

Municipal Engagement for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

The [Local Solutions and Community Action Team of the Vermont Governor's Economic Mitigation and Recovery Task Force](#) created the following tool as an aid to municipalities and local leaders who are looking to expand the vibrancy of their communities. The ideas and recommendations below come from Vermonters and in many cases have been implemented with success in communities throughout our state. The [Vermont League of Cities and Towns](#) has been working with the National League of Cities Racial Equity and Leadership program (REAL) to develop resources and engage in similar conversations in communities across Vermont.

Our hope is that this report will help more Vermont cities and towns to go further in their efforts to promote a welcoming and inclusive spirit in their communities.

The Importance of Inclusion

During this extraordinary time in our history, we are doing our best to stay healthy and safe and at the same time there has been enormous economic, emotional, and physical challenges for many of our friends, family, and neighbors. As is often the case, health disparities and economic struggles have hit groups who have been historically marginalized¹ the hardest, and many more who may have thought themselves immune are now struggling as we go deeper into economic recession. We recognize the need to be proactive in reaching out to *all* of our residents, finding out how they are being impacted, and working with them to recover and strengthen our communities for the future.

Civic and economic engagement of all people in Vermont will make our state a stronger, more resilient, and healthier place to live for us all. When our friends and neighbors are excluded from the workplace, have difficulty accessing services, or see their children unable to participate fully in educational opportunities, the sense of separateness is detrimental to us all and erodes our communities.

Our nation's landscape has become increasingly polarized. It is likely that people will face greater frustration and isolation as this pandemic continues. Such emotions are the breeding ground for radicalization, irrespective of which part of the political spectrum one occupies. This threatens the peace and security of us all. With municipalities facing instances of racism, violence, or hatred, we must focus on the positive in our communities and lean on tools to help ensure inclusivity and vibrancy. We must work proactively to honor and uphold the dignity of all citizens of Vermont.

What a Community Can Do

The following ideas are listed roughly in order from the easier to implement to harder or those that would require more energy and staffing. Not every idea will be appropriate for every community; they are listed as options that could be useful. There is no one tool that can accomplish all the goals discussed above, but any of these could be undertaken by any community.

There is privilege that comes from being a part of the dominant culture. Therefore, not taking any action benefits those in a dominant position. We are **all** called to act in some way to dismantle the status quo.

1. Host a community conversation on Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI).
 - Have an open forum for your community to discuss these topics using how-to toolkits like these:

¹ Access and privilege have not been justly distributed and there are people who have been denied resources, information, networks and power as a result of deliberate formal and informal practices and policy by dominant groups. *This document is iterative and will continue to be refined and improved. This version was **last updated 4/16/2021**.*

- Central VT has a “Showing Up for Racial Justice” [group on Facebook](#). This is a part of a larger network, and there are chapters in VT, [as shown here](#).
 - Policy Link has created a [Community Engagement and Participation Checklist](#) that could be a helpful tool for municipalities to address disparities for healthier places.
 - There are a lot of online tools to help municipalities, nonprofits, businesses and others such as [tools listed here](#).
2. Look at the language and imagery on the municipality’s website, public comments, signage, publications, applications, social media posts, and more to ensure a consistent tone of welcome and inclusion.
 - Imagine coming into your town for the first time. Would you like to see a website and signage that says ‘Welcome, we’ll help you get settled’, ‘Welcome, let us help keep you safe’, or would you rather see messages about ‘stay isolated for two weeks’?
 - Ask a newcomer to your community or someone outside your community to scan your websites and other public materials for welcoming and inclusive language and images.
 - Consider including an encouraging statement for diverse candidates when advertising for jobs and appointments.
 3. Draft and adopt a statement of inclusion. While a town can adopt a similar statement as another municipality, there often is value in starting from scratch and having the community discuss and debate what should be included and prioritized in their own local statement. Using others as a guide, this process has a way of inviting conversations about the town that may not otherwise be had. Examples of towns with existing statements include [Middlebury](#), [Moretown](#), [Brandon](#), [Pittsford](#), and [Waterbury](#). Placing this statement prominently on the town website and through other means will make clear the community’s intentions.
 4. Ensure your municipality has an ADA designee for accommodation inquiries and complaints. They will likely need regular training in the Americans with Disabilities Act. This person can help the municipality examine its website, meetings, communications, and events to ensure full accessibility by people with disabilities.
 - Engage the [Vermont Center for Independent Living](#) (VCIL) for resources for people with disabilities. They offer technical assistance to municipalities around community access to buildings, meetings, and more.
 - Offer sign language interpretation for public meetings. Some information can be found online at [Vermont Interpreter Referral Service](#).
 - Work with local people with disabilities to discuss emergency preparedness. Resources can be found online through [VCIL](#).
 5. Invite new people to engage in municipal meetings in new ways.
 - Check your town’s Front Porch Forum, or Facebook postings, and reach out to invite new groups to your public meetings who may not have historically participated. This could include religious organizations, local Chambers of Commerce, and MWBEs (Minority and Women-owned Business Enterprises).
 - Engage with people in the community who are already setting up mutual aid, protests, or other public events. Invite them to give an update at a Selectboard meeting.
 - Reach out to small churches that are not part of mainstream or inter-faith religious efforts.
 - Go beyond the basic requirements of Vermont law and ensure that public meetings are welcoming and encourage participation from people with different perspectives. To do this consider asking ALL speakers to only use acronyms after they have first explained the full term so that the meeting is easier to follow. Once people are encouraged to participate the meeting format itself must be structured in a way to welcome that participation.
 - Engage youth by reaching out to schools and giving young people advisory seats on commissions and boards, including the Selectboard, school board, planning commission, and more.

