focus Group is that there is minimal overlap between participants. Only (4) participants from (4) returning First Nations, are represented in the 2024 and 2025 Focus Groups. Although the comparison between the current data and the previous year's data will be minimal, the data is still valuable to

document the impacts of Energy Poverty within Region 2 and for Ishkoday in knowing where to offer Energy Efficiency Training.



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2025 Focus Group - Questions, Responses and Analyses

2025 Focus Group sessions began as the 2024 the sessions began with (2) questions to gauge the participants’ current knowledge on the concepts of Energy Efficiency and Energy Poverty; their responses are measured by response types submitted as well as the terminology chosen to use.

Question 1

What does “*Energy Efficiency*” mean? What comes to mind?



Figure 1: 2025 Focus Group - Region 2 | Question 1 responses – June 10, 2025



Figure 2: 2024 Focus Group – Region 2 | Question 1 responses – November 21, 2024

Among the most frequent response category were that of financial costs and savings. The next highest response category was that of conservation and energy usage and sustainability, followed, by environmental health and home comfort.

Question 1 – Analysis and Year to Year Comparison

Financial-type responses were the most submitted in the 2025 and 2024 region 2 focus groups. Financially assisting clients with energy bills and administrating funds for clients is a standard task of the First Nations Ontario Works.

The participants drew connections to the home, energy and mould; broader terms used in relation to the environment. Additionally, the responses “Sustainability” and “energy usage” showed that they know a connection exists but may lack the terminology or specific details of how Energy Efficiency and those considerations are connected.

“Energy poverty is an overlooked determinant of health in Canada.” Riva et al (2023, Feb 8 p. 429).

“Ishkoday” as a response indicates a familiarity with Ishkoday and recognition of the work the organization does. The response “Knowledge” is also a keen indicator that there are more things to learn about energy efficiency that will be beneficial.

In comparisons with the 2024 Focus Group, they are quite similar in terminology and ratio of response type, but the 2025 Focus Group session has subtle differences that indicate an increased understanding of energy efficiency, such as the connection to residential mould growth.

Question 2

What does “**Energy Poverty**” mean to you? What comes to mind?

