

Region 4 Focus Group 2025

**Ishkoday | First Nation Energy Sustainability
Association**

December 11, 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 4 Focus Group Details

Date: May 13, 2025

Location: Micro-tel Hotel in Sudbury, Ontario

Facilitator: Adam McLaren – Ishkoday

Host: Kelsey Leblanc – ONWAA

All communities in ONWAA's Region 4:

- Algonquins of Pikwakanagan
- Atikameksheng Anishnawbek (Whitefish Lake)
- Aundeck-Omni-Kaning First Nation
- Dokis First Nation
- Henvey Inlet First Nation
- Magnetawan First Nation
- M'Chigeeng First Nation
- Mississauga First Nation
- Nipissing First Nation
- Sagamok Anishnawbek Nation
- Serpent River First Nation
- Shawanaga First Nation

- Sheguiandah First Nation
- Sheshegwaning First Nation
- Temagami First Nation
- Thessalon First Nation
- Wasauksing First Nation
- Whitefish River First Nation
- Wikwemikong Unceded First Nation
- Zhiibaahaasing First Nation

Region 4 Communities represented Focus Group: (6/20)

- Nipissing First Nation
- Shawanaga First Nation
- Wikwemikong Unceded First Nation
- Magnetawan First Nation
- Henvey Inlet First Nation
- Algonquins of Pikwakanagan

Position held by participants in Focus Group:

(5) Ontario Works Administrators

(1) Ontario Works Intake Worker

(1) Ontario Programs Manager

(1) Transportation Coordinator

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. Our 8 participants consisted of (5) Ontario Works administrators, (1) Ontario Works Intake Worker, (1) Ontario Programs Manager, (1) Transportation Coordinator

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 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 4 Focus Group and current 2025 Region 4 Focus Group is that there is minimal overlap between participants. Only (1) participant from the 2024 Region 4 Focus Group attended the 2025 Region 4 Focus Group. 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 4 and for Ishkoday in knowing where to offer Energy Efficiency Training.



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: 2025 Focus Group - Region 4 | Question 1 Responses – May 13, 2025



Figure 2: 2024 Focus Group – Region 4 | Question 1 Responses– May 14, 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

In the 2025 Region 4 Focus Group, financially focused responses were the dominant response category. Financially assisting clients with energy bills and administrating funds for clients is a standard task of the First Nations Ontario Works.

Overall, Region 4 has a relatively low technical understanding of energy efficiency and did not make connections energy efficiency and health and wellbeing. Broader terms used in relation to the environment, sustainability and energy usage showed that they know of a connection but may lack the terminology or specific details of how Energy Efficiency and those considerations are connected. Financial implications are well understood by the participants but more specific terminology and the direct connection to home comfort, health, wellbeing and even safety is currently minimal. Regarding energy, health considerations are often overlooked even though energy affordability, accessibility and reliability is often a key determinate to the health of a home and its inhabitants. “Energy poverty is an overlooked determinant of health in Canada.” Riva et al. (2023, pg.429). As you will see in question 2 responses, participants have also overlooked the health and wellbeing impacts of energy poverty.

In comparisons with the 2024 Focus Group, they are quite similar in regards of terminology and ratio of response type. The response “Zen” indicates a connection with mental health. As with the previous year “cooling” considerations has yet to be a submitted response category.

Question 2

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



Figure 3: 2025 Region 4 Focus Group | Question 2 Responses - May 13, 2025



Figure 4: 2025 Region 4 Focus Group | Question 2 Response- May 14, 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

Analysis of question 2 of the 2025 Region 4 Focus Group shows that participants are very familiar with Energy Poverty. Some of the major indicators of energy poverty, (inaccessibility, un-affordability and un-reliability) were all referenced through their responses. Furthermore, they were connecting energy poverty with the struggles of an 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)

Affordability is still one of the most frequent response categories. Energy bill payments and support is a major aspect to how First Nations Ontario Works employees serve their clients. Affordability and financial considerations in responses are expected.

Affordability and inadequate housing were among the more frequent responses. Participants were able to make more direct connections to the experiences and realities that they have witnessed; confirmation of this will be seen in question 3 of this report.

It appears that Region 4 participants are more familiar with energy poverty than they are with energy efficiency. This conclusion was drawn from our 2024 data set as well. Through work and their personal life, it seems that participants have had more experience and exposure to the consequences of energy poverty than they have the benefits of energy efficiency.

