

Attachment 5: 2023 Customer Listening Sessions for 2024-2026 Plan

The Company hosted three listening sessions with RI Energy customers in June 2023:

- June 20, Commercial and Industrial (C&I) customers
- June 22, Income-Eligible customers
- June 27, Residential customers

These sessions were intended to collect feedback from customer segments regarding the priorities outlined in the 2024-2026 Energy Efficiency Plan. The Company solicited participants through outreach to Energy Efficiency and Resource Management Council (EERMC) and Energy Efficiency Technical Working Group (EETWG) members, including, for example, the Office of Energy Resources (OER) and the Rhode Island Center for Justice, as well through communication with community action agencies, chambers of commerce, and other local organizations and networks.

For the purposes of this document, RI Energy has separated the responses from the different breakout groups as many comments, questions and conversations built upon other participants' feedback.

1. Commercial & Industrial Session

The C&I Session was held on June 20, 2023. After a presentation regarding the Company's energy efficiency programs, participants were separated into two small break-out groups and asked the following two questions:

- What was your experience accessing and using RI Energy's efficiency program? Did it meet your expectations, why or why not?
- What actions can RI Energy take to encourage participation in their programs?

Following the break-out groups, a Company representative presented an overview of the 2024-2026 Plan's priorities and session participants offered their thoughts, comments and suggestions on the draft Plan for the Company to consider.

1.1 Question 1 Summary

What was your experience accessing and using RI Energy's efficiency program? Did it meet your expectations, why or why not?

Breakout Group #1 Responses

When asked if the program was easy to access, some participants spoke about potential issues arising when the RI Energy review timeline does not align with the customer's project timeline. These customers said, "technical review

must be fast and get back to the customer before the architect/designer gets too far along.” One customer noted they have not “accessed the program to date”; however, they have spoken to many people over the years about various iterations of the program and currently are “embarking on several projects” with a vendor.

When asked if the program met their expectations, participants noted the program had “met expectations for paperwork flow and process” while other said the C&I program was “easy and helpful.”

Breakout Group #2 Responses

When asked if the programs were easy to access, participants responded with “yes, it was easy to access,” “easy to access site, easy to navigate site,” and “When National Grid became RI Energy, service provided was improved.” One participant was concerned regarding the Strategic Energy Management Plan (SEMP) Initiative. They said their “SEMP expired, but the team is pushing you to get new SEM, feels they are treated like their SEM never expired.”

When asked if their expectations were met, participants noted there was a “lack of funding for electric vehicle infrastructure.” Other participants noted they had “difficulty navigating the payment site” as the “process is a little difficult.”

1.2 Question 2 Summary

What actions can RI Energy take to encourage participation in their programs?

Breakout Group #1 Responses

Participants were asked what actions the Company could take to encourage participation in the programs. Some suggestions focused on marketing the programs. Participants suggested the Company develop case studies to show the energy savings and measures implemented for actual customers. In addition, participants suggested more marketing including “more flyer awareness (printed materials), advertisements on social media, television and radio.” Additional suggestions include the development of a standardized form as the “email communication between RI Energy and subcontractors can be hard to follow.” Participants encouraged the Company to “partner with RI Department of Human Services, especially their workforce program to help people find jobs.”

Breakout Group #2 Responses

When asked how the Company could encourage participation, several group members suggested holding “community outreach and small events explaining the programs” and “small events and meetings.” Other participants suggested a “focus on equity” and targeting “underserved communities and build relationships and trust, engage with communities to better understand how to serve them and what their unique needs are.” Additional suggestions included collaborating with other state entities and community organizations as this will “better serve customers and make it easier for them to access all different programs” and incorporating “provisions for language access including translating program materials.”

Several participants suggested the Company streamline its processes such as making forms easier to complete where possible and hiring staff to walk customers through programs.

1.3 Collective Responses to Draft 2024-2026 Plan

Priority One: Reach More Customers

Session participants suggested the addition of a project expeditor, using existing partners as advocates, and developing relationships with trade groups, such as the Rhode Island Manufacturers Association.

Priority Two: Help Customers Find the Right Measures

Some participants suggested shifting from natural gas to electric buildings including “continue with program that incentivizes electric [measures] and reduce those for gas.” Others noted some industrial processes need gas and that there are no feasible alternatives at this point and that is “concerning for manufacturers, need significant incentives to change equipment.” Other participants expressed concern regarding light-emitting diode (LED) lighting incentives and asked for the Company to “keep these going.”

Priority Three: Enable Customers to Invest in Efficiency

Participants commented that there needs to be more knowledge of weatherization and importance.

