

### Engaging Community to Prioritize Efficiency

In 2023, the [New York State Energy Research and Development Authority](#) (NYSERDA) launched the [EmPower+](#) program to support low- and moderate-income residents in New York State with no-cost home energy assessments and energy efficiency upgrades. This program is a combination of two former NYSERDA programs: the Empower NY program, which started in 2004 and served low-income customers, and the Assisted Home Performance (AHP) program, which started in 2001 and served moderate-income customers.

The EmPower+ program helps reduce energy burden for residents by providing them with insulation, air sealing, heating system replacement, energy-efficient lighting, door sweeps, and weather stripping. The program also provides health and safety benefits, as needed, such as smoke and carbon monoxide detectors and furnace filters. To qualify for the program, New York residents in single- to four-unit homes must be considered low- or moderate-income, which the program determines through income verification (e.g., tax returns, pay stubs); categorical verification (e.g., participating in another low-income program such as SNAP or HEAP); or geo-eligibility (e.g., homes in [certain Census block groups](#)).

The goals of EmPower+ are to make homes more energy efficient, less expensive to operate, more comfortable, healthier, and resilient. Legislation such as [Green Jobs - Green NY](#) and the [Climate and Leadership and Community Protection Act](#) (Climate Act) provide guidance for program implementation including serving disadvantaged communities, providing energy assessments, and carbon reduction. Ultimately, the program strives to ease energy burdens on low- to moderate-income New

#### Fast Facts

**Program scope:** Home energy efficiency upgrades to reduce both energy costs and carbon emissions.

**Communities served:** Low- and moderate-income renters and homeowners in single- to four-family homes.

**Funding:** New York State, Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, NYSERDA's Clean Energy Fund, New Efficiency New York, and the New York Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance.

**Key partners:** New York State divisions and offices (e.g., Temporary and Disability Assistance), energy utilities (e.g., Con Edison), CLEAResult, energy efficiency contractors, and community-based organizations.

**Promising practices:** Prioritize community engagement, automate workflows where possible, make program materials more inclusive (e.g., multiple language options).



Yorkers while also helping the State achieve its goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 85 percent by 2050.<sup>1</sup>

## Community History

NYSERDA created the EmPower+ program to serve both low- and moderate-income New Yorkers, amounting to an estimated 2 million people.<sup>2</sup> The initial EmPower NY and AHP programs were created out of a need to support low- and moderate-income residents, respectively, in a variety of climate zones and building types—many of which suffer from deferred maintenance. New York also has a wide variety of ethnic groups and languages spoken, which requires the program to adapt accordingly and use funding effectively while seeking to meet New York’s ambitious climate goals. As such, the program application is available in multiple languages, as well as outreach services provided by the [Regional Clean Energy Hubs](#).

New York State, and especially New York City, have higher rates of renter-occupied housing than most other parts of the country.<sup>3</sup> Thus, EmPower+ works to provide services directly to renters, if possible, and determine the best strategies to incentivize landlord participation. New York State also consumes more fossil fuels in its residential buildings than any other state,<sup>4</sup> and nearly 40 percent of New York City’s greenhouse gas emissions result from heating buildings and water.<sup>5</sup> This energy efficiency program was created out of the recognition that it has the potential to significantly reduce emissions from the residential sector.

## Community Engagement

NYSERDA’s community engagement activities have been supported by the Climate Act since 2019. NYSERDA completed the first round of stakeholder engagement for the EmPower+ program in 2018 and plans to conduct more Inflation Reduction Act (IRA)-supported engagement activities in the future.

NYSERDA conducts community engagement through community organizations. Community engagement also occurs through Regional Clean Energy Hubs, which provide information to individuals, small businesses, and affordable housing owners about the benefits of the clean

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<sup>1</sup> New York State [Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act](#).

<sup>2</sup> [New Yorkers in Need: A Look at Poverty Trends in New York State for the Last Decade](#).

<sup>3</sup> NYSERDA 2020 [Clean Energy Fund Portfolio Summary](#).

<sup>4</sup> [Greenhouse gas emissions from buildings in the United States in 2017, by selected state](#). Statista. February, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> [NYC Greenhouse Gas Inventories](#).



energy economy, ways to reduce energy use and costs, and how to make more informed energy decisions. NYSERDA's programs have evolved in response to information gathered through these types of community engagement.

The decision to combine the EmPower NY and the AHP programs into EmPower+ was made in part due to program feedback received through the Low-Income Forum on Energy (LIFE) and from other stakeholders, which flagged that community groups and customers were confused between the two programs.<sup>6</sup> This in-depth stakeholder engagement resulted in logistical improvements that ultimately led to the creation of the EmPower+ program. NYSERDA combined the applications for both the EmPower NY and AHP programs, provided the application in 16 languages, and made it available both online and through mail. It also changed the parameters of the program to align the eligible measures, paperwork, and processes of both programs. NYSERDA then launched an online portal that kickstarted the newly merged program.

## Key Partners

NYSERDA's EmPower+ program built a diverse team of partners, including:

- [CLEAResult](#) – National energy solutions provider that supports energy efficiency and other demand-side management strategies; serves as the technical services implementation contractor for the program.
- [New York State Division of Housing and Community Renewal \(NYS HCR\)](#) – HCR operates programs to create and preserve affordable homes, support vulnerable populations, and implement electrification efforts.
- [New York State Department of Public Service](#) – The staff arm of the New York State Public Service Commission, mandated to ensure that New Yorkers have access to safe, reliable utility service at just and reasonable rates.
- [New York State Local Departments of Social Services](#) – Fifty-eight local offices that provide and administer social services to each of the State's service districts.
- [New York State Offices for the Aging \(NYSOFA\)](#) – NYSOFA administers home and community-based programs that provide older adults with access to supportive services designed to support and supplement informal care.
- [New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance \(NYS OTDA\)](#) – OTDA oversees programs that provide temporary cash aid, food assistance, heating support,

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<sup>6</sup> Scott Oliver, New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, 2023. Personal Communication.



child support enforcement, housing programs and other services for the homeless, and aid to immigrant populations.