Question 3

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



Figure 5: 2025 Region 4 Focus Group| May 13, 2025

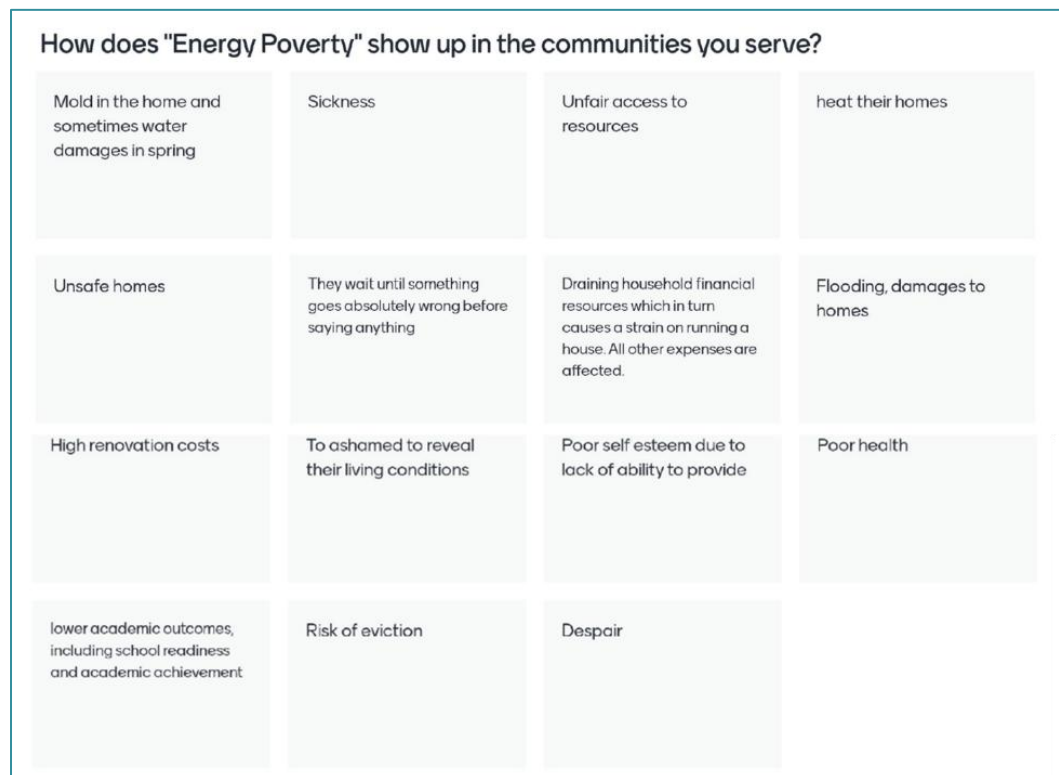


Figure 6: 2024 Region 4 Focus Group | May 14, 2024

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

In 2025, our participants indicated that their communities have “old” and “low quality” homes, resulting in energy inefficiencies and “lack pride in home” amongst members of their communities. Participants mentioned “Disconnections”, meaning the disconnection of a home from the power grid. Multiple bills to pay are indicating that they do witness people being disconnected by late payments and the financial burden of energy poverty existing in their communities. Other responses indicated overcrowding in Region 4 homes as well as unreliable utilities resulting in frequent disconnections.

All of these responses point towards inaccessibility, unaffordability, and unreliability. Unreliability is particularly harmful as constant and consistent community wide 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.

One of the participants in the 2025 focus group spoke openly about the struggles of consistent electricity blackouts in the community, citing that the electricity’s transmission lines into the community were particularly vulnerable to felled trees and encroaching tree growth. The participant vocalized that community communication with Hydro One, (the community’s electricity provider) was unsuccessful to instigate change and that their community was deemed a “low-priority” by Hydro One.

In 2024, our participants had made connections between energy poverty, health, resilience, safety and even academic outcomes. They were able to connect how energy poverty put a strain on all the household financial resources. In contrast to the responses from 2025, the 2024 focus group of participants were more detailed and made stronger connections to other areas like wellbeing and quality of life than just those of infrastructure, finance, and “lack of pride in home”.

The conversation between the First Nations Ontario Works departments in region 4 about energy efficiency and energy poverty is still in the early stages. Region 4 has indicated a diverse experience with energy poverty and is able to draw connections between some of the negative outcomes they are seeing in their communities.

Question 4

“Where are we at right now?”