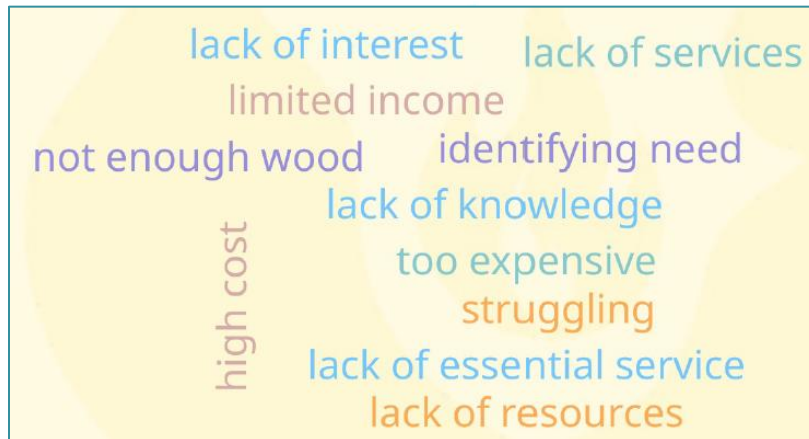


Figure 3: 2025 Region 2 Focus Group | Question 2 responses - June 10, 2025



Figure 4: 2025 Region 2 Focus Group | Question 2 responses – November 21, 2024

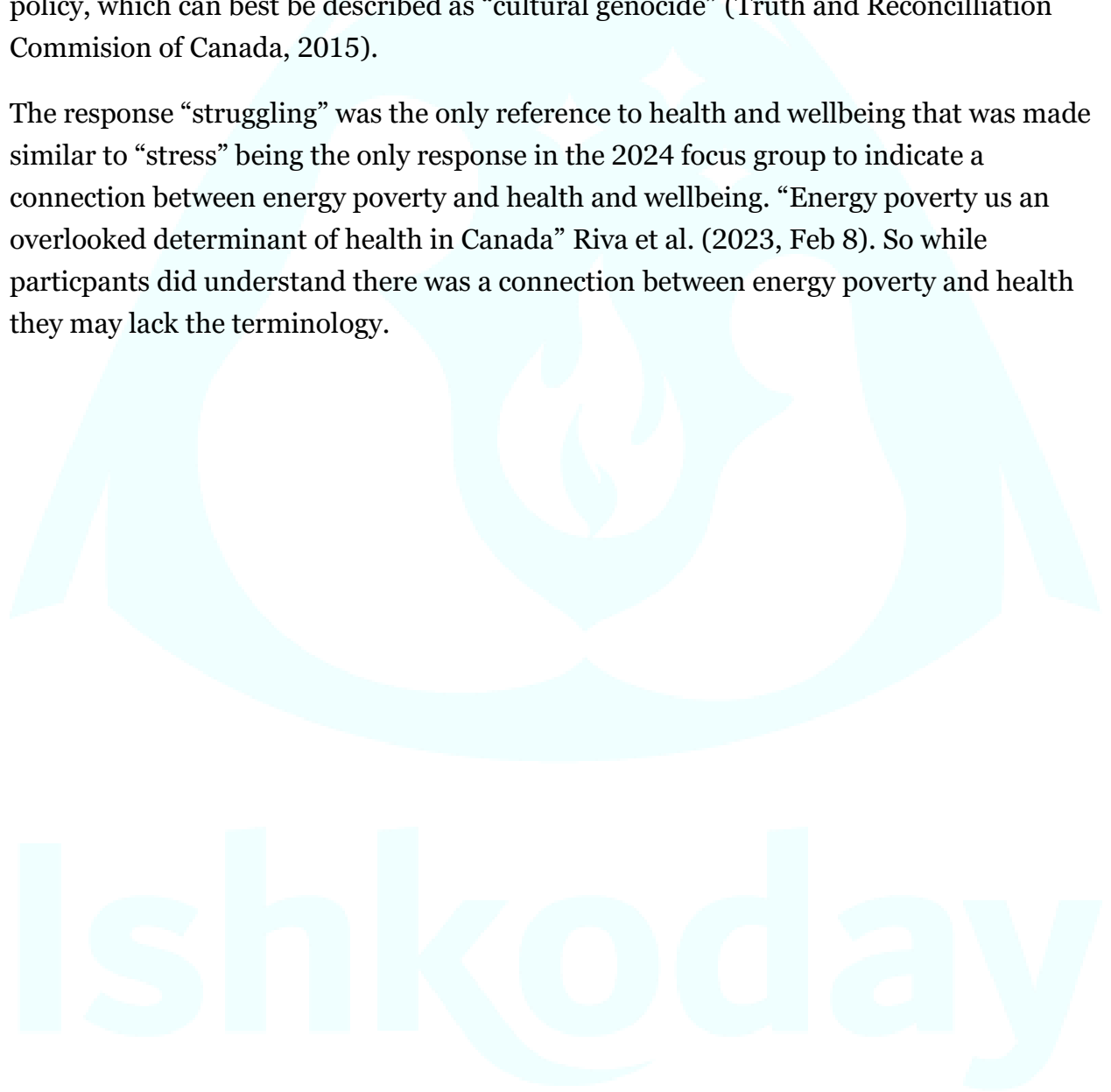
In question 2, participants were asked “What does energy poverty mean to you”. The goal is to discover the level of understanding of energy poverty as a concept, indicate areas of reaserch and opportunities for training where needed.

Question 2 – Analysis and Year to Year Comparison

Focus Group participants indicated the inaccessibility and unaffordability of energy requirements throughout the region. Region 2 has the second highest number of remote First Nation communities compared to other regions which has made physical access much more difficult, but the lack of political will to fix these systemic issues such as inadequate housing, inaccessibilty and affordability in northern onatrio has exaserbated

the difficult living conditions. For over a century, the central goals of Canada's Aboriginal policy were to eliminate Aboriginal governments; ignore Aboriginal rights; terminate the Treaties; and, through a process of assimilation, cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada. The establishment and operation of residential schools were a central element of this policy, which can best be described as "cultural genocide" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

The response "struggling" was the only reference to health and wellbeing that was made similar to "stress" being the only response in the 2024 focus group to indicate a connection between energy poverty and health and wellbeing. "Energy poverty is an overlooked determinant of health in Canada" Riva et al. (2023, Feb 8). So while participants did understand there was a connection between energy poverty and health they may lack the terminology.



Question 3

How does Energy Poverty show up in the communities you serve?



