

# Residential Contractor Listening Session

## NYSERDA's Residential Market Advisory Group Contractor Work Group Kickoff Meeting Summary

### Agenda and Meeting Objectives:

On April 15, 2020, the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERA) hosted a listening session for a subset of the Residential Market Advisory Group (RMAG), the Residential Contractor Working Group. This initial listening session included 22 contractor attendees representing 20 companies across the state. NYSEDA took the first step to convene an initial group in response to COVID-19 and the coordination needed to shape and lead a path forward for future RMAG activities. The listening session consisted of opening remarks, updates on NYSEDA's response to COVID-19 outbreak and NY PAUSE, a listening and ideation session, and closing remarks.

Overarching objectives for the listening session included:

- Share ideas about challenges and opportunities to support residential contractors during the New York Pause, and in the subsequent ramp up when field work resumes;
- Discuss short-term actions NYSEDA has identified following the DPS input session, and share feedback on priorities and challenges/opportunities in advancing potential short-term actions; and,
- Discuss planning and coordination for ongoing Residential Contractor Work Group activities.

### Opening Remarks:

Courtney Moriarta, Director of NYSEDA's Single Family Market-Rate Residential programs, provided opening remarks and reviewed the goals and objectives of the RMAG and the Residential Contractor Working Group. Courtney noted that given the current environment with COVID-19, there is an urgency to initiate the Working Group quickly in order to have a sounding board for possible solutions.

Courtney shared that a range of NY State agency and utility partners observed the working group discussion, including:

- Leadership from NYSEDA's Market Development Business Unit including Senior Vice President Janet Joseph and Director Emily Dean
- Management and staff from the following NYSEDA Teams:
  - Single Family Residential
  - Energy Affordability and Equity
  - Clean Heating & Cooling
  - Standards & Quality Assurance
- Representative from Department of Public Service
- Representatives from National Grid on behalf of the Joint Utilities

Janet Joseph, Vice President of NYSEDA's Market Development Business Unit, then provided additional opening remarks. Janet acknowledged the negative impact COVID-19 is causing businesses across New York State and emphasized NYSEDA's commitment to finding solutions for businesses to build back

during both the NY-PAUSE and Restart. NYSERDA is working on implementing short, mid, and long-term strategies to support all aspects of the recovery process. Janet noted that public health is the state's top priority and NYSERDA is working with other agencies and partner states to develop an action plan towards safely resuming field work. Janet concluded by noting the goal of the listening session is to hear feedback and prioritize most impactful actions as well as continuing to advance NYSERDA's clean energy goals.

## NYSERDA's Response to COVID-19 Outbreak and NY PAUSE

Courtney introduced actions NYSERDA is exploring advancing under NY PAUSE, including:

### 1. Enhanced subsidies for qualifying work

NYSERDA is assessing the potential for enhanced incentives and modified income thresholds for LMI programs including:

- Increasing project cost caps for EmPower
- Increasing incentive cost caps for Assisted Home Performance
- Increasing the Assisted Home Performance income qualification threshold

### 2. Expanded/enhanced loan options

The maximum loan amount of \$25k and cost-effectiveness guidelines are set by Green Jobs-Green New York statute. Enhancements being considered include:

- Alternative options for raising project caps
- Limited time access to 0% financing
- 3-month payment deferrals for new Smart Energy Loans
- Raising the 15% of project cost limit for health and safety related measures

### 3. Marketing and outreach assistance

NYSERDA is assessing options for increasing marketing efforts including:

- Availability of co-op marketing for industry partners
- Multi-channel outreach using social media, community-based partners, print, and media buys

### 4. Develop COVID19-safe work practices

NYSERDA considers the development of a COVID19-safe training program a near-term priority. NYSERDA is exploring working with industry partners and sister agencies to develop appropriate workplace safety protocols and trainings.

### 5. Develop effective methods for remote home energy assessments

NYSERDA is assessing options for developing and conducting remote assessments across all programs and sectors including:

- Crowd-sourcing solutions from contractors and vendors to enable a fast track to deployment and allow the market to choose tools and platforms that work
- Possible variations by program or project type
- Thoughtfully using remote audits as a tool to establish a customer pipeline during the Pause

## Major Feedback Topics:

The following is a summary of major feedback received during the listening and ideation session.

### Best Practice Protocols and Guidelines

Many participants noted that a set of workplace best practice guidelines and preapproved certified protocols could be established. By having COVID-19 specific best practices that have an authoritative “owner” (i.e. NYSERDA, or other state / federal partners), contractors would have the confidence needed to better engage with their clients and ensure they have a structured restart plan. It was recommended that any best practices incorporate healthy home elements to make it sustainable in the long term.

One participant noted that the goal for developing best practice protocols should be to reduce the chances of employees and clients transmitting COVID-19 virus to one another. It was suggested that this can be broken down into three physical focus areas:

- The location of the business,
- Workplace vehicles, and
- Client's homes or businesses.

