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USDN | urban sustainability
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USDN Impact Evaluation Report

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USDN Impact Evaluation Report

Executive Summary

Introduction

This report presents the findings and recommendations of an impact evaluation of the Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN). The evaluation was commissioned by USDN and conducted by Ross Strategic and Ullman Consulting from April 2020 to February 2021. It analyzed the effectiveness of a selection of USDN's programs and network of local governments supporting greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction, equity, and resilience efforts in the US and Canada. Data gathering and analysis focused on specific sets of USDN programs and activities; generally emphasizing those with the most longevity and/or widespread implementation. This evaluation is not an assessment of all USDN programs and network support activities due to limitations of time, funding, and scope; however, the themes presented here likely pertain to other areas that were given less time and depth.

The evaluation methodology included review of key documents and existing data sets as well as focus groups and one-on-one structured interviews with over 50 individuals. Interview and focus group contacts represented a broad range of perspectives, including USDN participants, external partners, funders, and staff. As USDN undertakes planning for the future, this evaluation offers insights into how USDN can best continue to support its members to take action in local sustainability. USDN defines "sustainability" to include work in racial equity, resilience, and GHG mitigation. This report synthesizes evidence from interviews, focus groups, surveys, and research into a set of thematic findings and recommendations for consideration by USDN.

Chapter 2 of this report describes the role that local governments have had and will continue to have in effecting change. The findings are then summarized into a set of six themes with nested subthemes and presented along with supporting evidence. The report concludes with findings in response to the question: What would the world look like if USDN did not exist?

The case for focusing on cities and counties

Chapter 2 briefly presents the case for addressing system change through cities and counties. Local governments play a critical role in advancing sustainability—especially the large-scale systemic changes required to meet ambitious goals to avert climate catastrophe, overcome long-standing inequities, and create broadly-shared opportunities for improved quality of life. They are not alone—state and national governments also play a critical role—but it can't be done without local governments. The local level is where policy comes to life. The key strengths of local government highlighted in the report apply to local sustainability broadly:

- **Leverage on-the-ground knowledge and experience**, enabling local governments to develop solutions that fit their communities' unique context and that are responsive to local equity issues.
- **Foster policy innovation and experimentation**, engaging a large and diverse range of local governments (often referred to as the "laboratory of democracy") to develop effective solutions that can diffuse to other local governments and up to state and federal levels.
- **Foster a race to the top** as local governments seek to maintain competitive advantage and attract jobs, businesses, and residents drawn to innovative, cutting edge locales.
- **Drive deeper emissions reductions**, extending what can be accomplished by federal and state policy alone and tap into areas where local governments often have primacy, such as code enforcement, land-use planning, zoning, waste management, procurement, and others.
- **Promote state and federal action**, by advocating with a collective voice as well as creating the space for change by showing what is possible.

This chapter presents the case that sustainability directors and departments are key change agents driving municipal impact, and that USDN is their key support organization. Sustainability directors and departments are often the change agents driving local sustainability action through partnerships and locally designed solutions. **Observers in the field note USDN's deep understanding of the role of local governments, its focus on the nuances of implementation, its ability to understand (and even anticipate) the needs of its local sustainability network, and its ability stay at the leading edge of practice.**

Thematic findings

The insights and reflections that the evaluation team gathered are described in Chapter 3. The six themes from interviews, focus groups, and data analysis are as follows (*click on the links below to navigate to each theme in Chapter 3*):

1. [USDN members are achieving impact](#)
2. [USDN is a key contributor to member impact](#)
3. [USDN's success is enabled by its network foundation](#)
4. [USDN directly enables equity-centered action in local communities](#)
5. [USDN is a driving force of innovation in the field](#)
6. [USDN helps members progress along a ladder from idea to impact](#)

These themes are summarized below (*click on the theme titles to navigate to the full discussion in the report*).

Theme 1: USDN members are achieving impact

USDN members are driving demonstrable, real-world impacts in their communities and the broader field of local government sustainability, climate, and equity issues. USDN members are leaders among communities taking significant action on GHG mitigation, equity, and resilience. USDN members outpace non-USDN communities in taking action on GHG mitigation and energy.

Examples of this theme observed from interviews and data analysis include:

- USDN members are leading in clean energy, equity, resilience, and adaptation. Core members represent all **American Cities Climate Challenge** cities selected by Bloomberg Philanthropies to receive funding and technical support to deepen and accelerate efforts to tackle climate change and promote sustainability. USDN core members represent 19 out of 20 cities and counties in the **City Energy Project** to transform markets for building energy efficiency. In resilience and adaptation, Northampton, MA (along with over 30 other USDN members) has advanced a community and Resilience Hub with a focus on frontline communities and those impacted by COVID-19.
- In CDP’s annual assessment of global cities, **USDN member cities reported 741 concrete GHG mitigation actions in comparison to the 226 of non-member cities.**¹
- **USDN members achieved a greater level of energy savings and renewable energy generation than non-USDN local governments** as demonstrated by a deeper dive into data on energy savings and renewable energy production reported by 197 North American local governments to CDP. For USDN members, these reported actions eliminated over 14 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent (62% of all energy-related emissions reductions from local governments in North America that reported to CDP).² This is roughly comparable to eliminating annual emissions from 3.6 average sized coal-fired power plants.³

Theme 2: USDN is a key contributor to member impact

Many members specifically connect the dots between USDN activities and concrete actions, and these insights are supported by survey and other data. **USDN's contribution is supported by an approach that anticipates communities' unique needs and offers peer learning and technical assistance that meets those needs.**

Sustainability directors and staff work in a unique environment that is interdisciplinary, interdepartmental, and interwoven with human health, environmental resilience, and economic stability. They have a particular set of needs, challenges, and constraints. USDN has tuned its tools, resources, and approach to solutions in this context, drawing on its deep understanding of local government. USDN prioritizes capacity building over any individual technical discipline and is fit for purpose to drive the rapidly evolving sustainability field. Key characteristics of sustainability work and how USDN addresses them are outlined in the table below (this table can also be found in chapter 3).

Characteristics of Local Government Sustainability Work	USDN’s Support for Specific Needs
Broad and cross-sectional portfolio of work can make it difficult to get deep into specialized areas of knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Topical breadth covering a range of issues supported by many offerings of peer groups, training, and resources
Generalists need to quickly get up to speed on a broad range of topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "Right-sized" information to provide core knowledge for members to move forward with confidence

¹ USDN, "A Summary of Climate Mitigation Actions Reported by USDN Members" (internal document on file)
² Ibid
³ EPA, Greenhouse gas equivalencies calculator, <https://www.epa.gov/energy/greenhouse-gas-equivalencies-calculator>

Local sustainability demands entrepreneurial spirit but is often understaffed and low on capacity. Teams need to be “scrappy” and get a lot done with very little; they borrow everything they can	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connection to a wealth of resources to help make work more efficient • Access to a large network of peers with models, tools, templates, and experience • Rapid capacity-building, especially for new staff
Local governments often have limited political will for high-risk sustainability efforts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to tap the credibility and experience of the USDN member network to de-risk solutions • Ability to bring colleagues and leaders into the network to build confidence
Sustainability teams face “David vs. Goliath” challenges of solving an intimidating suite of problems in the face of often intractable governments and opposing stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship-building and psychological/emotional support through human connections to others going through the same experience • Creating community helps people stay in the work
Local sustainability is rooted in people and places, requiring community engagement and connection between local government and its residents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program offerings focusing on equity, community engagement, and communications and outreach best practices

USDN offers topical breadth and interconnectedness and strikes the right balance of “just enough” information. It is designed to support entrepreneurial members, builds credibility, and de-risks political decisions. The network’s peer support helps sustain members and connect people and place. USDN also excels at understanding and anticipating the needs of its members and local sustainability work generally. USDN fills a unique and valuable niche among organizations in the field of supporting local sustainability.

Some examples of USDN’s contribution to member impact are as follows:

- **Renewable energy procurement:** The cohort and training on on-site procurement of renewable energy (a component of the Renewable Energy Procurement Learning Group) allowed Anchorage, AK to conduct site assessments of 17 buildings for solar installations and issue a \$2 million bond for projects.
- **Community collaboration:** Eugene, OR credited USDN as the motivation to expand community collaboration and center equity in climate action plan development using an approach inspired by USDN partners Providence, Portland, and Seattle.
- **Support for entrepreneurial members:** Through USDN's workshop on Building Performance Standards, a representative from Berkeley, CA had an "a-ha" moment that Cambridge, MA's approach to metrics for measuring building energy use would work well in Berkeley.
- **Building credibility and de-risking political decisions:** A contact from Missoula County, MT said the renewable energy boot camp on off-site renewables was "game changing" because it brought along elected leaders, building support for the county's adoption of a 100% clean commitment. The same contact noted the value of bringing the county's new facility director to a workshop on municipal energy as a foundation for future efforts on building decarbonization.
- **Filling a valuable niche among similar organizations:** A contact from a partner organization contrasted USDN's pragmatic approach with other organizations that start with a big and bold idea developed in isolation and then look to "sell" it to local governments who often look at it and say they could never implement it.

Several quotes from key contact interviews and focus groups illuminate the support members gain from the USDN community:

- “We are fighting a fight that is premised on the continued existence of humanity. Having to face that every day—the emotional toll of knowing that if you don't do your job there are significant ramifications—that creates a unique space for the camaraderie that develops.”
- “Everything I have been involved in with USDN is helpful at least in the fact that knowing you are not alone. There is always a sense of community.”
- “I think that a lot of it is...having the support and place to know that someone is walking through exactly what you are walking through. There are pieces that are really hard for people in our role where there's a lot of misunderstanding and mistrust. To have a place where you can go and feel understood and challenged is central.”
- “It was really hard to talk about equity and sustainability...then being told equity wasn't valued. If I didn't have the USDN People of Color support group, I probably would have pivoted to another form of work. I lean on other people of color at USDN, which helps me feel that I'm not crazy.”
- “The conversations that I have had with members, those are really, really deep and meaningful conversations that bring me so much fulfillment and alleviates the tricky parts. Those outweigh a lot of the hard parts of this job.”
- “USDN is critically important to local sustainability in the public sector. It is not so much about the content; it is about the community.”
- “There is huge burn-out in the field. I looked at other jobs this past year. I was questioning if I wanted to be in this role. A big motivator was knowing that I had USDN.”

Theme 3: USDN's success is enabled by its network foundation

USDN links members to an effective network of peer relationships that forms a foundation for concrete, value-added transactions, which significantly benefit members. This foundation fosters strong social interactions that transmit information and enable behavior change. We observed from interviews and datasets that the more members are involved in USDN activities, the more they are committed to contributing back to the network. At the same time, there can be a tension between maintaining close-knit connectivity and an openness to new members; we also heard that the barrier to entry can be high for outsiders, which may be an obstacle to expanding successful partnerships.

Examples of this theme in action include:

- Evanston, IL organized a bike share group that did not use a dock system. Through the Michigan Green Communities Network, Dearborn, MI was able to find this city's model with the “same DNA” and implemented a similar program.
- When developing bike lanes, staff in Blacksburg, VA consulted with other USDN members to select the best bollards to delineate the lanes. With limited budget, a contact in Blacksburg said it would have been a “fatal mistake” to pick the wrong solution.
- Sedona, AZ received help from Portland, ME with a virtual open house for a climate action plan. Sedona proceeded to turn around and help Ferndale, MI with the same project. The peer support resulted in a complete shift in approach around the virtual open house.
- A contact in Portland, OR explained that, as a city that focused on equity work earlier on, they have appreciated both being able to share their processes with other USDN members and see the equity

values and actions affirmed by other cities. They said that affirmation from other communities is “extremely important” and helps confirm a sense that “we are in it with other cities.”

Theme 4: USDN directly enables equity-centered action in local communities

USDN has a unique role in helping sustainability professionals in local government tackle a key challenge in a larger struggle: how can communities achieve ambitious GHG mitigation goals while also meaningfully reducing disparities? Integrating equity in sustainability is an established priority for USDN. USDN helps its members explore that challenge and figure out solutions. USDN propels an equity-centered culture among its members and prepares local sustainability leaders with the skills and knowledge to apply equity principles in local communities. We observed that local sustainability leaders take equity-centered action as a result of what they have learned through USDN. USDN has built and fortified a pipeline for equity-focused staff and Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) leaders in local sustainability. Members ranked equity as the top area where USDN contributed to their success in comparison to 14 other topic areas such as decarbonization, mobilization, renewable energy, etc.⁴ In the 2020 Member Impact survey, 80% of members indicated equity and community engagement as the highest priority areas of their work, surpassing GHG reduction for the first time.

We heard many examples of members attributing their progress in equity-centered work to their involvement with USDN, including the following:

- We heard contacts express that USDN has pushed the network toward equity, establishing it as a “social norm”—one contact in Fort Collins, CO summed it up as, “You aren’t keeping up if you aren’t doing [equity].”
- One member said that, inspired by the work done with USDN, they now focus on people-centered processes and building relationships to understand what people want before figuring out how sustainability plays into their needs. They said, “We now build long-term relationships instead of month-long advisory groups.”
- Participants in the Richmond Peer Learning Exchange on equity (explored in more detail later in this report) shared that the Exchange was crucial for their work on equity. One contact said, “What we learned in the Exchange became the north star for our work on climate equity.”
- A contact in Anchorage, AK shared that USDN has made it clear that putting equity front and center in sustainability work is critical, and that it needs to be incorporated right from the start.
- A contact in Washington, DC described that USDN’s grant funding from the Innovation Fund and Partners for Places has been instrumental in bringing their equity work “to the next level” as they built relationships with community partners.
- One member in Saanich, BC shared they adopted the USDN equity principles in their climate action plan. This laid the groundwork for their community engagement, which included surveying bus riders on their priorities, engaging youth, and hiring a translator to reach out to Chinese community members.

Theme 5: USDN is a driving force of innovation in the field

Members and external partners view USDN as a generative engine of new ideas in sustainability, including in racial equity and community collaboration. USDN communities often lead the field in taking action—as

⁴ USDN, Impact Survey 2020.

innovators to blaze the path and as early adopters creating momentum. USDN's collaborative relationship with members drives the innovation of new and creative ideas. USDN seeks to fully serve the needs of these innovative leaders and also the middle and more novice members; a broad audience that presents unique challenges but also opportunities to amplify impact.

Examples of USDN driving innovation in the field include:

- **Early leadership on renewable energy:** Through its "Ready for 100" initiative, the Sierra Club advocates for cities to make commitments to using 100% renewable energy and tracks cities that have made such commitments. Starting with a small group that made such commitments prior to 2013, the number of cities has taken off. USDN core members were half of the initial innovators and comprised a significant early component of a surge of commitments that began in 2017 and broadened out to many more local governments (USDN members and non-USDN partners alike) over the period 2017–2019.⁵
- **Early leadership in large-scale renewable procurement:** The Local Government Renewables Tracker, supported through the American Cities Climate Challenge, shows data on renewable energy procurement actions by cities and counties.⁶ Nearly 70% of local governments that have made large procurements over 100 MW are USDN members.
- **USDN's collaborative relationship with members drives innovation:** The evolution of building energy benchmarking and performance standards in the US can trace part of its roots to early USDN investments in a member-generated project. This laid the groundwork for policies that required larger building owners to disclose energy use. USDN went on to incubate and support the sharing and spread of those policies through peer learning groups, which were supported by a partnership with the Institute for Market Transformation (IMT) and City Energy Project (CEP).

Theme 6: USDN helps members progress along a ladder from idea to impact

USDN utilizes a ladder of engagement for members to move rapidly from inspiration to education to local action that leads to impact. Members show up at different stages of the ladder for different topics. Regardless of where they start, USDN provides the programs and support needed for members to grow and receive what they need at the right time. USDN helps members germinate and grow ideas. It helps members transform inspiration into deep learning and expertise. It supports members in turning ideas into action.

Some examples of USDN helping members progress along the ladder are:

- A member in Leon County, FL commented on the strong contribution that USDN has made to supporting local government sustainability progress at a pace that would not have been possible without the "collective learning, sharing, funding, assistance, and heart that USDN provides."
- A member in Knoxville, TN rooted USDN's greatest contribution in the facilitation of idea exchange. Whether it be a vehicle to develop ideas or physical in-person exchange, USDN has accelerated the ability of sustainability professionals to implement goals more efficiently.
- A contact in Fort Collins, CO shared how USDN orients new members to what they need to do on equity and provides access to resources to start doing the work quicker, saying "It is a huge accelerant."

⁵ Sierra Club "Ready for 100" data; USDN membership data

⁶ American Cities Climate Challenge, Local Government Renewables Tracker: <https://cityrenewables.org/local-government-renewables-action-tracker/>

- A contact in Tempe, AZ shared the numerous ideas that came from USDN that the city has adopted. These included decision-making structures, COVID emergency funding focused on low income and small businesses, energy and transportation solutions, and funding focused on energy justice issues.
- A contact in Asheville, NC commented how USDN is always their first stop in the energy space, saying “when an idea is percolating, USDN is the place that I go to see who has done it.”
- Several members in renewable energy focus groups shared how USDN (and partners World Resources Institute and Rocky Mountain Institute) provided vital contributions by helping their teams acquire in-depth knowledge of power purchase agreements (PPAs) and learn how to create renewable energy project RFPs through opportunities like the Renewable Energy Late-Stage Implementation Jam Session, which resulted in the development of an RFP template.

Case examples

Case examples showcasing stories of impact are distributed throughout Chapter 3 and serve to illustrate the themes. The following case examples are included (*click on the links below to navigate to each case example*):

- **Providence, RI: Novice to national leader** shows how one city used equity training from USDN to implement racial equity programming in its community and become a model for other members across the US and Canada.
- **Mobilizing members for better building codes** shows how USDN helped members come together to improve building energy codes across the US and Canada by leveraging their collective influence.
- **Peer Learning Exchange: Accelerating equity from commitment to action** illustrates how a cohort of members participated in an intensive training together that propelled them to center racial equity in their work.
- **Missoula, MT: Partnering with utilities – a path to 100% RE** describes how one city utilized a USDN “renewable energy procurement boot camp” training, as well as a peer cohort and learning group, to establish a partnership with its local utility to work toward a 100% clean energy goal.
- **Anchorage, Asheville, Honolulu, and Sedona: Starting at a sprint** illustrates how sustainability directors in four member communities were able to climb the learning curve very quickly and begin taking action in their communities, using help from the USDN peer network.
- **Alameda County, CA: Preparedness is a state of being** shows how one county utilized grant funding and coaching from USDN to create a cross-agency effort to engage with its community to communicate with frontline populations during poor air quality and wildfire events.
- **Minneapolis, MN: Resilience planning to support indigenous communities** shows how USDN’s annual meeting introduced one city to resilience hubs, allowing it to successfully center equity and community buy-in in its resilience planning, bringing in community members to be decision-makers.

