

# Region 3 Focus Group 2025

Ishkoday | First Nation Energy Sustainability  
Association



[ishkoday.ca](https://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. All cultures around the world have 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 can gain insight into the lives of some of the most vulnerable populations 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; all our 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 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.

## Region 3 Focus Group Details

Date: July 8, 2025

Location: North Bay, Ontario

Facilitator: Adam McLaren – Ishkoday

Host: Kelsey Leblanc – ONWAA

### All communities in ONWAA's Region 3:

- Aroland First Nation
- Attawapiskat First Nation
- Batchewana First Nation
- Biigtigong Nishnaabeg (Ojibways of Pic River)
- Biinjtiwaabik Zaaging Anishinabek (Rocky Bay First Nation)
- Brunswick House First Nation
- Constance Lake First Nation
- Fort Albany First Nation
- Fort William First Nation
- Garden River First Nation
- Ginoogaming First Nation
- Gull Bay First Nation
- Kashechewan First Nation
- Long Lake #58 First Nation
- Marten Falls First Nation
- Mattagami First Nation
- Moose Cree First Nation
- Pays Plat First Nation
- Pic-Mobert First Nation (Netmizaaggamig Nishaabeg)



- Red Rock Lake Helen First Nation
- Taykwa Tagamou Nation
- Wahgoshig First Nation
- Whitesand First Nation

### **Region 3 Communities represented in the 2025 Focus Group: (8/23)**

- Mattagami First Nation
- Pays Plat First Nation
- Ginoogaming First Nation
- Long Lake #58 First Nation
- Biinjtiwaabik Zaaging Anishinabek (Rocky Bay First Nation)
- Aroland First Nation
- Fort Albany First Nation
- Biigtigong Nishnaabeg (Ojibways of Pic River)

### **Position held by participants in the 2025 Region 3 Focus Group:**

- (7) Ontario Works Administrators
- (2) OW Managers/Case Managers
- (2) OW Caseworkers
- (2) Ontario Works Employments/Employment Counsellors
- (2) Administrative Assistants/Assistants
- (1) Secretary Bookkeeper
- (1) Band 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 aid 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 for 1.5 hours to ensure that discussion of various subjects and allow participants to share stories and experiences. Our 17 participants consisted of (7) Ontario Works Administrators, (2) OW Managers/Case Managers, (2) OW Caseworkers, (2) Ontario Works Employments/Employment Counsellors, (2) Administrative Assistants/Assistants, (1) Secretary Bookkeeper, and (1) Band Councillor.

Participants were notified early about the session and given a couple of 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 in the 2024 Ishkoday Focus Group, 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 3 Focus Group and the current 2025 Region 3 Focus Group is that there is minimal overlap between participants. Only (3) participant from the 2024 Region 3 Focus Group attended the 2025 Region 3 Focus Group but 6 of the 8 communities represented in this report are present, this is likely due to staff turnover in various Ontario Works departments. The comparison between the two focus groups will be valuable in documenting the impacts of Energy Poverty within Region 3.



# 2025 Focus Group - Questions, Responses and Analyses

The Focus Group 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 Region 3 Focus Group | Question 1 responses – July 8, 2025



Figure 2: 2024 Region 3 Focus Group | Question 1 responses – June 4, 2024

Understanding what our participants know or don't know about energy efficiency gives us insight into where they may need some support. This is vital for the work and direction of Ishkoday as an organization.

## **Question 1 – Analysis and year to year comparison**

Responses from the 2025 Focus Group show an emphasis on cost savings as well as environmental responsibility; energy conservation was the next most common response type. Our participants are all public servants in some regard, and saving money for their clients and programs opens opportunities to address other important priorities. When administrating funds to energy suppliers on behalf of clients is a daily routine, the more technical terms for energy efficiency or even larger scale federal agendas such as the push for “net-zero” are not prioritized.

The 2025 Region 3 Focus Group is similar to that of the 2024 Focus Group. Financial considerations are the most prominent response type. Environmental considerations are another noticeably prominent response type. Direct connections to housing quality, quality of life, and more resources to put towards food are considerations that were not represented in the 2025 Focus Group responses. “Energy poverty is an overlooked determinant of health in Canada” (Riva et al., 2023)

The response in the 2024 Focus Group that indicates energy efficiency should be a human right is very interesting. If federal policy were to name energy efficiency as a human right, that would set the stage for an incredible systems change.