Figure 7: 2025 Region 4 Focus Group | May 13, 2025

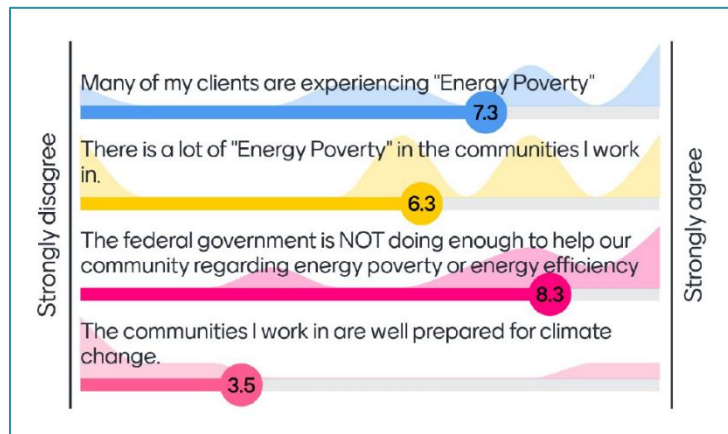


Figure 8: 2024 Region 4 Focus Group | May 14, 2024

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 2024 and 2025 there is agreement that “many of my clients are experiencing energy poverty” in region 4. In 2024, the statement was more 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 4.

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.”*

It is important to document the 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.

“nearly half of on-reserve households are living in a dwelling below a housing standard” CMHC (2025, p.11).

“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?”