Priority Four: Serve Customers Equitably

There were no comments made addressing this priority.

Priority Five: Ensure Workforce Capacity to Serve Customers

Session participants suggested Building Operator Certification (BOC) training.

Final Questions or Comments

Other questions and comments about the 2024-2026 Plan:

1. Electric vehicle owners need to be incentivized to charge at the right times (i.e., not at peak times).
2. There should be a similar forum for the other energy efficiency programs.

2. Income Eligible Services Session

The Income Eligible Services Session was held on June 22, 2023. After a presentation regarding the Company’s energy efficiency programs, the customers were separated into three small break-out groups and asked the following two questions:

- What was your experience accessing and using RI Energy’s efficiency program? Did it meet your expectations, why or why not?
- What actions can RI Energy take to encourage participation in their programs?

Following the break-out groups, a Company representative presented an overview of the 2024-2026 Plan's priorities and session participants offered their thoughts, comments and suggestions on the draft Plan for the Company to consider.

2.1 Question 1 Summary

What was your experience accessing and using RI Energy's efficiency program? Did it meet your expectations, why or why not?

Breakout Group #1 Responses

Group participants talked about how they found out about the Income Eligible Services (IES) Program. One participant found out about the IES Program through the Tri-Town Community Action Agency. These participants said about the IES Program: "people are friendly and informative," "great that it is free," and "grateful for resources." Other participants reported they found out about the IES Program through a Google search. One participant said it was not easy to access the IES Program as "they didn't know about help until it was needed" but once they started working with the program it was "easy and great."

When asked if the programs met their expectations, some participants said they were "great programs" and "people who come to the house are very helpful."

Breakout Group #2 Responses

Group participants were asked about their experience accessing and using the efficiency programs (i.e., IES Program). One group participant said, "once I found out about the program it was easy to use, but finding it was by chance." Participants felt the program was "geared toward an owner" and questions if the program "applies to them, when we look at the website it looks like it is for owners and landlords but is it something tenants can access?". Other participants talked about their lack of trust as their "experience with utility companies is not the best" and they have resisted "applying for assistance or programs the Company offers".

In response to the question regarding how the program met their expectations, participants responded positively, "exceeded my expectations by far. Once the connection was made my CCAP/BVCAP contact assisted me to all programs I qualified for" and "was easy to contact and schedule with CCAP/BVCAP representative." Another participant asked about the qualifications for income, "as family was just overqualified for the number of people in the household; they decided to not continue."

Breakout Group #3 Responses

In response to this question, some participants said they had accessed the program through the Tri-Country Community Action Agency and it was a "good experience" but there were contractor issues with the insulation and window repair. Other participants had accessed the program through a community action agency and they had a "great experience" with the furnace replacement and the CCAP agency kept them informed and followed up to make

sure things were working. Another participant discussed how they had noticed energy savings due to the new equipment (propane equipment and insulation) installed in their home.

When asked if the program met their expectations, participants said the program was “easy to schedule,” “exceeded expectations,” and the CCAP agency and the agency “provided follow-up and had good communications.” One participant did state when insulation was blown in it came in through the inside vents and plugged up their furnace chimney; however, the CCAP agency was able to address it.

2.2 Question 2 Summary

What actions can RI Energy take to encourage participation in their programs?

Breakout Group #1 Responses

Group participants discussed actions RI Energy can take to encourage participation in energy efficiency programs. Participants discussed advertising programs on “billboards on highways” and making resources and information more “visible in public spaces” such as “grocery stores, libraries, Department of Motor Vehicles, community health centers, malls, and Walmart.” Other participants suggested the Company participate in “more public and community events” to “help people understand what help is available before that help is needed.”

Some participants suggested educating children about energy efficiency and “teaching programs in schools.” They noted that “many people who need help are parents; attract the kids and get information to the adults about programs.” Participants also suggested bilingual education programs and outreach as for “many folks, English isn’t their first language.” These breakout group participants also suggested making information about energy efficiency eye catching as “if you are looking for a program like this you probably need help—fight or flight mode—finding that has to pop up to you, be large, eye-catching, creative!”). Participants also suggested a gift card for those individuals who participate in energy efficiency programs.

Breakout Group #2 Responses

Some suggestions included using different language and terms in promotional items to describe potential outcomes such as “lower energy costs” and “save you money.” Other group participants suggested proactive outreach to customers who are late and/or past due with utility bills to offer the IES program as a solution to lower energy costs and make energy affordable. One group participant suggested finding more efficient marketing campaign for clients to find out about the programs as it is “too hard to find right now.” Suggestions included marketing the program through printed information in energy bills, public areas, website, social media, and texts.