# Question 2

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



Figure 3: 2025 Region 3 Focus Group | Question 2 responses – July 8, 2025



Figure 4: 2024 Region 3 Focus Group | Question 2 responses – June 4, 2024

Focus group question 2 asked participants “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

The 2025 Focus Group responses indicated that they recognize the root causes of energy poverty to be: affordability, accessibility, and reliability. Furthermore, they were connecting energy poverty with the struggles of the ongoing Indigenous housing crisis

within Canada. CMHC states that in 2021, “nearly half of on-reserve households are living in a dwelling below a housing standard” (2025).

The responses in 2025 are heavily focused on affordability and housing disparities, while responses in 2024 also made those connections but made more direct connections to health, stress, geography (accessibility).

Affordability and finances are the most indicated category, as administering clients' energy bills is a large part of the work of First Nations Ontario Works employees.

# Question 3

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

Low income	People with one income ,having hard time paying bills	All homes were made quickly	Not enough knowledge and good mental health to access better energy programs
Homes not maintained	Mold issues hydro disconnections	Financial strain	Generator Usage
High Bills	Ventilation, affordability geared to size of units, location of residency	Lack of adequate housing & inefficient homes	Being in isolated community, can only get materials only thru winter road .
High cost	High bills		

Figure 5: 2025 Region 3 Focus Group | July 8, 2025

Frequent power failures	Poor construction of the building of the home	Neighbours running extension cords	Broken windows, outdated furnaces, electrical
Poor construction	Unemployment	Poor housing	Improper electrical installations
Mould	Lack of Training	Houses not built to code WindowsDoorsSiding HVAC not installed	Lack of resources to maintain basic structural needs
Utility disconnections	Disconnections	Stressful situations in families	Lack of funding and or supports available to homeowners
"Surges" & "Brownouts" affecting appliances	Community development stagnation	Mental health	Poor health
Health issues such as asthma phenonla skin problems caused by mold	Tenants destroying the homes or not able to maintain homes	Mold, or having people move to the city due to poor health	

Figure 6: 2024 Region 3 Focus Group | June 4, 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 that 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, participants reference the high cost and low wages in Region 3 which leads to instability of their clients. Furthermore, inadequate and inefficient homes are leading to mold and homes deteriorating at a faster rate. Educational resources as well as resources currently available through Ishkoday. Ishkoday has developed a home energy efficiency training that can help support these communities in education and finding and utilizing other resources.

In 2024, our participants had drawn connections to their housing struggles and community health and wellbeing. Struggles of affordability, accessibility, and reliability are prominent in responses and highlight the precarious means people resort to in order to keep warm through the winter. While some of the examples have not carried over into 2025 affordability, accessibility and reliability of energy and resources is still seen in the most recent responses.

## Question 4

“Where are we at right now?”

