

Regional Clean Energy Hubs Market Evaluation and Baseline Customer Survey: Executive Summary

Final

Prepared for:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Background

The Regional Clean Energy Hubs (RCEH) Initiative was developed by NYSERDA as a key part of the Statewide LMI Implementation plan. The 12 Regional Clean Energy Hubs (Hubs), one in each of New York's 10 Economic Development Regions (except for New York City, which has three Hubs) build capacity at the local level to strengthen the participation of disadvantaged communities (DACs) in the clean energy economy. The RCEH Initiative was initiated in September 2022 and will extend through 2026 (four years). To evaluate the first year of this initiative, Industrial Economics (IEc) reviewed available secondary data from the program (Sept. 1, 2022 – July 31, 2023) and collected insights from key stakeholder groups, including Hub Leader and subcontractor organizations and DAC consumers from across New York State. The primary data collection period for this evaluation began in May 2023 and extended through April 2024. The purpose of the evaluation is to characterize existing relationships between organizations within the Hubs, characterize progress to date, set a baseline for DAC consumer awareness, and provide recommendations for the initiative.

2. Results

Hub organizations have a history of working with NYSERDA or other New York State agencies (N=12). Most Hubs have served New York State residents and businesses directly or peripherally as a part of the Community Energy Engagement Program (CEEP) (n=7), Heat Smart campaign leader (n=3), and/or Clean Heating and Cooling Campaigns provider (n=3). Hubs new to NYSERDA are either part of the Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) Network (and thus familiar with many NYSERDA's programs) or have extensive previous experience in helping communities meet their housing and/or clean energy needs. Collectively, the Hubs have 55 subcontractors. Each Hub has between three and seven subcontractors, except Mohawk Valley (the prime had only one subcontractor at the time of data collection, resulting from challenges in contract negotiation with other potential subcontractors).

2.1 Hub Activity Results

Four Hubs experienced early delays in outreach and engagement efforts because the Hub infrastructure took some time to set up, including negotiating contracts with their subcontractors and hiring, onboarding, and training Hub energy advisors. At the time of data collection, eight Hubs were preparing to conduct a Regional Assessment and Barriers Analysis (RABA) in their respective regions to build a foundation from which to better serve communities; two Hubs had already started their conducting their RABAs. The remaining two Hubs did not share the status of their respective RABAs. As of July 31, 2023, Hubs had:

- Conducted 103 outreach events and 12 workshops.
- Coordinated 143 customer opportunities with wraparound services (i.e., any NYSERDA or non-NYSERDA services connect applicants to services in addition to energy assistance).
- Conducted three existing, and initiated one new, community campaigns.
- Reported on 58 workforce development-related efforts.

Hub Leaders and subcontractors pointed to some logistical hurdles that have slowed progress, including challenges with branding the Hubs, lack of information or inconsistent information from NYSERDA, and limited access to NYSERDA-approved contractors in some regions.

While the positive attitude toward collaboration was a key theme of the Hub Leader and subcontractor discussions, some opportunities for improving collaboration and communication were suggested, including:

- Sharing best practices across and within Hubs to facilitate learning from others.
- Providing outreach to, or support for, organizations in NYSERDA’s network. Hub subcontractors are interested in hearing about, and providing feedback on, changes to NYSERDA’s consumer programs before they are implemented so they can better anticipate changes.
- Improving functionality in Salesforce so that Hub Leaders and subcontractors can better serve the customers that contact them for updates on their application process.

2.2 DAC Consumer Baseline Results

Survey results illustrate that consumer respondents are either somewhat aware (57%) or very aware (16%) of energy efficiency products (n=225). Survey respondents most commonly associate terms like “ENERGY STAR® appliances” (14%) and “energy efficient products” (13%) with the term “energy efficiency” (n=199).

Survey respondents are either somewhat aware (41 %) or very aware (11%) of the term “renewable energy generation and storage” (n=225). Survey respondents most commonly associate terms like “rooftop solar panels” (37%) and “wind power” (32%) with the phrase “renewable energy generation and storage” (n=184).

Over half (55%) of DAC consumer survey respondents were unfamiliar with clean energy and energy assistance programs through NYSERDA (n=225). A majority (69%) of DAC consumer survey respondents indicated that they had not received a free audit, and a further 10% did not remember whether or not they received such an audit. Of the 44 respondents who had received a free audit, 20 of them (45%) received the home energy audit through a NYSERDA program, while 19 (43%) did not remember.

Survey respondents indicated that the most common barriers to pursuing clean energy products, programs and services include having “more pressing needs that take priority when [they] have available funds” (50%), needing “more information about the benefits of energy efficient products” (35%), needing “more information on ways to make energy purchases more affordable” (33%), and needing “more information on clean energy technology options for [their] home” (31%, N=225). DAC focus group findings supported the survey findings, by most commonly identifying cost as a key barrier to clean energy adoption (n=9). Focus group respondents were not provided the same prompts as the survey respondents, but in discussion identified two additional barriers not included in the survey. These included a lack of trust that the equipment or clean energy services would reduce home energy bills (n=4), and a need for more information or evidence to support the decision to purchase or install clean energy equipment (n=2).