Conclusion

The report concludes with a discussion of the question: what would the world be like without USDN? We posed this question to key contacts and explored datasets using that inquiry as a lens. It was clear that the landscape and impact of local sustainability would be very different without USDN. One contact described their thoughts bluntly and broadly: **“Having been involved since the very beginning, I feel like [without USDN], everything would be different.”**

- **USDN is keeping people working in the local sustainability field.** Contacts described the support that they receive from USDN as critical to keeping them in this line of work. Some USDN members who are people of color specifically referenced the support they receive through USDN’s People of Color Support Initiative, and the organization’s equity work more broadly, as having been essential to their decision to stay working in local government sustainability.
- **Key local impacts would not have happened at all without USDN.** One member said that their electric vehicles work “flat out would not have succeeded” without USDN. Another member said that their city would not have a climate action plan at all without USDN. Some contacts opined that the field of urban sustainability would not have evolved as quickly as it did without USDN. Others said that there would overall be fewer people experimenting and sharing knowledge between communities. One member said, “our program would not be where it is now if we had not had that support [from USDN] early on to grow and build the way we did.”
- **Some activities might have still happened, but they would have been much more difficult and taken much longer.** The 2020 Impact Survey asked members what would be different if USDN didn’t exist. The most prominent theme in their responses was that they would have to do much more work and constantly “reinvent the wheel” instead of building on the support network they currently enjoy. Many indicated that their impact would be hampered by lack of high quality and diverse information. USDN is an enabling platform for local government sustainability work. Without USDN, there would be fewer person-to-person relationships, less structure to connect sustainability directors with peers in other cities, and more work required to get anything done.
- **Without USDN, local government staff across North America would not be nearly as informed and engaged on equity issues.** We heard from members that USDN has been a key factor in shifting their focus to center equity in their sustainability work. One said, “I spend more time on equity now than on environmental work; that wouldn’t have happened on its own.” USDN has provided people with their first foundational knowledge of equity and helped them build on it to implement it in everything they do.

Without USDN, there would be less impact from local governments. Their work in sustainability would be slower, less efficient, more prone to mistakes, less holistic, and less equitable. There would be much less support for the field of local government sustainability, higher turnover in the field, and possibly fewer people working in it overall. Reflection on the data gathered over the course of this evaluation offers a clear indication: without USDN, the world would be a more challenging—and less equitable—place for local government sustainability work.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Purpose

This report provides a set of findings and recommendations from an impact evaluation of the Urban Sustainability Director's Network (USDN) to inform its future direction and growth with lessons from the past and insight from members. Since its establishment, USDN has pursued a broad spectrum of programs and projects to accelerate local government work to develop, adopt, and share practices that create equitable and prosperous communities and a healthy environment. As USDN undertakes planning for the future, this impact evaluation offers insights about the focus and breadth of USDN work across sectors, and the future goals and operations of USDN.

The impact evaluation provides a general analysis of the effectiveness of USDN's programs and impact supporting local government greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction, equity, and resilience efforts in the US and Canada. The purpose of the impact evaluation is to draw on interviews, focus groups, and existing data sets to critically assess the effectiveness and impact of USDN's work over the last several years.

Methods

To qualitatively and quantitatively analyze the effectiveness of USDN's programs and activities supporting local government, the evaluation team's insights into programmatic impact are largely based on interviews and focus groups with USDN members, external partners, and staff. These are complemented by 2020 USDN Impact Survey data and external stakeholder insight.

The primary source of information for this evaluation was a set of interviews and focus groups with over 50 individuals, conducted between April 2020 and January 2021. Interviews focused on informing a set of evaluation questions developed in collaboration with USDN at the outset of this evaluation. Interviews included members of the USDN network—current USDN staff, coaching partners, funders, county and city staff and members—as well as a set of contacts with broader, outside perspectives on USDN, including federal, academic, and private partners. All interviewees are listed in Attachment B. Our data gathering was primarily focused on areas of work suggested by USDN: renewable energy, building performance standards and electrification, community collaboration, and equity; as well as a lighter touch on resilience. Interviews focused on informing a set of evaluation questions, which at a high level addressed:

- The extent to which USDN is living up to its mission to connect and support local government practitioners to accelerate equity-centered sustainability action.
- Real world impacts and observable changes in organizational culture of local government as a result of USDN membership.
- Which activities, resources, programs, and projects have best served members.
- How USDN activities have contributed to on the ground action and the conditions that lay the groundwork for members to take action.
- Programmatic recommendations for renewable energy, building and performance standards, and community collaboration.

We approached interviews and the distillation of findings and recommendations with the understanding that members are coming from various disciplines, organizations, and locations and experience with USDN programs. The varying experiences with the network and what we are communicating in this evaluation validates what we see as a key strength of USDN—that it is effective at self-reflection, listening to its members, and continuous adaptation to meet member needs and the field at large. To indicate USDN's role in the broader landscape of sustainability-oriented municipal government networks, the evaluation team analyzed a range of external data sources. To illustrate and quantitatively support themes, the evaluation team also focused on the 2020 USDN Impact Survey to disaggregate data by member types to indicate how USDN is serving members across a range of experience, location, size, and capacity. Impact survey raw data informed the understanding of USDN's delivery on value propositions and the network's contribution level to member success. The graphic below displays the aspects of USDN's programming that we investigated with heavy, moderate, or light coverage, as well as those areas that we did not explore, due to limitations in the evaluation scope. Topics that were given light or no coverage should not be seen as any less important to USDN's overall impact.

Figure 1: Topic Areas of Exploration in the Evaluation

HEAVY COVERAGE	MODERATE COVERAGE	LIGHT COVERAGE	NO COVERAGE
Building electrification	Member capacity-building	High Impact Practices	Communications and engagement (including coaching)
Renewable energy bootcamp/ procurement cohorts	Renewable energy learning groups	Leadership skills (change agent training, facilitation, etc.)	Electrifying transportation
Member-facing equity portfolio	Regranting programs (e.g., Innovation Fund)	Resilience hubs	Waste
Community collaboration	Equitable climate action planning	All hazard mitigation planning	Regenerative ecosystems
Peer-learning and relationship development		Equitable mobility	Financing resilience and making the case for sustainability
Building performance standards		People of Color Support Initiative	Resilience training and coaching
		Influencing partners (federal agencies, nonprofits, technical partners)	Building audit/tune-ups and efficiency
		Nexus and operationalizing equity in climate work	
		Collective influence pilots	
		Equity Diversity and Inclusion Fellows	
		Building energy benchmarking	
		Innovation development	

Chapter 2: Setting the Stage

The case for addressing system change through cities and counties

Local governments play a critical role in advancing sustainability—especially the large-scale systemic changes required to meet ambitious goals to avert climate catastrophe, overcome long-standing inequities, and create broadly shared opportunities for improved quality of life. They are not alone—states and national governments also play a critical role—but it can't be done without local governments. The local level is where policy comes to life.

In a 2020 report of complementary roles of US city, state, and federal agencies in policies to reduce GHG emissions, the World Resources Institute (WRI) highlights that local and state governments have not only been the primary drivers of environmental progress in the absence of US federal leadership in recent years, they will continue to play a critical and complementary role as federal action re-emerges with the transition to a new presidential administration.⁷ The key strengths of local government highlighted in the report apply to local sustainability broadly:

- **Leverage on-the-ground knowledge and experience**, enabling local governments to develop solutions that fit their communities' unique context and that are responsive to local equity issues.
- **Foster policy innovation and experimentation**, engaging a large and diverse range of local governments (often referred to as the "laboratory of democracy") to develop effective solutions that can diffuse to other local governments and up to state and federal levels.
- **Foster a race to the top** as local governments seek to maintain competitive advantage and attract jobs, businesses, and residents drawn to innovative, cutting edge locales.
- **Drive deeper emissions reductions**, extending what can be accomplished by federal and state policy alone and tapping into areas where local governments often have primacy, such as code enforcement, land-use planning, zoning, waste management, procurement, and others.
- **Promote state and federal action**, by advocating with a collective voice as well as creating the space for change by showing what is possible.

The WRI study emphasizes that local strategies are often most effective when success requires deep knowledge of local conditions and extensive engagement with local communities. Moreover, the traditional purview of local jurisdictional authority provides local governments with specific levers in sectors like transportation, buildings, land use, and others that state and national governments simply don't have. It should be mentioned that all municipalities do not have the same jurisdictional authority, which makes it even more important for local governments to customize solutions to their community.

⁷ WRI (October 2020), "New Climate Federalism: Defining Federal, State, and Local Roles in a US Policy Framework to Achieve Decarbonization," <https://files.wri.org/s3fs-public/new-climate-federalism-working-paper.pdf>. The report includes a detailed description of the specific authorities that local governments have in transportation, buildings, land use, and other sectors.

Another recent report reviewing activity among local governments and other entities committed to America's Pledge and We Are Still In (both commitments focused on reducing carbon emissions as their primary goal), illuminates some of the ways that local governments are leveraging their unique roles and taking action:⁸

- In three years, the number of cities committed to 100% clean energy has grown from 33 to 165 (as noted later, many of the early cities are USDN members) and 29 have already met the goal. Along with states that have made 100% commitments, a third of all Americans now live in places that are committed to 100% clean energy.
- More than 80 cities and transit agencies across the US are implementing urban mobility and street design measures to improve walking, biking, and transit ridership (up from 53 in 2017), including some offering free transit ridership. Over one-third of US public transit fleets have committed to electrifying their buses.
- Following Berkeley, CA in 2019, 36 more cities (with a collective population of 6 million) are pursuing or have passed moratoriums on gas heat in new builds or related measures to advance thermal decarbonization of buildings. Cities like San Jose and Ann Arbor are leading the way on equitable electrification.

Impact Snapshot

In three years, the number of cities committed to 100% clean energy has grown from 33 to 165 (many of the early cities are USDN members) and 29 have already met the goal. Along with states that have made 100% commitments, a third of all Americans now live in places committed to 100% clean energy.

In interviews for this evaluation, contacts highlighted many more examples in specific cities across a broad range of sustainability actions. This includes a commitment to lead with racial equity in Fort Collins, CO's Our Climate Future process to achieve the community's energy, zero waste, and GHG mitigation goals and a racial equity focus in strategic planning in Lawrence and Douglas Counties, KS. It includes applying a community of practice model to bring those most marginalized and impacted by food insecurity to the table in developing Phoenix, AZ's Food Action Plan. It includes acquiring land and developing affordable housing in Seattle, WA's Duwamish Valley and hiring, mentoring, and empowering women of color in local government in Tempe, AZ.

Sustainability directors and departments are key change agents driving municipal impact, and USDN is their key support organization

Sustainability directors and departments are often the change agents within local government driving local sustainability action through partnerships and locally-designed solutions. They have a comprehensive, high-level view as well as relationships in neighborhoods, which allows them to make connections and play a unique role. Many local sustainability actions cut across traditional departments and require coalitions and collaborations beyond government. USDN is unique in the field of organizations working with these agents of change. USDN's network and activities are designed to meet the specific needs and opportunities of sustainability departments and to incubate and scale proven local strategies. **Observers in the field note USDN's deep understanding of the role of local governments, its focus on the nuances of implementation, its ability to understand (and even anticipate) the needs of its local sustainability network, and its ability stay at the leading edge of practice.** USDN members emphasize that USDN's peer network is the only place that offers such scale of relationships and

⁸ America's Pledge and We Are Still In (2020), "We Are Still In to Deliver on America's Pledge: A Retrospective": https://assets.bbhub.io/dotorg/sites/28/2020/09/We-Are-Still-In-to-Deliver-on-Americas-Pledge_.pdf

intentional support for peer sharing and learning. USDN offers a broad range of ways for members to learn and engage across a breadth of topics. It serves leaders, those following fast, and those catching up.

In short, USDN achieves impact by uniquely supporting and enabling members to take action locally, contributing strength to pull the levers that only local governments can pull.

Member Perspectives

USDN creates "a systemic resource for municipal sustainability professionals to access knowledge, connections, and financial resources. Such an organization does not exist in any other field, and it is a testament to its creators and the network. I simply could not be as effective as I am in my position without USDN."

— *Member, 2020 Impact Survey response*

Chapter 3: Findings of the Evaluation

The insights and reflections that we gathered throughout this evaluation were broad and diverse in their scope but fell into some common threads. In this section of the report, we present six themes from interviews, focus groups, and data analysis, along with evidence that supports each theme. (Click on a theme to go to its full discussion.) The themes are:

1. [USDN members are achieving impact](#)

2. [USDN is a key contributor to member impact](#)

3. [USDN’s success is enabled by its network foundation](#)

4. [USDN directly enables equity-centered action in local communities](#)

5. [USDN is a driving force of innovation in the field](#)

6. [USDN helps members progress along a ladder from idea to impact](#)

Most themes are followed by one or two stories of impact—these case examples illustrate provide an illustration of USDN’s impact in action, as it was told to us in interviews. The case studies reflect several of the themes in the findings, with the most prominent thematic elements mapped in the table below.

Table 1: Case examples mapped to relevant themes

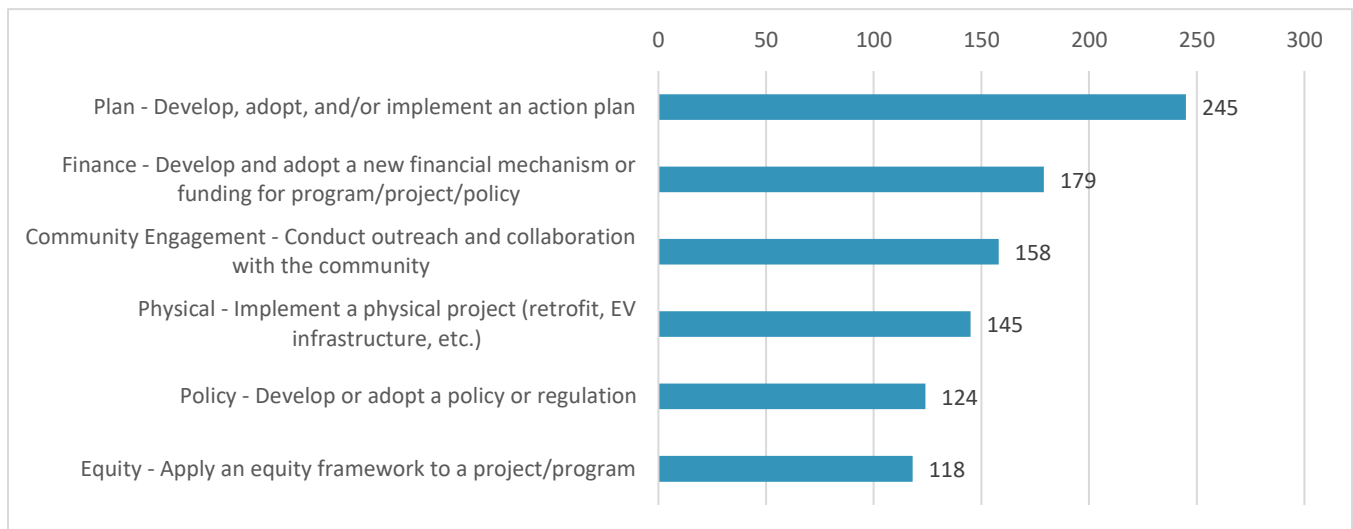
	Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3	Theme 4	Theme 5	Theme 6
Providence, RI: Novice to national leader	X		X		X	
Mobilizing members for better building codes	X		X			
Peer Learning Exchange: Accelerating equity from commitment to action	X			X		X
Missoula, MT: Partnering with utilities – a path to 100% RE	X	X				
Anchorage, Asheville, Honolulu, and Sedona: Starting at a sprint	X	X				
Alameda County, CA: Preparedness is a state of being	X			X	X	
Minneapolis, MN: Resilience planning to support indigenous communities	X			X		

Theme 1: USDN members are achieving impact

USDN members are driving demonstrable, real-world impacts in their communities and the broader field of local government sustainability, GHG mitigation, and equity issues. Members, many of whom have been engaged with USDN for 10 years or more, are leaders among cities taking significant GHG mitigation and other sustainability actions. When compared to other cities in various types of national sustainability rankings, the cohort of USDN members outpaces non-USDN cities.

The 2020 Impact Survey of USDN members identified respondents' top three successes over the past two years. The chart below shows USDN members driving local success most in developing, adopting, and implementing action plans, securing financing/resources to move a sustainability effort forward, engaging communities, and other top actions. Top areas of work included GHG mitigation and decarbonization, changes in government operations, reducing building energy use, and advancing equity. Among other things, the leading successes reflect the time and attention that USDN and its members have committed to adopting climate action and decarbonization plans.

Figure 2: Member-Reported Successes



Source: USDN, "Impact Survey." 2020.

Subtheme 1.1: USDN members are leaders among cities taking significant action on GHG mitigation, equity, and resilience

USDN members are very highly represented among various groups of cities leading on sustainability. Moreover, USDN has spawned initiatives over time to encourage these leaders and create pathways for others to follow.

Energy and Buildings: In the area of clean energy action, USDN core members represent nearly all of the cities and counties participating in key city leadership initiatives or ranked highly in leading "scorecard" efforts (for details, see Appendix A). For example:

- USDN core members represent all **American Cities Climate Challenge** cities selected by Bloomberg Philanthropies to receive funding and technical support to deepen and accelerate efforts to tackle climate change and promote sustainability.
- USDN core members represent 19 out of 20 cities and counties in the **City Energy Project** to transform markets for building energy efficiency.
- All but one of the cities ranked among the top 20 by the **ACEEE Clean Energy Scorecard** are USDN core members.

In addition to the strong efforts of members in the field mentioned above, USDN has fostered new initiatives to drive the leading edge of clean energy efforts, including:

- The **Zero Cities Project**, led by 11 USDN core members, to help cities develop roadmaps and strategies to equitably achieve a zero-net carbon building sector by 2050.⁹
- The **Building Electrification Initiative**, led by eight USDN core members, to develop and refine strategies to achieve equitable electrification of building heating and cooling systems at scale.¹⁰
- The **Carbon Neutral Cities Alliance**, led by nine USDN core members, to support leading cities globally to achieve carbon neutrality in the next 10–20 years.¹¹

Equity: USDN members are also leading on equity. Over 75 USDN members are also members in the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE), a leading national network of cities committed to achieving racial equity and expanding opportunities.¹² Of the GARE members that are in city or county governments, more than 60% are also USDN members (see Figure 3 for a map of USDN members that are also members of GARE). GARE’s organizational focus on equity within government and other institutions complements USDN’s focus on individuals as the fulcrum of change. GARE has been a partner with USDN on initiatives.

Resilience and Adaptation: USDN members are pushing the needle at the nexus of racial equity and climate resilience. Because of USDN’s innovation, support, and programming on adaptation and resilience, members have implemented programs such as:

- Northampton, MA has advanced a community and Resilience Hub with a focus on frontline communities and those impacted by COVID-19. Thirty other USDN members have also set up Resilience Hubs.
- Richmond, VA created the RVAgreen 2050 Climate Equity Index as part of a climate vulnerability and risk assessment.
- Shoreline, WA completed a Climate Impacts and Resiliency Study and developed climate-related tools (with equity data included) for capital project managers to use.
- Memphis, TN sustainability staff built relationships with finance department colleagues to develop a first-ever Environmental Impact Bond for Memphis that focused on establishing green infrastructure, mitigating flood risk, increasing walkability, and increasing green space in low-income communities.

⁹ See: <https://www.usdn.org/projects/zero-cities-project.html>.

¹⁰ See: <https://www.beicities.org/about>.