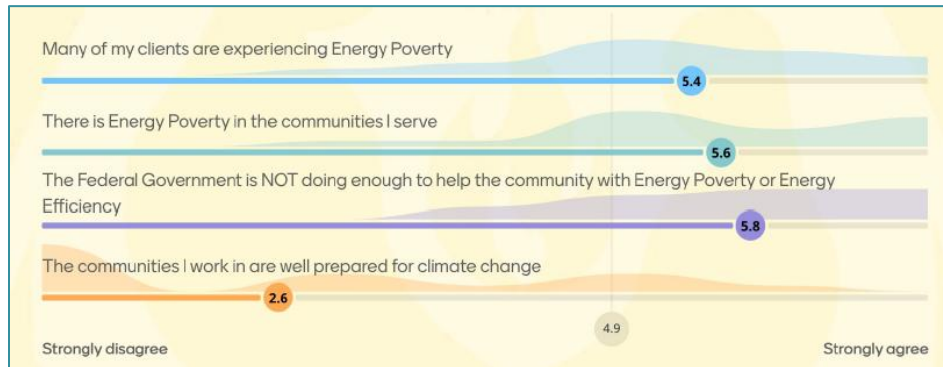


Figure 7: 2025 Region 3 Focus Group | July 8, 2025

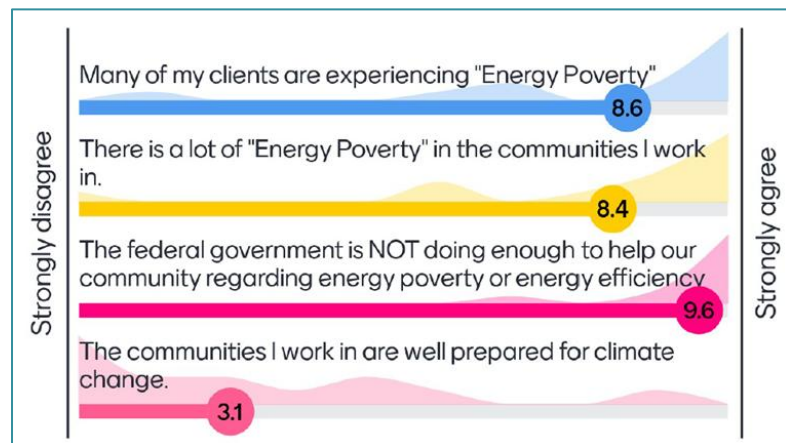


Figure 8: 2024 Region 3 Focus Group | June 4, 2024

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 participants’ clients were experiencing energy poverty. In 2024 and 2025 there is agreement that “many of my clients are experiencing energy poverty” in Region 3. In 2024 the statement was more strongly agreed with than 2025. It will be interesting to see what the future comparisons will be from year to year especially since Ishkoday is actively working with OW offices and clients in Region 3.

**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. 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 that “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.”” (2015).

**Statement 4:** “The communities I work in are well prepared for climate change”

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

## Question 5

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

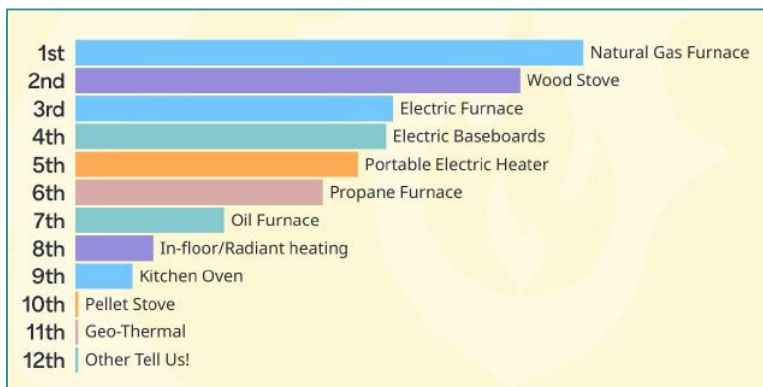


Figure 9: 2025 Region 3 Focus Group | July 8, 2025

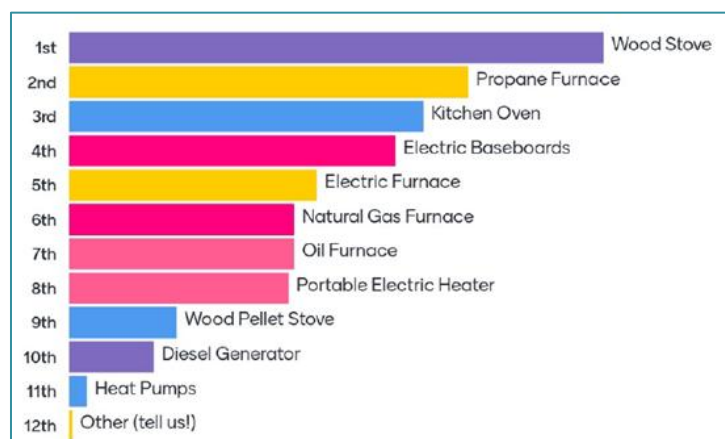


Figure 10: 2024 Region 3 Focus Group | June 4, 2024

In 2024 and 2025 participants were asked to rank which heating options 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**

The 2024 and 2025 Focus Group have interesting differences, wood is still ranked highly as the most common heat source for clients in Region 3, notably electric baseboards and electric furnaces are also steady among the rankings in both years. Recognition of the “kitchen oven” as a common heating source to be ranked lower than the previous year is a good sign. There seems to be quite a diversity of heating sources used in Region 3, although it should not attribute that to accessibility throughout Region 3 as some communities in Region 3 are reliant on ice road for shipping larger home heating systems.