Figure 5: 2025 Region 2 Focus Group | June 10, 2025

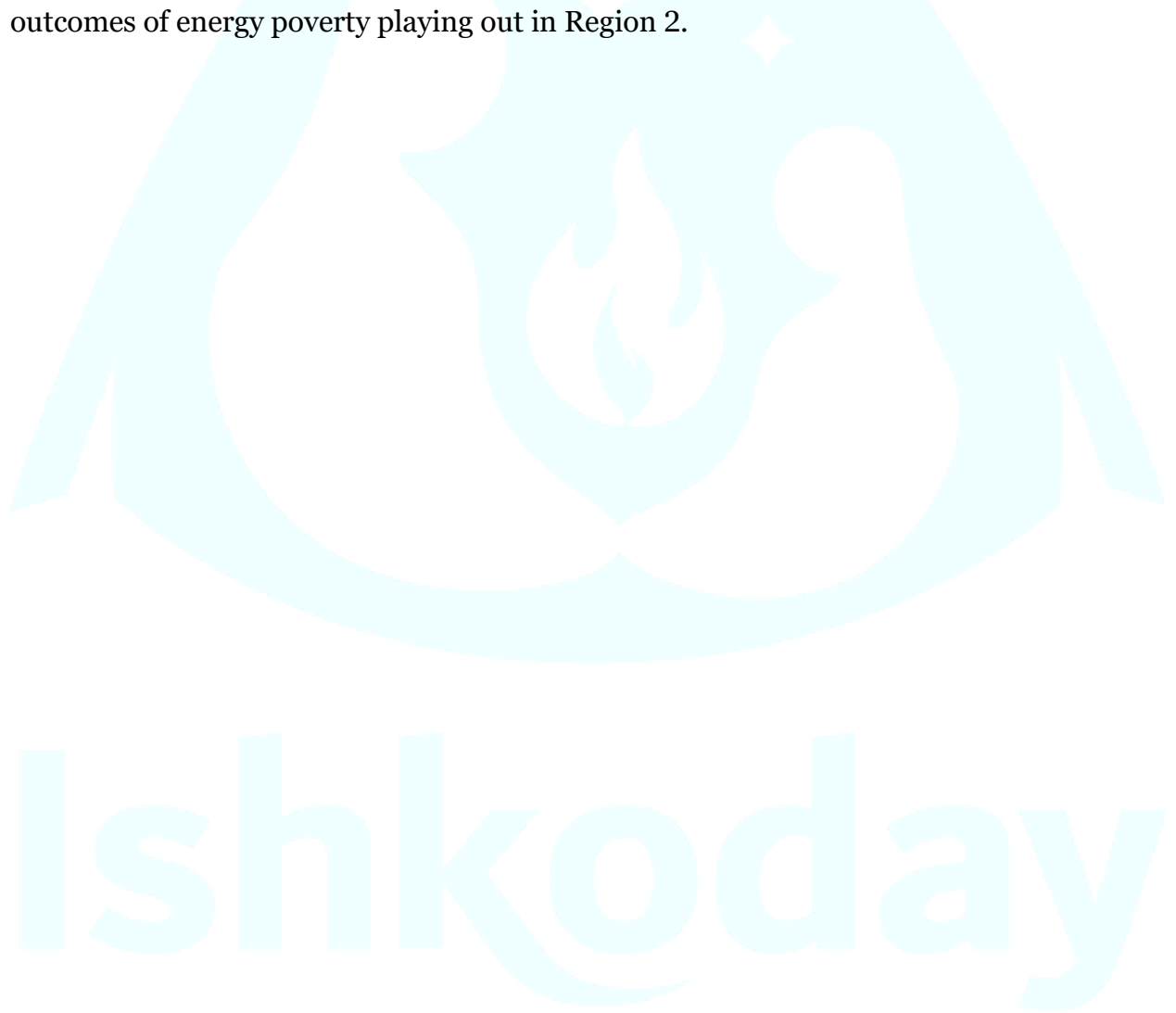


Figure 6: 2024 Region 2 Focus Group | November 21, 2024

The purpose for proposing this question is to document and learn about the real-life struggles that are taking place within their communities. As well as what kind of supports Ishkoday can create or advocate for on behalf of these communities. These are firsthand accounts of the people working with some of the most vulnerable populations in Ontario.

Analysis and Year to Year Comparison

In 2025, our participants indicated that energy poverty shows up in very intense and debilitating ways, not only for people on a personal level but systemically as well. Energy poverty leaves their clients having to choose between food or electricity, which can lead to utility arrears and disconnection notices. Depression is an outcome of these extremely challenging circumstances. On a wider scale, energy poverty affects the ability to grow their local economy, and a lack of access to reliable energy systems has affected their capacity for building or updating infrastructure. These are some major and precarious outcomes of energy poverty playing out in Region 2.



Question 4

“Where are we at right now?”

