

A Dozen Reasons To Have Faith In Local Government

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VLCT Wraps Up the Second Cohort of Welcoming and Engaging Communities Program

Since I was a little boy, Sunday mornings have been synonymous with one of the most simple pleasures in life: a rectangular box containing a dozen donuts. Opening that box and finding a rainbow sprinkle donut stands as one of the happiest moments of my childhood, and it's one I try to continue for my boys.

But for the past six months, I've been filled with anticipation leading up to seeing a *different* dozen each month: the twelve municipalities that participated in the second cohort of VLCT's Welcoming and Engaging Communities program. Representatives from Barre City, Bradford, Brandon, the City of Essex Junction, Hartford, Milton, Morristown, Shelburne, Waterbury, and Winooski met seven times during the spring of 2024 to take part in an Ethical Performance Improvement Campaign (EPIC). Two of Vermont's Regional Planning Commissions also participated: the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission and the Lamoille County Planning Commission.

VLCT partnered with cultural transformation consultancy Abundant Sun to offer municipalities the "EPIC Journey," which begins with conducting the Inclusion and Belonging Survey to determine their organization's workplace culture and baseline level of inclusivity. The EPIC Journey is a strategic methodology based on data and science aimed at catalyzing organizations to build better cultures from within. It involved seven two-hour sessions providing foundational education about why focusing on cultural transformation is important, how to do it, and practical work toward implementation. Nearly 1,000 municipal officials have participated in the survey since VLCT offered the first Welcoming and Engaging Communities cohort in 2022.

Who doesn't want to live in a community filled with trust, civility, and manageable expectations?

This program was not "equity training." Yes, there were some PowerPoint slides that touched on the fundamental facts about diversity, equity, and inclusion, but most of the time was spent talking to each other about how to make municipal government more responsive, more effective, and more inclusive.

To put the theoretical into practice, each municipality identified a "wicked problem" to work on during the program. **Four key needs emerged: to build trust, to increase civility, to improve community engagement, and to avoid burnout.** At first I was surprised these "Big 4" themes emerged so clearly and quickly in our sessions – but I came to understand that people don't feel included in communities ripe with distrust and incapable of basic dialogue. And it makes perfect sense that the result is people feeling overwhelmed, giving up, and disengaging – all classic signs of burnout.

I find that few people are truly comfortable talking about race, gender, sexual orientation, and identity issues (myself included). Few Vermonters run for the selectboard or become a town clerk to focus on these issues. They want their roads maintained, are concerned about growth (whether too much or too little), or are simply compelled by civic duty. But I do think many people get involved because they see imperfections in municipal institutions' ability to make people feel included in decisions that affect everything from land use and policing to transportation. Discrimination and injustice are ultimately rooted in power structures that fail to value the inclusion of varied perspectives in decision-making processes. These fundamental flaws in systems don't always need to be about race, economic status, or sex, but they often are.

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Interestingly, once a selectboard member, city councilor, or alderman wins their election and begins governing, it's rare that they have time to get deep into improving civic engagement. Disasters come and go, concerns over short-term rentals pop up, dump trucks need to be bought, and day-to-day pressures fill agendas. This year's Welcoming and Engaging Communities cohort offered the three dozen or so people who participated an opportunity to

focus on *how* they govern – specifically, how they build cultures of inclusion – by giving them several hours, once or twice a month, to engage in peer-to-peer learning. That’s one of VLCT’s fundamental purposes – connecting you with others in similar roles to facilitate sharing. This seems especially important given how polarizing the use of the words equity or diversity can be in a community. Our EPIC Journey taught me it doesn’t have to be. Like eliminating curb cuts to facilitate wheelchairs, improving the inclusivity of local government benefits everyone and can be much more simple than dismantling systemic racism. Who doesn’t want to live in a community filled with trust, civility, and manageable expectations?

At the end of this second round of the Welcoming and Engaging Communities program, VLCT surveyed the participants to ask if it was worth their time and their community’s resources – and whether we should continue offering it. Nineteen of the 37 participants responded, and 90 percent of respondents said yes. So, VLCT is beginning the work to plan how best to deliver this program to more Vermont communities. We’re currently in discussions with Abundant Sun about how to do exactly that.

Until then. I’ll have to go back to anticipating my donuts. Ever since my dad passed the torch to me and I started buying them, it’s a little anticlimactic.

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