

Investing in Change: Operationalizing Sustainability in Local Governments

Local governments are financing and embedding equity, environmental, and economic health priorities into their services, operations, and planning processes. Find out how USDN facilitates that process.

There is no single how-to guide or one-stop shop that local governments can rely on during the complicated and nuanced journey towards making communities more sustainable. Though many somewhat lofty definitions of sustainability exist, most municipal sustainability directors are working to make their urban centers socially fair, economically strong, and environmentally healthy places to live, work, and play. What that overarching vision looks like when broken into specific actions can be very different depending on local political climates, resources, and opportunities.

Even with climate action plans serving as guiding vision and strategy documents, city actions to become more sustainable can sometimes appear fragmented. Investing in a variety of efforts like energy efficiency, recycling, community resiliency planning, multimodal transit, or green stormwater infrastructure can mean that the overarching impacts of the collective work are not immediately obvious. Being a municipal sustainability director is daunting for this reason and because the parameters around the job description can be blurry and undefined.

Sustainability is by nature about changing the way society operates – and, specifically in the USDN context – changing how local governments provide essential services and community benefits. That means not only engaging in work that modifies local greenhouse gas emitting systems (buildings, for example), but also seeking out operational and behavioral changes - which deliver at times intangible but incredibly valuable outcomes. There is a big difference between “should” and “could.” No one knows this better than a person working in local government who is trying to move current reality towards a more sustainable reality. Balance requires both dedication to vision and flexibility in journey.

In some respects, this is the very reason USDN continues to thrive: Sustainability directors find a safe place to vent frustrations, vet ideas, and develop methods together that can change how their communities function. The value is in the ability to share, test, and spread new ways of doing things in a local government context - saving time for members. USDN facilitates this process by offering grant opportunities and hosting opportunities to learn from and exchange with peers on shared priorities and challenges through conference calls, webinars, and in-person meetings. In USDN’s 2016 Member Satisfaction Survey, members reported record highs in the impact the network is having on their daily lives. It is no surprise that saving time and finding a solution to challenges are at the top of this list.