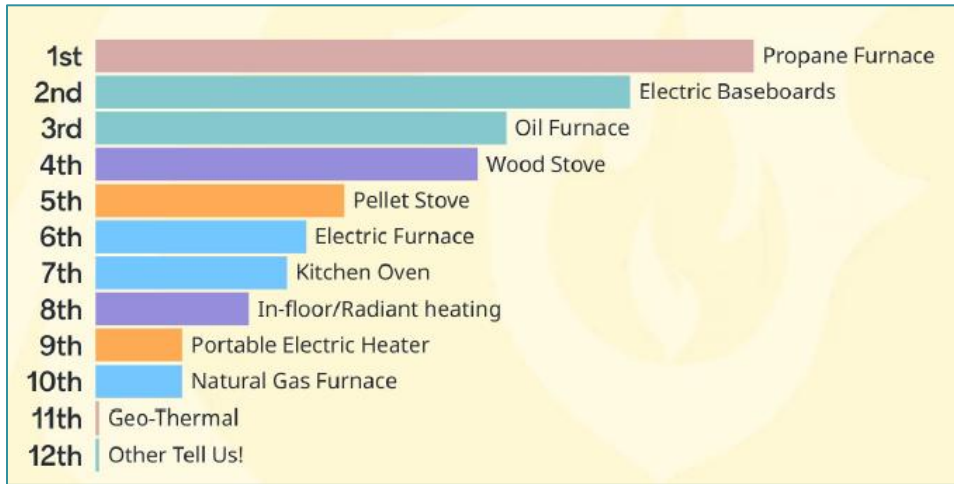


Figure 9: 2025 Region 4 Focus Group | May 13, 2025

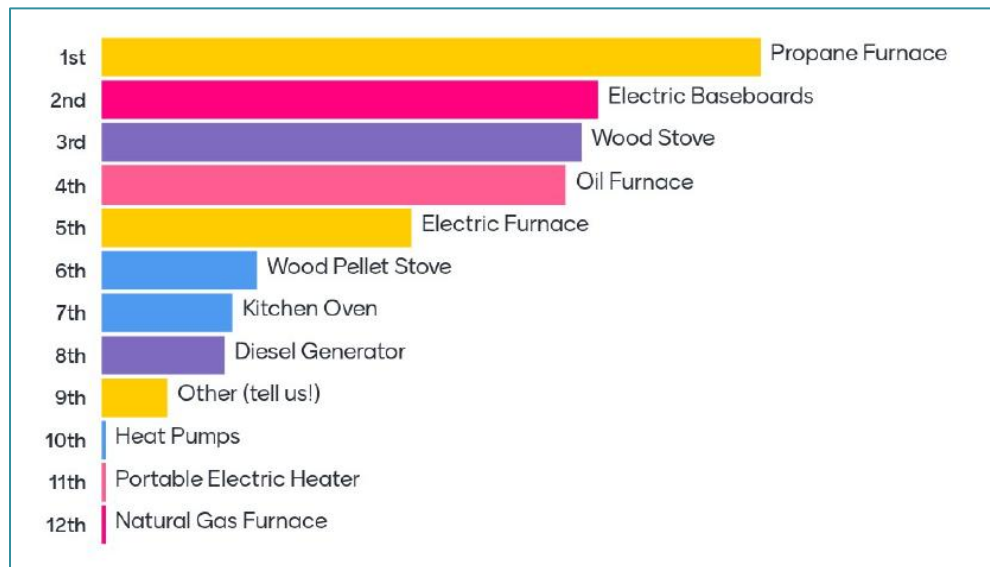


Figure 10: 2024 Region 4 Focus Group | May 14, 2024

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 2024 and 2025 focus group yielded similar results. Propane is still ranked the most used among low- and fixed-income clients. Kitchen oven is still recognized and ranked as a way that clients are heating their home. Having an appliance such as “kitchen oven” recognized and ranked as highly as it is in region 4 is a strong indicator that the common technologies for heating a home are still either inaccessible or unaffordable.

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 Focus Group | May 13, 2025

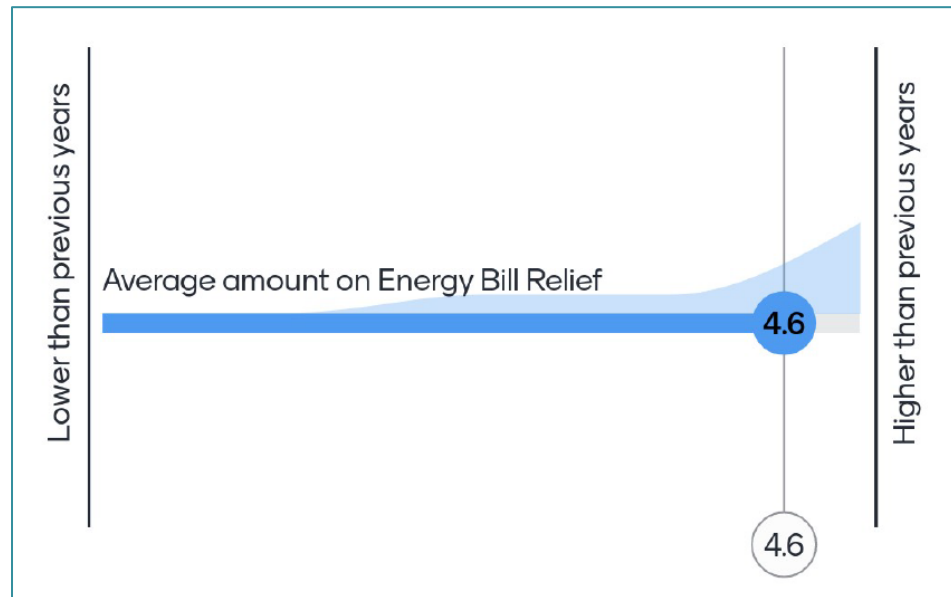


Figure 12: 2024 Focus Group | May 14, 2024

Analysis and Year to Year Comparison

In region 4, 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 illustrate the affordability and efficiency trends throughout First Nations in Ontario.

Comparison of the results from year to year should be minimal for the reason stated in the above section – in *Considerations for Analysis* (pg.6), both groups had indicated that the burden of energy bill relief was higher than the previous year.

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 Focus Group | May 13



Figure 14: 2024 Focus Group | May 14

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

In the responses in 2024 and 2025, our participants responded that they would prioritize addressing the root of energy poverty by funding housing as well as upgrading any other inefficiencies. Food supports and food sovereignty initiatives are other major priorities that our participants would like to invest into. Cultural programming and “land-back” initiatives were also strong considerations for the wellbeing of their communities and Indigenous sovereignty.

The responses from both 2024 and 2025 show an understanding of the root causes of energy poverty as well as an understanding of initiatives that would support the health of their communities.

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 4 were included for analysis purposes.

