

Region 1 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. 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; 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 1 Focus Group Details

Date: August 11, 2025

Location: Vahalla Inn – Thunder Bay, Ontario.

Facilitator: Nicholas Puran – Ishkoday

Host: Jessica Nadjiwon – ONWAA

All communities in ONWAA's Region 1:

- Bearskin Lake
- Cat Lake First Nation
- Deer Lake First Nation
- Eabametoong First Nation
- Fort Severn First Nation
- Kasabonika Lake First Nation
- Keewaywin First Nation
- Kingfisher Lake First Nation
- Kitchenuhmaykoosiib Inninuwig
- Mishkeegogamang Band
- Muskrat Dam First Nation
- Neskantaga House First Nation
- Nibinamik First Nation
- Weagamow First Nation (North Caribou Lake First Nation)
- North Spirit Lake First Nation
- Pikangikum First Nation
- Poplar Hill First Nation
- Sachigo Lake First Nation
- Sandy Lake First Nation

- Slate Falls First Nation
- Wapekeka First Nation
- Webequie First Nation
- Wunnumin Lake First Nation

Region 1 Communities represented Focus Group: (9/23)

- Kasabonika Lake First Nation
- Sandy Lake First Nation
- Weagamow First Nation
(North Caribou Lake First Nation)
- Mishkeegogamang First Nation
- First Nations of Saugeen
- Eabametoong First Nation
- Cat Lake First Nation
- Poplar Hill First Nation
- Slate Fall First Nation

Position held by participants in Focus Group:

(3) Ontario Works Administrators

(1) Ontario Works Casefile Manager

(1) Ontario Works Caseworker

(1) Ontario Works Administrators Assistant

(1) Finance Clerk

(3) Band Council

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 for 1.5 hours to ensure that discussion of various subjects and allow participants to share stories and experiences. (10) participants consisting of (3) Ontario Works Administrators, (1) Ontario Works Casefile Manager, (1) Ontario Works Caseworker, (1) Ontario Works Administrators Assistant, (1) Finance Clerk, (3) Band Council representatives.

Ontario Works Administrators 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 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 content of the 2024 Ishkoday Focus Group Project.

Considerations for Analysis

The 2025 Region 1 Focus Group had only (1) returned participant from the 2024 Region 1 Focus Group. Between 2025 and 2024 Region 1 Focus Groups only (2) communities are represented in both groups. This is likely due to staff turnover with their respective Ontario Works office. This will make year to year analysis a little more difficult so the analysis will be minimal.



As in 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?

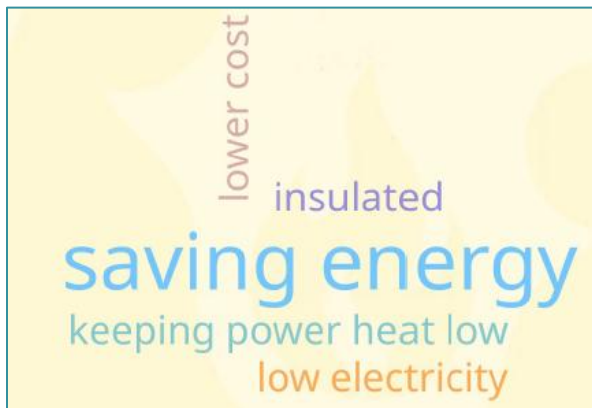


Figure 1: Region 1 Focus Group - August 11, 2025



Figure 2: Region 1 Focus Group - June 5, 2024

Question 1 – Analysis and year to year comparison

In the 2025 Region 1 Focus Group participants indicated that energy efficiency meant conservation, using less energy, lower financial cost and insulation to capture heat better. In essence that is what energy efficiency is, the European Commission defines it on their website as “*Energy Efficiency* means the ratio of output of performance, service, goods or energy to input of energy, in other words the practice of using less energy to provide the same amount of useful output from a service (such as heating water, lighting, or cooling a fridge).”, although participants may lack the terminology and specifics of the concept of energy efficiency.

The 2025 Focus Group participants responded less frequently and with less variety than the 2024 Focus Group. In 2024, “environment” was a response that was not repeated in 2025. Renewable energy generation type responses were present in 2024 but not 2025 and the financial cost of energy was a more frequent response type. Energy Poverty related responses can be seen in 2024 as well. Notably there was no direct connection made between health and wellness in either 2024 or 2025.