There are also specific protocols that could be developed regarding how to sanitize each location, what protective gear is required, and what physical distancing measures need to be established. Another participant suggested best practices could include a checklist for how to enter homes safely.

NYSERDA acknowledged that developing COVID-19 safety protocols is a top priority.

### Professional Development Opportunities

Below are professional development opportunities participants suggested be accessible for contractors during the Pause:

- **Certifications:** NYSERDA could provide monetary aid for contractors to take additional certification courses.
- **Internship:** The New York State Clean Energy Internship Program is available for contractors to utilize during the PAUSE. More information on funding opportunities can be found here: [https://portal.nyserdera.ny.gov/CORE\\_Solicitation\\_Detail\\_Page?SolicitationId=a0rt000000MdhViAAJ](https://portal.nyserdera.ny.gov/CORE_Solicitation_Detail_Page?SolicitationId=a0rt000000MdhViAAJ).
- **Training:** NYSERDA could provide monetary aid for contractors to take outside training sessions. In addition, NYSERDA could provide virtual workforce trainings during the Pause.
- **Workshops:** NYSERDA could fund industry presenters to lead training and workforce development virtual workshops.

### Co-op Marketing

Participants engaged in an open discussion around co-op marketing experiences and opportunities during the NY PAUSE and restart. Some participants reflected that the best time to *develop* a co-op marketing approach is during the PAUSE, adding that it takes time to organize and plan for a co-op marketing campaign. The group emphasized the importance of timing, noting that a campaign may be best organized to be launched *after* the PAUSE, at some point along the restart process.

## **Financing Opportunities**

A participant suggested NYSERDA develop market-based incentives for homeowners. Many agreed that NYSERDA should expand loan options for contractors such as providing 0% financing and longer payment deferral periods. Others suggested virtual and remote audits are priorities to ease pressure on contractors. One participant inquired if the \$25k loan amount ceiling can be allowed for more than one project.

One participant noted that the loan process could be simpler and more readily available. Others shared support for streamlining and improving “ease of use” of loans as a priority over reduced interest rates. Participants explored potential tools to support loan activities, including:

- References on how to fund projects;
- Measures and criteria to get a loan;
- Narrative on why some projects need to be reevaluated every time; and
- Application table to get approval quickly.

NYSERDA noted that low interest financing has been a point of discussion with resident contractors and communities since before COVID-19 and will be a top priority during the PAUSE. Many expressed appreciation with NYSERDA’s efforts exploring increased funding options and assistance towards customer work, also adding that it is important to consider how to best equip and staff contractors to meet improved opportunities.

## **Navigating Unemployment and COVID-19 State and Federal Benefits**

One participant expressed confusion about unemployment and benefit information, noting that options like partial unemployment were difficult to understand, challenges with applying benefits to shared-work roles, and accessing payroll protection resources. NYSERDA was asked if NY could make this information more accessible and understandable for contractors. Regarding payroll protection money specifically, participants noted that these funds will be available at a time when contractors cannot conduct work, creating a potential challenge to re-energize the workforce.

## **Streamline and Fasttrack Processes**

Multiple attendees noted that for actions to be fast tracked, NYSERDA needs to work collaboratively with other agencies. For example, Heat Pump application and incentive process streamlining would require coordination with NY State partners. Participants encouraged NYSERDA to work with other agencies in communities that know the people/leaders that can rapidly spread information on the programs and safety initiatives, while staying connected to contractors so questions and concerns are addressed quickly. One participant raised a specific topic of concern about providing a path forward for engaging vulnerable residents such as Low- and Moderate-Income (LMI) and senior citizen populations. A first step could be to look at existing processes and understand how to model, reengineer, and combine those process with other resources. Another residential contractor added that COVID-19 “downtime” could present a good opportunity to develop and refine innovative business models, and invest in developing and calibrating an industry-wide vision.

NYSERDA shared interest in exploring many of these topics, also noting that some of these suggestions exceed existing statutory and regulatory constraints. It is important to continue exploring these pieces,

while prioritizing impactful actions that can be advanced quickly. Participants share unanimous support that timing is key, encouraging NYSERDA to be proactive with communications around action planning and implementation.

## Outcomes & Next Steps

- **Collecting Input:** NYSERDA to engage with the Contractor Working Group exploring pending survey results.
- **Planning:** NYSERDA to continue planning for NY PAUSE and Restart actions
- **RMAG and Work Group Coordination:** NYSERDA to organize next step for the Residential Markets Advisory Group (RMAG), and related Residential Contractor Working Group coordination.
- **Work Group Leadership:** Several people shared interest in helping organize and lead future work group conversations.
- **Work Group Organization:** Explore how to organize the Residential Contractor Working Group and meeting agendas around key distinguishing factors, such as:
  - Certification process;
  - Geography;
  - Industry vision;
  - Legislative ownership;
  - Unemployment protocols; and,
  - Workforce development / activation restart strategy.

## Closing Remarks

Janet thanked everyone for their participation, interest, and very helpful feedback.