¹¹ See: <https://carbonneutralcities.org/about/>.

¹² See: <https://www.racialequityalliance.org/>.

Figure 3: Cities and Counties That Are Both USDN and GARE Members



Source: <https://www.racialequityalliance.org/where-we-work/jurisdictions/>

Subtheme 1.2: USDN members outpace non-USDN cities in taking action on clean energy

When compared to other cities in various national rankings of sustainability action, USDN members outpace non-USDN cities in taking action in a key area of local sustainability: GHG mitigation.

In its annual assessment of global cities, CDP analyzes over 800 cities for the strength of their GHG mitigation actions. A city receives the highest score and makes the "A list" for demonstrating best practices in climate adaptation and mitigation. In 2020, 27 of the 29 (93%) North American cities on the A list were USDN core members.¹³

USDN member cities reported 741 concrete GHG mitigation actions to CDP in comparison to the 226 of non-member cities.¹⁴ These covered a range of actions, including infrastructure development, financial mechanisms, and public procurement. Collectively, these GHG mitigation actions reported by USDN members represented \$6.7 billion US dollars of investment.

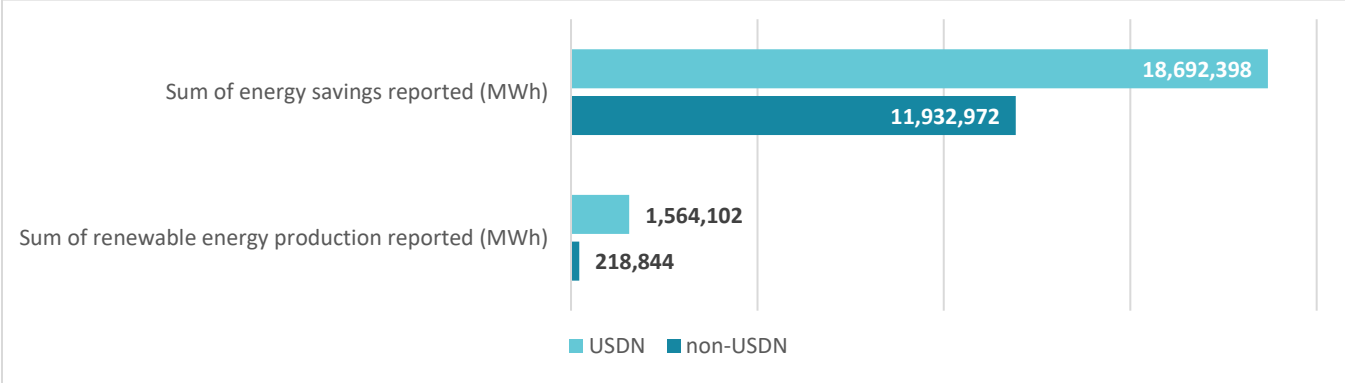
USDN members have achieved a greater level of energy savings and renewable energy generation than non-USDN local governments as demonstrated by a deeper dive into data on energy savings and renewable energy production reported by 197 North American local governments to CDP. For USDN members, these reported

¹³ CDP, "Cities A List," <https://www.cdp.net/en/cities/cities-scores>. CDP describes an A list city as one that "demonstrates best practice standards across adaptation and mitigation, has set ambitious but realistic goals and made progress towards achieving those goals, [and has] strategic, holistic plans in place to ensure the actions they are taking will reduce climate impacts and vulnerabilities of the citizens, businesses and organizations residing in their city."

¹⁴ USDN, "A Summary of Climate Mitigation Actions Reported by USDN Members" (internal document on file)

actions eliminated over 14 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent (62% of all energy-related emissions reductions from local governments in North America that reported to CDP).¹⁵ This is roughly comparable to eliminating annual emissions from 3.6 average sized coal-fired power plants.¹⁶

Figure 4: CDP-Reported Energy Savings and Renewable Energy Production from Local Governments in North America



Source: USDN, "A Summary of Climate Mitigation Actions Reported by USDN Members" (internal document on file); [Mini study](#)

Theme 2: USDN is a key contributor to member impact

USDN significantly contributes to member impact. Many members are able to specifically connect USDN activities to concrete actions in their communities, and these insights are supported by survey and other data. **USDN's contribution is supported by an approach that meets the unique needs of local sustainability work, anticipates communities' needs, and offers peer learning and technical assistance that meets those needs.** In its approach, USDN fills a unique and valuable niche among organizations supporting local sustainability and helps other organizations in the ecosystem enhance their contribution. Sustaining this level of contribution requires that USDN continue to evolve as the sustainability field evolves.

Subtheme 2.1: Members connect the dots between USDN and actions in their communities

Members tell specific stories of how USDN contributed to actions on the ground. Survey results and other data strengthen the case that members see USDN as making concrete contributions to their success.

Many interviewees and focus group members offered specific stories of how participation in USDN catalyzed action in their communities. In addition to the many examples cited throughout this report, these include:

- **Renewable energy procurement.** The cohort and training on on-site procurement of renewable energy (a component of the Renewable Energy Procurement Learning Group) allowed Anchorage, AK to conduct site assessments of 17 buildings for solar installations and issue a \$2 million bond for projects.

¹⁵ USDN, "A Summary of Climate Mitigation Actions Reported by USDN Members" (internal document on file)

¹⁶ EPA, Greenhouse gas equivalencies calculator, <https://www.epa.gov/energy/greenhouse-gas-equivalencies-calculator>

Member Perspectives

90% of USDN member respondents said USDN contributed to at least one of their top three successes over the last two years. 59% said that USDN made a vital contribution (would not have happened otherwise) or significantly contributed to their success. When asked about what most contributed to their success, respondents emphasized the value of peer-to-peer interactions: "Inspiration and learning from the experience of peers" topped the list of types of support most valuable to respondents, followed by "developing new ideas and problem solving with peers."

— USDN, 2020 Member Impact Survey

- **Community collaboration.** Eugene, OR credited USDN as the motivation to expand community collaboration and center equity in climate action plan development using an approach inspired by USDN partners Providence, Portland, and Seattle.
- **Adaptation in frontline communities.** With an Innovation Fund grant, Alameda County, CA developed a smoke communications protocol in response to the unprecedented recent wildfires, crediting USDN with the approach the County used for outreach to affected communities. The contact said, "I definitely feel that USDN's focus on adaptation and frontline communities helped us articulate what groups to reach out to" and "we would not have done this project without the outreach specifically from USDN."
- **Decarbonization in affordable housing.** USDN's Partners for Places grant to Evanston, IL accelerated the city's understanding that it needed to focus on decarbonization of affordable housing. The contact said that the understanding "that in order to decarbonize quickly and effectively you need to look at existing buildings and address affordable housing...would have come, but happened much more quickly because people were having those conversations in a variety of learning groups in USDN."
- **Centering frontline communities.** A contact in Providence, RI noted the contribution of USDN's Equity Foundations training and a Partners for Places grant, saying "I continue to use those trainings, I've brought [them] to our team, regional network, and Rhode Island environmental groups." The city is now working to center front-line communities in developing a renewable energy community choice aggregation plan.
- **Carbon neutrality planning.** A contact in Washington, DC said USDN was critical in flipping its carbon neutrality plan from what would have been a technocratic plan to one that advances community priorities. The plan was developed by engaging directly with those most impacted by a changing climate.
- **Renewable energy in regional grid transmission.** A USDN grant for Philadelphia and other members in the mid-Atlantic region kicked off a coalition to work toward a 100% renewable grid.

In the 2020 Impact Survey, 90% of USDN member respondents said USDN contributed to at least one of their top three successes over the last two years. Of reporting communities, 67% (140 communities) indicated that USDN participation was vital ("would not have happened without USDN") or significant ("made the impact deeper, faster, more effective") to at least one of their most impactful actions of the last two years. When asked about what most contributed to their success, respondents emphasized the value of peer-to-peer interactions: "inspiration and learning from the experience of peers" topped the list of types of support most valuable to respondents, followed by "developing new ideas and problem solving with peers." In the 2019 member satisfaction survey:

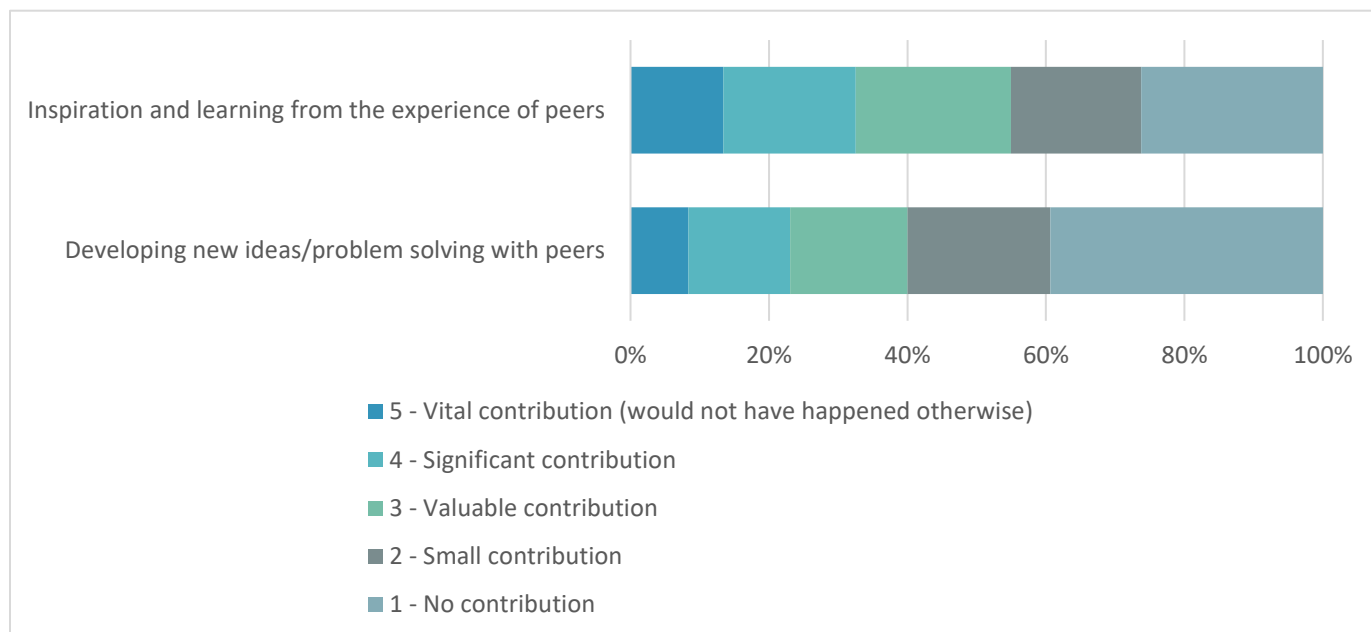
Resilience. 85% of members indicated that USDN added value to resilience efforts.

Equity. 85% of members indicated that USDN added value to their equity efforts.

GHG Mitigation. 86% indicated USDN added value to mitigation efforts.

USDN's contributions to member successes were primarily described as the result of learning from and problem solving with peers. The type of support with by far the highest rate of “vital,” “significant,” and “valuable” contributions to member success was “Inspiration and learning from the experience of peers” (55%).

Figure 5: USDN Contribution to Member Highest Impact Action



Source: USDN, 2020 Impact Survey.

Deep dive into the Renewables Accelerator success: USDN’s partnership with the Rocky Mountain Institute (RMI) and the World Resources Institute (WRI) on the collaborative **Renewables Accelerator** initiative shows a close up view of USDN’s contributions to members. In one element of this program, 28 people from 15 cities and counties participated in a cohort to procure off-site renewable energy through power purchase agreements (PPAs).¹⁷ Most joining the cohort did not have much experience with this type of procurement. Coming out of the work, nine of the 15 local governments planned to pursue an off-site PPA. Together, these PPAs represent a GHG reduction potential of 325,000 metric tons of CO₂ (equivalent to eliminating 795 million vehicle miles per year). Out of a total score of 5, participants rated the value of the cohort as 4.67 and all said they were more confident moving a renewable energy project forward.¹⁸ A similar cohort working on on-site renewable energy procurement garnered similar results: 92% said their on-site renewable energy projects were further along due to participation in the cohort.¹⁹

¹⁷ City Renewables Accelerator, Off-site Cohort Impact Report.

¹⁸ All agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I feel more confident in my ability to educate other city staff and move an off-site RE project through the city process than before participating in the cohort."

¹⁹ City Renewables Accelerator, On-site Cohort Impact Report.

Below, a case example in Missoula, Montana provides an illustration of this subtheme in practice.

Case Example: Missoula, MT – Partnering with Utilities – A Path to 100% RE

USDN Scaling RE across the network. Through USDN’s partnership with The World Resources Institute (WRI) and the Rocky Mountain Institute (RMI) City Renewable Accelerator Program, over 300 individuals in 141 cities and counties in 37 states have participated in training, peer learning, and technical assistance on renewable energy purchasing. By focusing on large-scale power purchase agreements and direct municipal purchasing and installation of solar, it is estimated this effort could ultimately lead to over 475 MW of renewable energy development.

Challenge. In 2019, when Missoula County and the City of Missoula jointly adopted a goal of 100% clean electricity community-wide by 2030, Montana's energy mix included 49% coal. Reliance on this climate-changing fuel didn't align with the future Missoulians wanted to see. Yet NorthWestern Energy, the monopoly utility that supplies most of Missoula's energy, was seeking to increase its ownership in coal power and build hundreds of megawatts of new gas plants. People in this Mountain West community knew clean energy was the only acceptable path forward—but didn't know how they would influence the utility to make a different plan.

The Sustainability Program Manager for Missoula County and the Energy Conservation and Climate Action Coordinator for the City of Missoula were jointly responsible for implementing the city and county’s 100% clean electricity goal. They understood the risks of partnering with the utility to pursue clean energy. Would the community trust the county if they partnered with the utility? Would the utility use a partnership as a play to abdicate responsibility? Despite these risks, a partnership with the utility was the best shot they had to achieve their community’s clean energy goals.

Partnering with the Utility - A Path to 100% RE. Missoula’s Sustainability Program Manager and Energy Conservation and Climate Action Coordinator plugged into several USDN activities:

- **City RE Accelerator (CRA) Program.** USDN partnered with WRI and RMI who provided the deep technical expertise and guidance USDN members needed to be able to apply winning renewable energy strategies in their local context through the **Renewable Energy Procurement Boot Camps**. Missoula’s sustainability managers were able to bring elected officials (a county commissioner and a city councilmember) with them to the Boot Camps, so they could learn side by side and gain shared understanding of the options for achieving 100% clean electricity. The support provided through USDN partners in this boot camp was top notch national expertise. Following the boot camps, the Missoulians participated in an ongoing **cohort** along with other cities in the region through which they were guided step-by-step as they developed and implemented their utility engagement strategy. This level of technical resource on sustainability solutions is rarely available

Member Perspectives

"We wouldn't have taken any of these essential steps if not for the USDN Renewable Energy Bootcamp."

— Member, *Impact Evaluation Interview*

Case Example: Missoula, MT – Partnering with Utilities – A Path to 100% RE

to an individual community, but often collectively provided through the power of USDN partnerships.

- **Renewable Energy Learning Groups.** Throughout 2019, Missoula’s sustainability managers were also regular participants in both of USDN’s RE learning groups: RE Procurement and RE Strategies. These monthly learning opportunities focused on expert and peer content on a range of renewables topics and ran in parallel to the CRA program. Peer learning, expert training, and the action-oriented accelerator positioned the Missoulians with the knowledge, skills, and technical assistance they needed.

Real World Impact: In June 2020, Missoula County and the City of Missoula signed a Memorandum of Understanding with NorthWestern Energy committing the three entities to work together in pursuit of the city’s and county’s 100% clean electricity goal. They are now working with NorthWestern to develop an Implementation Plan identifying the concrete projects and programs that will put the MOU into action.

Subtheme 2.2: USDN uniquely meets the needs of local sustainability work

Sustainability directors and staff work in a unique environment that is interdisciplinary, interdepartmental, and interwoven with human health, environmental resilience, and economic stability. They have a particular set of needs, challenges, and constraints. USDN has tuned its tools, resources, and approach to solutions in this context, drawing on its deep understanding of local government. USDN prioritizes capacity building over any individual technical discipline and is fit for purpose to drive the rapidly evolving sustainability field. Key characteristics of sustainability work and how USDN addresses them are outlined in the table below.

Table 2: Key Characteristics of Sustainability Work and how USDN Addresses Them

Characteristics of Local Government Sustainability Work	USDN’s Support for Specific Needs
Broad and cross-sectional portfolio of work can make it difficult to get deep into specialized areas of knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Topical breadth covering a range of issues supported by many offerings of peer groups, training, and resources
Generalists need to quickly get up to speed on a broad range of topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "Right-sized" information to provide core knowledge for members to move forward with confidence
Local sustainability demands entrepreneurial spirit, but departments are often understaffed and low on capacity. Teams need to be “scrappy” and get a lot done with very little; they borrow everything they can	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Connection to a wealth of resources to help make work more efficient ● Access to a large network of peers with models, tools, templates, and experience ● Rapid capacity-building, especially for new staff

Characteristics of Local Government Sustainability Work	USDN's Support for Specific Needs
Local governments often have limited political will for high-risk sustainability efforts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to tap the credibility and experience of the USDN member network to de-risk solutions • Ability to bring colleagues and leaders into the network to build confidence
Sustainability teams face “David vs. Goliath” challenges of solving an intimidating suite of problems in the face of often intractable governments and opposing stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship-building and psychological/emotional support through human connections to others going through the same experience • Creating community helps people stay in the work
Local sustainability is rooted in people and places, requiring community engagement and connection between local government and its residents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program offerings focusing on equity, community engagement and communications and outreach best practices

USDN offers topical breadth and interconnectedness. Sustainability departments work on a broad and cross-sectional portfolio of work, prioritizing breadth over specialized areas of knowledge. In response, USDN offers information on a broad range of topics supported by peer groups and training. Participants in one of the focus groups described USDN as the "first stop" for new topics and the "catch all for everything." A recurring theme in the renewable energy focus groups was how USDN members quickly connect new sustainability department employees to USDN to accelerate their learning curve. Others described how USDN's broad offerings help more senior staff and leadership "germinate" new ideas that may grow over time into community priorities and initiatives.

Beyond the breadth of topics, interviewees emphasized how USDN illuminates connections among topics. A contact from Boston described how USDN helps break down silos, for example between GHG mitigation, housing, transportation, and equity, helping members recognize interconnections and systems. For example, one interviewee in Anchorage, AK brought colleagues from their transportation department to a training on equity and mobility, after the credibility of USDN convinced the colleagues to attend. The training “opened the door” and convinced the transportation department to begin to embrace equitable mobility.

USDN provides "right-sized" information. Interviews and focus group participants emphasized that sustainability staff and leaders are typically generalists asked to quickly get up to speed on a broad range of topics. Several described USDN as providing the right amount of information to get enough up to speed on issues to ask the right questions, understand the terms, engage with experts, and move forward with confidence. Capturing this idea, one midwestern city contact noted that information he learned through USDN gave him "courage to take on the utility."