Question 2

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



Figure 3: Region 1 Focus Group - August 11, 2025



Figure 4: Region 1 Focus Group - June 5, 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

In 2025, participants answers to question 2 indicated their perception of energy poverty included, high delivery costs, lack of services, lack of education, poor housing construction, and old appliances. These responses indicated that participants understand that unaffordability, inaccessibility and unreliability are aspects of energy

poverty, responses indicating these three aspects of energy poverty are also evident in the 2024 responses.

The response “lack of education” is an interesting connection, it indicates that gap in knowledge on any given subject will inevitably lead to lack of solutions.

The responses from 2024 were more frequent and more varied than in 2025. Both did not draw any connections to health or wellness which is often overlooked in discussion about energy poverty. “Energy poverty is an overlooked determinant of health in Canada.” Riva et al. (2023, pg.429).

Question 3

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



Figure 5: Region 1 Focus Group - August 11, 2025

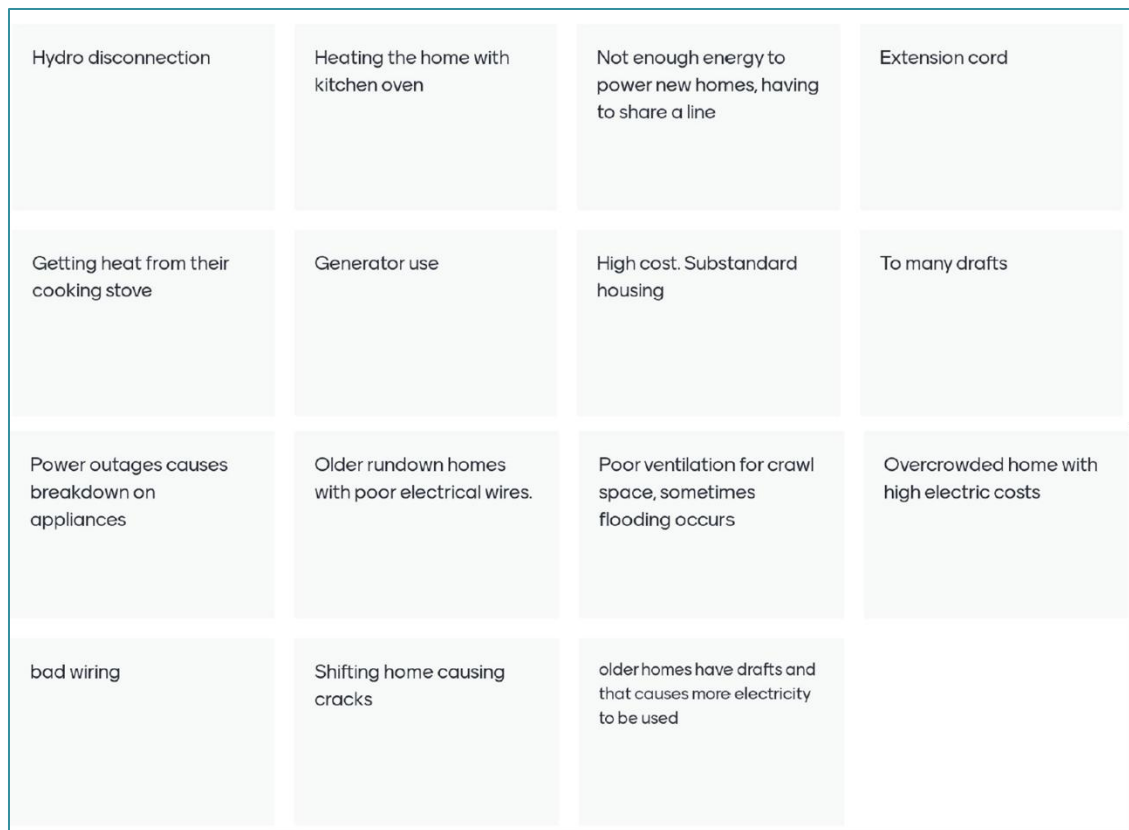


Figure 6: Region 1 Focus Group - June 5, 2024

The purpose for proposing this question is to document and learn about the real-life struggles that are taking place within their communities. These are firsthand accounts of the people working with some of the most vulnerable populations in Ontario.