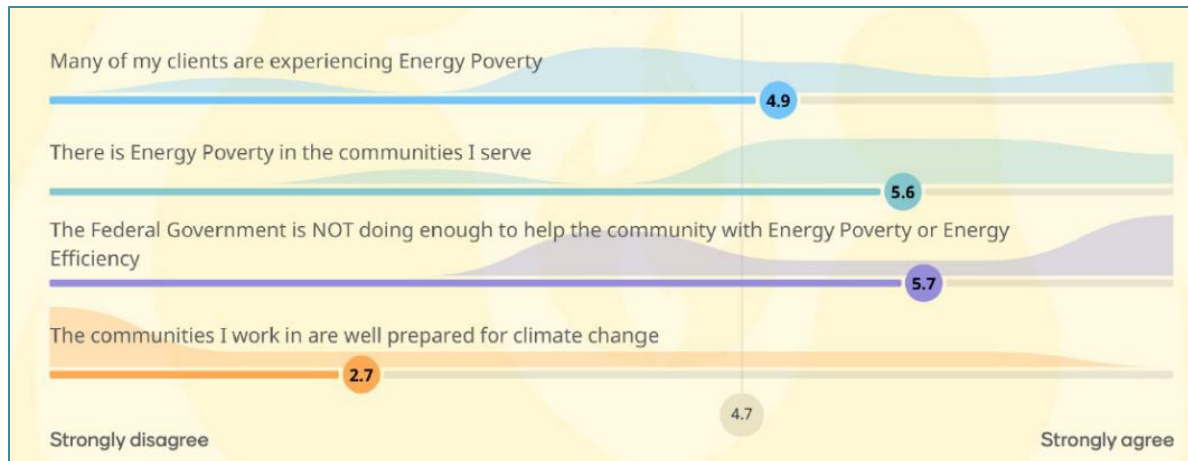


Figure 7: 2025 Region 2 Focus Group | June 10, 2025

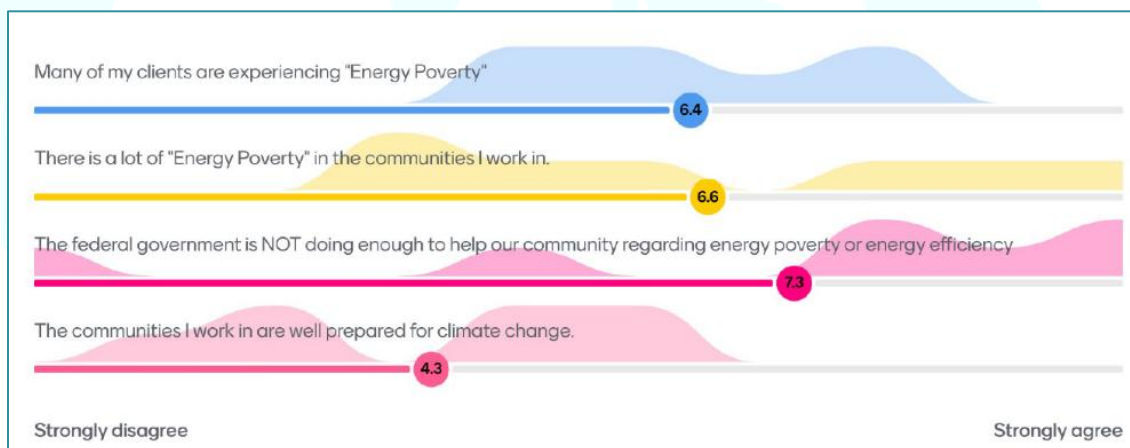


Figure 8: 2024 Region 2 Focus Group | November 21, 2024

In the 2024 and 2025 focus group participants were asked to agree or disagree with a statement to gauge the state of energy poverty in their communities. The lowest value indicates a strong disagreement with the statement and the high value indicates a strong agreement with the statement.

In 2025, the value from a scale of 1-10 to a scale of 1-7 to simplify our question and have a dedicated value for a “neutral” position.

Analysis and Year to Year Comparison

Statement 1: “Many of my clients are experiencing ‘Energy Poverty’”.

This statement was used to broadly indicate how many of the participant's clients were experiencing energy poverty. In 2024 and 2025 there is agreement that "many of my clients are experiencing energy poverty" in region 2. Yet in 2025 there was not a full consensus. Lastly, while in 2024 there was more of the consensus that many of their clients were experiencing energy poverty, that seems to have shifted a little in 2025.

Statement 2: *"There is a lot of energy poverty in the communities I work in → There is energy poverty in the communities I work in."*

This statement has gone through a small but significant change since last year, the change in the wording could lead to a more skewed understanding of what we had expected for participants, along with the change in how we valued the scale. Describing "A lot of energy poverty" as opposed to indicating that "there is energy poverty" In both statements participants did indicate that energy poverty exists in the communities they serve.

Statement 3: *"The Federal Government is NOT doing enough to help the community with Energy Poverty or Energy Efficiency."*

We wanted to document our participants general sentiment regarding support from the Federal Government. It is perceived that the Federal Government is not doing enough to support their communities with energy poverty and energy efficiency. The ongoing housing crisis in First Nations is likely a large part of the sentiment, as well as the history and legacy of colonization that is ongoing to this day. The CMHC states "nearly half of on-reserve households are living in a dwelling below a housing standard" (2025).

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission found that, "For over a century, the central goals of Canada's Aboriginal policy were to eliminate Aboriginal governments; ignore Aboriginal rights; terminate the Treaties; and, through a process of assimilation, cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada. The establishment and operation of residential schools were a central element of this policy, which can best be described as "cultural genocide"" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

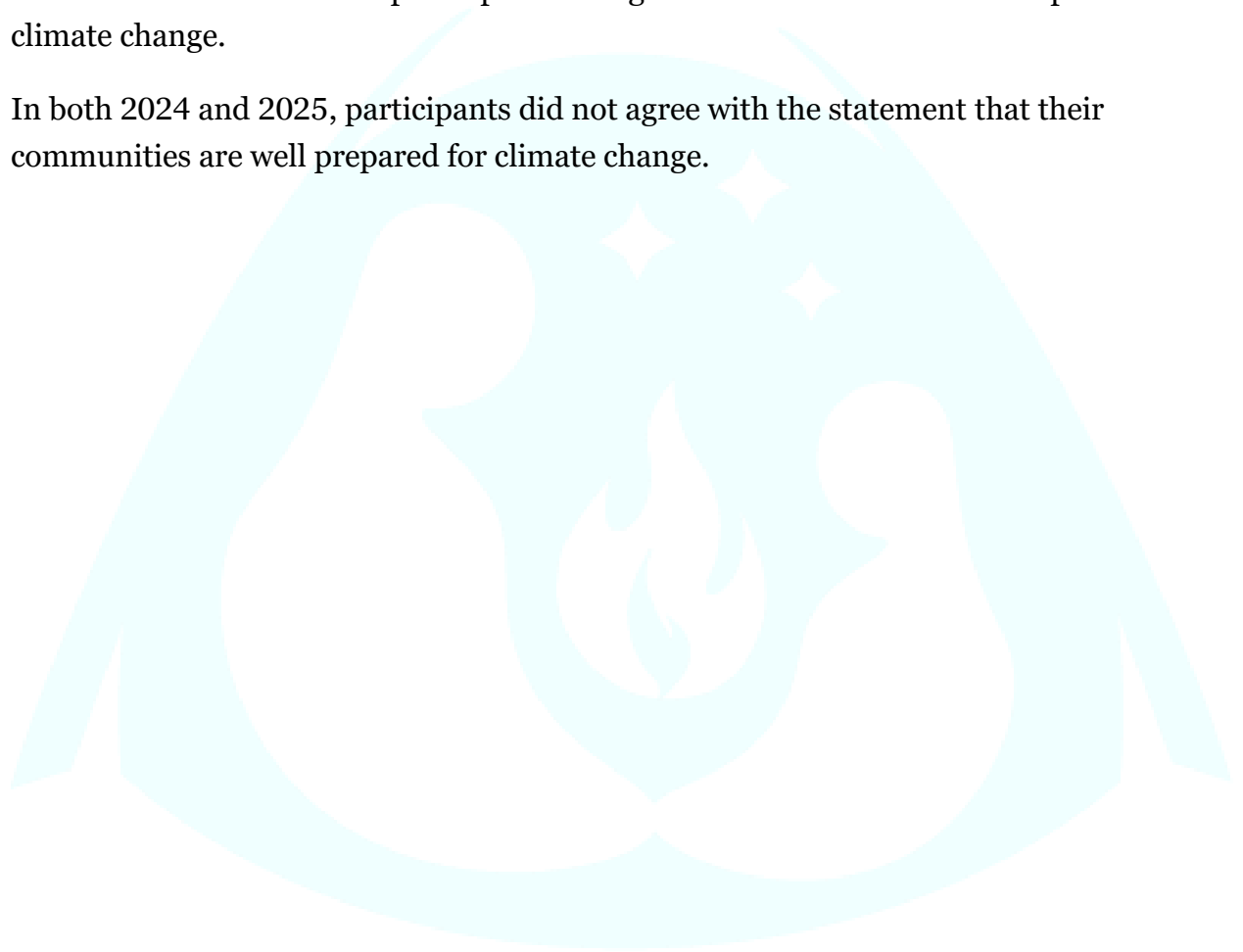
Statement 4: *"The communities I work in are well prepared for climate change."*

