

Community Success Story

Training Youth in Energy Efficient Construction at Westbank First Nation

Community Context

Westbank First Nation (WFN) is located in south-central British Columbia, in close proximity to the City of Kelowna, and is one of eight Okanagan Nation communities. Situated on 5,340 acres, there are 855 Members, the majority of whom reside on reserve along with 9,000 non-Member residents.

WFN has a young population, with 64% of its membership under the age of 40. As WFN carries on its path toward self-sufficiency, its youth continue to be the focal point towards creating a healthy, vibrant and robust community. A widely endorsed philosophy at WFN is that a community without youth is a community without a future. As WFN looks forward, there is the sense that the future of WFN is in good hands. Today's youth are more likely to finish high school, and many are going onto post-secondary education and meaningful careers. Despite this progress, youth at WFN still face multiple barriers to employment, so the opportunity to train, support and build capacity in energy efficient construction was something that Kevin Ned welcomed at Westbank First Nation. Kevin Ned noted that, "We want to encourage our youth to pursue careers rather than jobs. To be able to run a program which could simultaneously support career development and train local members to learn about sustainable building practices on-ation captured many of our values at Westbank First Nation."

Project Description

Now in its 10th year, the Residential Energy Efficiency Works (REnEW) Program was designed by FortisBC to be a community-based program that educates and trains participants in energy-efficient construction. Their target audience includes those who may have previously experienced barriers to employment. The REnEW program was a great example of true partnership work and was hosted by Okanagan Training and Development Council (OTDC) and WFN. The REnEW Program was delivered during the height of the COVID 19 pandemic, and their work within the community provided unique opportunities for students to thrive and succeed.

The participants were part of a demonstration project built with energy efficiency tenets. The students worked together to build a garden shed, teaching them about the scope of work necessary to complete a residential building project.



Photo credit: Westbank First Nation

Collaborators

- Westbank First Nation
- Okanagan Training Development Council (OTDC)
- FortisBC's Residential Energy Efficiency Works (REnEW) Program
- WIBCO Construction LTD

Funding Providers

- FortisBC

Project Leads

- Kevin Ned**
Employment & Training Facilitator,
Westbank First Nation
- Karen Abramsen**
Program Manager,
Okanagan Training and Development Council
- Katheleen Dixon**
Marketing Coordinator,
FortisBC



FIRST NATIONS HOME ENERGYSAVE IS SUPPORTED BY:



For more information about First Nations Home EnergySave visit: www.fnenergy.ca

Milestones

June 2020

Recruitment of a program coordinator and students began classroom learning.

September 2020

12 Indigenous construction students worked to build an energy-efficient shed on Westbank First Nation (WFN).

October 2020

10 out of 12 students graduated from the program.

January 2021 & Onwards

7 participants are now in full-time or part-time employment.

2 of the participants are enrolled in post-secondary programs that started in January. FortisBC offered a scholarship to both participants for demonstrating exceptional drive and interest in the program.

Photo credit: Westbank First Nation



Students gained exposure to a wide range of building practices, including constructing foundation, framing, insulation, and roofing. This 'hands-on' approach created a focused learning environment as students learned how and why something was done. Locally owned construction company WIBCO Construction also got involved by signing up to be the construction partner to mentor participants and lead the on-site construction project.

Running the program on-nation in the uncertainty of the pandemic took students out of their comfort zone. For this reason, it was integral to all project partners to help students feel comfortable and supported in their learning environment. Steps were taken to provide students the support they needed throughout the day—both in the classroom and out on the project site. Typically, the REnEW program includes two weeks of classroom instruction, followed by a two-week group building project in the community. An additional week was added so the students could earn their small machinery operator's licence alongside the eight other safety-related certificates they received, including WHMIS and First Aid.

After the project finished, the student-built energy-efficient garden shed would be donated to WFN. The shed would act as a valuable community building and a reminder to the students of the hard work and dedication they put into the project every time they passed by the building. For the students, this was just the start of their journey. After the project, students were supported for two weeks of work experience on a real construction site and continued to receive mentorship for up to three months as they searched for more job or educational opportunities. FortisBC has also partnered with OTDC to provide post-secondary scholarships for two graduates of the REnEW program.

If you are interested in accessing training for jobs in the growing field of energy-efficiency retrofitting via the REnEW program, please get in touch with Katheleen at katheleen.dixon@fortisbc.com

Lessons Learned

1. Getting community buy-in for the project at all stages of the project life cycle was vital. It was important to work closely with the Council, Elders and community members to make this a project by the community for the community.
2. Creating a hands-on/supportive learning environment was a significant factor in the success of this project. Providing a safe and nurturing first step back into a formal educational setting meant students were more comfortable engaging in the course and didn't just learn how, but questioned why things were done a certain way.
3. Putting time and resources aside for ongoing support and mentorship. The completion of the garden shed wasn't the end of the project. There was continual wrap-around support for the students, so they could continue developing through new careers or continued educational opportunities.
4. Delivering the training across the uncertainty of COVID-19 meant that all project partners were very flexible and patient with their delivery approach. Project partners went above and beyond to build collegiality, motivate participants and adapt training schedules, all while respecting socially distancing.
5. Providing the students with clear incentives for their hard work, including safety-related certificates, a course completion bonus and daily meals.

FIRST NATIONS HOME ENERGYSAVE IS SUPPORTED BY:



For more information
about First Nations Home
EnergySave visit: www.fnenergy.ca