Analysis and Year to Year Comparison

Region 1 Focus Group participant's responses indicated the continuation of the indigenous housing crisis within Canada. CMHC (2025) states that as of 2021 "nearly half of on-reserve households are living in a dwelling below a housing standard" (p. 11)

Unreliability is particularly harmful in Region 1 as constant brown outs and black outs can damage the appliances that their clients rely on. Not only are heating and cooling systems at risk of damage from brownouts and blackouts but also cold storage for food, many First Nations in Ontario are reliant on land-based diets, freezers are a necessity for First Nations people to safely store food. If these systems fail or become damaged that could put their food sources for an entire year at risk.

Accessibility and reliability are major concerns in Region 1, the connections drawn to mold show that there is some understanding that energy poverty is connected to health and wellbeing.

Question 4

“Where are we at right now?”

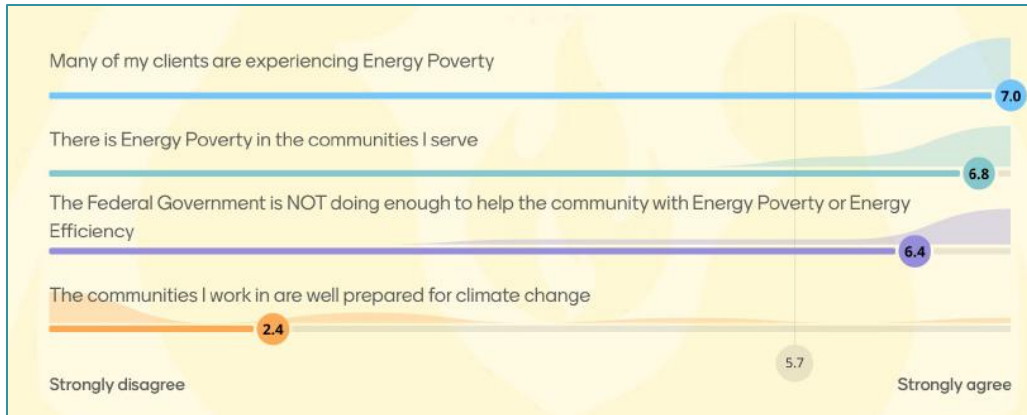


Figure 7: Region 1 Focus Group - August 11, 2025

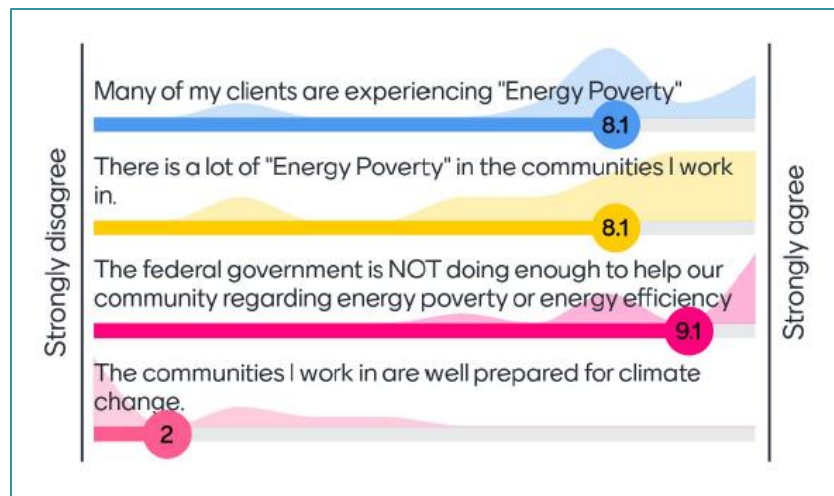


Figure 8: Region 1 Focus Group - June 5, 2024

In the 2024 and 2025 focus groups, 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 was adjusted 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 2025 there is unanimous agreement that there is agreement that “many of my clients are experiencing energy poverty” in region 1. In 2024, the statement was a little less strongly agreed with than in 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 1.

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. Once again, the statement was more strongly agreed with in 2025 than it was in 2024.

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

It is important to document the participants general sentiment regarding support from the Federal Government. It is strongly agreed with 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 Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2015 states 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, p.10)

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, most 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?”