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

## Question 6

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

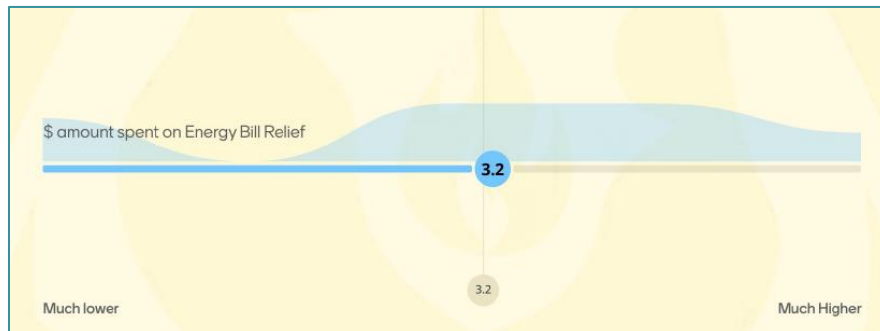


Figure 11: 2025 Region 3 Focus Group | July 8, 2025

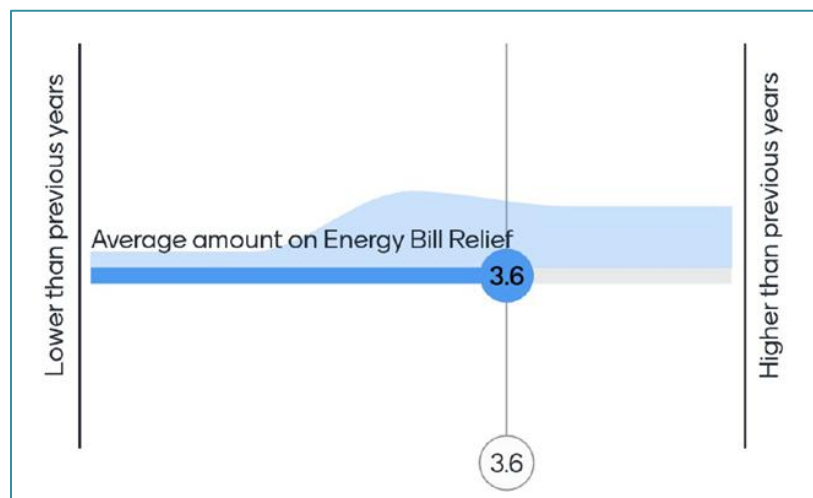


Figure 12: 2024 Region 3 Focus Group | June 4, 2024

### Analysis and year to year comparison

Respondents from both 2024 and 2025 on average have agreed that cost of energy is increasing year to year, with a small amount of participants saying it was “much lower” than previous years.

According to the Ontario Energy Board on November 1, 2023, electricity had increased 20.5% on peak times from the previous year’s 15.1kw/h. On November 1, 2024, the peak time has decreased 13.2% to 15.8 kw/h.

## Question 7

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

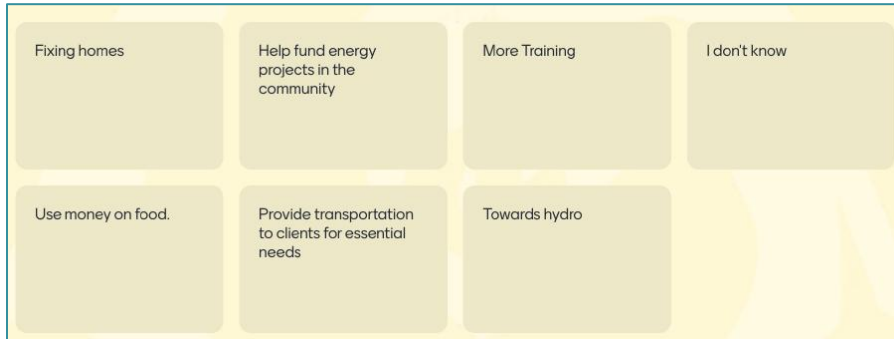


Figure 13: 2025 Region 3 Focus Group | July 8, 2025

Food security	Home repairs and updates	Mental health and addictions treatment programs	Food bank
Home renovations	Food security	Food sustainability	Food
Food bank	Home Reno, food sovereignty program, life skills	Hkme Renovation	Food
Provide them with clothing allowance	Buy food for families	Repair the homes	Food bank
Give it back to clients	Energy saving renovations		

Figure 14: 2024 Region 3 Focus Group | June 4, 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.