Canada's movement and shift to a carbon neutral society is politically challenging, climate change is the major threat that is driving this shift. While communities all across

the nation already face increasingly unpredictable weather patterns, First Nations are still behind in basic needs such as adequate housing.

We wanted to see what our participants thoughts about their communities' plans for climate change.

In both 2024 and 2025, participants did not agree with the statement that their communities are well prepared for climate change.



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Question 5

“What are the most common ways your clients are heating their homes?”

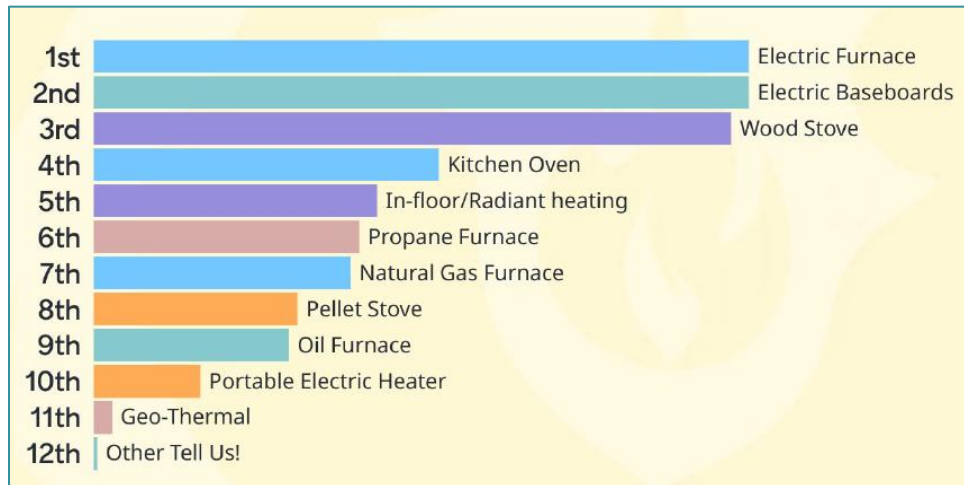


Figure 9: 2025 Region 2 Focus Group | June 10, 2025

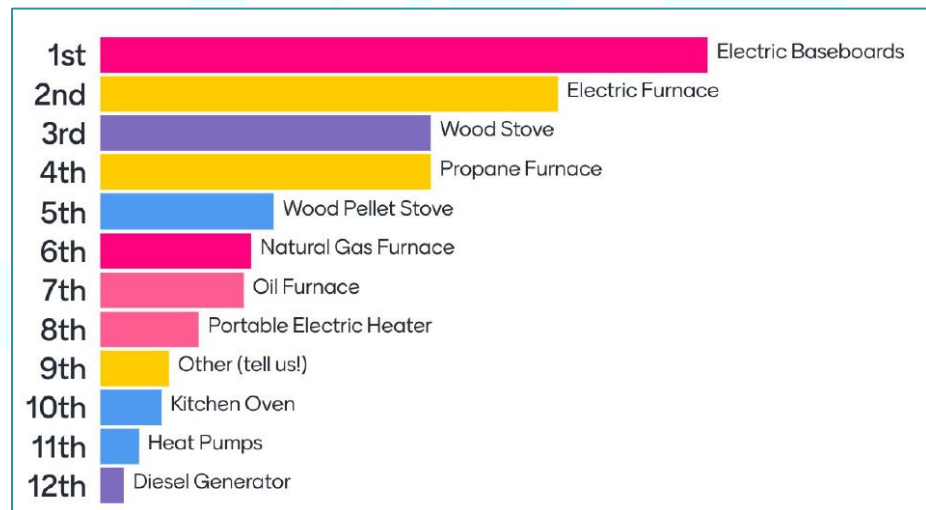


Figure 10: 2024 Region 2 Focus Group | November 21, 2024

In 2024 and 2025 participants were asked to rank which heating options on a provided list that were most used by their clients.

There are slight differences in the list of heating options between 2024 and 2025. In 2025 heat pumps and diesel generator were removed from the list of heating options because in 2024 geo-thermal and radiant heating options was indicated as a “other”

option. Masking heat pumps as “other” was an opportunity to see if they were knowledgeable about the installation of heat pumps within their community.

