

USDN Peer Learning Exchange Grant Program 2015 Annual Report

History

The USDN Peer Learning Exchange program was launched in 2013 with support from the Summit Foundation. The grant program is designed to support USDN members to meet in person with their peers to learn and share together about one or more practices, policies, or programs.

At the 2013 USDN Annual Meeting, members agreed that they want to pilot proactive, facilitated, deeper peer learning methods, including:

- **Best Practice Dissemination:** Collaborative work to deeply share a member's policy/practice with one or more peers who are ready to adapt it,
- **Peer Review:** Critical assessments of and/or recommendations for a member's selected policy/program by one or more peers, and
- **In-Depth Exchanges:** Detailed discussions between two or more members to deeply explore several shared priority topics, creating value for all participants.

A volunteer committee of USDN members has since guided the evolution of this grant program and works to review and select high-quality proposals. Proposals are solicited through an RFP process, which is launched every three months, in order to fund exchanges as timely topics arise.

2015 USDN Peer Learning Exchange Committee Members:

- Jacqui Bauer; Bloomington IN, *co-chair*
- Peter Nierengarten; Fayetteville AR, *co-chair*
- Brendon Slotterback; Minneapolis MN
- Jennifer Green; Burlington VT
- Katherine Mortimer; Santa Fe NM
- Lisa LaRocque; Las Cruces NM
- Sarah Coulter; Park Forest IL

As of December 2015, the USDN Peer Learning Exchange grant program has awarded \$85,959.89 to fund 21 exchanges, with a total of 104 participating communities. 42% of USDN member communities have collaborated on proposals through its first three years.



June 2015 USDN Peer Learning Exchange on access to building energy data.

2015 Grants

In 2015, USDN Peer Learning Exchange grant program funded 9 in-person exchanges for participants from 42 communities:

- Washington DC received \$2,406 to travel with Cleveland to Boston to share [engagement strategies](#) for working with residents, private sector leaders, and neighborhoods. [Read more.](#)
- Berkeley CA received \$2,459 to convene with Ann Arbor, Boulder, Denver, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Salt Lake City, and Seattle to discuss use cases for [aggregated whole building data access](#) for owners and operators of residential and non-residential commercial buildings. [Read more.](#)
- Northampton MA received \$4,851 to travel with Albany, Baltimore, Burlington, Cincinnati, and St. Louis to Cleveland to discuss issues affecting post-industrial or “[legacy cities](#)” and their unique challenges and opportunities in urban sustainability.
- Burlington VT received \$4,065 to travel with Boston to Chattanooga to learn about their state-of-the-art [fiber optics system](#), including management and regulation. Boulder also joined the exchange.
- Fayetteville AR received \$3,024 to travel with Dearborn and Northampton to Evanston to evaluate, explore, and discuss a [bike share program](#) in a small city.
- Palo Alto CA received \$4,400 to host Cambridge and Santa Monica for a discussion on “[zero net energy](#)” [policy development](#) and attracted two local utilities and experts to join pro-bono to add their perspectives.
- Surrey BC received \$4,855 to host Seattle, Tacoma, Vancouver, and Victoria to discuss engagement strategies for [sea level rise planning](#) in the Cascadia region.
- Baltimore MD received \$4,300 to travel to Minneapolis to discuss their strategies for increasing [access to healthy food](#) for low-income populations.
- Fort Lauderdale FL received \$4,990 to host 5 Southeastern communities – Asheville, Fayetteville, Miami Beach, Sarasota County, and Wilmington – to observe, discuss, and provide feedback on a [municipal staff training program](#) on sustainability and climate change preparedness.

Follow up reports for these and all previous USDN Peer Learning Exchanges are available to USDN members on the USDN.org website [here](#).



November 2015 Exchange on Zero Net Energy with 7 USDN cities and their partners

2015 Grant Impacts

In 2015, 85% of members rated the USDN Peer Learning Exchange grant program as high value, an increase of over 10% from 2014. Its value was second only to the USDN Annual Meeting, which has consistently been the most valuable USDN activity with over 90% of members consistently rating it “high value.”

In March 2015, Cleveland, Washington DC, and Boston gathered for an exchange on community and stakeholder engagement. All three cities recently developed comprehensive climate action or sustainability plans that recognize that success hinges on community action. Furthermore, each city had a robust community engagement effort underway but were each excelling in different areas – from ambassador programs to summits to CEO-level engagement. By comparing their successes and challenges, participants were able to share their expertise while learning from others. One participant noted, “[A Peer Learning Exchange in Boston really opened my eyes to a variety of low-cost, high-impact strategies for engaging our residents around sustainability. Within a week of returning home, we had already begun adapting those strategies.](#)”

Seven USDN communities that identify as post-industrial or “legacy cities” convened in Cleveland in June 2015 to discuss economic and social challenges and opportunities they face as it relates to sustainability. That exchange leveraged funding from the German Marshall Fund of the United States Urban and Regional Policy Fellowship to produce a literature scan that informed the agenda and discussions. Participants identified key themes that are necessary to growth and in these communities: strong downtowns, community equity, valuing community history, having a shared vision, making the best use of limited resources, and collaborating across sectors. Participants noted the value in discussing sustainability programming with similar cities; one called it “[the single best thing I have experienced in nearly 6 years with USDN.](#)”



A USDN Peer Learning Exchange grant supported another meeting in June 2015 that arose from USDN User Group and Green Cities California (GCC) regional network conversations, to continue ongoing member conversations on building energy benchmarking and disclosure policies, specifically about access to whole building energy data. Additional funding was secured to bring in ten non-profit organizations, state agencies, and federal agencies. During the exchange, participants committed to pursue a legislative strategy to advance data access in California. One participant said, “After the first few speakers, it became increasingly apparent how necessary it was to bring all the key players into the same room. Getting everyone on the same page of the current issue was critical, and this meeting did exactly that.” Afterwards, another noted, “[The benchmarking element of the bill awaiting Governor Brown’s signature \[SB 350\] is a direct result of the GCC/USDN workshop.](#)”