

Leadership Material:

Three ways philanthropy can help expand the leadership pool in Vermont

THE TAKEAWAY

Vermont needs more leaders and a more diverse pool of emerging leaders. Philanthropy can help. Here's how:

- Fund leadership development
- Fund efforts to create more civility in public life
- Fund youth organizations that help create next generation leaders



AS VOTERS REVIEWED TOWN MEETING DAY ballots around Vermont this year, there was plenty of blank space where there should be candidates' names. In some cases, a candidate was unopposed. In other cases, no one at all filed to run. It's true that there were some highly contested races around the state. But the abundant blank space is a reminder—**Vermont needs more people to seek leadership roles at all levels of government.** Furthermore, Vermont needs a more diverse pool of leaders, including more women, people of color, LGBTQ+ candidates, and others who are under-represented.

There are many reasons people don't run for elected office, or don't seek the appointed slots on commissions and boards that can be feeders for larger leadership posts. But let's start with why they should.

Energetic leadership builds democracy through informed debate, study of issues, brainstorming for a better way, and crafting the pathway to get there. Whether it's a small-town selectboard or a statewide office, participating in government can strengthen community and help people thrive.

The contribution that people can and do make is enormous, said Ted Brady, executive director of the Vermont League of Cities and Towns (VLCT), a statewide nonprofit based in Montpelier. "Local government—and local democracy in America—is one of the most well-coordinated and most successful volunteer efforts in the history of the world. In Vermont, it's thousands of people who are stepping forward to volunteer their time to do big jobs."

Xusana Davis, executive director of the Vermont State Office of Racial Equity, echoes the importance of leadership and the work needed to remove barriers. “The thing we always like to say is, representation matters.”

But there’s no question that government leadership is getting more complicated, from handling politically sensitive issues, to delving into multi-million-dollar budgets and environmental regulations. Even at the local level, you see fewer people wanting to take on this challenge, and that’s concerning, Brady said. “I don’t think we’re at a crisis moment or anything, but it’s hard for a working Vermonter to stop and say, ‘I’m going to spend four hours every week to talk about my town’s highway budget or talk about how to spend ARPA [American Rescue Plan Act] money.’ That’s a big ask.”



Another disincentive for some, understandably, is polarized politics and division that has sifted down from the national scene and contributed to rancor and disruption at public meetings, attacks on social media, and protest that is more about intimidation than championing an issue. This climate of incivility discourages some people from seeking leadership slots and causes some incumbents to step off boards when they still have contributions to make.

Philanthropy can help. Here’s how:

Fund leadership development

Donations to nonprofits that work on supporting new

leaders go a long way. Sometimes it’s about “tapping someone on the shoulder” and helping them see themselves as a leader, said Brady at VLCT, which has pulled many people into leadership seminars. Still, he said, “I think there needs to be a more concerted effort to invite people to do the jobs.” To help with this, the Vermont League of Cities and Towns has launched an action plan to break down barriers, broaden diversity, and work with municipalities to facilitate learning around equity, power, and privilege. The Vermont Community Foundation has supported this work with grant dollars.

Broadening the pool and overcoming bias about who can be a leader is important, Davis said. “I think that people are so accustomed to envisioning certain kinds of people when they hear the term leadership,” she said. Getting past that is just one of numerous challenges. Others, and action steps, are outlined in the Vermont Racial Equity Task Force 2021 report to the Vermont Legislature (included in the Deeper Reading section at the end of this brief).

Meanwhile, the numbers underscore the need for change. About 89 percent of the state’s population overall is white. But the population of Vermonters who do not identify as white is growing, and for government to be truly representative, this should be reflected in leadership positions. It is not.

A 2021 survey by the Center for Research on Vermont showed that leadership posts at the local level, both in elected and staff positions, are mostly occupied by people who are white, male, and older. The survey included 562 people in 137 towns who serve as town manager, town clerk, or selectboard members. Of these, 97 percent identified as white, 76 percent were over age 50, and about two-thirds of selectboard members were male, while three-quarters of town managers and administrators were male.

The Vermont State Legislature is also mostly white, male, and older. About 40 percent of people serving in the Vermont State Legislature identify as female and it’s taken many years to get to what still is not parity. And Vermont is the only state in the country that has never sent a woman to Congress.



Davis, meanwhile, points out that while a citizen legislature has benefits, it also has costs. The nominal pay and monthslong time commitment mean many qualified individuals can't afford to serve. "It comes at a great cost and that cost is, again, narrow representation," Davis said.