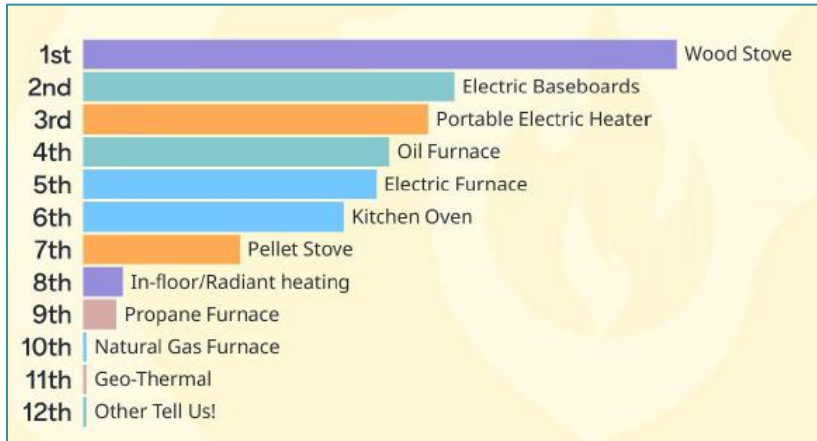


Figure 9: 2025 Region 1 Focus Group | August 11, 2025

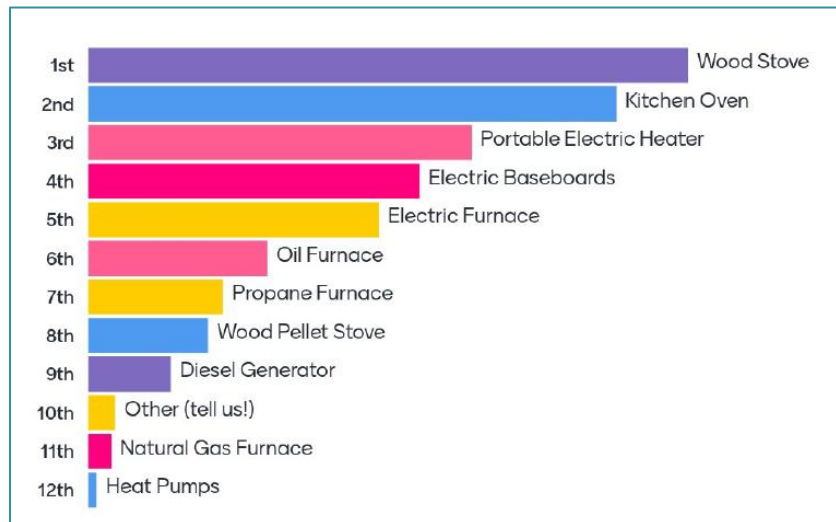


Figure 10: 2024 Region 1 Focus Group | June 5, 2024

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 generators were removed from the list of heating options because in 2024 geo-thermal and radiant heating options were indicated as a “other” option.

Analysis and Year to Year comparison

The Region 1 2024 and 2025 Focus Groups yielded similar results, “Wood Stove” is the reportedly the most common heating source in the home. Wood is part of the local economy and is bountiful in most areas, although as reported by Sandy Lake First Nation representative, wood harvesting for wood stoves is becoming an increasingly difficult task, as they have to travel farther and farther for the wood.

Electrified sources of heat are the next most used sources. The sources “Portable Electric Heaters” and “Kitchen Stove” are indicators that the primary heating sources used in Region 1 are inadequate.

It will be interesting to see how these rankings change from year to year over the course of 5 years. Ishkoday is interested in monitoring which new technologies are implemented and if the current common heating appliances become more accessible and/or affordable to First Nation communities in the region and across Ontario.

