

Eight Vermont Communities Are Diving Into Equity Work With VLCT

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Editor's note: This article was originally published in January of 2023. As of September 25, 2023, the Vermont Declaration of Inclusion had been adopted by 125 communities.

Vermont selectboard members and city councilors are talking a lot about equity. A look through agendas, minutes, and recordings on town websites shows citizens demanding action – from flying the Black Lives Matter flag, to police reform, to updating the pronouns in town documents so they'll be gender neutral. As a result, local officials have taken action, forming equity committees, passing resolutions addressing equity (like the 87 that have passed the Declaration of Inclusion), and hiring equity consultants to provide training to boards and staff. Yet making the resulting new insights operational has proven difficult.

Since October of 2022, local officials from Brandon, Hartford, Hinesburg, Jericho, Middlebury, Putney, Richmond, and Williston have been discussing how they can make Town Hall more welcoming for the employees and volunteers who work there and for the citizens who depend on them. The VLCT Welcoming and Engaging Communities Cohort is a partnership with Vermont cultural transformation consultancy Abundant Sun to allow municipal leaders to participate in the firm's Ethical Performance Improvement Campaign (E.P.I.C.). The E.P.I.C. Journey is a strategic methodology based on data and science aimed at catalyzing organizations to build better cultures from within. The program has been offered free of charge to VLCT members who applied last summer.

At the core of the effort is the belief that before a community can turn outward and address systemic inequities, it must first look inward and evaluate and improve workplace culture. The eight communities surveyed 519 local officials using Abundant Sun's Inclusion and Belonging Survey – a tool that evaluates the engagement of an organization's employees. The survey scores communities based on six criteria: supervisor relationships, coworker relationships,

respect, culture, organizational commitment to diversity and inclusion, and organizational advocacy. One of the key takeaways of the survey: our municipalities' workforces and volunteer cadres are on par with other non-profit and private sector organizations when it comes to the challenges and opportunities of inclusion and belonging.

The survey results generate an inclusion and belonging score from zero to 100, with a low score indicating hostility and higher scores elevating through evasion, neutrality, and acceptance to the culmination: inclusion. The Welcoming and Engaging Communities Cohort composite score was 77, firmly in the second tier "acceptance" range and similar to the median score of other Abundant Sun clients of 77.1. A deep dive into the data shows that municipalities have lots of promoters of inclusivity, but also struggle with a fair number of detractors that either don't feel welcome or don't appreciate the community's culture.

VLCT's hope is that by combining training from Abundant Sun, the data from the Inclusion and Belonging Survey, and the practical experience that each of the eight communities brings to the table, we will spark actionable ideas to promote inclusivity. During the most recent meeting of the cohort, several communities shared how the program was helping to advance equity work in their towns.

The Middlebury Diversity Equity and Inclusion Workgroup recently hired a consultant to complete a [resident survey](#) that evaluated the experience of living, working, learning, and visiting the Town of Middlebury. Richmond and Hinesburg are considering the creation of formal equity committees. Putney is in the midst of a community visit process with the Vermont Council on Rural Development that has engaged 300 residents in a community visioning process. Hartford and Williston have contracted with Abundant Sun to provide equity training to their local officials. And several cohort members are actively using the [VLCT Municipal Equity Toolkit](#) to advance their equity work.

The Welcoming and Engaging Communities Program is just one piece of a larger effort to help municipalities undertake this work. The Vermont Office of Racial Equity's [IDEAL Vermont](#) program offers municipalities a chance to work with the state and other municipalities to make Vermont more inclusive and equitable for current and future residents. VLCT encourages municipalities to consider applying to the Vermont Community Foundation's [Equitable and Inclusive Communities Grant](#) program, which offers communities up to \$10,000 to undertake equity work and help close the [opportunity gap](#). VLCT is also a listed partner of the [Vermont Declaration of Inclusion](#), an initiative that has successfully worked with 87 communities to

adopt statements committing to inclusivity.

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