Responses to Question 7 are 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**

The most notable responses in 2025 indicated a desire to fix homes, fund community energy projects and more training. These types of initiatives seek to address the affordability, accessibility and reliability of energy.

Utilizing money for other services such as, food for clients and transportation for essential services are excellent ways to add to their programs.

In 2024 the majority of the responses were about food sovereignty programs and renovation programs that homes are more energy efficient. The 2024 responses, “Mental health and addictions treatment programs”, “clothing allowance” and “give it back to clients”, were not reiterated in the 2025 responses.

## Question 8 & 9

What percentage of your workload each month is spent assisting clients with energy related matters?

	Average Temperature		Region 3	% of Workload dedicated to energy
	Lowest Avg.	Mean Temp.	Highest Avg.	
2024 January	Lowest Avg.	-30.4	-30.4	43%
	Mean Temp.	-11.7	-11.7	
	Highest Avg.	3.2	3.2	
February	Lowest Avg.	-30.2	-30.2	42%
	Mean Temp.	-9.7	-9.7	
	Highest Avg.	6.7	6.7	
March	Lowest Avg.	-27.5	-27.5	41%
	Mean Temp.	-5.9	-5.9	
	Highest Avg.	10.8	10.8	
April	Lowest Avg.	-14.2	-14.2	49%
	Mean Temp.	1.7	1.7	
	Highest Avg.	16.3	16.3	
May	Lowest Avg.	-2.8	-2.8	37.8%
	Mean Temp.	9.3	9.3	
	Highest Avg.	25.2	25.2	
June	Lowest Avg.	0.5	0.5	45.8%
	Mean Temp.	14.1	14.1	
	Highest Avg.	28.7	28.7	
July	Lowest Avg.	4	4	40.2%
	Mean Temp.	17.2	17.2	
	Highest Avg.	29.7	29.7	
August	Lowest Avg.	2.3	2.3	35.6%
	Mean Temp.	16.9	16.9	
	Highest Avg.	31.1	31.1	
September	Lowest Avg.	0.4	0.4	23%
	Mean Temp.	14.9	14.9	
	Highest Avg.	27.6	27.6	
October	Lowest Avg.	-6.1	-6.1	45.4%
	Mean Temp.	6.5	6.5	
	Highest Avg.	20.8	20.8	
November	Lowest Avg.	-8.7	-8.7	32.9%
	Mean Temp.	1.1	1.1	
	Highest Avg.	10.7	10.7	
December	Lowest Avg.	-28.3	-28.3	36%
	Mean Temp.	-8.2	-8.2	
	Highest Avg.	3.6	3.6	

Figure 15: 2025 Region 3 Focus Group | July 8, 2025. Weather data added to our chart are median, highest, and lowest average temperatures taken from climate stations in close proximity to the First Nations represented in this focus group.

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

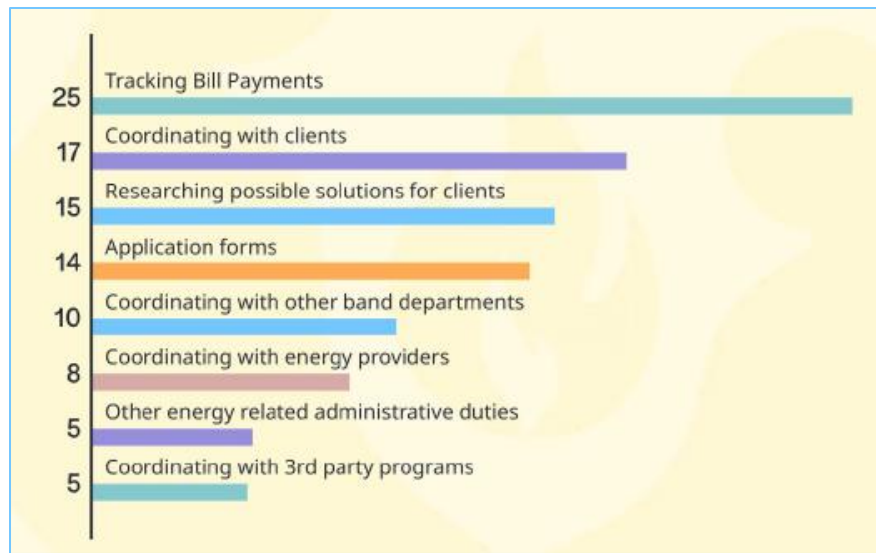


Figure 16: 2025 Region 3 Focus Group | July 8, 2025

## Analysis

In Region 3, of the participants who are Ontario Works administrators and caseworkers, have indicated that more than a third of their workload per month is centered around energy. April, June and October are reported to be the busiest times of the year for energy related work.