Question 6

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



Figure 11: 2025 Region 1 Focus Group | August 11, 2025

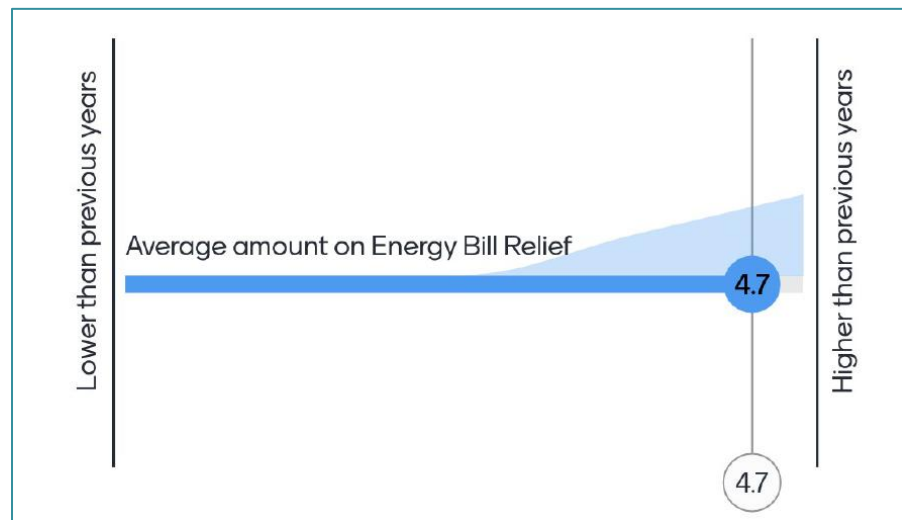


Figure 12: 2024 Region 1 Focus Group | June 5, 2024

Analysis and Year to Year Comparison

In Region 1 participants responded that in both 2024 and 2025 the average amount for energy bill relief was higher than the year previous. 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.