USDN is designed to support entrepreneurial members. Being successful in local sustainability requires entrepreneurial spirit, but often departments are understaffed and team capacity maxed out. One member in Alaska described her team as half of one staff member and half of a temporary fellow. These teams need to be "scrappy" to take action with lean resources. They borrow everything they can. They rely on peers for lessons they've learned. They look for guidance, support, roadmaps, and honest assessments from those who have gone before. USDN helps by connecting members to a wealth of resources. USDN members routinely described how they "steal" from each other. They have developed an unofficial “creative commons” through USDN. One

member related: "At the 2019 USDN meeting I was able to talk with folks in Washington, Oregon, Boulder, and Fort Collins who are trying to center equity. I now just call them or email them, I remember you talking about this, here is where I am, can you help me?" Other examples include:

- Sedona, AZ adopted green fleet policies from Fort Collins and developed an RFP for on-site renewables based on examples and insights from a cohort of the Renewable Energy Procurement Learning Group.
- Through USDN's workshop on Building Performance Standards, a representative from Berkeley, CA had an "a-ha" moment that Cambridge, MA's approach to metrics for measuring building energy use would work well in Berkeley.
- Somerville, MA was inspired by Boulder, CO's SmartRegs for buildings to figure out how they could work for Somerville.

USDN builds credibility and de-risks political decisions. USDN helps members strengthen their credibility by tapping into the credible "brand" and experience of the USDN network to de-risk solutions. Advancing many aspects of sustainability is not politically or economically easy, and many communities do not have supportive mayors, councils, or senior staff. In one focus group, USDN members described themselves as "stewards of limited resources and political will." An important lever for sustainability staff locally is demonstrating that other communities have been successful. A contact from Berkeley, CA said that showing the city was part of a national cohort working on Building Performance Standards helped "sell" the concept to their city council. A contact from Asheville, NC said USDN peers helped "make the case" for advancing solar lighting efforts in the city.

Several contacts noted the value of being able to bring colleagues and leaders into the network to build confidence, for example by inviting staff from other agencies or elected leaders to training events:

- A contact from Missoula County, MT said the renewable energy boot camp on off-site renewables was "game changing" because it brought along elected leaders, building support for the county's adoption of a 100% clean energy commitment. The same contact noted the value of bringing the county's new facility director to a workshop on municipal energy as a foundation for future efforts on building decarbonization.
- Participation of senior leadership from Blacksburg, VA in cohorts working on solar energy procurement as part of the Renewable Energy Procurement Learning Group helped get them comfortable with solar.
- A contact in Washington, DC noted the value of bringing community members to an equity training and how those community members partnered to lead community engagement around sustainability.

USDN provides a community of psychological and emotional support. Several contacts noted that sustainability work is not easy. They describe a "David vs. Goliath" challenge of solving an intimidating suite of complex challenges, often in the face of intractable governments and opposing stakeholders. One contact noted that "many members start as a single person in the city taking on an enormous and existential topic." Another related, "It is really intense to be standing in a public meeting over and over again with people grilling you and the city council not standing up for you." Contacts noted that the support of the USDN network has been critical for people staying in their jobs, reducing staff turnover, and keeping innovative and talented people in the field. Several quotes illuminate the support members gain from the community:

Member Perspectives

"If USDN didn't exist, I'm not sure we would even have a building energy benchmarking ordinance."

– Member, *Impact Evaluation Interview*

- “We are fighting a fight that is premised on the continued existence of humanity. Having to face that every day—the emotional toll of knowing that if you don't do your job there are significant ramifications—that creates a unique space for the camaraderie that develops.”
- “Everything I have been involved in with USDN is helpful at least in the fact that knowing you are not alone. There is always a sense of community.”
- “I think that a lot of it is...having the support and place to know that someone is walking through exactly what you are walking through. There are pieces that are really hard for people in our role where there is a lot of misunderstanding and mistrust. To have a place where you can go and feel understood and challenged is central.”
- “It was really hard to talk about equity and sustainability...then being told equity wasn't valued. If I didn't have the USDN People of Color support group, I probably would have pivoted to another form of work. I lean on other people of color at USDN, which helps me feel that I'm not crazy.”
- “The conversations that I have had with members, those are really, really deep and meaningful conversations that bring me so much fulfillment and alleviates the tricky parts. Those outweigh a lot of the hard parts of this job.”
- “USDN is critically important to local sustainability in the public sector. It is not so much about the content; it is about the community.”
- “There is huge burn-out in the field. I looked at other jobs this past year. I was questioning if I wanted to be in this role. A big motivator was knowing that I had USDN.”

Partner Perspectives

“Communities and organizations move at the speed of trust.”

– Partner, Impact Evaluation Interview

USDN helps connect people and place. Local governments are the front line of connecting sustainability to place and people by engaging community members. In the 2020 Impact Survey, respondents put community engagement and collaboration above all other topic areas in the category of “most important/major focus of my time and resources.” Community engagement and collaboration was ranked in this highest category by 82% of respondents, and communications and outreach was ranked in the highest category by 65% of respondents. One contact noted, “Our work is people centered. Instead of assuming what people want and need, it is building relationships to understand.” Another said, “we don't do anything without community input.”

Whether it is about resilience, transportation, buildings, energy, or other topics, USDN helps sustainability staff connect to people and place with support for community engagement and equity:

- “Because of USDN’s emphasis on equitable community collaboration, we went from not being the community at all to being much more a part of the community.”
- “We now build long term relationships, instead of months-long advisory groups which changes accountability.”

Below, see a case example that illustrates this subtheme in action.

Case Example: Anchorage, Asheville, Honolulu, and Sedona – Starting at a Sprint

Challenge: Every year hundreds of communities are making new commitments to drive local action on sustainability. A very common first step in these cities and counties is to hire someone. In the words of one former city manager, "we need someone to wake up every day thinking about sustainability." The challenge comes in when that sustainability lead starts on day one with expectations to achieve carbon neutrality goals, prepare the community to adapt to climate change, and often address hundreds of years of structural racism. These individuals need to ramp up with knowledge of the community, local politics, and technical solutions to act extremely quickly and hit the ground running.

Starting at a sprint: Anchorage, AK hired their first sustainability manager in 2018. One contact in Sedona, AZ began building that city's first sustainability program in 2018. Another contact joined the City and County of Honolulu, HI a year ago and began running a climate resilience and equity program. Each of these local leaders faced the same challenge: expectations to go from zero to 100 mph as quickly as possible. These contacts described how integral USDN has been to their work:

- "As a generalist we're expected to become experts in a matter of a few days to guide policy. I would not have been able to become an expert on electric vehicles so quickly if it weren't for USDN. I flat-out would not have succeeded." **Sedona, AZ**
- "Being a USDN member is essential for me to engage our leadership. If I don't mention USDN, or offer an example from another city, my word doesn't get too far. When I go to USDN, I get both of these things. Either I can find the latest information on what the network has distilled, or I can get access to another community who has gone before us." **Honolulu, HI**
- "When an idea is percolating, USDN is the place that I go to see who has done it. Having that opportunity to reach out to people, and having a network that is so engaged, is a great resource." **Asheville, NC**
- "Reviewing policies from other communities to get ideas and insight for our communities is really helpful. There is no better place for this than USDN." **Anchorage, AK**
- "USDN is bizarrely good at fostering relationships and at some point every one of us needs to ask for help. USDN is the place we go and get free advice from peers and increasingly from experts too. It feels like USDN brokers tons of hours of free consulting for us so we can rapidly take action." **Sedona, AZ**
- "When I started I felt like we were starting from zero. How do you get from zero to 100 within a few years? It turns out the best way to do this is join USDN." **Anchorage, AK**
- "USDN is a key platform to provide me access to what other cities around North America are doing, they always have a sense of what the best practices are. The conversations and information at USDN are the national standard." **Honolulu, HI**

Featured USDN Communities

Featured in this case study:

- Anchorage, AK
- Asheville, NC
- Honolulu, HI
- Sedona, AZ

Case Example: Anchorage, Asheville, Honolulu, and Sedona – Starting at a Sprint

Real World Impact: These members told us that USDN was instrumental in rapidly escalating their ability to begin implementing sustainability action in their communities.

Subtheme 2.3: USDN excels at understanding and anticipating the needs of its members and local sustainability work generally

Members and partners emphasize that a core strength of USDN is anticipating the leading edge of needs for community sustainability. At a broad level, annual surveys ask members to rate the level of importance of a range of topics for the coming year (see Figure 6 for member-reported priorities from the 2020 Impact Survey).

Within the context of specific workstreams, USDN is adept at identifying key needs and barriers to be overcome within those topics then building programming around them. For example, a focus group on renewable energy emphasized the value of support for overcoming regulatory barriers and working effectively with utilities. Over a longer time scale, the process of regularly reaching out to members about interests and priorities allows USDN to adapt as the field of community sustainability evolves.

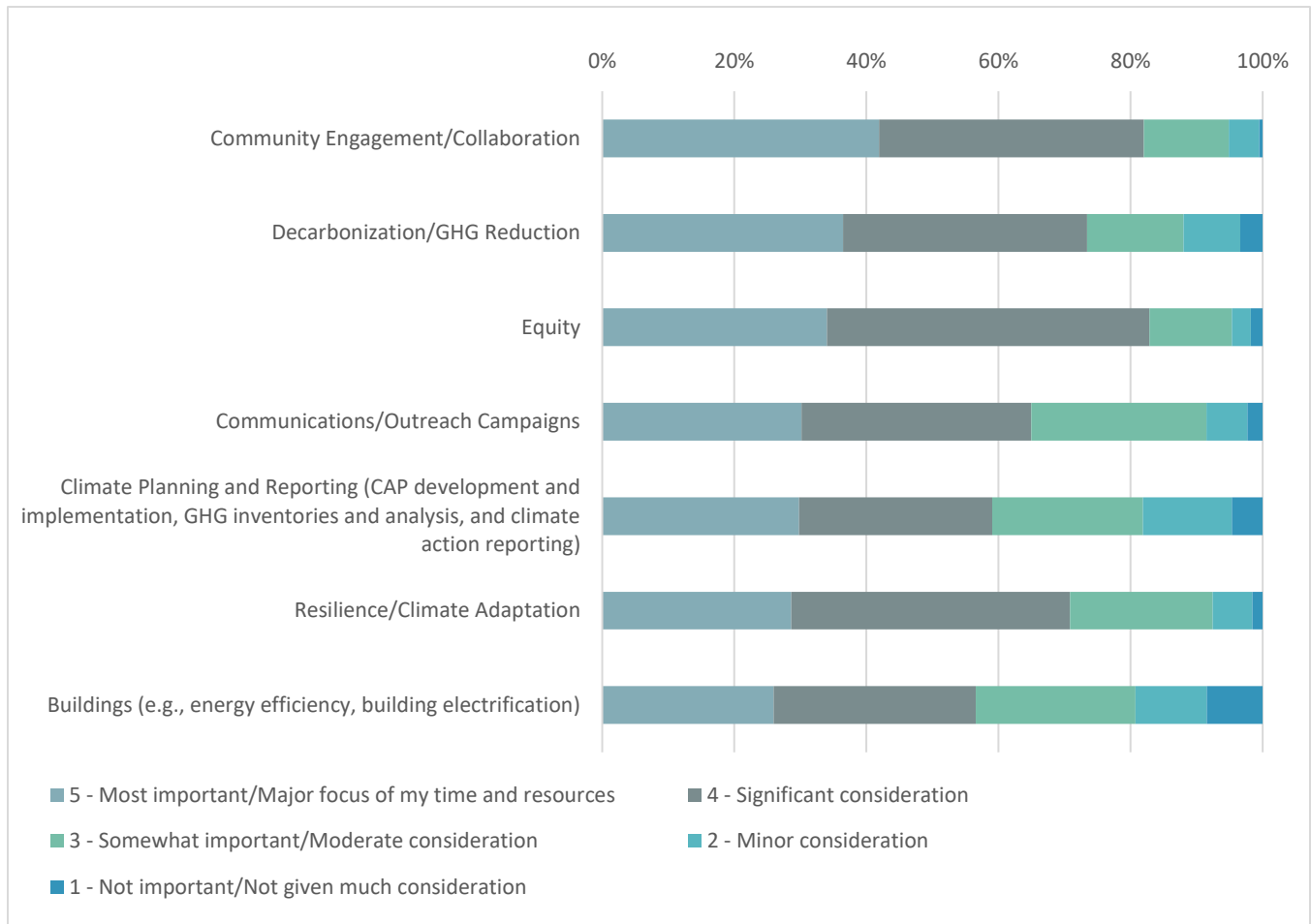
In the 2020 Impact Survey, 78% of respondents said USDN was "delivering very well for me" on "offers access to trusted information about current urban sustainability issues, best practices, and models." Sixty-four percent said USDN was delivering very well on "keeps me on top of future trends and other big picture field information to help me evaluate my priorities and practices."

Member Perspectives

"A ton of communities have set goals that they have no idea how to turn into something actionable and USDN offers a platform for members to dramatically scale their actions."

– *Member, Impact Evaluation Interview*

Figure 6: Member-Reported Priorities



Source: USDN, 2020 Impact Survey

USDN is quick to pivot to meet the needs of the day such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the summer 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. In the 2020 Impact Survey, around 80% of respondents reported that COVID-19 and reckoning with racial injustice disrupted their personal and professional lives. Despite these disruptions, many more were turning to USDN than away from it: 35% reported relying more on USDN as a result of the growing societal reckoning with racial justice compared to 3% relying less on USDN. As a result of COVID-19, 27% reported relying more on USDN compared to 11% relying less on USDN. In interviews about USDN support for members on equity, contacts shared that their USDN training made them better prepared for the surge of awareness of equity needs that surfaced during summer 2020’s Black Lives Matter racial justice protests.

Subtheme 2.4: USDN’s suite of activities with which it engages and supports its members provides them with the knowledge and tools they need to succeed

USDN engages and supports its members through peer-to-peer learning and technical assistance in ways that provide its members with the knowledge and tools they need to succeed—and cannot get anywhere else.

Members shared, through interviews and the 2020 Impact Survey, that they gain value from all USDN activities. The Impact Survey asked members to indicate interest in a range of upcoming activities and the extent to which their capacity to participate was likely to be disrupted by COVID-19. Setting capacity to participate aside, a large majority of members said they were interested in all of the primary ways that USDN engages members in peer-to-peer activities—the annual meeting, learning groups, "offline" connections, action groups, and affinity groups—as well as technical assistance through trainings, professional capacity building, and more. (The lowest scoring item, not surprisingly, was participation in USDN committees.) The annual meeting and learning groups (all conducted virtually in 2020) topped the list of items where members said they would be fully able to participate in spite of COVID-19, perhaps an indicator of their importance of these activities to members. The indication of high interest across the board for USDN activities is consistent with responses in interviews and focus groups where members had very little to say about what USDN should cut back on. The overall sense is that the range of offerings is valuable to meet a diversity of member needs and learning styles and that the offerings build on each other and can be combined and customized by members. For a deeper exploration of how this emerges specifically in the area of equity and racial justice, see Theme 4.

A strong theme in interviews and focus groups was the value of peer-to-peer networking supported by many of USDN's suite of activities. When asked about the most valuable USDN activities they have participated in, member contacts nearly all referenced peer engagement and learning in some way, whether it be learning groups, affinity groups, regional sub-groups, or others. One contact noted that "learning groups bring the threads together to change the outcome of a project."

Many contacts emphasized the value of in-person interactions especially when they involved dedicated time and deep engagement, such as USDN annual meetings or multi-day trainings. When devoted to specific topics, these interactions allow members to get deep into complex topics. Of the Building Performance Standard workshop, for example, a contact from Philadelphia related that "BPS is so complex and all-encompassing...a few days of immersion where you are forced to focus (not multi-tasking) brings you into the experience." In addition to the formal programming, members find informal engagement valuable, describing the value of "one-off conversations with folks before and after the meeting to follow up on threads of discussion," help answering the "little questions," and side conversations on a range of topics.

Member Perspectives

2020 Impact Survey results reinforce the value of peer engagement for members. 72% of respondents said USDN was delivering very well on the proposition "Offers space for me to learn from and share with peers in other communities," and 63% on "Helps me build relationships with peers facing similar challenges."

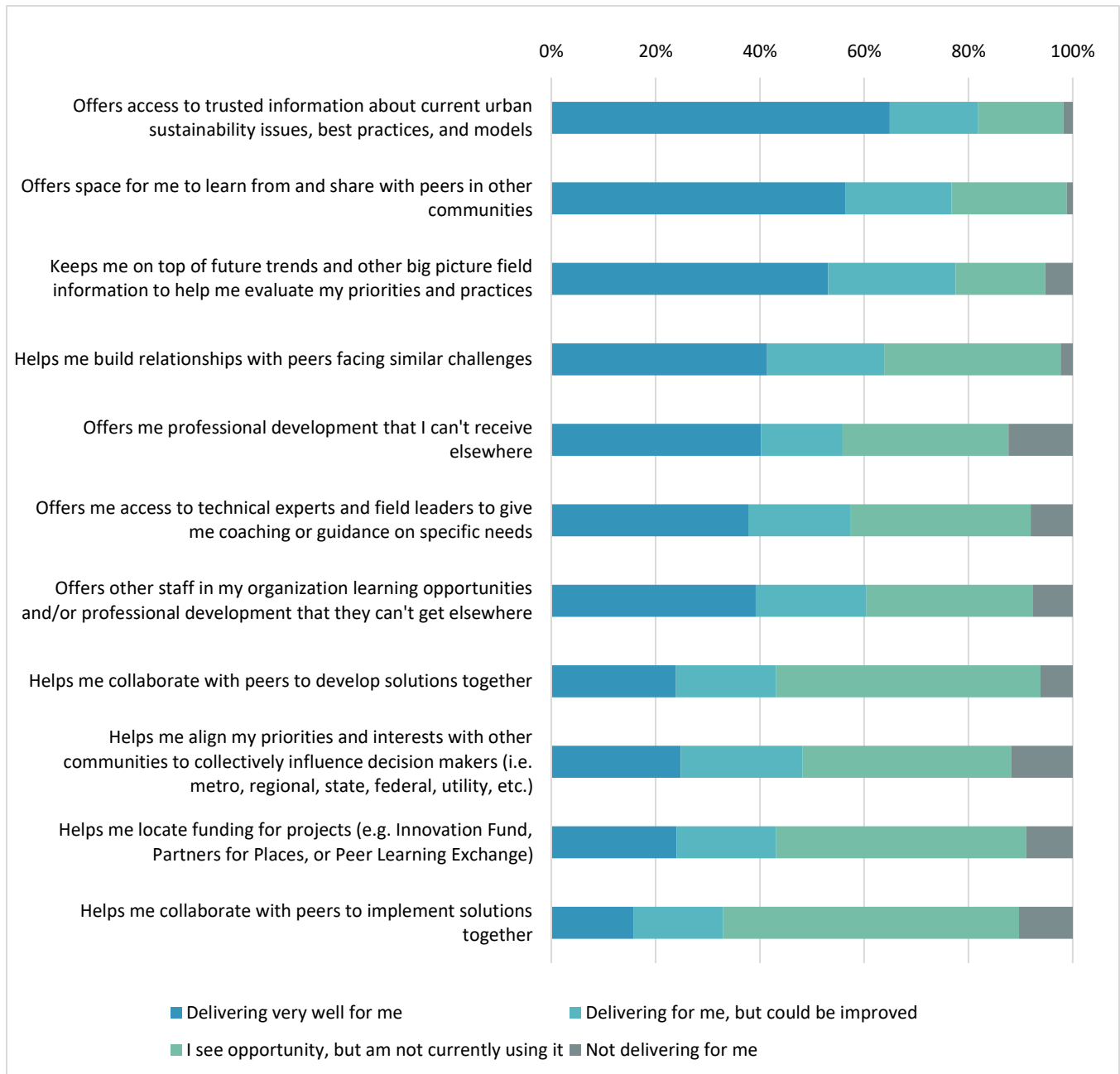
– USDN, 2020 Member Impact Survey

Member Perspectives

"City sustainability staff are one of the more organized city-level fields in North America, because of USDN."