- Consider new ways to recruit volunteers for specific, deadline-oriented projects instead of a long-term committee appointment with unclear work plan and charge.
6. Consider ways to support economic development of Minority- and Women-owned Business Enterprises (MWBEs).
- Add an encouraging statement to your contracting notifications to invite new entrepreneurs that may not have done business with your community before.
 - Request the Economic Development Commission (if the municipality has one) or the regional Chamber of Commerce or other natural partner to gather a listing and information on MWBEs and ask them to reach out to these businesses and assess their needs.
 - Promote mentorship opportunities for businesses to help support each other.
7. There is a federal threshold of creating a municipal language access plan when one language group other than English is larger than 6%. While many communities may not currently be above that level, communities should consider creating a language access plan as a signal of being welcoming. The most spoken languages in Vermont beyond English are French, Nepali, Somali, Swahili, Burmese, Vietnamese, Arabic, Mandarin, and Spanish. Offering relevant public information and materials ensures all residents (and future residents considering moving to your area) have access to the information they need.
- Consider a triaged or tiered approach where public-facing materials focused on health and safety are regularly translated, and then additional materials can be translated as time and budget allows.
 - A language access plan is being developed by the State of Vermont and will be shared with municipalities once completed. The City of Burlington also is developing a plan through the [Community Development and Neighborhood Revitalization](#) committee. As this becomes final and public, it will be posted online.
 - While not directly applicable, the [Vermont Judiciary](#) has a language access plan that could serve as a guide for communities.
 - There are other Language Access Plan tools available online, such as through the [federal government](#) as well as the [Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services](#),
8. Evaluate Opportunity for Small-Scale Housing & Business in Local Zoning
- Do zoning rules significantly differ between rich and poor areas of your community?
 - How easy is it for a small business, micro-enterprise, or seasonal vendor (like a food truck) to set up shop in your town?
 - Do zoning districts served by water and sewer have excessive lot sizes that make housing more expensive?
 - To what extent does your zoning result in patterns of development that can support real transportation choices, like walking, biking, or riding the bus?
 - Are small-scale residential uses (like a four-plex) allowed on the same size lot as single-family dwelling.
9. Engage your community in the fair and impartial policing discussions. While following any guidance on fair and impartial policing practices, there are other ways to spark a dialogue between the community and law enforcement.
- Your local law enforcement can be invited to share their proactive work to advance fair and impartial policing. Selectboards that contract for law enforcement services can host a discussion at a Selectboard meeting.
 - Open letters, invitations to participate in rallies, early calendaring and discussions about public events are all vital to engage police and sheriff departments.
 - As taxpayers, community members can advocate for training and support for law enforcement to be more informed and be leaders in social justice discussions. As an example, community members can ask local police and sheriff departments to participate in the Vermont State Police training for law enforcement agencies seeking to implement policing reforms. When municipalities contract for law

enforcement services they can request information about policies and officer trainings and request specific contract provisions if needed.

- Community members can request local law enforcement share a public statement against the ongoing, unnecessary use of force and humiliation against people of color by police across the country, and in support of the inherent value of the lives of black and brown people in our state.