Question 7

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

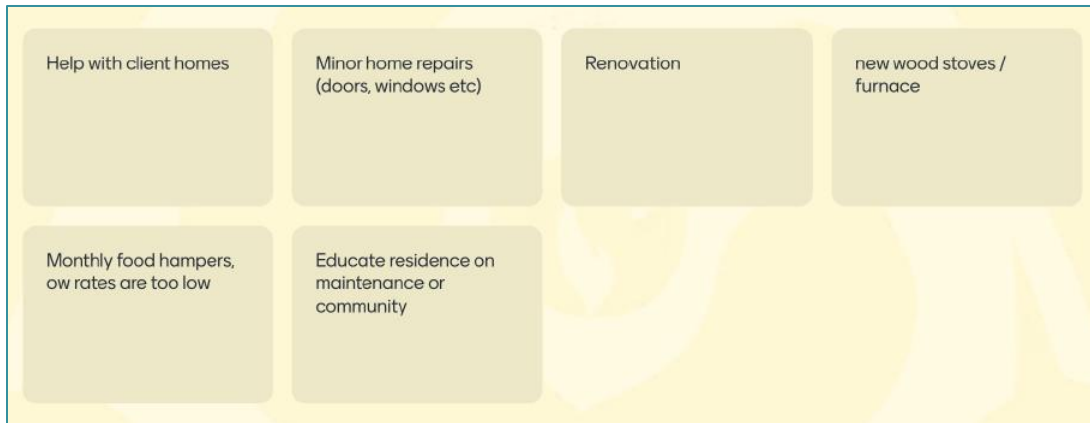


Figure 13: 2025 Region 1 Focus Group | August 11, 2025

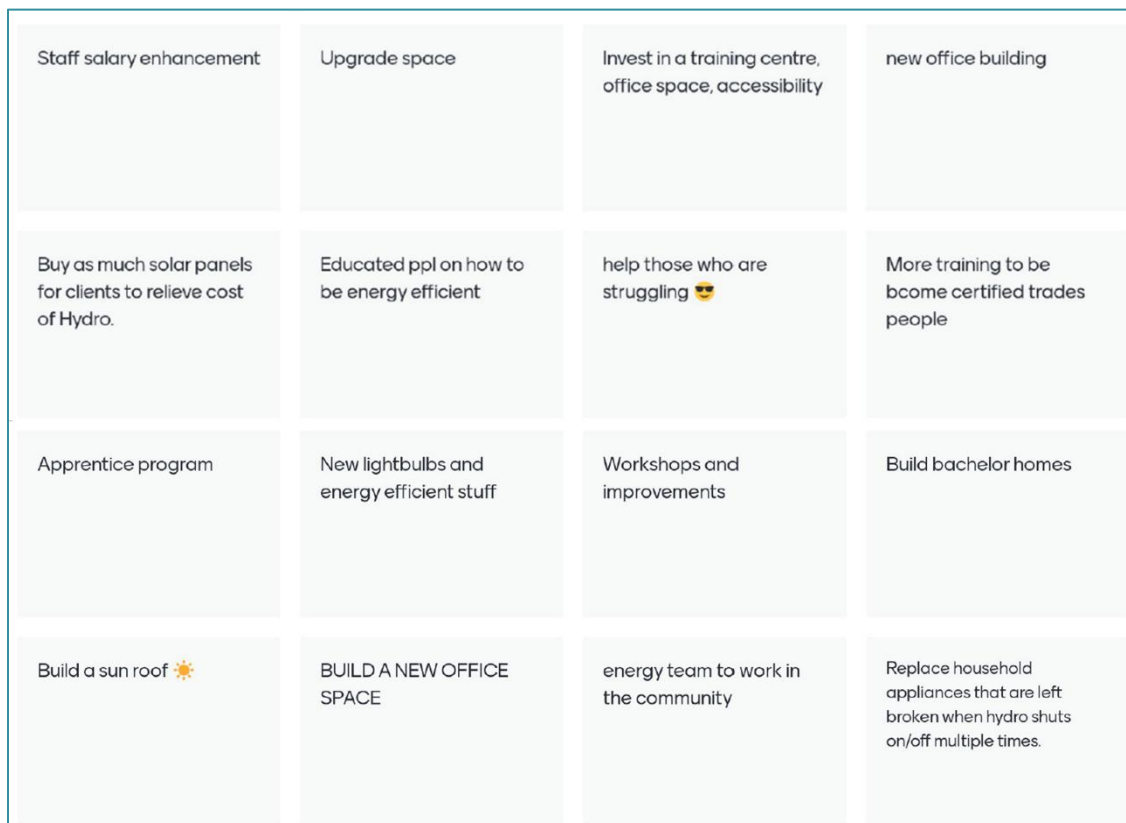


Figure 14: 2024 Region 1 Focus Group | June 5 2024

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.

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 alone limits what is achievable for individuals and communities.

Analysis and Year to Year Comparison

The 2025 responses indicate that participants would use money that would otherwise go to an energy provider to raise the level of home efficiency for their clients. Through renovations, repairs, heating system upgrades and education. Food security is another response that participants said that they would prioritize.

Although the 2024 Focus Group had more varied responses, the desire to assist clients in meaningful ways is present. In 2025 the responses seemed to have more tangible ideas that could lead to immediate improvements.

Interesting responses about the current working conditions seen in, “build a new office space”, “new office building”, “upgraded space”, and “staff salary enhancement”, indicate that the working conditions may be difficult. Often First Nation Social Service departments are understaffed and underfunded. Working in precarious conditions can really make assisting others more difficult.

Question 8 & 9

What percentage of your workload each month is spent assisting clients with energy related matters? (2024 year). The weather averages for the year in Region 1 were included for analysis purposes.

		Average Temperature	Region 1	% of Workload dedicated to energy
2024	January	Lowest Avg.	-33.7	78.1%
		Mean Temp.	-16.5	
		Highest Avg.	2.1	
	February	Lowest Avg.	-32.8	78.1%
		Mean Temp.	-12.5	
		Highest Avg.	3.3	
	March	Lowest Avg.	-30.6	74.9%
		Mean Temp.	-11.25	
		Highest Avg.	9.7	
	April	Lowest Avg.	-19.4	59.4%
		Mean Temp.	1	
		Highest Avg.	17.6	
	May	Lowest Avg.	-3.1	64.7%
		Mean Temp.	8.1	
		Highest Avg.	25.2	
	June	Lowest Avg.	1.1	61.2%
		Mean Temp.	14.1	
		Highest Avg.	28.8	
	July	Lowest Avg.	6.2	49.2%
		Mean Temp.	18.7	
		Highest Avg.	31	
	August	Lowest Avg.	4.5	54.7%
		Mean Temp.	17.5	
		Highest Avg.	30.1	
	September	Lowest Avg.	1.3	63.4%
		Mean Temp.	15.1	
		Highest Avg.	27.3	
	October	Lowest Avg.	-9.5	81.1%
		Mean Temp.	4.3	
		Highest Avg.	17.5	
	November	Lowest Avg.	-12.5	82%
		Mean Temp.	-1	
		Highest Avg.	11.1	
	December	Lowest Avg.	-30.9	79.4%
		Mean Temp.	-15.4	
		Highest Avg.	2	

Figure 15: 2025 Focus Group | August 11, 2025 – Region 1 Responses Compared to 2024 Ontario Temperature Data (Government of Canada, 2024). Weather data added to our chart show median, highest, and lowest average temperatures taken from climate stations near the First Nations represented in this focus group.