Participants from Region 3 indicated that tracking bill payments and coordinating with clients are the most time consuming aspect of energy-based work. The next most time-consuming work is coordinating with clients followed by researching possible solutions for clients. Ishkoday hopes to alleviate the time heavy task of research with the Boodawewin app.

The workload percentage doesn't quite line up with the average temperature trends from month to month, however this could be due to differences in administration

processes. Region 3 spends a large portion of their time on energy related tasks for their clients.

More in-depth work should be done in Region 3 to see how some of these processes could be improved and what other solutions could be implemented.

## Question 10

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

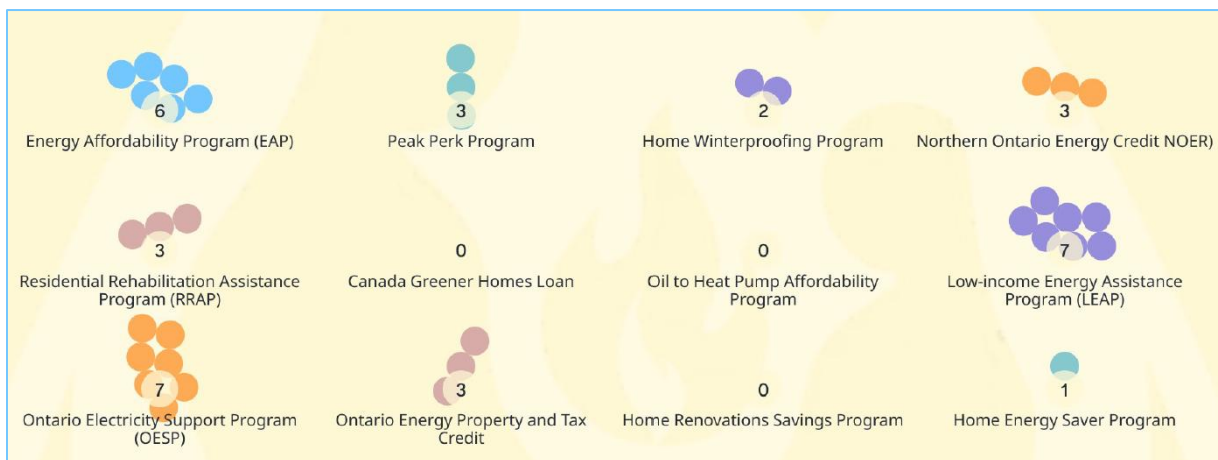


Figure 17: 2025 Region 3 Focus Group | July 8, 2025

## Analysis

Ishkoday works hard to ensure that First Nations OWA’s know about the resources available for their clients. Ishkoday has seen a measurable success by promoting energy efficiency programs, and their delivery agents we have seen a increase in recognition and engagement with these programs and the delivery agents managing them. It will be interesting to see how the familiarity with resources changes over time.

## Conclusion

A fundamental part of the human experience is our relationship to energy. Our relationship to energy has changed everything about how humans live, all cultures around the world have 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.

In ONWAA's Region 3, energy poverty is a major aspect of reality for the participants. There is a large amount of time spent addressing the energy needs of their clients, and in turn less time spent that they could be providing other services. Region 3 is home to Northern remote nations. This means that accessibility becomes more complex and pricing for food and resources is exacerbated by shipping costs. Addressing energy poverty could alleviate the administrative burden on First Nations social services and begin to allot more time and resources to other competing priorities. While the pricing of electricity rates rise in Ontario (Ontario Energy Board, 2025), the First Nations Housing Crisis remains.

## 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, gain a comprehensive understanding of home energy systems and develop agency in their relationship to energy. We recommend that Region 4 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. The country is known as an "energy super power" but that is not the experience for First Nations across Ontario.

Ishkoday wants 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. Successfully understanding this relationship could create more culturally relevant supports, sow good relations and collaborative efforts with First Nations people and their leadership.

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