– Member, Impact Evaluation Interview

Figure 7: USDN Delivering Value for Members



Source: USDN, 2020 Impact Survey

Subtheme 2.5: USDN fills a unique and valuable niche among organizations in the field of supporting local sustainability

USDN is the only place that provides on-the-ground implementation experience from peers at scale. USDN members don't just "steal" policy and program designs and resources from each other, they draw on each other's insights about implementation—large and small. It allows members to see how a peer city actually used a tool or leveraged experience—how they approached issues and solved problems. A contact from Berkeley, CA noted that the level of understanding and insight into how to actually implement solutions at the local level is

not available through any other organization with the size and breadth of USDN. A contact from Las Cruces, NM said peer engagement through USDN allows groups to engage on "how to make it better" rather than just "how to."

USDN staff understand how difficult it is to be in local government but also how impactful it can be. Many staff have worked for local government. In practice, USDN's city-centered approach means starting with understanding what local governments are looking for and recognizing the opportunities and constraints that they face. **A contact from a partner organization contrasted USDN's pragmatic approach with other organizations that start with a big and bold idea developed in isolation and then look to "sell" it to local governments who often look at it and say they could never implement it.** Of USDN staff, this partner said, they "couldn't be in there any more with local government staff...they are driven by what local government staff are looking for and do a really good job of listening to what members want."

Partner Perspectives

"My participation with USDN annual meetings and the session and workshops have informed my own understanding of racial equity and inclusion. It is one way that our organization is stepping up. [My organization] has had a long-time commitment to equity and inclusion. We are working on developing a racial equity action plan; some of the language is on our website. Because of the collaboration with USDN, we are reinforcing and amplifying the importance of this work."

– Partner, Impact Evaluation Interview

USDN Helps Partners More Effectively Deliver and Scale Contributions to Local Sustainability

USDN enables external partners to succeed in helping local governments achieve impact by efficiently connecting them to a broader network of communities and helping them understand what these communities really need. Describing the value of USDN as an impact multiplier to scale assistance to a large network of communities, a partner described USDN as the "go-to organization for networking; no one else provides a network at this scale... They popularize ideas among members...and push them out."

There are several examples of USDN helping extend the reach of federal agencies and other partners, allowing them to efficiently engage a broad network of communities. These include:

- Through the **Cities Renewables Accelerator** partnership with WRI and RMI on renewable energy, USDN leveraged philanthropic support through the American Cities Climate Challenge and connected these partners to USDN members in the Renewable Energy Procurement Learning Group. This allowed a broader group of USDN members to benefit directly from the Challenge, especially smaller cities that often don't get direct philanthropic support. It provided access to implementation lessons through peer engagement, technical expertise from RMI and WRI, and use of replicable tools. Through peer learning cohorts and training as part of this work USDN, WRI, and RMI trained and supported over 300 people in 141 cities and counties in 37 states.
- For the final phase of the **City Energy Project**, USDN partnered with the Institute for Market Transformation (IMT) to capture lessons from 20 cities that had received direct financial and technical support in earlier phases of the project into materials and engagement for cities within the USDN network. IMT and USDN developed broadly useful products on the business case for

USDN Helps Partners More Effectively Deliver and Scale Contributions to Local Sustainability

energy efficiency and equity and engaged USDN partners through learning groups. IMT described this work as helping a broader range of communities "pick up where other cities have blazed a trail."

- Leading a consortium for a NOAA Grant, USDN partnered with the RAND Corporation to help communities with decision support under extreme uncertainty. Through a collaborative effort with the RAND's **Mid-Atlantic Regional Integrated Sciences and Assessments (MARISA)** team, USDN is advancing opportunities for communities to use Hazard Mitigation Plan development (importantly, a process required for accessing federal funding) to develop more locally-relevant and actionable resilience plans that anticipate a changing climate and authentically engage communities. MARISA is a relatively small program without the resources to work one-on-one with many communities, even as this planning is necessarily very local. "We need to be clever in how we deploy time and resources for maximum impact," a contact says. The contact describes MARISA's work with USDN as a "perfect marriage" because the USDN network allows them to work with particular communities but know that the work can be disseminated and used by other like-minded communities within and beyond the USDN network. USDN provides MARISA a partner with "boots on the ground" in communities and experience working across multiple local agencies on resilience. In short, the contact says, it "solves the problem of scale" for MARISA.
- The **Funders Network for Smart Growth** partners with USDN on the grantmaking initiative Partners for Places. A contact with the Funders Network shared that they personally increased their understanding of equity and racial justice from their interactions with USDN and went on to apply that knowledge in their work.
- **NATURA's** involvement with USDN has led to the expansion and institutionalization of equity within the nature-based solutions network. In partnerships with city practitioners, community organizations, and NGOs, all parties are interested in similar questions, but key differences across sectors remain. As a result, NATURA's partnership with USDN has focused on relationship building and moving at the speed of trust. A contact shared, "having connectors between academics and practitioners—that is an important role that USDN plays."
- USDN has partnered with **FEMA** on pre-disaster mitigation programs. As a part of this work, USDN staff collaborated with a member to generate a nugget of insight that grew into a creative and replicable framework for integrating equity and resilience into a community's hazard planning. Cities were already required to create all hazard mitigation plans (AHMPs) in order to qualify for FEMA pre-disaster mitigation funds; this collaboration sparked the idea to use those plans to center community collaboration, racial equity, and climate resilience. A USDN Innovation Grant enabled the first member community to pilot a "Game of Extremes" that helps a community create their AHMP in a way that centers on humans rather than centering on the hazards. A hands-on workshop then drew attendees from over 10 communities to learn about this approach. This innovation has the potential to scale widely even beyond USDN, as the plans are required for many cities and counties across the US.

USDN Helps Partners More Effectively Deliver and Scale Contributions to Local Sustainability

In addition to helping partners engage with the USDN network, organizations partnering with USDN described the valuable role USDN played as a periscope into the sustainability community, helping them understand what communities need and care about. A technical partner emphasized “They know their members really well, what they need and what they know, which is really helpful for characterizing the audience. They understand general needs and have a catalogue of knowledge about specific cities.” A contact from the same organization noted how attending USDN's annual meeting provides a very deep and efficient connection to what local governments around the country are doing and what they need. She described USDN as “the best portal into sustainability directors, our key contacts in cities—a very efficient aggregation of leaders.”

Finally, USDN helps partners create engagement strategies by providing resources and tools that are broadly useful for communities. Contacts from a technical partner that worked with USDN on a convening in 2020 emphasized that USDN played a critical role in putting on a partner event, shaping content, and creatively engaging participants to complement the partners' technical expertise. The partner noted his organization could never have put on that type of event alone. USDN is also helpful for showing how to develop tools that are broadly useful to communities. With strategic advising from USDN, MARISA is developing an online portal that any community in the mid-Atlantic region can use to identify potential hazards and is scaling this work with other RISAs around the country and through work with federal programs.

Theme 3: USDN’s success is enabled by its network foundation

USDN members benefit one another through the network structure and contribute to both its growth and strength. USDN, at its core, is a powerful network. Going beyond individual connections, USDN links members to an effective network of peer relationships and forms a foundation for a set of concrete, value-add transactions that significantly benefits members. This foundation fosters and develops strong social interactions that transmit information, channel individual relationships, and enable behavior change.

USDN is an advanced social network, facilitating both rich discussions and shared understanding, as well as increasing awareness between members at different places in their sustainability evolution. With members tapping into the network through various channels, such as affinity or peer learning groups, the social network creates a collaborative communication approach to problem-solving. Such a level of cohesion would not exist without the network foundation. As an organization, USDN prioritizes relationships and capacity building and is thus well suited to drive action in a rapidly evolving and unique field. The field is increasingly interdisciplinary, interdepartmental, and interwoven with the complementary and competing needs of environmental sustainability, equitable operations, and economic stability. As a result, USDN and its members work in extremely complex contexts with challenging stakeholder ecosystems and high levels of uncertainty.

There are identifiable ways in which the entire suite of network activities benefits members. Through peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, the network model of USDN helps members navigate complexity and overcome key barriers. This results in a network that translates a much higher volume of information, giving capacity for network impact and illustrating the invaluable nature of peer-to-peer relationships. Thus, anything USDN does to grow the network and strengthen connections within it increases value to its members.

Subtheme 3.1: Members tap into and benefit from the network in a multitude of ways

Members access and use USDN as a resource through a variety of touchpoints. Emotional resourcing and building psychological safety acts as a strategy to reduce emotional labor involved in the field. Relationship building among peers helps members to handle the high level of turn-over in their field. Sharing experiences and strategy builds both understanding and adaptability. Connectivity enables members to quickly find contacts to fill their needs. Small cohorts allow members to translate experiences from one context to another with ease. With the support of the network, local government practitioners are able to pivot into this systems-focused space with the entire knowledge of a network behind them. We heard many examples of the ways in which members are able to lean on each other; some of them include:

- **Phone a Friend.** A member in Sedona, AZ received help from Portland, ME with a virtual open house for a Climate Action Plan. Sedona proceeded to turn around and help Ferndale, MI with the same project. The peer support resulted in a complete shift in approach around the virtual open house.
- **Help Desk.** When a member in Las Cruces, NM was unsure how to proceed with an RFP, they called USDN staff for support. With many staff at USDN coming from a city government background, they are aware of how cities and counties work and what they need.
- **Access to Consultants.** Staff in Asheville, NC learned of recommended consultants from their peer network. This resulted in the city developing its 100% renewable energy roadmap with the help of consultants.
- **Regional Networks.** As a result of a bike share group organized by Evanston, IL; Dearborn, MI was able to find a similar city as a model that did not use a dock system. Through the Michigan Green Communities Network, Dearborn was able to find a city with the “same DNA” and implemented a similar program.

Partner Perspectives

“I have now worked with a number of different networks. I think the level of engagement that is built with USDN is superior to everything else.”

– *Partner, Impact Evaluation Interview*

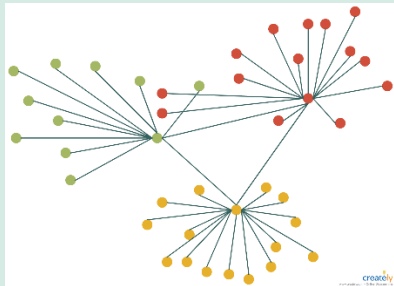
Member Perspectives

USDN's contributions to members' successes were primarily described as the result of learning from and problem solving with peers. The type of support with by far the highest rate of "vital," "significant," and "important" contributions to member success was "Inspiration and learning from the experience of peers" (55%).

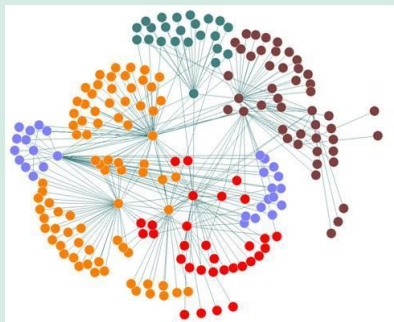
– *USDN, 2020 Member Impact Survey*

Social Network Theory and the Power of Relationships

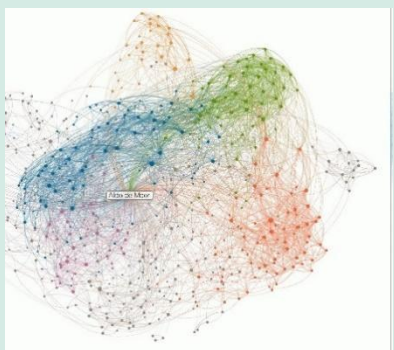
When networks are overlaid in the way that they are in USDN, social groups bridge, strangers form cohorts, and patterns result. Some patterns that have grown from USDN include members contacting other members to solve problems or fill needs, members seeking out small cohorts who have similar characteristics, and members gaining core knowledge from the network before acting. In such a cohesive network, clusters give members confidence to begin a policy or program that they otherwise might not have attempted and further increase capacity of subgroups to collaborate. In a network such as USDN, we see nodes, or members, are connected to multiple clusters, or cohorts.²⁰ There is an emphasis on flexible and collaborative communication, as opposed to a top-down approach. A variety of solutions to uncertainty are established, with multiple avenues for problem-solving. Thus, at its core, USDN is a powerful network. Through working cooperatively and collaboratively, USDN and its members have created an effective way of initiating change with adaptive capacity for the future.²¹



Level 1: Individual nodes dominate. While members are connected in various ways, most actions are at the individual or city level and independent of what other members or clusters may be doing. At this level, there is likely a diversity of reactions to uncertainty and there is little consensus.



Level 2: Members and cohorts are linked and there is increased cohesion and collaboration. However, the linkages tend to be solely like-minded, with an emphasis on singularly-focused learnings groups or regional connections.



Level 3: Nodes, or members, are connected to multiple clusters, or cohorts. There is an emphasis on flexible and collaborative communication, as opposed to a top-down approach. A variety of approaches to uncertainty are established, with multiple avenues for problem-solving among the network.

²⁰ Duke Network Analysis Center Resources, 2019. Available at: <https://dnac.ssri.duke.edu/resources.php>

²¹ F.N. Stokman, in International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences, 2001. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/social-network-analysis>

Subtheme 3.2: Rising member commitment leads to increased contribution

More advanced cities and counties often give back more to the network. This reflects the desire to deepen and strengthen engagement within the network, rather than simply expand it in terms of numbers. By curating and translating value from advanced communities, USDN supports deep reflective work among other members. Through increased contributions and involvement from experienced communities, the network is engaged and thinking about evolving solutions in differing context. The network becomes an evolutionary agent with early adopters actively reducing levels of uncertainty and de-risking new strategies. Some examples of this phenomenon include:

- One contact shared that the more they are involved in USDN, the more they find themselves relying on the relationships formed rather than the formal programming.
- A contact in Portland, OR explained that, as a city that focused on equity work earlier on, they have appreciated both being able to share their processes with other USDN members and see the equity values and actions affirmed by other communities. They said that affirmation from other communities is “extremely important” and helps confirm a sense that “we are in it with other cities.”
- Providence, RI—much like Portland—found themselves leading work on equity and had developed a framework for how to incorporate equity into their work. They found themselves overwhelmed by the amount of interest from other communities and were able to share that framework broadly via USDN. This story is explained in more detail in the case example that follows this theme.
- In the 2020 USDN Impact Survey, only 12% of core members indicated they were not tapping into the network, while 33% of observer members and 24% of specialist members indicated they saw opportunity but were not tapping into the network.

Subtheme 3.3: There is a tension between maintaining close-knit connectivity and an openness to new members

The fact that the network is the most valuable part of USDN can result in a difficult balancing act between maintaining intimacy and fostering close bonds versus welcoming in more members to increase impact on the ground. Different members have experienced different types of programs and support as USDN has evolved during their tenures as a part of the network. As a result, long-standing members have voiced concern about losing the connective tissue and intimate relationships within the network. Various member types have also expressed dissatisfaction with the distinction between core and other members. However, as the network has grown, peer relationships and peer learning remain a pivotal part of the network. One of the highest rated value propositions that USDN is currently delivering on for members is “Offers space for me to learn from and share with peers in other communities” (72%).²² Some examples that illustrate this balancing act are as follows:

- A contact said that USDN’s growth as a peer network has brought with it the challenge of having so many individuals in different geographies and with vastly different backgrounds—different topical areas of expertise, different political ambitions, different directions. They expressed that it can be difficult to create learning sessions that are valuable to everyone given that reality.
- Some members offered a critique of the membership model’s distinction between core members and others; an interviewee described it as a “disservice to USDN.” One contact said, “I feel like I am not able to contribute; it is disempowering given the amount of time and work that we put into USDN.”

²² USDN, Impact Survey 2020.

- A contact expressed a sense of regret that the increasing number of individuals at the annual meeting has meant that “the closeness was gone” and that it was more difficult to form relationships with everyone; this was exacerbated by turnover. This sentiment was echoed in multiple conversations with members who have been with USDN for many years.
- Among core members, 65% indicated that they feel that USDN is delivering very well on offering a space to learn from and share with peers. In comparison, 45% of observer members and 50% of specialist members indicated “delivering very well.”²³
- One interviewee recommended that as USDN grows, it is important to remember and emphasize the importance of the smaller peer cohorts. They shared that “Those more intimate groups have been really helpful in terms of relationship building and trust building.”

Subtheme 3.4: Collective action is an opportunity area for the network

Due to the network foundation of USDN, members are able to collaborate and contribute to achieve successes they could not individually. USDN’s rejection of top-down solutions and a “one size fits all” approach is key to members’ commitment to USDN. This results in members sharing their processes, pursuing innovation, and exploring collective action work. Opportunity for greater impact could come from enabling collective action among members.

- A contact from San Luis Obispo, CA commented that more investment and focus on joint work efforts is the way to go, sharing, “If we have 2–3 cities sign up to collectively do work, it allows us to take more risk.”
- A contact in Portland, OR shared that in order to make bold sustainability-focused actions that push the needle, communities will be stronger if they do it together. Portland cited taking on transportation companies and coming out with strict permitting requirements as an example of potential for collective action amongst members.
- One contact in Asheville, NC expressed that there is an opportunity for USDN to do more on collective action, noting in particular the area of shared GHG action goals.
- 26% of members identified the opportunity to exert collective influence and take collective action with peers as very important or crucial.

Below, a case example provides an illustration of this theme in practice.

²³ Ibid.

Case Example: Mobilizing Members for Better Building Codes

Challenge. Buildings are major contributors to climate change. Depending on the source, buildings account for 30–40% of global carbon emissions. Because the energy demands of buildings are so large, designing and constructing energy efficient buildings can lead to large and vital reductions in energy consumption. A major leverage point to influence energy efficiency in new construction is at the International Code Council (ICC) where codes and standards are determined that all new constructions in the US and Canada need to follow.

Approach. Two USDN members had been deeply involved in the ICC voting processes in the past, and they raised the flag of opportunity to their peers in the Federal Issues Committee of USDN. USDN seized the opportunity and rapidly plugged into the Energy Efficient Codes Coalition knowing that with USDN’s member mobilization power they had a real chance at influencing the 2019 building code vote.

- First, USDN worked with members to vet proposed code changes and then relayed that into the model vote the Energy Efficient Code Coalition advocated for.
- Second, USDN hosted webinars for members and answered a myriad of member questions while coaching members on how to work with their code officials in this voting process.
- Third, USDN conducted personalized outreach to every member encouraging them to participate in the virtual ICC vote.