		Average Temperature	Region 4	% of Workload dedicated to energy
2024	January	Lowest Avg.	-23	38.6%
		Mean Temp.	-6.4	
		Highest Avg.	3.4	
	February	Lowest Avg.	-20	26.8%
		Mean Temp.	-4.02	
		Highest Avg.	10.9	
	March	Lowest Avg.	-15.9	25.2%
		Mean Temp.	-0.3	
		Highest Avg.	14.3	
	April	Lowest Avg.	-7.2	8.6%
		Mean Temp.	5.8	
		Highest Avg.	21.4	
May	Lowest Avg.	2.7	8.6%	
	Mean Temp.	14		
	Highest Avg.	27.3		
June	Lowest Avg.	4.6	8.2%	
	Mean Temp.	17.4		
	Highest Avg.	32.4		
July	Lowest Avg.	8.4	22.8%	
	Mean Temp.	20.3		
	Highest Avg.	30.2		
August	Lowest Avg.	8	7%	
	Mean Temp.	19.2		
	Highest Avg.	31.6		
September	Lowest Avg.	4.2	7%	
	Mean Temp.	16.7		
	Highest Avg.	27.3		
October	Lowest Avg.	2.3	14.2%	
	Mean Temp.	9.4		
	Highest Avg.	23		
November	Lowest Avg.	-5.7	18%	
	Mean Temp.	3.4		
	Highest Avg.	16.9		
December	Lowest Avg.	-21.1	25.4%	
	Mean Temp.	-4.3		
	Highest Avg.	7.3		

Figure 15: 2025 Focus Group | May 13, 2025 – Region 4 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?”

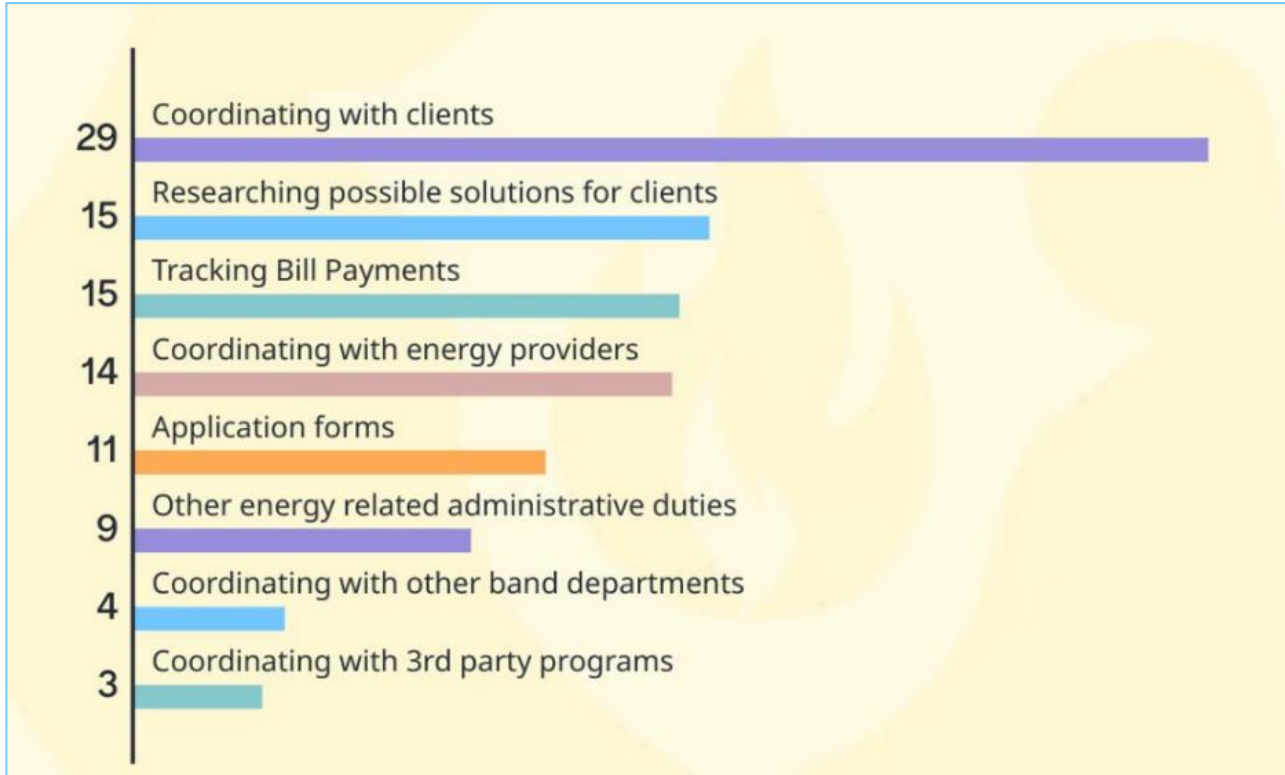


Figure 16: 2025 Focus Group | May 13, 2025

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.