- [Participating contractors](#) – Companies throughout New York State that provide home energy assessments and/or energy efficiency services.
- New York State energy utilities (except the Long Island Power Authority) – Entities that provide services including the generation, distribution, and sale of electricity and natural gas to residents.
- Community Based Organizations (CBOs) – Nonprofit organizations composed of residents of the local community.

In most cases, NYSERDA has collaborated with these partners for many years and has integrated their processes into the EmPower+ program design to best serve low- and moderate-income New Yorkers. CLEAResult is the program’s main implementation contractor. More than 200 participating contractors that perform the assessments and installations join the program through an open enrollment process. CLEAResult ensures that these contractors have the proper certifications and are familiar with administrative processes such as using the project management system.

NYS HCR runs the State’s [weatherization assistance program](#), which is federally funded and has contractors that also work in the EmPower+ program. NYS OTDA and several New York energy utilities provide both funding and referrals for the program, and NYSOFA also provides referrals. A variety of CBOs participate through Regional Clean Energy Hubs to provide customer assistance (e.g., translation and referrals to other programs as needed, such as for roof repairs).

### Funding Mechanism

Funding for the Empower + program comes from a variety of sources including New York State Legislature-Enacted FY2024 budget providing \$200 million for EmPower+ in 2023 as well as the [Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative](#), [Clean Energy Fund](#) , [New Efficiency: New York](#) utility funds, and the [New York Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance](#). In 2023 the program provided approximately \$150 million in incentives and served 22,000 homes.

NYSERDA is planning to leverage funding opportunities from IRA to expand the scope of beneficial electrification that the program can offer through the funding of electrical work such as panel box upgrades and new wiring, as well as the installation of heat pumps. To continue



supporting program operations, NYSERDA is participating in a NYS Public Service Commission proceeding to establish utility rate payer funding for the years 2026 through 2030.

### Program Impact

As of September 2023, nearly 210,000 low-income and 46,000 moderate-income households have received energy efficiency upgrades through EmPower+ and its program

predecessors.<sup>7</sup> The most recent impact evaluation conducted by NYSERDA occurred before the EmPower NY and AHP programs officially merged in 2023. This evaluation, which examined services provided to 5,400 homes from the first quarter of 2017 to the first quarter of 2019, found that the average home serviced by the Empower NY program saved 357 kWh per year in electricity costs and 238 kWh per year for homes serviced by the AHP program.<sup>8</sup>

The EmPower+ program supports beneficial electrification and energy efficiency efforts to achieve the Climate Act goal of economy-wide decarbonization by mid-century.<sup>9</sup> The scale of effort that is required highlights the critical role that the EmPower+ program plays in achieving economy-wide decarbonization in the state.

### Barriers and Challenges

EmPower+ program administrators have found it challenging to manage the wide variety of funding sources with different rules and requirements. Balancing the need for robust data collection and reporting with the need to simplify and streamline processes for contractor and customer participation is also difficult. In response to this challenge, NYSERDA developed project management software to automate tasks such as work scope submissions, funding allocation, and certain project approvals.

Incentivizing landlords to participate in the program has proven to be an unexpected challenge, as renters pay the cost of utilities but do not have the authority to agree to retrofits that require a

"Life was confined to our one room for 7–8 months of the year. Now, we will be able to use our kitchen and bathroom in the winter... My children and I are so thankful to Standard Insulating Co., Inc.!"

- **Christina from Cleveland, NY**, who saved an average of \$1,063 on the family's annual energy bill after energy efficiency upgrades through EmPower+

<sup>7</sup> Scott Oliver, New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, 2023. Personal Communication.

<sup>8</sup> NYSERDA Residential Retrofit Impact Evaluation (2017- Q1 2019)

<sup>9</sup> [New York State Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act](#).



homeowner's permission. However, the program can provide energy efficiency upgrades directly to renters by updating lighting fixtures, supplying smart power strips, or replacing tenant-owned appliances such as refrigerators.

### Recommendations from the Field

- **Prioritize community engagement.** NYSERDA developed EmPower+ with robust, compensated, community stakeholder engagement, which it believes is vital to success. It found that community groups were able to provide important perspectives on disadvantaged communities in the program planning process and by developing effective outreach strategies. To build positive relationships with stakeholders, NYSERDA has provided administrative funding support to the Building Performance Contractors Association and has developed a separate compensation system for community stakeholders who participate in stakeholder working groups.
- **Select contractors strategically.** EmPower+ administrators recommend that contractor engagement begins with larger regional contractors and then grows to mid-sized groups.
- **Use robust project management systems.** Build project management systems that are highly configurable and interface well with existing agency systems.
- **Provide outreach materials in multiple languages.** Ensure program materials are available in languages that are used by the target demographic.
- **Get certified.** Rely on nationally recognized standards such as Building Performance Institute (BPI)-1100 and other BPI certifications.

### For More Information

- [EmPower+ Program](#)
- [2023 EmPower+ Program Manual](#)
- [EPA Informational Resources on Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy in Low-Income Communities](#)