Real World Impact. USDN mobilized 646 people to vote in the 2019 code cycle, which secured 98 of the 100 proposed energy efficiency measures in the final vote. This turn-out represented a little over half of the voting participants in that voting cycle and was by far the highest participation of local government in any code cycle to date. As a result, today we have the most energy efficient building code ever made.

Theme 4: USDN directly enables equity-centered action in local communities

Equity is not a sector; it is an approach that needs to be practiced and embedded across a body of work. As such, it should not be siloed, whether that is in local government work or in an organization’s evaluation. An indication of USDN’s effectiveness with equity is that we saw evidence connecting local equity impact to USDN in all themes of this report. For example, we strongly observed local government impact in equity as a result of USDN facilitating a ladder of engagement from inspiration, to education, to action, to impact (see Theme 6 for detail). Likewise, the support USDN provides members to gain essential knowledge and skills about equity accelerates and catalyzes members to take action (see Theme 2 for detail).

USDN has a unique role in helping sustainability professionals in local government tackle a key challenge in a larger struggle: how can communities achieve ambitious GHG mitigation goals while also meaningfully reducing disparities? Historically, these have been seen as competing needs by the white-majority mainstream climate movement, even though the two problems result from the same root cause of broken systems. USDN is playing a crucial role in helping its members explore that challenge and create solutions in part by helping members see how equity is embedded (or not) in everything they work on. Everyone in the sustainability world is struggling

with this challenge, and USDN may be uniquely well-positioned to help people address it, in part due to the groundwork they have laid with their members to help them build these skills. USDN encourages its members to function at “the nexus”—the intersection of equity, resilience, and greenhouse gas mitigation.

As a national nonprofit, USDN brings together four key components to impact equitable sustainability outcomes in local communities. These are:

1. A network culture that deeply values equity principles.
2. Effective national programs that provide members with the knowledge and skills they need.
3. Local leaders who are positioned to take local action.
4. Support for BIPOC local government sustainability leaders.

The subthemes in this section elaborate on the impact USDN accelerates for each component. All four components are essential to achieve local outcomes. For example, if USDN had the best national programs but thin access to local leaders, the programs wouldn’t be utilized as frequently and deeply as they are now. If USDN maintained access to local leaders, but equity wasn’t a strong shared value, there would be scattered impact as opposed to the widescale national impact we observed during this evaluation. Therefore, to continue accelerating equity impact in local communities, USDN needs to continue balancing the rigor, support, and resources between these components.

Subtheme 4.1: USDN propels equity culture among members

Culture provides a framework of norms, principles, and knowledge that influences the behaviors and actions of individuals who share that culture. When people share the same culture, it heavily influences their actions. USDN creates a strong unique culture for members. USDN’s culture sets the norm that members need to pursue equity and racial justice in order to succeed in their local government sustainability objectives. This shared norm may be co-developed based on other cultures members are part of (e.g., local community, faith, etc.), but USDN uniquely prepares local sustainability leaders with technical knowledge, practical know-how, coaching, and grants to implement solutions from their position of power in local government, as you will see evidenced in subsequent themes.

A formal recognition of the value USDN places on their culture of equity is present in USDN’s shared equity principles. USDN utilized the network organizing infrastructure to explicitly articulate shared equity principles for local sustainability leaders. These principles were co-created between USDN members of the Equity Advisory Committee, POC Support Initiative, USDN staff leadership, and USDN equity partner Kapwa Consulting.

USDN has accelerated the cultural expectation among members to embed these equity principles into their local government work.

These equity principles are:

Member Perspectives

“I went to the first peer to peer exchange on equity in 2014. Since then, I’d done a large equity training with USDN every year and I’ve gotten multiple grants. USDN gave me the foundational knowledge to work in this area and grants to apply what I’d learned. I am so much more aware of my power as a white man in government. Now almost everything I do in my job has a serious equity focus. That wouldn’t have happened on its own.”

– Member, *Impact Evaluation Interview*

1. The root causes of climate change, environmental injustice, and racial inequity are the same.
2. Successful solutions prioritize the most marginalized.
3. Prioritizing marginalized communities means leading with race.
4. Equity is a professional competency.
5. Equity is responsible governance.
6. Diversity is an asset.

We heard many examples of how USDN is propelling equity culture among members:

- In the 2020 Member Impact Survey, 80% of members indicated equity and community engagement as the highest priority areas of their work, surpassing GHG reduction for the first time.
- A contact in Honolulu, HI shared their perception that USDN is “normalizing human-centered work within local government sustainability solutions.”
- We heard contacts express that USDN has pushed the network toward equity, establishing it as a “social norm”—one contact in Fort Collins, CO summed it up as “You aren’t keeping up if you aren’t doing [equity].”
- Participants in the Richmond Peer Learning Exchange on equity (explored in more detail later in this report) shared that the Exchange was crucial for their work on equity. One contact said, “What we learned in the Exchange became the north star for our work on climate equity.”
- Another contact shared that “USDN hugely legitimized the concept that equity is a part of sustainability work.” They shared that “USDN gave me the language and positive peer pressure to know that this is where things are headed in our field—it would not have happened without USDN.”
- A contact in Anchorage, AK shared that USDN has made it clear that putting equity front and center in sustainability work is critical, and that it needs to be incorporated right from the start.

USDN Helps Members Understand How Equity Connects to Everything They Do

USDN not only connects its members to each other (as explored in Theme 3) but helps them build an understanding of interconnections between topics, departments, regions, and more. This is a fundamental part of the “special sauce” of what makes USDN so different. This also means USDN empowers members to notice and nurture the interconnections they learn about through USDN programming. The more members engage with USDN activities, the more they connect with the fundamental model of network-driven solutions, and relationships, partnerships, and connections as a sustainable source of meaningful change.

Members may come to USDN by word-of-mouth, and not realize how different their experience will be from other organizations with which they may have interacted. Instead, members quickly learn USDN is an adaptable and flexible organization—not a place for one-size-fits-all approaches. As an organization, USDN provides its staff with freedom, encouragement, and support to be creative and think outside the box. As a result, the member experience is rich with applied ideas and tailored approaches. Staff and member communities work together to solve problems, formulate ideas, and drive solutions.

USDN Helps Members Understand How Equity Connects to Everything They Do

The problem-solving support USDN offers members is especially important to impact equitable outcomes because, historically, sustainability offices have been solving their problems with only environmental drivers in mind. As members engage in USDN they see that equity needs to be a driver in problem solving as well, which results in stronger solutions. Our interviews and focus groups found several such examples of member experiences.

- Several renewable energy practitioners in USDN communities described how USDN helped them come to center equity in their work, rather than layering equity on at the end. For example, a contact in Blacksburg, VA credited the culture of centering equity within USDN for helping get equity work integrated in their renewable energy efforts.
- A contact in Philadelphia, PA was working on buildings policy, and through their work with USDN came to understand they needed an approach rooted in collaboration with their community. This helped them realize that to make further progress on building decarbonization, they needed to engage with people who live and work in the buildings to make sure they were benefiting from these efforts.
- Some members described coming to understand and pursue a broader set of equitable mobility solutions in their communities based on their work in the network. Through this approach, the work becomes not just about putting more electric vehicles on the road, but promoting equitable community benefits, including infrastructure, that make it easier for people not to need vehicles.

Subtheme 4.2: USDN prepares local sustainability leaders with the skills and knowledge to apply equity principles and practices in local communities

USDN equity culture alone is not enough to impact outcomes on the ground. The work to transform culture into action requires that people internalize cultural values, are equipped with knowledge, and possess skills to take action. USDN programs co-create technical knowledge with members and provide resources for members to apply that knowledge while building their skills, all with coaching and technical support.

For example, USDN's equity training, the Equity Foundations Course, teaches members to assess how race and local government relate historically and currently, equips members with shared language and frameworks, and coaches them in integrating equity into their policies, planning and programs. USDN members who have taken the Equity Foundations course reported the following takeaways:

- 93% had a better understanding of key racial equity definitions
- 90% had a better understanding of how to choose a good project to advance equity and how to build a strong equity team

Member Perspectives

For members highly engaged in USDN's equity programming in the past two years, 91% report that USDN has played a vital or significant role in their most impactful actions, and 85% indicate that USDN added value to their equity efforts.

– USDN, 2020 Member Impact Survey

- 87% felt better prepared to craft a compelling story about racial equity and sustainability in their community²⁴

As of January 2021, 291 individuals from 80 different jurisdictions have taken this course; this represents 21% of USDN membership. USDN's program support also includes grant resources for members to apply their learning in their local context through the Innovation Fund and Partners for Places programs. Some examples of how USDN gives people the education on equity to apply in their community include:

- A contact in Lawrence Douglas County, KS told us how USDN made the central role that equity must play in sustainability work very clear, how “they are joined at the hip.” They said, “USDN put language and framing around how to implement equity in sustainability work.”
- Members ranked equity as the top area where USDN contributed to their success in comparison to 14 other topic areas such as decarbonization, mobilization, renewable energy, etc.²⁵
- A contact in Washington, DC explained that USDN’s grant funding from the Innovation Fund and Partners for Places has been instrumental in bringing their equity work “to the next level” as they built relationships with community partners.
- One contact in Fort Collins, CO noted how USDN orients and trains new members, giving them what they need to get started on equity, and provides them access to resources that help them start doing equity work very quickly.
- A contact in Honolulu, HI who said that USDN provided them with one-on-one coaching specifically on their equity strategies expressed that “If I hadn't had USDN, I am not sure how successful I would have been understanding local government power and role in the community. USDN sets the standards.”

Subtheme 4.3: Local sustainability leaders take equity-centered action as a result of what they have learned through USDN

We observed three significant action areas where sustainability leaders have taken local action to pursue racial equity in their work as a direct result of their participation in USDN. USDN provides unique value because the nature of the programming is highly customized to address work for leaders within a city or county government.

Applying an equity frame to municipal work. Local sustainability leaders often lead planning efforts. These activities are critical junctions to integrate framing to achieve racial equity outcomes through government policies and programs. USDN members understand applying an equity frame is a best practice and are implementing this practice in their communities.

- When asked in the 2020 Impact Survey about their need for USDN support in order to achieve success, members ranked equity as the highest need, particularly how to apply an equity framework to a program or project.
- A contact in Providence, RI shared that receiving a Partners for Places grant to develop a local framework for incorporating equity in their work later birthed their Racial Justice and Equity Committee. (For more detail on this impact story, see the case example in this report, “Providence, RI: Novice to National Leader.”)

²⁴ USDN, <https://www.usdn.org/equity-foundations-training.html#/>

²⁵ USDN, Impact Survey 2020.

- One member in Saanich, BC shared that they adopted the USDN equity principles in their climate action plan. This laid the groundwork for their community engagement which included surveying bus riders on their priorities, engaging youth, and hiring a translator to reach out to Chinese community members.
- A contact in Fort Collins, CO said, “We’re now centering equity in other plans beyond climate due to our USDN journey, including our hazard mitigation plan and housing plan.” They also shared that they have done a pilot on analyzing all departmental budgets from an equity lens.

Building equity-centered culture in local government. For members to succeed in their equity work, they need colleagues in local government who value and share this culture as well. USDN members are increasingly leading this culture change in their organizations. This is illustrated by:

- A contact in Providence, RI shared that they have used the USDN Equity Foundations training locally, having conducted the training with their regional network and Rhode Island environmental nonprofits.
- In Lawrence Douglas County, KS, a contact shared that they integrated equity advisors into their recovery team for COVID-19 emergency management.
- The Honolulu, HI sustainability department has begun working with their human resources department to engage all staff in equity training through their professional development catalog.
- Several members have used the Equity Foundations course to train other municipal staff. The Saanich, BC sustainability office included their planning department in the Equity Foundations course; through that experience they developed common language and a shared approach to move forward. In Ann Arbor, MI, a contact shared that they adapted the Equity Foundations curriculum and used it to train more than 70 city employees. In Fort Collins, CO, their sustainability staff took the Foundations training and then conducted it on their own with 15 other staff; they now use the training with their climate action plan community advisory committee.

Building relationships and sharing power with BIPOC community members. Targeted universalism is a design approach that theorizes that if you design solutions for the most marginalized people, all people will thrive. To center marginalized people in problem-solving requires building deep trust and sharing power with people in the community. USDN has normalized this approach and members are living examples of the mantra “If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.” We are seeing increasing numbers of USDN members using targeted universalism in their work. Some examples include:

- A contact in Washington, DC shared that their participation in USDN activities has shaped the way they apply for grants. “We used to center ourselves when we applied for grants. Now we center community groups to direct the use of those funds. For example, we pre-engaged a Latinx community group for them to determine what we were going to apply for in the Partners for Places grant.”
- One member said that, inspired by the work done with USDN, they now focus on people-centered processes, and building relationships to understand what people want and then figuring out how sustainability plays into those needs. They said, “We now build long-term relationships instead of month-long advisory groups.”
- A contact in Fort Collins, CO shared, “When our USDN Equity Diversity and Inclusion fellow came on board, they helped us think about equitable engagement, stakeholder mapping and created the plan for hiring community organizations to lead community engagement.”
- A contact in Honolulu, HI shared that USDN taught them how to get around the procurement obstacles in order to contract with frontline community leaders to facilitate and lead community dialogues. Rather than the city staff leading that work, they were able to transition the power to the community group.

Subtheme 4.4: USDN built and fortified a pipeline for equity-focused staff and BIPOC leaders in local sustainability

Racial representation matters. It especially matters in places where power resides, and in the case of USDN that power is in members' roles as local government leaders. As with many local government roles, municipal sustainability roles have largely been filled by white people. USDN acknowledges that to deeply impact local equity-centered action, government leaders supporting these efforts need to be more diverse. To address this, USDN leads two programs focused on increasing representation in the field: the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Fellows Program and the People of Color Support Initiative (POCSI).

The Fellows Program develops a pipeline of talented, highly skilled professionals to serve in local government sustainability programs by funding the startup of those positions. Once hired, fellows assist USDN members to dismantle the cultural and systemic barriers to inclusion for people of color in sustainability positions while completing important sustainability projects that are responsive to community needs. The POC Support Initiative is a space for members and staff who identify as a person of color. The goals are to:

1. Build a more culturally responsive USDN (in partnership with staff)
2. Increase the number of members and staff of color within the network
3. Establish a resourced support space for POC within the network

As a result, there have been 26 USDN EDI fellows in 22 communities. Of these, 23 have been BIPOC, which has greatly increased the access to opportunity for DEI professionals interested in local government and sustainability. Furthermore, USDN's newer participants are more racially diverse than longer term participants: 29% of participants who have been active for less than a year are people of color compared to 14% of 3+ year participants. Some examples of this in USDN member offices include the following:²⁶

- Fort Collins, CO valued their EDI fellow so much that they hired them as a full-time employee.
- As a direct result of working with USDN, Washington DC's sustainability director hired a dedicated staff person to focus on equity.
- USDN's People of Color Support Initiative has been invaluable for some members. One shared, "I joined and helped co-found POCSI. That has been the most valuable space for me in USDN. That is the group of folks that I trust the most."

Below, a case example in Minneapolis, MN illustrates this theme in practice.

Member Perspectives

"The POC Support Initiative was critical in me staying in local government sustainability. It was really hard to talk about equity and sustainability in my former community, which is very conservative. Working in a space where people's actions told me equity wasn't valued was very hard. If I didn't have that support group, I probably would have pivoted to another form of work."

– Member, Impact Evaluation Interview

²⁶ USDN, Impact Survey 2020.

Case Example: Minneapolis, MN – Resilience Planning to Support Indigenous Communities

Challenge: In Minneapolis, MN communities of color, especially indigenous groups, experience unequal health, wealth, employment, and education outcomes. On top of these inequities, these communities are overburdened by environmental stressors including stationary pollution sources, brownfield sites, and blight and substandard housing. The challenge at hand for the Office of Sustainability in Minneapolis was to increase BIPOC participation when planning solutions at the nexus of health, energy, and GHG reduction. Minneapolis Sustainability Department’s Little Earth Resilience Hubs demonstrate this approach well.

Little Earth Resilience Hub

USDN has been a key influence in the equity transition. The Minneapolis Sustainability Office “didn’t always approach planning in this way,” says a USDN member there. The City of Minneapolis’s Little Earth Resilience Hub program started with the USDN Equity Foundations course. The course allowed the Office of Sustainability to engage among office staff about climate as a human issue, rather than a solely a technical issue. This resulted in the Office of Sustainability using a framing of anti-racism in their sustainability work moving forward.

Beyond the Equity Foundations course, the annual meeting further served as a source of inspiration. Minneapolis applied for a USDN grant around climate adaptation in community engagement. The grant provided funding for Minneapolis to conduct a climate vulnerability assessment and workshop to learn what vulnerabilities the community saw.

To implement that workshop, Minneapolis partnered with the Little Earth Community, the first affordable housing complex in the US that gives preference to American Indians. The workshop allowed the city staff to ask and understand the priorities and concerns of the Little Earth community. When the Minneapolis staff heard about resilience hubs from the USDN network and Baltimore, the Office of Sustainability applied and was awarded another grant from the Health Impact Project to develop a collaboration with the Department of Health. This led to a continuing series of community workshops around emergency preparedness, weatherization, and developing resilience hubs. As a result of USDN equity training, the city was able to strengthen relationships with the community, shift power to residents, and move toward addressing health and environmental inequities.

Results: Coordinating this inclusive process helped to re-envision what engagement looked like for the Minneapolis Office of Sustainability and community partners. The structures, systems, and processes of government are difficult to understand for community members yet are crucial for making strategic decisions on whether to work within the system or recommend alternatives to the system. Capacity building around technical information helped bring in community members to be decision-makers. It

Member Perspectives

"I had zero budget and have partners to this day that would not be at the table if it were not for USDN resources."

– Member, *Impact Evaluation Interview*

Case Example: Minneapolis, MN – Resilience Planning to Support Indigenous Communities

takes time and patience to on-board community members on different topics and helps greatly to pair community members with agency technical experts. The shift in approach in the Office of Sustainability will lead to impactful changes in the future as this trend continues.