Analysis and Year to Year Comparison

In 2025 the electric furnace, electric baseboard heaters, and wood stove were a consensus top 3. Kitchen oven was ranked fourth, indicating that energy poverty is present throughout the region. In 2024 kitchen oven ranked lower while propane furnace ranked higher.

It will be interesting to see how these rankings change from year to year over the course of 5 years, and to see what new technologies are implemented, and how accessible and affordable the current common heating appliances become.

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Question 6

“Is the amount spent on energy bills higher or lower than the previous year?”

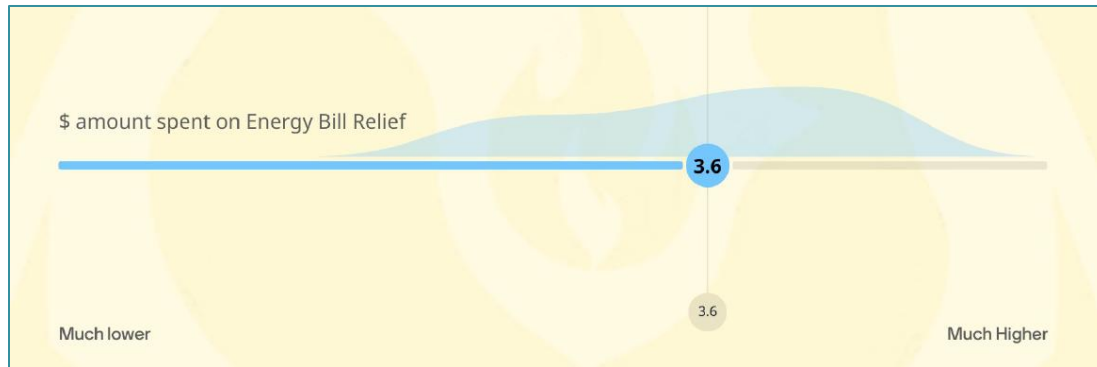


Figure 11: 2025 Region 2 Focus Group | June 10, 2025



Figure 12: 2024 Region 2 Focus Group | November 21, 2024

Analysis and Year to Year Comparison

In region 2 Hydro One is the dominant electricity supplier, but there are various fuel suppliers throughout the region. Measuring the bill relief payments from year to year will give us an idea of the affordability and efficiency trends throughout First Nations in Ontario.

While we are not going to compare the results from year to year for the reason stated in the above section – *Considerations for Analysis* (pg.6), both groups had indicated that the burden of energy bill relief was higher than the previous year.

Historic pricing data from the Ontario Energy Board shows that since November 1, 2023, the price of electricity rose 20.5% on peak demand times, then decreased 13.2% on November 1, 2024. As of November 1, 2025, on-peak demand time pricing has risen 28.5% from the previous price of 15.8 cents per kilowatt hour to 20.3 cents per kilowatt hour (OEB 2025).

Question 7

“If you could invest all the money you have spent on energy bill relief, what would you do with it?”



Figure 13: 2025 Region 2 Focus Group | June 10, 2025

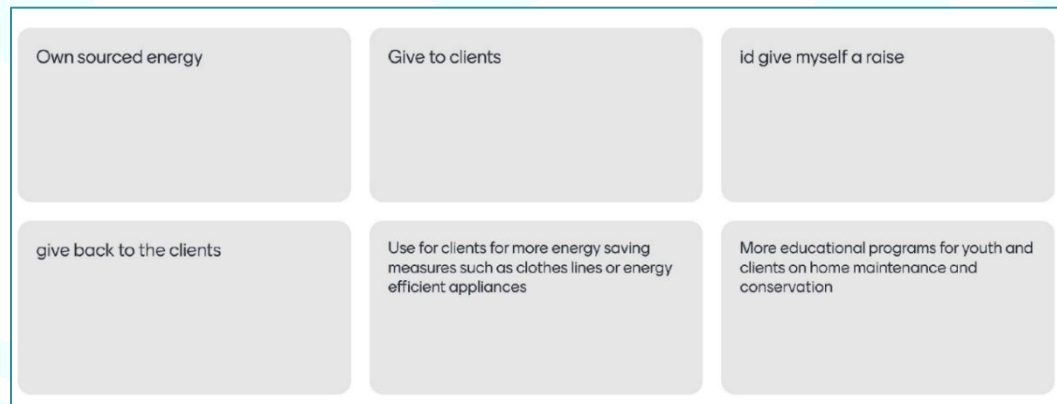


Figure 14: 2024 Region 2 Focus Group | November 21, 2024

Energy is a fundamental aspect of our lives, it is required for cooking, heating, access to fresh water, technology etc. Access to energy is a priority for human existence, the cost of energy poverty cascades into many different areas of life, the financial burden on its own limits what is achievable for individuals and communities. Above, you will see

examples of what would be prioritized by First Nations Ontario Works if the burden of energy bill relief did not exist.

Analysis and Year to Year Comparison

Participants indicated a desire to give back to clients, either through funds directly to them or other means such as, “grocery gift cards”, “food cards” and, “greenhouses”. These are important ways to provide for clients, especially in a region that sees clients make the hard decisions of “having to choose between food or electricity” (Question 3, Figure 5.)

Funding renewable energy programs to achieve energy sovereignty initiatives are big ideas that could lead to a number of positive outcomes for community. It would be an excellent way to reinvest money that would otherwise leave their community to the bank accounts of their service providers.