Analysis

In Region 4, energy related work load increases during the colder months beginning in October reaching highs in January and continuing until March. There is a spike in July – midsummer. 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 4 mirror that of the busy workload periods seen throughout the year. Substantial hot and cold temperatures meant a greater workload for workers as more time was spent with clients assisting them with necessary energy related matters.

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

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.

Question 10

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



Figure 17: 2025 Focus Group | May 13, 2025

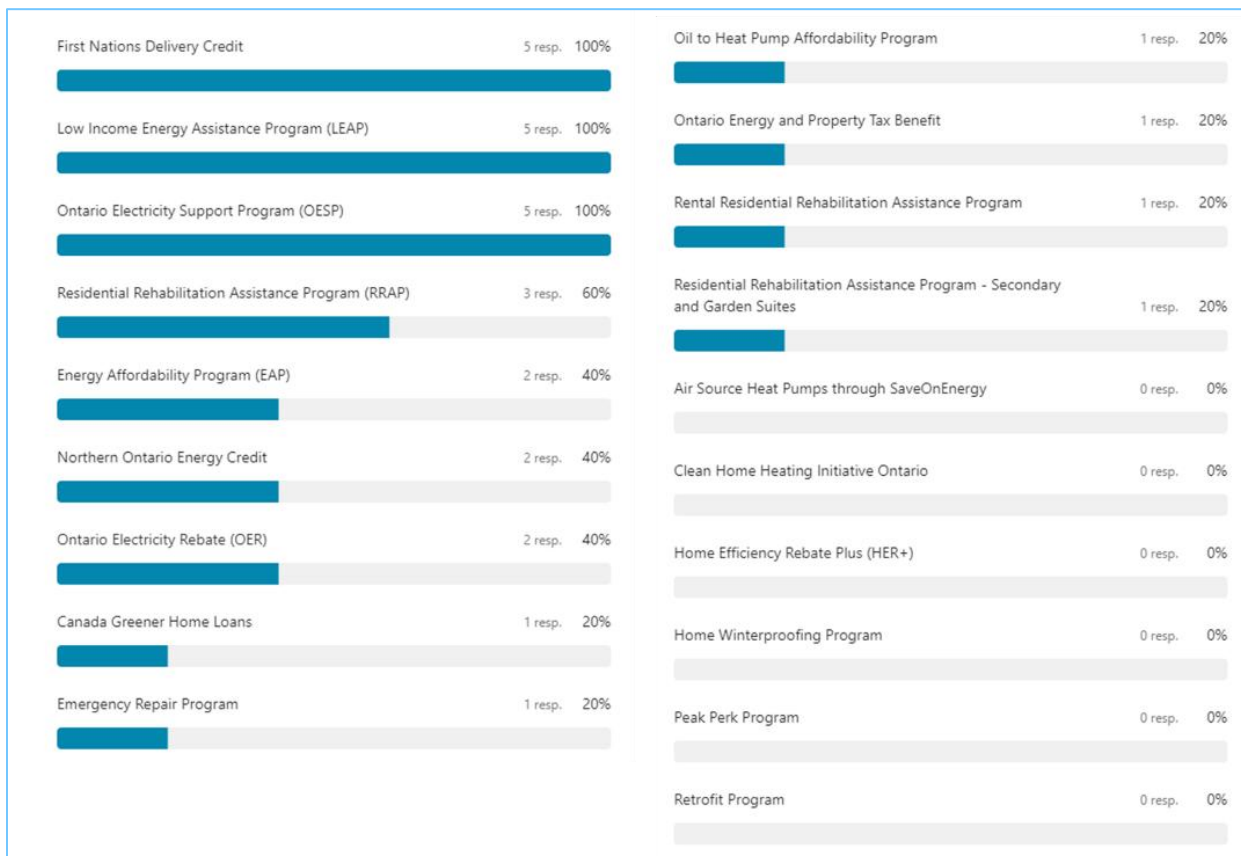


Figure 17: 2025 Focus Group | May 14, 2024

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.

Conclusion

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

In Region 4, 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 in food sustainability programming, investing in competing priorities like cultural programming or nation building initiatives. The cost of energy poverty is the dignity of inhabitants of an inefficient home. The cost is living in precarious and sometimes fatally dangerous conditions.

Energy Poverty is pervasive and cascading throughout Region 4 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 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 is 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, 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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