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



Figure 16: 2025 Region 1 Focus Group | August 11, 2025

Analysis

Region 1 reported the highest percentage of “workload dedicated to energy” through all months. Region 1 is predominately remote communities from northern Ontario, with limited access to goods and services that are enjoyed by the rest of the province. Energy and adequate housing conditions (CMHC 2025) and reliable energy services and affordable living is a major burden for the residents in Region 1.

Below -30 degrees celsius days during the winter months is not uncommon for Region 1 to experience which puts strain on home heating appliances as well as make newer technology like Cold Climate Heat Pumps not viable as a primary heating source.

Region 1 has also been experiencing more unpredictable weather. Warmer days in the winter further exacerbate their ability to import resources into their community as the window of opportunity for ice roads in the winter becomes smaller and smaller.

Question 10

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



Figure 17: 2025 Region 1 Focus Group | August 11, 2025

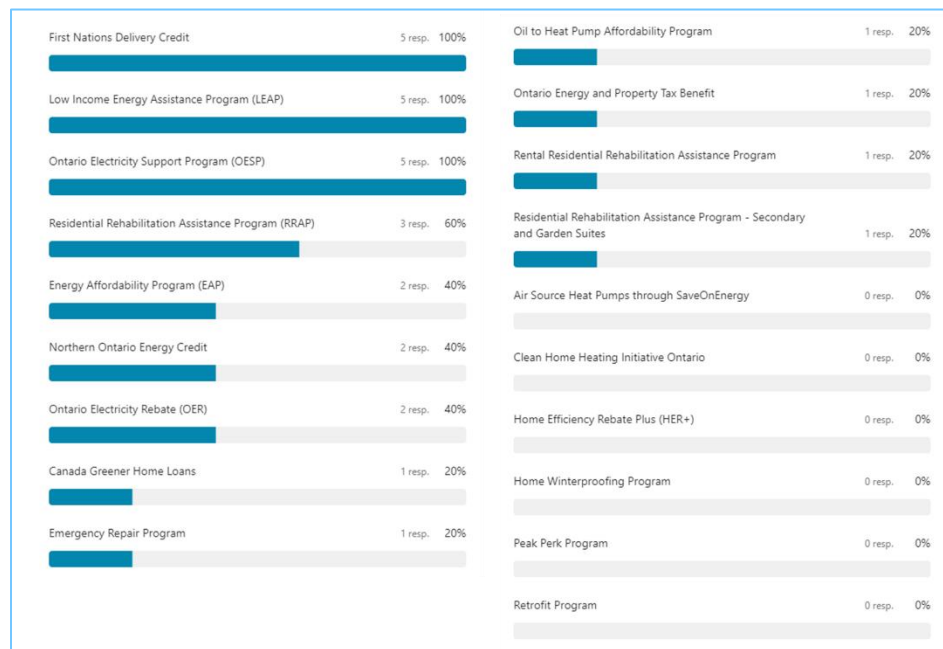


Figure 17: 2024 Region 1 Focus Group | June 5, 2024

Analysis

Ishkoday works hard to ensure that First Nations OWAs know about the resources available for their clients. We have seen a measurable success; by promoting energy efficiency programs and their delivery agents we have seen an increase in recognition and

engagement with these programs and the delivery agents managing them. Many programs in Ontario are often not designed with Remote Northern Ontario communities in mind and are not feasible for them to apply, some programs are designed specifically for Remote Northern Ontario communities and are accessible to them.

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

The cost of energy poverty is more than just overdue bill payments; the cost, is often time and funds that could go towards investing food sustainability programming, and educational programs to give people the tools and capacity to meaningfully grasp energy efficiency measures.

Energy Poverty is pervasive and cascading throughout Region 1 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. Its 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 1 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, call to action #92). 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 collaborate efforts with First Nations people and their leadership.

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