Participants also indicated that they would give “raises”. This was a response that has carried over from the 2024 focus group. This is very understandable as most First Nations social service departments are understaffed and underfunded. There are few safety nets keeping First Nations social service employees from being on “the other side of the table”.

Educational initiatives were both considered in 2024 and 2025, showing the desire for a “resource hub” which could be a space for educational tools and supports.

Question 8 & 9

What percentage of your workload each month is spent assisting clients with energy related matters? (2024 year).

2024	Month	Average Temperature	Region 2	% of Workload dedicated to energy
		Lowest Avg.	-29.8	
Mean Temp.	-11.1			
Highest Avg.	9.3			
February	Lowest Avg.	-29.3		26.8%
	Mean Temp.	-6.5		
	Highest Avg.	7.1		
March	Lowest Avg.	-18.8		25.2%
	Mean Temp.	-5		
	Highest Avg.	13.3		
April	Lowest Avg.	-10.4		8.6%
	Mean Temp.	4.9		
	Highest Avg.	20		
May	Lowest Avg.	-1.1		8.6%
	Mean Temp.	11.3		
	Highest Avg.	24.4		
June	Lowest Avg.	4.4		8.2%
	Mean Temp.	16.1		
	Highest Avg.	29.1		
July	Lowest Avg.	8.9		22.8%
	Mean Temp.	20		
	Highest Avg.	30		
August	Lowest Avg.	7.3		7%
	Mean Temp.	18.9		
	Highest Avg.	31		
September	Lowest Avg.	4.2		7%
	Mean Temp.	17.5		
	Highest Avg.	28.3		
October	Lowest Avg.	-4.3		14.2%
	Mean Temp.	7.9		
	Highest Avg.	22		
November	Lowest Avg.	-16		18%
	Mean Temp.	1.2		
	Highest Avg.	12.2		
December	Lowest Avg.	-31.2		25.4%
	Mean Temp.	-9.5		
	Highest Avg.	3.2		

Figure 15: 2025 Region 2 Focus Group | June 10, 2025. Region 2 Responses compared to 2024 Ontario temperature data (Government of Canada, 2024).

“What aspects of that workload takes up the most time?”

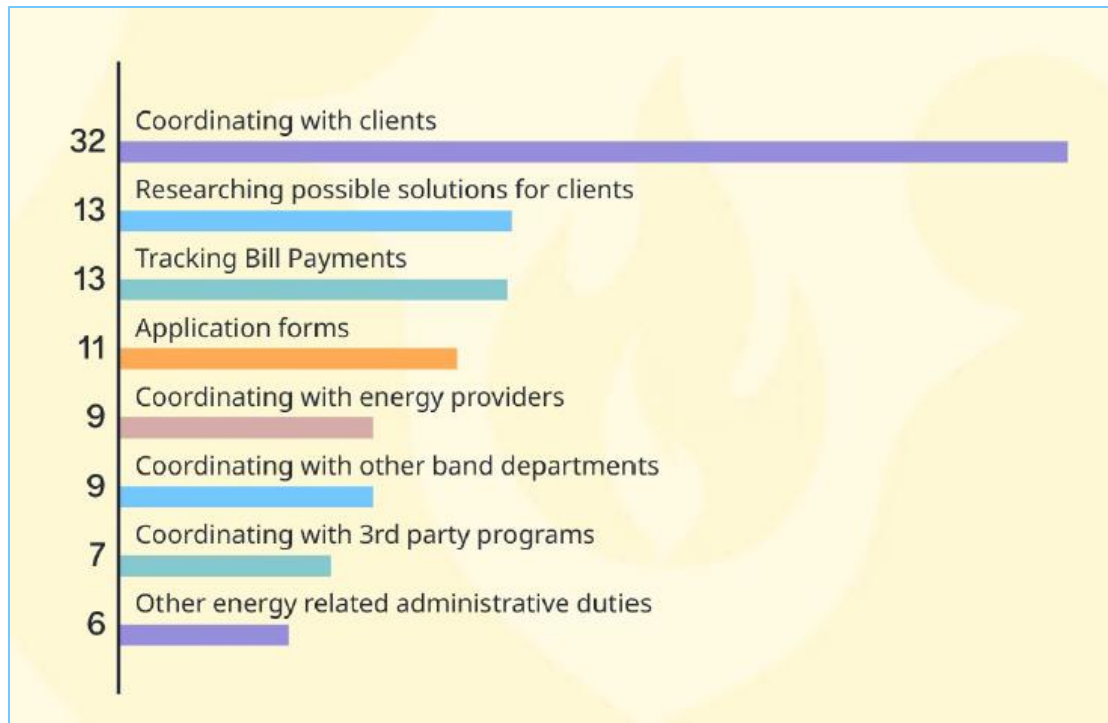


Figure 16: 2025 Region 2 Focus Group | June 10, 2025

Analysis

In Region 2, energy-related workload increases during the colder months, the percentage of energy related workload beginning in October and peaking in January, continuing until March. There is a spike workload in July, mid-summer, which indicates the cooling efforts in the heat of the summer. Temperature data from weather monitoring stations near the participating communities in the 2025 focus group have been included to show a correlation between temperature trends with the energy related workload of our participants. Temperature data from region 2 mirror that of the busy workload periods seen throughout the year.