Breakout Group #3 Responses

Some suggestions for encouraging participation in the programs include outreach at food banks, senior centers, community health care centers, and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes at libraries. Participants noted lots of information does come via utility bills; however, “a lot of people don’t read them” and “there needs to be resources for people without computers.” Other suggestions include a Social Media channel to serve as a Q&A forum and to

instruct people regarding how to engage in programs. One participant noted financing options were helpful. Participants also suggested incentives for people who completed surveys and/or programs.

2.3 Collective Responses to Draft 2024-2026 Plan

Priority One: Reach More Customers

Session participants spoke about the need for landlords to be made aware of energy efficiency programs and how Rhode Island Housing should share with their clients (participants unsure if they did share). Participants said it should be “illegal for landlords not to inform tenants about resources for utilities and maybe RI Energy could be on the lease.” Other suggestions included giving information to homebuyers enrolled in the First Time Home Buyers program for single and multifamily properties.

To increase awareness, session participants spoke about how most RI Energy customers have paperless bills and therefore, do not see bill inserts advertising energy efficiency programs. These participants suggested monthly texts instead. Other participants suggested the Company ensure program information is displayed and available at “unbiased places” such as grocery stores (e.g., banners). Other participants expressed concerns about relying on social workers to relay information about energy efficiency programs.

Priority Two: Help Customers Find the Right Measures

Several participants requested household rate assistance for customers who use geothermal heat pumps (i.e., electric customers receive rate assistance). These participants noted, “[geothermal heat]” is the same as electric resistance heat, powered by electric and electric energy used solely when temperatures drop below freezing.” Other participants suggested more support for existing buildings or “older construction” through window replacement and weatherization as there is a “huge energy loss with inefficient older construction.” Some participants suggested implementing an incentive, such as a gift card, for joining calls/webinars/information sessions to learn about RI Energy programs. Others spoke about the need for RI Energy to provide solar panel support and expand programs to include renewables. *Note: Rhode Island solar photovoltaic programs and other renewable programs are supported by state agencies and other entities.*

Priority Three: Enable Customers to Invest in Efficiency

The majority of this group’s discussion focused on the integrated delivery of federal and state programs as “sometimes the combined programs makes it more worthy” and making sure customers are aware of all incentives. This suggestion includes making sure customers are educated about the federal and state programs simultaneously and how there should be more outreach at public places, such as grocery stores.

Priority Four: Serve Customers Equitably

Participants noted “equity is not the same as equal.” Others said energy efficiency should be a mandatory course in high school and college and that it “would also be cool if RI Energy went to a high school and did a presentation to plant that seed for high schoolers once they get out in the real world.” Other participant suggestions included making monthly workshops available, opening a HUB help location using the RI Energy name in some areas, and expanding

weatherization to windows and glass doors. One participant suggested the Company, “inform individuals that these programs are little to no cost to income-affected individuals as they are afraid of getting more bills.”

Priority Five: Ensure Workforce Capacity to Serve Customers

One suggestion was to offer classes and/or training programs through high schools and colleges.

Final Questions or Comments

Several participants had the following questions and comments about the 2024-2026 Plan:

1. Implement fraud prevention to increase trust in RI Energy. Some participants noted there were “lots of scammers using RI Energy to sell windows, etc. on social media.”
2. One participant noted their refrigerator was replaced the prior week and they said Tri-County Agency was “excellent” and “provided so much information about energy savings.” Their suggestion was to share information on how they can get additional energy-saving ideas. Another participant spoke highly of the IES Program and its benefits as they “could not have afforded them” and that the “contractors, delivery people, and all staff were courteous and knowledgeable and were always on time and pleasant.”
3. Participants suggested providing municipalities with inexpensive energy-saving supplies to initiate local community interest (e.g., outlet insulators, window/door stripping).
4. Expand natural gas to locations currently not being served.

3. Residential Session

The Residential Session was held on June 27, 2023. After a presentation regarding the Company’s energy efficiency programs, the customers were separated into three small break-out groups and asked the following two questions:

- What was your experience accessing and using RI Energy’s efficiency program? Did it meet your expectations, why or why not?
- What actions can RI Energy take to encourage participation in their programs?

Following the break-out groups, a Company representative presented an overview of the 2024-2026 Plan’s priorities and session participants offered their thoughts, comments and suggestions on the draft Plan for the Company to consider.

3.1 Question 1 Summary

What was your experience accessing and using RI Energy’s efficiency program? Did it meet your expectations, why or why not?