Theme 5: USDN is a driving force of innovation in the field

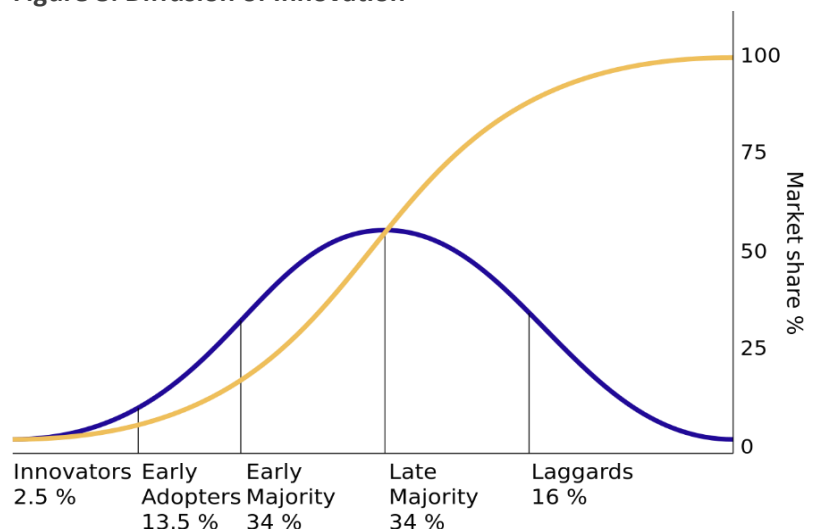
We heard from both members and external partners that USDN is viewed as a generative engine of new ideas in sustainability, including in racial equity and community collaboration. Member communities often can be seen at the front of the field in innovating and adopting new ideas. Staff and members enjoy a collaborative relationship that frequently sparks these new ideas, and USDN has fostered a productive environment for the organic development, piloting, adapting, and distributing of these innovations as they emerge. USDN staff offer insight, inspiration, technical expertise, and other resources to help drive these innovations. While these patterns of innovation are valuable, it is difficult to fully serve the needs of the leading-edge innovating communities, the middle, and the novice members at the same time; in many instances these communities require tailored assistance.

Subtheme 5.1: USDN communities often lead the field in taking action—as innovators to blaze the path and as early adopters creating momentum

Diffusion of innovation is often represented by an "S-curve" in which innovations incubated by a small group of innovators are taken up over time by larger and larger groups, starting with early adopters then early/late majority and finally laggards. Through this process, leading practice becomes common practice.

Data on renewable energy action illustrates the leading role that USDN members have played as innovators and early adopters. Through its "Ready for 100" initiative, the Sierra Club advocates for cities to make commitments to using 100% renewable energy and tracks cities that have made such commitments. Starting with a small group of cities that made such commitments prior to 2013, the number of cities has taken off,

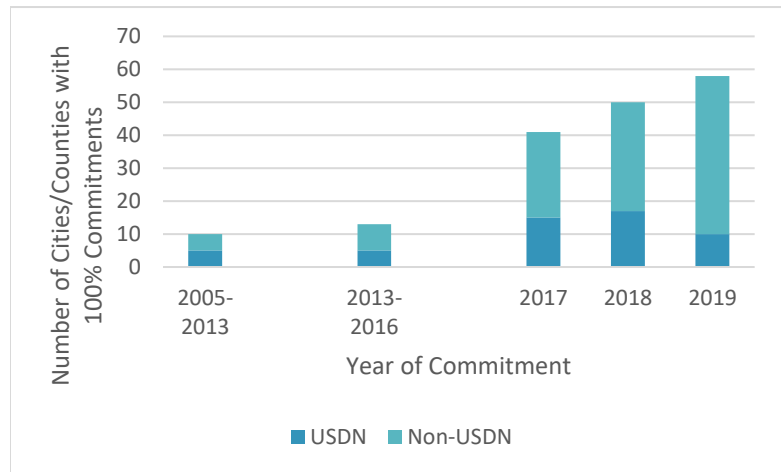
Figure 8: Diffusion of Innovation



reflecting the type of diffusion and adoption typical of the S-curve model. While USDN core members now only account for a third of US cities that have made 100% renewable energy commitments, they were half of the early innovators and comprised a significant early component of a surge of commitments that began in 2017 and broadened out to non-USDN partners over the period 2017–2019.²⁷

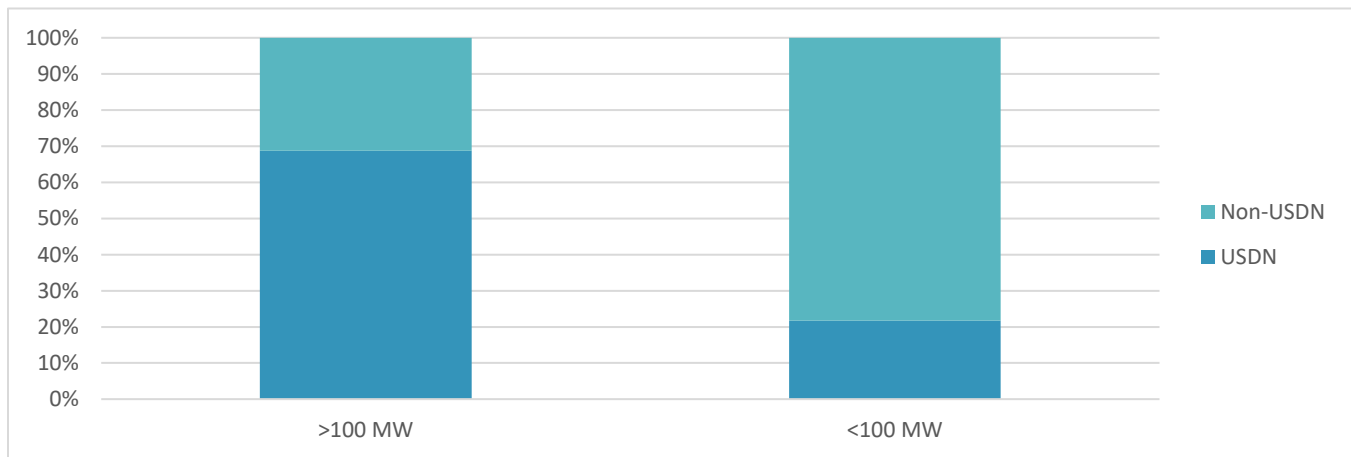
A similar pattern of early leadership among USDN members for large-scale procurement of renewable energy is evident in data on renewable energy procurement actions by cities and counties, which are tracked by the Local Government Renewables Tracker supported through the American Cities Climate Challenge.²⁸ While USDN core members only make up 27% of local governments that have procured renewable energy, nearly 70% of those that have made large procurements over 100 MW are USDN members.

Figure 9: Timeline of Renewable Energy Commitments



Source: Sierra Club "Ready for 100" data; USDN membership data.

Figure 10: USDN Core Members Make Up Nearly 70% of Local Governments with Procurements Over 100 MW



Source: Local Government Renewables Action Tracker data; USDN membership data

Subtheme 5.2: USDN’s collaborative relationship with members drives the innovation of new and creative ideas

USDN structures its support for members in a way that fosters collaborative innovation both among members and between members and USDN staff. Staff and members collaborate to identify challenges, create ideas,

²⁷ Sierra Club "Ready for 100" data; USDN membership data

²⁸ American Cities Climate Challenge, Local Government Renewables Tracker: <https://cityrenewables.org/local-government-renewables-action-tracker/>

generate solutions, and spread them to others. USDN collaborations have produced dozens of new ideas now in action throughout North America. One example is the development of building energy benchmarking, performance standards, and electrification policies. Another example is the creation of community resilience hubs that are working to establish hazard mitigation plans that recognize and mitigate climate risk.

This pattern of collaborative innovation does not follow a strict linear roadmap, but a general outline of some common stages could be described as follows:

- A small group identifies a need, challenge, or problem, and engages in collaborative idea-generation in small learning groups, sessions at the annual meeting, conversations with staff, etc.
- A newly germinated idea will be initially tested by pilot communities, often supported by USDN Innovation Grants. These grants are a key tool in the innovation process, as they offer a relatively easy-to-access injection of funds to try out something new.
- Piloted ideas are refined based on practice and learning, often in topic-based cohorts.
- Best practices are diffused to the broader network through guidance, best practices, frameworks, webinars, etc.

USDN's diverse partnerships with outside organizations, such as Kapwa Consulting (their external equity partner), or the Rocky Mountain Institute (RMI), the World Resource Institute (WRI), or Institute for Market Transformation (IMT), help support leading, innovative organizations and connect members to them. USDN will then roll innovations out to the broader programming to reach its membership at a wider level. Much of the ideas that are produced by USDN are a result of this collaboration between staff and member communities, trying out ideas—not all of which work, but many do.

We heard examples of this pathway of collaborative innovation between members and USDN staff in many of our interviews and focus groups. A few examples are below.

- The evolution of building energy benchmarking and performance standards in the US can trace part of its roots to early USDN investments in a member-generated project, which laid the groundwork for policies that required larger building owners to disclose energy use. USDN went on to incubate and support the sharing and spread of those policies through peer learning groups, which were supported by a partnership with IMT.
- USDN staff are currently collaborating with members to develop a guide to help communities replace the typical climate action plan framework with a new “nexus” model that centers community priorities. Together, staff and members have been developing, testing, and adapting this guide that can eventually be disseminated broadly across the network.
- The case example below, “Providence, RI: Novice to National Leader,” provides an example of this roadmap for innovation. Members used knowledge acquired from USDN training to replicate that training model, which they then grew into applied work in environmental justice, equity, and community collaboration in their local government. Interest on the part of other members across the network spread rapidly, and led to the Providence team securing a USDN Innovation Grant to effectively spread their lessons in a packaged framework, which is now being implemented by members across the organization.

Subtheme 5.3: Tailored offerings are needed to fully serve the needs of leaders, the middle, and novice members

While many USDN members are leaders pushing the edge of innovation and creating momentum through early adoption, the growth and expanding breadth of USDN's membership creates tensions about how to meet the needs of leading communities as well as communities that are farther behind the curve on sustainability. From its origins as an effort to engage leading communities, USDN has evolved to include communities with a broad range of capacity, including those who have joined USDN to be able to learn and “catch up.” As new areas of focus are introduced, even communities that lead in one area may find they need to catch up in other areas. There are challenges inherent in serving the needs of members across the spectrum of innovators, early adopters, early/middle majority, and laggards. They need different things.

The cohort of USDN member cities in the American Cities Climate Challenge (ACCC) working with USDN and partner organizations on renewable energy is an example of how USDN does well at homing in on the needs of members who are doing specific, technical work. Seventy-five percent of ACCC cohort cities rate USDN support as vital or significant to their most impactful actions, and they expect to need more USDN support moving forward than their non-ACCC cohort peers do. At the same time, several representatives from cities on the cutting edge in particular areas noted in interviews that they may not always rely significantly on USDN technical assistance or the peer network to advance their work in areas in which they already lead. Often, these leading cities need very localized solutions and problem-solving.²⁹ In some cases, leading cities know more than most other USDN member communities and even technical assistance providers. Several described how they have evolved into providing more into the peer network than they take from it. For example, a representative from Boston working on building energy efficiency—an area where Boston has long been a leader—said he is already well connected to counterparts in other leading cities and doesn't rely on USDN for this network. Contacts working on energy efficiency and renewable energy in Washington DC, Salt Lake City, and Cincinnati—all cities leading on clean energy—said much of their involvement with USDN is to provide insights back to other cities to follow their lead.

Communities that are leading in some areas, such as renewable energy, may still need USDN's help and support in areas that are new to them. Contacts in communities that said they rely less on USDN for areas in which they already lead, noted that they still rely on USDN to learn new things, such as equity. In one of the renewable energy focus groups, for example, participants emphasized that USDN has been most helpful to them in understanding the intersection between renewable energy and equity, a topic relatively new to them. USDN helps communities climb the learning curve on new topics, and it is reasonable to expect that this will continue to be true as new topics continue to emerge.

Some focus group members also noted that USDN could do a better job on-boarding and supporting communities at the other end of the spectrum: those that just being exposed to sustainability solutions, especially smaller communities with less capacity. Improved on-boarding would help them get started and feel part of the network. Programming would provide basic foundational support to cities that are just starting out in particular areas. It would reflect what is feasible for cities with less capacity and resources, for whom examples from leading communities that have ample resources and support from elected leaders might be inspiring but

²⁹ USDN has some models for supporting problem-solving in localized contexts. For example, many members spoke highly of their use of one-on-one coaching time with the equity consultant as a way to grapple with individual challenges in the equity space.

out of reach. One contact noted that the Small Office Affinity Group is a good foundation to grow from. Others noted that dues were a barrier to smaller communities.

Below, a case example in Providence, RI and one from Alameda County, CA provide illustrations of this theme in practice.

Case Example: Providence, RI – Novice to National Leader

Challenge: The state capital of Rhode Island, Providence, ranks third highest in the country for income inequality as demonstrated by white people being 2.3 times more likely to own their own home than people of color and the wealthiest residents make 16.7 times—about \$189,000—more than their poorest neighbors.

From Novice to National Leader: A newly-appointed sustainability director turned to USDN to learn how their role in local government could contribute to a better quality of life for their neighbors. At that early point in the evolution of the field of equity in local sustainability, there were not yet many peers with experience in equity-centered sustainability work.

First, Providence participated in the inaugural Equity Foundations training course. They went on to adapt and replicate that training with their department and other environmental leaders throughout Rhode Island. The trainings, convenings (which included community partners), and other support from USDN helped build relationships with community partners. These relationships and USDN’s support were a critical foundation for the community engagement with Providence’s frontline communities that would soon follow. It also led to a grant award from Partners for Places that would ultimately support the creation of the Racial & Environmental Justice Committee (REJC) in 2017, a committee to advise the sustainability office to ensure policies and programs are equitable. This community collaboration resulted in many improvements to local policy. For example, plastic bag bans, which were a popular policy at the time, typically add a surcharge when the consumer chooses a single-use bag. The REJC knew this would place an unfair burden on the most disadvantaged members of the community and were able to alter the course of the policy to ensure it wouldn't negatively impact frontline communities. It also established the platform for the creation of Providence’s Climate Justice Plan, which was co-created by the City and historically underserved communities via representation on the REJC. All of this work has led to substantial shifts in decision-making. For example, shortly after the Climate Justice Plan was released, a waste transfer station was proposed in an overburdened community. Because of the recent commitments, the City put the necessary resources behind finding a way to deny the project, even though on a surface level, it appeared to be allowed by-right in the zoning code. The City is now in the process of revising its Comprehensive Plan—and then the Zoning Code—to ensure that future developments will consider environmental justice.

This feedback loop of knowledge, skills, and experience accelerated further when Providence noticed they were getting more and more questions from other USDN members about how they were making so much progress. They then won an Innovation Fund Grant and, in partnership with Seattle, Portland, and Washington DC, distilled what was working in their communities and disseminated it to peers through the network. That project contributed to the development of the Spectrum of Community Engagement to

Case Example: Providence, RI – Novice to National Leader

Ownership Framework cited by many sustainability directors as the core framework for their journey to transition power to community members in municipal planning.

Through Providence's six-year journey from equity novice to national leader, USDN was supporting the work at every step, enabling them to apply their learning through action on a specific project. All of the progress in Providence was then leveraged by USDN's peer network which adapted it to become national best practice.

Real Life Impact: Building on this work, Providence centered equity in their Community Choice Aggregation (CCA) plan. From the beginning, the sustainability office prepared a CCA plan to ensure the most vulnerable weren't harmed by inserting criteria to pursue as much renewable energy as possible without raising prices. Based on years of building trusting relationships, the sustainability office was able to amplify the voice of historically underserved communities which resulted in a plan that will pursue as much renewable energy as possible without raising the prices. Those who want to pay more for more renewable energy will have that option. Those who do not want any additional renewable energy and want to maximize savings will have that option as well.

Case Example: Alameda County, CA – Preparedness Is a State of Being

Challenge. Limited funding for community engagement and communication challenges with hard-to-reach populations created significant barriers in getting Alameda County's smoke communication protocol up and running. Alameda County voiced that they would not have been able to do the program without USDN support.

Wildfire Smoke Response. With fire seasons becoming longer and more regular, Alameda County has become accustomed to a grey haze settling over the East Bay, blown in from fire across the state. Yet with no consistent messaging, residents were left uncertain about how to take precautions from the smoke and the smoke's resulting effect on human health. To expand communication to the public during wildfire smoke events, Alameda County's Sustainability Office partnered with the Public Health Department, Office of Emergency Services, and Fire Department to address how agencies respond to poor air quality events and how to effectively communicate to populations most vulnerable to smoke impacts.

Alameda County's fundamental goal was being responsive to the needs of the community; they therefore looked at communities within the county to determine who was most underserved. While brainstorming methods for smoke communication, the Sustainability Office looked at fellow USDN members, with Contra Costa County inspiring the idea for heat vulnerability mapping and workshops. They shared, "We feel that USDN's focus on adaptation and frontline vulnerable communities helped us articulate what groups to reach out to." Smoke inhalation was of particular concern for those in the county that had

Case Example: Alameda County, CA – Preparedness Is a State of Being

respiratory issues. To address this, the Sustainability Office engaged with clients through public health partners, such as Asthma Start.

Wishing to expand the program further, Alameda County applied for an Innovation Fund grant to create a cross-agency effort to develop a smoke communications protocol. Before the USDN funding, the work was theoretical. The largest thing that USDN allowed Alameda County to do was take the project from a single agency to multiple agencies. Furthermore, because of USDN's outreach and community collaboration focus, the Sustainability Office decided to put out a survey. They heard from the community that residents aren't likely to sign up for an alert service directly and are more likely to get information from a trusted source. To increase accessibility and trust with frontline communities, Alameda County decided to go beyond an English-only alert system.

Once funded by the grant, Alameda County began the workshop adaptation and implementation project. Using resources from adaptation assessments, Alameda County developed a program to engage vulnerable populations, work across agencies, and establish a consistent communication protocol. Even when staff received pushback on the connection between equity and public health, Alameda County shared, "one of the reasons that the work and public health connection is important is that past government programs have created and enacted racial inequity through policy making. It is important to recognize history." USDN's equity training served as a basis for this acknowledgement and the program's community engagement focus. Alameda County specifically cited USDN's Equitable Community Driven Climate Preparedness guide as a key resource for the program.

Other USDN resources and support for the workshop came from coaching with USDN. Alameda County used this coaching time to discuss equity, targeted universalism, and forensic mapping in the context of the County. Through such conversations around equity, Alameda County adjusted their procurement process and included RFP requirements for small, local, emerging business contractors that understand the community. Through the workshops and subsequent community-centered programs, Alameda County is working to become a more collaborative government.

Real World Impact. As a result of the grant, the wildfire smoke response led to three focus groups dedicated to listening to the needs of seniors, families with young children, non-English speakers, and people with respiratory issues. Additional outreach targeted towards low-income households and outdoor workers was conducted. In addition to engaging vulnerable populations, Alameda County hosted two working groups to develop processes for how information dissemination will occur with the smoke communication protocol being codified. Alameda County has instituted a communication protocol for smoke days based on the feedback received during these workshops.

On top of community engagement efforts, Alameda County convened half-day workshops to discuss effective ways of messaging based on past experiences with wildfire smoke and findings from the community engagement efforts. Due to the cross-agency work, the Alameda County interim project public health manager noted how the smoke workshops built cross-agency procedures. Alameda County commented, "We were better prepared for COVID because we had done this cross-agency work."

Theme 6: USDN helps members progress along a ladder from idea to impact

USDN provides the programs and support needed for members to grow and receive what they need to progress at the right time. USDN provides resources across broad activities to meet member interests. As a result, USDN is a space that helps members become inspired and educated about opportunities, motivates them to pursue important action, and supports them to implement change.