3. Findings and Recommendations

IEc’s key findings and recommendations for NYSERDA are summarized in **Table ES-1**.

ES- 1. Evaluation Findings and Corresponding Recommendations

Finding	Recommendation
<p>1. NYSERDA and the Hubs are laying a solid foundation upon which to build a culture of collaboration.</p>	<p>1. NYSERDA should explore ways to effectively help Hubs share best practices to leverage expertise and lessons learned, and identify opportunities to support Hub-to-Hub engagement and program development outside of regular meetings.</p> <p><i>NYSERDA Response to Recommendation:</i> Implemented. To strengthen collaboration and coordination amongst the RCEH, NYSERDA currently hosts regular monthly Hub Leadership meetings, Hub Webinars, Hub All Staff Meetings, as well as a Salesforce Working Group and an Outreach Working Group. These convenings allow Hubs the space to stay up to date on program announcements, share insights gained from Hubs’ on-the-ground regional engagement, and collectively develop strategies for reaching disadvantaged communities. NYSERDA, along with subset of Hub members, is organizing an annual Hub meeting where Hub Staff will meet in person for two days and focus on peer learning and strengthening their partnership networks. Additionally, the Hub Implementation Contractor has developed a Hubs-specific Teams site to facilitate real-time discussion via chat among Hubs, distribute program information, and gather feedback collaboratively.</p>
<p>2. NYSERDA’s approach to communications has challenged Hubs through inconsistent or opaque messaging and lack of outreach to or support for organizations when programs change.</p>	<p>2. NYSERDA should work on improving communication practices with messaging to avoid confusing overpromises on incentive amounts or timelines, providing sufficient program resources (e.g., FTE) for such a large and multifaceted program, and offering “listening sessions” with Hubs and organizations in their network prior to launching new programs (or new program branding).</p> <p><i>NYSERDA Response to Recommendation:</i> Pending. In order to address concerns around communicating needs, NYSERDA is currently working on several tools to collect, organize, and manage feedback from the Hub Staff to facilitate communication between NYSERDA program staff and Hub staff.</p>

Finding	Recommendation
	<p>Collecting this feedback will allow NYSERDA to identify shared areas of improvement and opportunities for collaboration. For example, NYSERDA can record feedback heard from Hub staff at meetings or received via chat or email, which the Hub staff can then view to see how the feedback is addressed. This feedback tracker will also be available for public viewing to further improve communication and transparency. Feedback received on NYSERDA programs will be recorded in the feedback tracker and provided to the NYSERDA Program Teams in a timely manner for a response and potential solution. Once the NYSERDA Program Team has responded to the feedback provided the Hub who provided the feedback will be notified and the feedback will be updated. Additionally, NYSERDA is developing an anonymous feedback form and scheduling listening sessions for Hub Staff to provide suggestions or comments, which will be tracked in the feedback tracker. These tools will improve transparency, continue to build trust, and foster continuous improvement within the RCEH initiative and NYSERDA.</p> <p>NYSERDA also continues to facilitate communication through the regularly scheduled Hubs meetings (Hub Leadership, Hub all Staff and Monthly Webinar meetings). NYSERDA Program Teams work with RCEH staff to provide Hub staff with program updates and trainings on NYSERDA and Non-NYSERDA programs through these meetings. Additionally, NYSERDA Program Teams are organizing working groups where they invite the Hubs to provide feedback on program design and development.</p> <p>Hubs are also invited to participate in the Energy Equity Collaborative, a coordinated forum for community-based organizations and stakeholders that are representative of or principally serve Disadvantaged Communities, NYSERDA, and interagency partners to work together to address energy equity and climate justice issues and develop equitable programs.</p>
<p>3. DAC consumers are aware of energy efficiency and renewable energy generation and storage concepts but require evidence to make informed decisions about purchases.</p>	<p>3. NYSERDA should develop case studies showing cost effectiveness for a realistic DAC household before/after installation, or over time, to help provide potential customers with a better idea about the extent of cost savings (or payback period) they can expect from clean energy or energy efficiency purchases.</p> <p><i>NYSERDA Response to Recommendation:</i> Implemented. NYSERDA is currently working with the Hubs to develop customized case studies and testimonials as well as consumer facing materials on living in an energy efficient home.</p>
<p>4. Negative perceptions, misinformation, and lack of confidence about the reliability of renewable energy generation and storage technologies and energy efficiency products may prevent DAC consumers from participating in the clean energy economy.</p>	<p>4. NYSERDA should support Hubs by developing materials with talking points explaining the role of battery storage in ensuring stability of electricity service and framing educational materials around non-energy benefits such as health and comfort to reduce misunderstandings and negative perceptions about electrification.</p> <p><i>NYSERDA Response to Recommendation:</i> Pending: A Hub serves as the source for community members across the region to receive reliable and accurate information about clean energy programs and opportunities. As a team of non-profit organizations that come from the communities they serve, Hub Staff are actively attending, hosting and organizing community events to engage with communities. In addition, the Hubs are developing websites and marketing campaigns that speak in plain language about incentive and rebate programs, renewable energy generation and storage technologies and energy efficiency measures to debunk misinformation.</p>