Breakout Group #1 Responses

In general, group participants’ experiences with the EnergyWise or Income Eligible Services (IES) programs were positive. This included statements of “great success with the energy audit” and “great success with the energy audit

and work completed.” A group participant noted they had received IES Program services through the Tri-Town Community Action Agency and “were led there after responding to a statement on our utility bill. We received some energy-efficient light bulbs.” Other participants spoke about needing more clear communications regarding EnergyWise Program eligibility guidelines noting that they “did an assessment in 2001/2002ish but did not really implement anything at the time because of finances. We would do so now but do not know the time parameters of being able to have another assessment.”

Through the Residential Consumer Products Program, consumers can purchase efficiency products at a local retailer, online at the [RI Energy Marketplace](#) (Marketplace), or through any online retailer (as long as the product meets product specifications, with receipt). Some group participants shared how they “had issues with the Marketplace.” Additional feedback included satisfaction with the easy rebate process stating, “we have used [the Programs] in the past, the National Grid rebates for a new refrigerator as well as a thermostat. That was easy to do the rebate.” The same participant did note they had “also bought new power strips through the rebate [Program] and did not like them.”

General feedback noted how the “light bulbs have been useful” and that they were “very happy” with their experience. Other group participants shared that the “energy rebate process was frustrating,” “working with sub-contractors was also frustrating,” and “clearly different from the experience of working with RI Energy.”

Breakout Group #2 Responses

Some participants shared their limited experience with the Company’s Residential programs; however, they had heard of several offerings. “I have no experience, as I have not accessed it previously,” said one group member. “I do receive a periodic letter that indicates our efficiency in our household as compared to other households in our neighborhood. In the past, we received some rebates for purchase of energy-efficient appliances.” Another participant’s experience was limited as they had “no experience as I have not accessed it.”

Other participants reported the EnergyWise Program was “simple to access” and “straight forward.” Other individuals spoke about how the “contractor was great to work with, helped with enhanced rebates, and showed them how to take advantage of the zero percent interest loan” while others noted their participation with the “energy audit in the past, at that time it felt cost prohibitive.” One group member had participated in the EnergyWise Program twice (2012 and Winter 2022/2023) and had converted from oil to a mini split system two-and-a-half months ago. They were “impressed with the dehumidifying” and thought their “contractor was great to work with as they helped with rebates.” The same member stated the “first [audit] felt like it was about getting everyone switched over to light-emitting diodes (LEDs), the second [audit] felt more about the [building] structure.”

Breakout Group #3 Responses

Group members provided varied feedback regarding their experience with, and the accessibility of, the Company’s Residential programs. Program awareness was a big topic for this group. Members referenced they had “heard through word of mouth” and had “responded to statements on energy bills linking them to Tri-County Community Action Agency where they heard about the programs.” Another group member referenced the “support for multilingual customers had been helpful [in Woonsocket].”

This breakout group also discussed the confusion between the numerous groups and agencies involved in Residential efficiency programs. One participant noted, “RI Energy, OER, RISE, can be confusing for a customer to sort out as they are not sure who they are talking to.” Another participant stressed the importance of “making sure appointment confirmation is not on the customer’s to-do list;” highlighting the necessity of pre-audit confirmation phone calls from EnergyWise and ISE Program contractors.

Several participants shared their positive experience with audits, “work was well done and audit was great,” “efficient lighting bulbs have been helpful,” and “good experience on the installation side, positive results come winter/summer.” Other group participants asked for “better guidance for written audit reports with regards to income eligibility (how is income determined),” “coordination between HVAC and insulation installation,” and the “potential [need for] training for heat pump installers.”

3.2 Question 2 Summary

What actions can RI Energy take to encourage participation in their programs?

Breakout Group #1 Responses

Group participants shared their opinions regarding actions the Company could take to encourage participation in the Residential programs. The general feedback from this breakout group suggested more and better Company communications regarding the Residential programs. “There is conflicting information still out on the web from the [Company’s previous name] National Grid. It would be helpful to have that stuff taken down off website,” stated one participant. Other participants suggested the Company, “incorporate better communications in monthly bills, as well as the emails that are sent every month with the Home Energy Reports” and identified the need for “clear [program] expectations.” Another suggestion was “social media outreach and an easily accessible Question & Answer feature.”

Breakout Group #2 Responses

Some participants suggested the Company offer financial incentives to encourage participation. One suggestion was on-bill incentives: “We are admittedly a money/coupon motivated household; so, even a \$10 rebate on our bill might be enough to get us to sign up for an assessment.” While another participant suggested a “refer-a-friend program/incentive” as they are “always looking for more energy savings.”