The USDN network helps cities and counties move along a ladder of engagement—from inspiration to education to action to impact. By developing meaningful and substantial peer-to-peer connections and offering technical resources, USDN shortens the distance from brainstorming to impact on the ground. Members have highlighted the value of smaller peer networks or localized learning groups, which allow for customization and translation across contexts. Direct models like this have resulted in members accelerating their path to implementation. Coaching and ad-hoc supported conversations have further provided critical feedback for members. Professional capacity building, especially Equity Foundations training, has given members the knowledge they need to approach programs and policies through a lens of environmental justice going forward. Through offering insight, technical expertise, peer connections, coaching, and other highly relevant resources at the moment of need, USDN supports a range of members, regardless of discipline, organization, or location. Some examples include the following:

- A member in Leon County, FL commented on the strong contribution that USDN has made to supporting local government sustainability progress at a pace that would not have been possible without the “collective learning, sharing, funding, assistance, and heart that USDN provides.”
- A member in Knoxville, TN rooted USDN’s greatest contribution in the facilitation of idea exchange. Whether it be a vehicle to develop ideas or physical in-person exchange, USDN has accelerated the ability of sustainability professionals to implement goals more efficiently.
- A contact in Fort Collins, CO shared how USDN orients new members to what they need to do on equity and provides access to resources to start doing the work quicker, saying “It is a huge accelerant.”

Subtheme 6.1: Inspiration: USDN helps communities germinate ideas that grow over time

USDN's focus on providing inspiration transitions members from being unfamiliar with a topic, to motivated toward addressing it. Inspiration serves as a relational piece for members. It is in this stage that members hear what others have done and are exposed to potential. This is illustrated by the following examples.

- A contact in Tempe, AZ shared about the numerous ideas that came from USDN that the city has adopted. These included decision-making structures, COVID-19 emergency funding focused on low income individuals and small businesses, energy and transportation solutions, and funding focused on energy justice issues.
- A contact in the City of Asheville, NC commented how USDN is always their first stop in the energy space, saying “when an idea is percolating, USDN is the place that I go to see who has done it.”
- Inspiration and learning from the experience of peers in the context of applying an equity framework to a project or program was the rated the highest for USDN contribution to member success.
 - 32% of survey respondents indicated that the USDN provided a vital or significant contribution to "Inspiration and learning from the experience of peers."

- 23% of survey respondents indicated that the USDN provided a vital or significant contribution to "Developing new ideas and problem solving with peers."³⁰

Subtheme 6.2: Education: USDN helps members move from inspiration to action through deep learning and expertise

USDN provides a broad array of resources from learning groups to Equity Foundations to expert coaching to technical training. It is these resources that allow members to become educated and equipped for action. This is illustrated by:

- Members' highest-ranked USDN contributions centered around education. Seventy-eight percent of members indicated that USDN's offerings of trusted information about current urban sustainability issues and best practices were delivering very well.
 - 18% of survey respondents indicated that the USDN and partners provided a vital or significant contribution through curated resources/training/coaching.³¹
- Several members in renewable energy focus groups shared how USDN/WRI/RMI provided vital contributions by helping their teams acquire in-depth knowledge of PPAs and learn how to create renewable energy project RFPs through opportunities like the Renewable Energy Late-Stage Implementation Jam Session, which resulted in the development of an RFP template.
- A contact in Honolulu, HI commented how USDN provided them with an equity foundation from which to navigate. Without the resources or support from within their government and no expectations for equity, they shared how "USDN really helped me understand the government psychology around strategy and power analysis, and re-oriented me to this new space that I was not privy to."
- A member in Asheville, NC commented "I think hands down the peer learning exchange opportunities have been most helpful." The city was going to install solar streetlights on their greenway. Asheville was able to make the case for doing trenching for a utility pole vs. the cost for the solar lights based on information from a peer who had done the cost analysis. Having the opportunity to reach out to people and having access to a network that is so engaged with timeliness is a great resource for many communities.

Subtheme 6.3: Action and impact: USDN supports members in building foundational change management skills to help overcome barriers across the implementation journey

Transitioning beyond planning, USDN provides the culture building, technical support, and peer connections needed to transform ideas into action and thus widens the funnel of possibilities for member action. In a field with extreme levels of complexity and risk, USDN offers support to use members' own experiences as a resource for making impact easier. This is illustrated by:

- A member in Salt Lake City, UT shared, "USDN is the most effective membership group that I have ever been involved in. People work together. There isn't just talk, there is action." Members across the board echoed USDN's role in helping members implement ideas.

³⁰ USDN, Impact Survey 2020.

³¹ Ibid.

- When developing bike lanes, staff in Blacksburg, VA consulted with other USDN members to select the best bollards to delineate the lanes. With limited budget, a contact in Blacksburg said it would have been a “fatal mistake” to pick the wrong solution.
- A member in Tempe, AZ was specifically interested in place-based and people-based approaches to resilience. After working with Arizona State University (ASU) on the intersection of emergency management and sustainability and resilience, the city’s sustainability director advocated for an emergency manager position for the city. The city is now in the county hazard mitigation planning process. Because of individualized USDN staff support and resources (Innovation Grant and nexus work), Tempe has included several actions in its hazard mitigation plan for addressing extreme heat waves.
- Sixty-seven percent of member communities indicate that USDN participation was vital (“would not have happened without USDN”) or significant (“made the impact deeper, faster, more effective”) to their most impactful actions of the last two years.
 - 80% (168 jurisdictions) indicate that USDN participation was valuable/significant/vital in achieving their most impactful actions.
 - 140 Jurisdictions reported that USDN participation was significant/vital to achieving their most impactful actions.³²
- 190 respondents (59%) indicated that for at least one of their top three successes, USDN had a vital or significant contribution. 292 out of the 323 (90% of respondents) indicated that UDSN contributed to at least one of their top three successes of the past two years.

Below, a case example provides an illustration of this theme in practice.

Case Example: Peer Learning Exchange – Accelerating Equity from Commitment to Action

Challenge. Equity is a six-letter word with thousands of interpretations. Proportionally-few city leaders have started grappling with what pursuing equity means for their community and fewer yet have a meaningful understanding of how to pursue equity in practice.

Accelerating Equity from Commitment to Action. The USDN members in this story knew that their climate action plans needed to be "equity centered," yet they didn't know what that meant beyond adding equity language into their documents. What they did have was USDN's network of peers, support, and resources to help them tackle this challenge. To help them move from commitment to action, five USDN members collaborated to obtain a Peer Learning Exchange grant from USDN. This group came together for an intensive two-day convening in Richmond, VA. Through this collaboration they gained an understanding that to succeed in their sustainability work,

Featured USDN Communities

Cities involved in the Peer Learning Exchange:

- Fort Collins, CO
- Portland, OR
- Richmond, VA
- San Antonio, TX
- Washington, DC

³² USDN, Impact Survey 2020.

Case Example: Peer Learning Exchange – Accelerating Equity from Commitment to Action

equity must be a non-negotiable and it needs to be approached from a change management mindset. To apply this mindset, they collaborated on equitable approaches to address common challenges. The focus of this collaboration was on creating community advisory structures, building alignment across internal and external stakeholders, balancing and shifting power, and implementing equitable data analysis.

Real Life Impact. This convening provided USDN members with thought leadership and support to begin centering equity in sustainability work through specific actions in their communities. The list below illustrates the actions members identified to support centering equity in sustainability planning:

- Co-create the climate advisory committee with the community
- Use community priorities to center and support sustainability initiatives
- Engage implementation partners from the beginning
- Be transparent with decision-making and budgeting
- Utilize storytelling and data to support narratives with communities
- Prioritize relationship building and respect

These five communities were able to spread their learning to the peer network through the Equity in Action Learning Group, and now dozens of communities across the US and Canada have adopted these equity actions.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

What would the world be like without USDN? Since USDN was first founded in 2008 as a safe place by and for local government sustainability professionals to learn from each other, the organization has experienced tremendous growth across US and Canada. More than a decade later, it is clear to everyone involved with the network that it has staying power, having established itself as the connective tissue that binds local government sustainability professionals together. It is less obvious, though, how to describe the impact that USDN and its members have made and continue to make in communities. This report has sought to answer those questions *to the extent possible*.

Many key contacts that contributed to this evaluation told us they were certain that USDN had enabled their success in a broad sense, but found it difficult to directly attribute impacts on the ground to specific actions taken by USDN. An imperfect analogy, perhaps, might be climate scientists' work in early years to determine whether increasingly extreme weather events could be tied back to climate change: everybody feels in their gut that the connection is there, and a pile of evidence points strongly in that direction, but there are simply too many factors involved to present a simple conclusive link. The thematic findings and stories of impact presented throughout this report do not list a number of gigatons of GHG that USDN's actions have reduced, and we do not believe such a quantified link is plausible. Due to the fact that USDN's value rests on the foundation of its peer network, it is also not plausible to quantify the direct impacts of specific programming activities. However, a preponderance of evidence from interviews, focus groups, and data sources that we analyzed in this evaluation strongly indicate that such impacts do exist, and are effecting tangible change in the real world.

Throughout this report, we have sought to reflect back what we heard from key contacts about USDN's impacts. In short, USDN achieves impact by uniquely supporting and enabling members to take action locally, contributing strength to pull the levers that only local governments can pull. We heard:

- **USDN members are achieving impact**
- **USDN is a key contributor to member impact**
- **USDN's success is enabled by its network foundation**
- **USDN enables equity-centered action in local communities**
- **USDN is a driving force of innovation in the field**
- **USDN helps members progress along a ladder from idea to impact**

One important thread throughout our data-gathering conversations that produced these findings was the question: what would the world be like without USDN? Members, external partners, and other contacts were quick to offer thoughts on this scenario. Some common themes we heard are as follows.

- **USDN is keeping people working in the local sustainability field.** Some members told us that if USDN did not exist, they would have left the local government sustainability field entirely. As explored in Theme 2, this field has specific and substantial challenges and demands that can generate what one contact described as "huge burnout in the field." Contacts described the support that they receive from USDN as critical to keeping them in this line of work. Some USDN members who are people of color specifically referenced the support they receive through USDN's People of Color Support Initiative, and

the organization’s equity work more broadly, as having been essential to their decision to stay working in local government sustainability. Another network partner expressed a belief that if USDN didn’t exist, many sustainability directors would be struggling, especially those in smaller and midsize communities.

- **Key local impacts would not have happened at all without USDN.** As explored in the findings in this report, we heard from many members that USDN has sparked, incubated, and accelerated their work. It comes as no surprise, then, that many of them told us that without USDN, certain activities in their communities would never have taken place. One member said that their electric vehicles work “flat out would not have succeeded” without USDN. Another member said that their city would not have a climate action plan at all without USDN. Some contacts opined that the field of urban sustainability would not have evolved as quickly as it did without USDN. Others said that there would overall be fewer people experimenting and sharing knowledge between communities. One member said, “our program would not be where it is now if we had not had that support [from USDN] early on to grow and build the way we did.” If USDN did not exist, it seems apparent that each city’s sustainability staff would only know a handful of others across the country, perhaps through regional cohorts—a stark contrast to the network of sharing across a continent that exists today.
- **Some activities might have still happened, but they would have been much more difficult and taken much longer.** If USDN did not exist, we heard that sustainability jobs would be much more difficult. As explored in thematic findings of this report, relationships and trust form the foundation of USDN—without them, it would be much harder to accomplish work in local government sustainability. It would be harder for partner organizations to connect with local governments and understand what opportunities exist in communities. It would be more difficult to accelerate progress in communities and catalyze engagement with them in sustainability work. The 2020 Impact Survey asked members what would be different if USDN didn’t exist; the most prominent theme in their responses was that they would have to do much more work and constantly “reinvent the wheel” instead of building on the support network they currently enjoy. Many indicated that their impact would be lessened as well because the quality and diversity of information would be hard to find. USDN is an enabling platform for local government sustainability work. Without USDN, there would be fewer person-to-person relationships, less structure to connect sustainability directors with peers in other communities, and more work required to get anything done. The transaction costs of learning new things would be much higher for local government staff. Communities would be much more reliant on third-party case studies to gain an understanding of new ideas and innovations, and would lack tailored coaching and advice for how to adapt those solutions to their unique context. Sustainability directors would have to figure everything out on their own, rather than being able to plug into hundreds of other people’s experiences and lessons learned.

Member Perspectives

“If I didn't have that support group within USDN, I probably would have pivoted to another form of work. Being able to lean on other people of color doing this work, understanding I'm not the only one, that I'm not crazy when I talk about some of the things that are happening. I felt so strongly about the fellowship USDN was supporting, and it was so important to diversify the field.”

– Member, *Impact Evaluation Interview*

- **Without USDN, local government staff across North America would not be nearly as informed and engaged on equity issues.** We heard from members that USDN has been a key factor in shifting their focus to center equity in their sustainability work. One said, “I spend more time on equity now than on environmental work; that wouldn’t have happened on its own.” USDN has provided people with their first foundational knowledge of equity and helped them build on it to implement it in everything they do. Without USDN, local government sustainability offices would not be nearly as far along on their path to understanding and applying power-shifting, community collaboration, and human-centering lessons in their communities.

One contact described their thoughts bluntly and broadly: “Having been involved since the very beginning, I feel like [without USDN], **everything** would be different.” This sentiment was typical of many conversations and reflects a sense that USDN’s impact has been so enmeshed with sustainability directors’ perception of how they do their job that they find it challenging to extract one from the other. Without USDN, there would be less impact from local governments. Their work in sustainability would be slower, less efficient, more prone to mistakes, less holistic, and less equitable. There would be much less support for the field of local government sustainability, higher turnover in the field, and possibly fewer people working in it overall.

Reflection on the data gathered over the course of this evaluation offers a clear indication: without USDN, the world would be a more challenging—and less equitable—place for local government sustainability work.

Appendix A: USDN Partners in Leading Climate and Clean Energy Initiatives and Rankings

City/County	First Year of USDN Membership	American Cities Climate Challenge?	City Energy Project?	ACEEE Clean Energy Scorecard Top 20?	ACEEE Scorecard Ranking (1=highest)
Albuquerque NM	2019	Yes			52
Atlanta GA	2012	Yes	Yes		22
Austin TX	2011	Yes		Yes	9
Berkeley CA	2009				NA
Boston MA	2009	Yes	Yes	Yes	1
Boulder CO	2012				NA
Burlington VT	2009				NA
Cambridge MA	2009				NA
Charlotte NC	2010	Yes			68
Chicago IL	2011	Yes	Yes	Yes	14
Chula Vista CA	2019			Yes	20 (tie with Sacramento)
Cincinnati OH	2009	Yes			34
Columbus OH	2009	Yes			25
Denver CO	2010	Yes	Yes	Yes	8
Des Moines IA	Not a member		Yes		NA
Fort Collins CO	2012		Yes		NA
Grand Rapids MI	2018				38
Honolulu HI	2018	Yes			47
Houston TX	2010		Yes		35
Indianapolis IN	2011	Yes			50
Kansas City MO	2009		Yes		23
Long Beach CA	Not a member			Yes	18
Los Angeles CA	2009	Yes	Yes	Yes	7
Miami-Dade County FL	2010		Yes		55 (City of Miami)
Minneapolis MN	2009	Yes		Yes	4
New Orleans LA	2016		Yes		52
New York NY	2010			Yes	6
Oakland CA	2009			Yes	12

City/County	First Year of USDN Membership	American Cities Climate Challenge?	City Energy Project?	ACEEE Clean Energy Scorecard Top 20?	ACEEE Scorecard Ranking (1=highest)
Orlando FL	2010	Yes	Yes	Yes	15
Philadelphia PA	2009	Yes	Yes	Yes	16
Phoenix AZ	2011			Yes	17
Pittsburgh PA	2015	Yes	Yes	Yes	19
Portland OR	2009	Yes		Yes	10
Providence RI	2009		Yes		25
Reno NV	2017		Yes		61
Sacramento CA	2009			Yes	20 (tie with Chula Vista CA)
Salt Lake City UT	2009		Yes		30
San Antonio TX	2015	Yes			32
San Diego CA	2015	Yes		Yes	13
San Francisco CA	2009			Yes	2
San Jose CA	2011	Yes	Yes	Yes	11
Seattle WA	2010	Yes		Yes	3
St. Louis MO	2010	Yes	Yes		36
St. Paul MN	2009	Yes	Yes		31
St. Petersburg FL	2018	Yes			39
Washington DC	2009	Yes		Yes	5
Toronto ONT	2010				
Vancouver BC	2009				

Appendix B: USDN Impact Evaluation Interviewees

Phase 1

Name	Organization/City
Kathryn Wright	USDN
Kristin Baja	USDN
Jon Crowe	USDN
Natalie Narotzky	USDN
Tracy Morgenstern	USDN
Nils Moe	USDN
Mia Arter	USDN
Sarah McKinstry-Wu	USDN
Garrett Fitzgerald	USDN
Michael Armstrong	City Scale
Susanna Sutherland	Sutherland Associates
Diane Ives	Kendeda Fund
Desiree Williams	Kapwa Consulting
Deborah Rafael	SF Department of Environment
Robyn Eason	City of West Hollywood
Dan Guilbeault	Washington D.C.
Adam Freed	Bloomberg Associates
Nathaly Agosto Filion	City of Newark
Lindsay Ex	City of Fort Collins
Leslie Ethen	City of Tucson
Molly Saylor	City of Fort Collins
Kelly Schultz	American Cities Climate Challenge
Anna Loizeaux	JBP Foundation
Ann Fowler Wallace	Funders Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities
Darryl Young	Summit Foundation
Julie Nelson	Government Alliance on Race and Equity

Phase 2

Name	Organization/City
Jasmin Moore	Lawrence Douglas County, KS
Lala Nuss	City of Honolulu
Leah Bamberger	City of Providence
Ann Fowler Wallace	Funders Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities
Dan Guilbeault	Washington D.C.
Glenys Verhulst	City of Saanich
Emily Drennan	City of Ann Arbor
Lindsay Ex	City of Fort Collins
Peyton Jones	City of Boston
Chelsea Clinton	City of Eugene
Emily Sadigh	Alameda County, CA
Sarah Church	Alameda County, CA
Kumar Jensen	City of Evanston
Erin Desautels	City of Surrey
Kelly Muellman	City of Minneapolis
Vicki Bennett	Salt Lake City
Zachary Greene	City of Philadelphia
Brenda Scott Castro	City of Vancouver
Benjamin Silverman	City of Boston
Chris Read	City of San Louis Obispo
Molly Saylor	City of Fort Collins
McKenzie Jones	City of Sedona
Shaina Kilcoyne	City of Anchorage
Carol Davis	City of Blacksburg
David Norwood	City of Dearborn
Diana Maneta	Missoula County, MT
Lisa LaRocque	City of Las Cruces
Bridget Herring	City of Asheville
Michael Forrester	City of Cincinnati
Steve Hubble	City of Boise
Billi Romain	City of Berkeley
Ammon Reagan	City of Berkeley
Christine Andrews	City of Somerville
Megan Ross	City of Los Angeles

Name	Organization/City
Sharon Jaye	Washington D.C.
Jensen Morgan	City of Fort Collins
Alisa Kane	City of Portland
Brienne Mullen	City of Richmond
Doug Melnick	City of San Antonio
Jenn Hatch	Washington D.C.
Braden Kay	City of Tempe
Ingrid Fish	City of Portland
Brenda Nations	Iowa City
Leith Sharp	Harvard University
Julie Hughes	IMT
Zachary Hart	IMT
Debra Knopman	RAND Corporation
Nancy Grimm	NATURA

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