10. Look at existing commissions and boards with an eye for demographics.

- Planning commissions, historical review boards, Selectboards, development review boards, school boards. Across Vermont we know that many of these seats can be hard to fill. Take a look at your municipal boards, and then promote the open seats – and especially promote them in places where you can find a disproportionate number of people who have been historically marginalized. Additionally, reach out to local organizing organizations, indigenous groups, organizations that serve Vermonters in poverty, educational institutions, and so on. This can include proactively looking for young, racially and ethnically diverse, differently abled, and others who may not be currently represented throughout your community committees and leadership.
- One [tool to consider](#) could include asking existing commissioners and volunteers to self-identify their demographics, strengths, and connections and filling vacancies could be targeted to voices not already represented. This should be customized based on the commission being evaluated to look for unintentionally excluded populations. Examples can include:
 - Planning Commission: ensure there are both landowners and renters, as well as those who receive housing subsidies;
 - Library Commission: ensure there are both parents of young children and non-parents;
 - Recreation Advisory Commission: ensure there are people with mobility impairments; and
 - Housing Commission: ensure there are both owners and renters, as well as those who receive housing subsidies.
- Conduct a self-reflective exercise to identify next steps to make incremental progress
 - Conduct a self-assessment of your community's diversity and equity work, similar to [Brattleboro](#) with identified action steps for the Selectboard and town staff to achieve. Hartford also had each town department complete an assessment, [such as the parks and recreation department's](#) most recent submission.
 - Create an equity-based strategic plan like the [City of Burlington](#) and post updates and related actions on a municipal website.
- Create an opportunity for a youth advisory member on all municipal boards and commissions. Partner with the school district to develop a program that could include youth who serve in this role to mentor the next student named at the end of each school year.

11. Create a Diversity and Equity Commission and Support Schools in Curriculum.

- Some municipalities have created stand-alone commissions to lead the work of their community's diversity and equity work. The benefits of this approach is to have a dedicated group of volunteers working on this effort and holding the community and all commissions accountable to carry out the ongoing work. The drawback could be assuming that it's the Diversity and Equity Commission's sole responsibility to undertake this work.
- Examples of Vermont communities with Diversity and Equity Commissions are:
 - [Putney, Vermont](#)
 - [Hartford, Vermont](#)
- School districts have a resource with the [Vermont Coalition for Ethnic Studies and Social Equity](#), and legislation passed in 2019 to increase cultural awareness, eradicate racial bias, provide content and support welcoming curriculum. Many free resources for teachers are available on their website. The [Vermont Principals' Association's Equity Initiative](#) holds regular gatherings and hosts resources for schools. Supporting students, teachers, administrators of color with caucuses and holding safe spaces for conversations about race are some of the key elements that provide support for schools.

12. Break down data on the programs the municipality administers by race, disability status, and other demographics to better understand who is being served (or not).
 - The first step is to collect demographic information on the users of municipal programs and assess how many people from historically marginalized communities are participating in meetings, availing themselves of services, and engaged in leadership and volunteering roles. It is a best practice to have people self-identify their demographic characteristics.
 - Once information is collected, assess the success of each program in reaching historically marginalized communities and then respond accordingly. If a community is under-represented, engage with local leaders in that area to ask how to better engage individuals and reach people.

In Conclusion

In many ways Vermont is at a turning point and the journey is just beginning. Vermont communities, and all of us, are engaged in a deep process of learning, and an important point in appreciating each other and advancing step by step toward a more fair and just society. We hope that the tools in this short guide can be useful to Vermont communities—in all their diverse size and character—as we work together to strengthen local democracy and inclusivity in ways that benefit us all.

This is not easy or quick work, but it is worth the effort. All municipal leaders need to work through any doubt, resistance, or fear to make progress. While some community members may not be ready for change, it is desperately needed if Vermont is to thrive as a vibrant home to all.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the authors of this document for their work: [Maura Collins](#) (VT Housing Finance Agency), [Xusana Davis](#) (State of Vermont), [Josh Hanford](#) (VT Dept of Housing and Community Development), [Nick Richardson](#) (VT Land Trust), [Dr. Jude Smith Rachele](#) (Abundant Sun), and [Sarah Waring](#) (VT Community Foundation). Please send additional suggestions, edits, and ideas to any of us for consideration.