Former program participants spoke about wanting to know what was available to them now. “We did the energy assessment 20 years ago; we were in a different financial situation as new homeowners,” the participants said. “Now things are different, house is older now too, would be good to know what we could do now and what is available to us (i.e., another assessment).” The group also shared how the Company should “tell us how we can benefit from the programs without making it look like an advertisement. Sometimes it looks like an advertisement and we disregard the information.”

Breakout Group #3 Responses

This breakout group suggested the Company should increase its outreach through “social media,” “leaving behind some reference materials,” “tables at festivals and local events,” and “working with other groups and agencies (e.g., DARE, Poor People’s Campaign, state agencies, George Wiley Center, etc.)” Participants also suggested a phone consultation service for participants (especially for heat pumps) as this would provide “more support in evaluating HVAC contractors and estimates.” Other suggestions included “more advertisements with energy bills” and “more guidance in decision making processes.”

The Home Energy Reports Program was noted as “useful for education but doesn’t always change opinions.”

3.3 Collective Responses to Draft 2024-2026 Plan

Priority One: Reach More Customers

Session participants noted the Company should work more closely with HVAC and other contractors to serve as the program promoters as they are a trusted source for customers.

Another idea was to resource community-based organization to conduct outreach. Session participants said the Company should directly fund community groups for their time and capacity to perform outreach and not just provide marketing collateral for distribution. This direct funding would include incentives to community groups to serve vulnerable populations and partnering with “trusted leaders who have the same ethnic background and that frequent popular community gathering places such as community centers and faith-based organizations.

Session participants also thought the Company should actively seek out Homeowner Associations (HOAs) for economy of scale savings (e.g., replacing furnaces and roofs at same time). One participant noted their furnace needed replacing and that their HOA had 37 houses. If their unit needs replacing then there is a high likelihood other furnaces would need replacing. It was also noted coordination in neighborhoods without HOAs would also be helpful.

Priority Two: Help Customers Find the Right Measures

Several participants noted the majority of recommended contractors seemed more comfortable with keeping their house on gas and were not “pro-heat pump or electrification” and “[I] was talked out of heat pump to stay with oil.” Another participant said, “more help is needed to get contractors to be more willing to install heat pump systems into existing solar battery backup systems.”

Additional questions were raised regarding the alignment of heat pump trainings with recommended contractors and how the recommended contractor list was vetted. Other participants asked how the Company could coordinate better with OER’s heat pump program.

Priority Three: Enable Customers to Invest in Efficiency

One participant talked about how renters are not in a position to “finance” measures since the landlord owns the building. They said, “If income eligible, they [the renter] should receive no-cost measures” and that the priority should

be rewritten to include “expand incentive options” rather than just financing. Another participant said there should be a “focus on multifamily buildings for renters” while another talked about net metering for solar customers and giving them the “ability to fully size solar for future electrification and peak times.”

Other comments included the inclusion of pre-weatherization barrier remediation for zero interest loans and other rebates, a zero-interest loan for electric air source heat pumps (currently only accessible to oil and not gas customers), and offering a new energy efficiency rebate for induction stoves (in combination with an educational campaign regarding the technology’s efficiency and health benefits).

Priority Four: Serve Customers Equitably

Some participants suggested the Company offer incentives to community groups who are serving vulnerable populations and the need to benchmark energy efficiency program participation data for race, geography, socioeconomic status, language, age of home, age of owner, age of renter, heating fuel type, type and age of heating/hot water/cooling systems. A question asked was “how can we prioritize equity in the programs to make sure we prioritize underserved customers?”.

Another suggestion was to offer a finders fee (or a bill reduction) for referrals for customers with electric heat. One participant said it was important to remember the elderly as they are “less skilled at online stuff. Even the phone can be hard as hearing is diminished.”

Priority Five: Ensure Workforce Capacity to Serve Customers

Some participants suggested the Company collaborate with local diverse community organizations to train and certify potential workers including Progresso Latino, Hispanic chamber of commerce and Cape Verdean community development. Another suggestion was to partner with career offices at CCRI, and at other local colleges and universities to leverage and access younger adults with internship opportunities.

Final Questions or Comments

Several participants had final questions and comments about the 2024-2026 Plan:

1. What are the plans for addressing health and safety barriers to weatherizing homes (e.g., mold, mildew, asbestos, etc.)?
2. Since RI Energy profits from conversions to electricity, you might invest in promoting heat pump conversion from propane both in terms of rebates and in terms of popularizing more among installers. Free education and training.
3. Speak to Senior Centers for those not computer savvy.