The most time consuming energy-based aspects of our participants work goes towards coordinating with clients, while the next most time consuming aspects were researching possible solutions for clients, tracking bill payments, and application forms.

Ishkoday had identified the need for a more streamlined research process and created the “***Boodawewin***” app, to help lighten the load of researching possible solutions for First Nations Ontario Works clients.

By understanding the different burdens of energy poverty on First Nations social service departments we can find direction as an organization for the creation of tools and resources to assist in these matters.



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Question 10

“Which of the following programs have you heard about before?”



Figure 17: 2025 Region 2 Focus Group | June 10, 2025

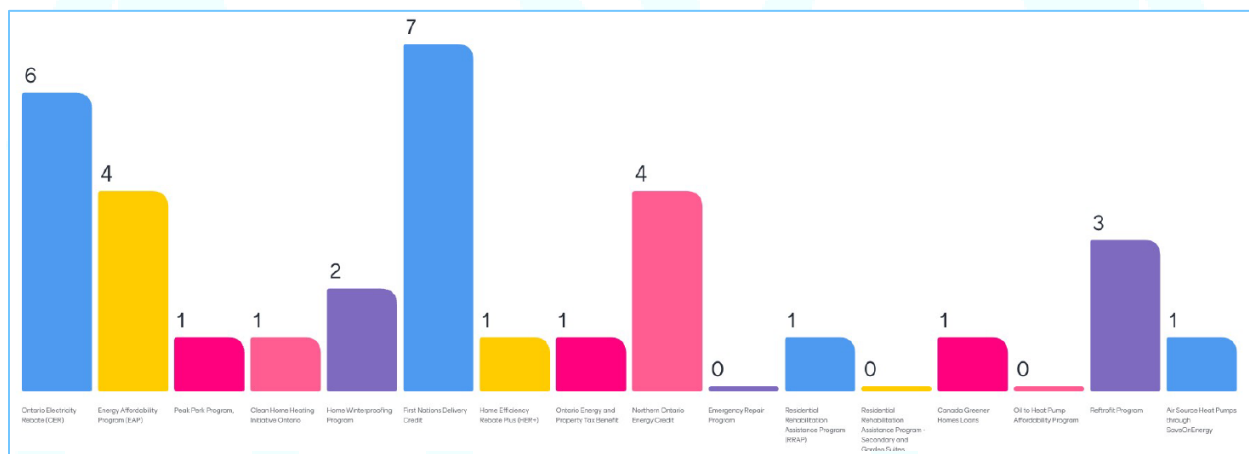


Figure 18: 2025 Region 2 Focus Group | November 21, 2024

Analysis

Ishkoday works hard to ensure that First Nations OWAs know about the resources available for their clients. Ishkoday has seen a measurable success by promoting energy efficiency programs and their delivery agents. Ishkoday continues to promote and engage with social service providers and have been making introductions and

connections between them and the various program delivery agents to help bring energy efficiency measures into First Nations.

Conclusion

Fire and energy are fundamental to human existence, Ishkoday finds it incredibly unjust and worrying that the experiences of unreliability, unaffordability and inaccessibility is still prevalent within this region.

In Region 2, our participants are indicating that energy poverty is increasing. While energy costs rose throughout most of the year in 2024 (Ontario Energy Board 2025) the First Nations housing crisis still remained (CMHC 2025).

The cost of energy poverty is more than just overdue bill payments; the costs often time and funds that could go towards investing in food sustainability programming, competing priorities like cultural programming or nation building initiatives. The cost of energy poverty is the loss in dignity of inhabitants of an inefficient home. The cost of energy poverty is living in precarious and sometimes fatal conditions.

Energy Poverty is pervasive and cascading throughout Region 2 communities. Addressing energy poverty will undoubtedly raise the quality of life for many people as well as free up time and resources for First Nations leadership, Ontario Works and social services offices to focus in on other priorities.

Solutions

Ishkoday offers Home Energy Efficiency Training for ONWAA members free of charge, this training is practical and designed specifically for First Nations people. It's an opportunity for First Nations Ontario Works clients to find supports, understand home energy systems and begin to take some agency in their relationship to energy. We recommend that Region 2 Ontario Works Administrators book a session with the Ishkoday team.

The conversations around energy needs to include the health benefits and the health risks of energy poverty in a more detailed way. The conversations around energy needs to include a right to have access to energy in its modern day form in order to live a life of

dignity and opportunity. Canada is often described as one of the most energy stable countries in the world, or an energy super power but that is not the experience for First Nations across Ontario.

Ishkoday want to reinforce Truth and reconciliation call to action 92:

“We call upon the corporate sector in Canada to adopt the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a reconciliation framework and to apply its principles, norms, and standards to corporate policy and core operational activities involving Indigenous peoples and their lands and resources. This would include, but not be limited to, the following:

1. Commit to meaningful consultation, building respectful relationships, and obtaining the free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous peoples before proceeding with economic development projects.
2. Ensure that Aboriginal peoples have equitable access to jobs, training, and education opportunities in the corporate sector, and that Aboriginal communities gain long-term sustainable benefits from economic development projects.
3. Provide education for management and staff on the history of Aboriginal peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal–Crown relations. This will require skills based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights, and anti-racism.

(Truth and Reconciliation Commission,2015).

The corporate energy sector needs to continue to understand the histories and relationship that First Nations have had with Canadian Governments and their predecessors of the energy sector, in order to create more culturally relevant supports, sow good relations and collaborative efforts with First Nations people and their leadership.

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