Kesha Ram Hinsdale, the first woman of color in the Vermont state Senate and a Democratic candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives, is the director of development at the nonprofit Bright Leadership Institute (BLI) in Burlington that formed in 2021, an offshoot of NAACP chapters in Vermont. It was created "with the goal of getting more people of color in office and leadership roles," Ram Hinsdale said. "We celebrate, too often, people running themselves into the ground to create change. With BLI, we're trying to really steer away from that model and give people the resources to succeed and create balance in their lives."

She added, "When I talk to young folks of color who want to run for office or enter the professional and business world, I think it's important to be very upfront that you will stand out. With that comes significant responsibility and it can be exhausting, so you have to lean on the BIPOC folks around you, and the networks of support that are set up. Funding is fundamental to these support networks and to change the narrative around who has the resources to run for office and win."

Leadership in the private sector and in staff positions at schools and government is important too. Often, people who lead in one sector become interested in leading in another. The nonprofit Richard A. and Barbara W. Snelling Center for Government in Williston works to foster civic leadership and encourage public service.

Some of the work is to help people who have tasted leadership enhance their skills and aspire to more. Jody Fried is director of the Vermont Leadership Institute at the Snelling Center, a professional development program. "Everybody comes to the program with a shared passion for making Vermont a better place," said Fried. Part of the work is to do a "really deep dive into self" that involves looking at participants' values, their

Representation matters.

biases, and understanding what they do and don't know about themselves, Fried added.

Fund efforts to create more civility in public life

Public service is not an invitation to be threatened and harassed. But there is no doubt this is happening. A 2021 report by the National League of Cities found that around the country, 81 percent of local officials had experienced harassment, threats, and violence. Many officials reported being targeted for race, gender, or political affiliation, among other factors. It's not surprising that these conditions lead to burnout and fear that reduces participation.

Philanthropy can help by funding work to heal divisions and educate the public on the importance of civil discourse. Nonprofits that are already doing leadership work are a good outlet for this effort, and so are leadership awards that recognize people who demonstrate the leadership Vermont needs to inspire. The Con Hogan Award, administered by the Vermont Community Foundation, is one example of an award that recognizes Vermonters who are leading for the public good.

Nonprofits such as the Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD) work to bring people together and build community, along with civility, as they solve local problems. When people come together to open a much-needed local childcare center or create more local housing for seniors, the work can bring out commonalities and reduce division as everyone roots for their hometown. "People really believe in each other," said Brian Lowe, executive director of VCRD. "You are willing to work hard for your neighbor, whatever your politics." The nonprofit also runs the Vermont Community Leadership Network, which helps leaders build civility with workshops on meeting management, civil dialogue, and fostering unity.



Fund youth leadership

Many adult leaders can look back and see that experiences in their youth helped them build knowledge, confidence, and interest in pursuing leadership roles as adults. Therefore, the more opportunity that young people have to test out leadership, the better.



Traditional forums such as school student councils and athletic team captainships are terrific, but there are many other ways to lead, too. Funders can help by supporting youth arts programs and extracurricular academic programs that allow young people to direct a play, lead an orchestra, or head up a young entrepreneurs' project.

Teen centers and councils also provide opportunity for young people to step up and lead, as do nonprofits that tap youths to help organize anti-racism efforts. Organizations such as Outright Vermont give young people leadership roles by helping run events and programming for LGBTQ+ youth. Many nonprofit youth organizations such as 4-H, operated by the University of Vermont Extension Service, build leadership development into their activities and encourage all participants to take part. These organizations often invite adults to help as volunteers, which is another opportunity to give.

Instilling leadership in the next generation is important, said Fried at the Snelling Center. Kids make decisions conceptually about themselves at a very young age and need to see that yes, they have leadership potential.

If society does not make that part of the conversation when people are young, then it will take a whole lot of time to convince adults "that they should be leaders, when there's a culture that's told them they shouldn't," Fried said. Leadership programs at colleges and universities also deserve support, he added. Philanthropy can help by funding new programs while recognizing existing programs and asking, "How can we expand those, how can we scale those up?"

Charitable individuals can also give to leadership development efforts directed at young adults in the early stages of their careers through programs like the Vermont Changemakers Table, which is led by the Vermont Businesses for Social Responsibility in partnership with the Community Foundation.

Deeper Reading

National League of Cities, "[On the Frontlines of Today's Cities: Trauma, Challenges and Solutions](#)"

[The Con Hogan Award for Creative, Entrepreneurial, Community Leadership](#), Vermont Community Foundation

[The Report of the Vermont Racial Equity Task Force](#)
[Vermont Town Leaders Survey and Report](#)

[Vermont Changemakers Table](#)

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