



**USDN** | urban sustainability  
directors network

**Strategic Vision and Plan**  
2022-2024

# Introduction

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From its beginning, Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN) has aspired to be a unifying force across an emerging field of local government sustainability. By bringing together and connecting practitioners from the U.S. and Canada, USDN has helped align the field, build greater affinity and coordination, inspire innovation, and drive change.

Through a unique organizing model, one underpinned by trust and connectivity, the organization has achieved significant growth and progress. What started as a small peer learning collaboration is now a robust and engaged network of more than 2,000 member practitioners, representing more than 250 communities and more than 100 million residents across the U.S. and Canada, all working to address issues of sustainability in their local communities.

Recognizing this milestone, USDN finds itself at a critical juncture as it shifts from an emergent organization focused on scaling to one oriented around deepening its mission to achieve impact. In recent years, the network identified and evolved a set of High Impact Practices to focus USDN and member efforts around a holistic view of equity, carbon reduction, and resilience. USDN must now continue to hone the support it provides to individual practitioners to implement local, high impact progress while also more intentionally harnessing the power of the collective to effect widespread change and advance the field.

The strategic vision and plan that follows — which has been informed by the USDN Board of Directors, staff, members, the Planning & Advisory Committee, and external partners — aims to guide USDN as it moves into this next chapter. The plan also refreshes and refocuses USDN’s identity for the growth ahead, providing both a supporting roadmap for USDN’s work over the next three years and the flexibility to continue to adapt its strategy in response to emergent opportunities and challenges.

## Opportunity Context

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The world faces a confluence of social and environmental crises that threaten the progress and sustainability of our communities and challenge life as we know it. The COVID-19 pandemic, related economic and democratic destabilization, and civil unrest and public reckoning of systemic and historic racism have all collided with unrelenting environmental disasters spurred by climate change. People are feeling battered and exhausted. While the impacts of these inter-related upheavals spare no one, they are most intensely and acutely impacting those already marginalized and vulnerable in our society.

These interconnected, acute crises highlight the common causes of climate change and social injustices and provide a rare window of opportunity to galvanize support for a recovery plan that addresses both issues. The pandemic-induced economic crisis has heightened the role and presence of the United States federal government and shifted the norms of public spending, pushing out trillions of dollars in aid to state and local governments to drive recovery. Recalling the lessons learned from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, this spending re-centers the importance of influencing federal government investments in support of local community priorities. While this creates an opportunity to drive ambitious, long-term change, it also comes with significant timeline and absorption pressures as cities and counties prepare to implement recovery actions at the local level.

Front page photo by Olena Sergienko on Unsplash



As public attention is focused more than ever on the urgency of crisis mitigation and management, the time is ripe for USDN to refresh its strategic direction and act boldly in preparing local governments to lead ambitious, equity-centered progress on climate, resilience, and sustainability. Doing so will require USDN to both deepen its commitment to network-based change, modernizing its operational infrastructure and investing in expanded practitioner support, and to use its role and proximity to the field to drive system-level progress more intentionally. This plan provides a roadmap for USDN to hone its strategic focus to lead interventions that create new opportunities for local government action and transformation over the next three years.





# Organizational Profile

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USDN works to transform the role of local government to create equitable, resilient, and sustainable communities. It drives progress by building the capacity of local government sustainability practitioners to take action, by supporting efforts to scale innovative sustainability practices and solutions, and by leading and mobilizing systemic change across the field.

## Mission

USDN works to create equitable, resilient, and sustainable communities by advancing the field of local government sustainability and equipping practitioners to be catalysts of transformative change.

## Vision

An equitable, resilient, and sustainable future for all

## Core Beliefs

1. A diverse, inclusive, and equity-centered approach is essential to achieving our mission.
2. Local governments have both an influential role and an inherent responsibility within the movement toward equitable, resilient, and sustainable communities.
3. Meaningful, long-lasting change happens from the ground up through a collaborative approach where local governments work with the communities they serve.
4. By working with each other and their communities, local government sustainability practitioners can accelerate transformative change.



## Our Approach

USDN brings local government sustainability practitioners together to learn, collaborate, and accelerate the work of local sustainability. By equipping them with the knowledge, resources, and partnerships they need to succeed, USDN helps advance change locally in member communities as well as across the field of practice. The aggregate impact and influence of our collective work makes an equitable, resilient, and sustainable society more attainable.

## Target Audiences

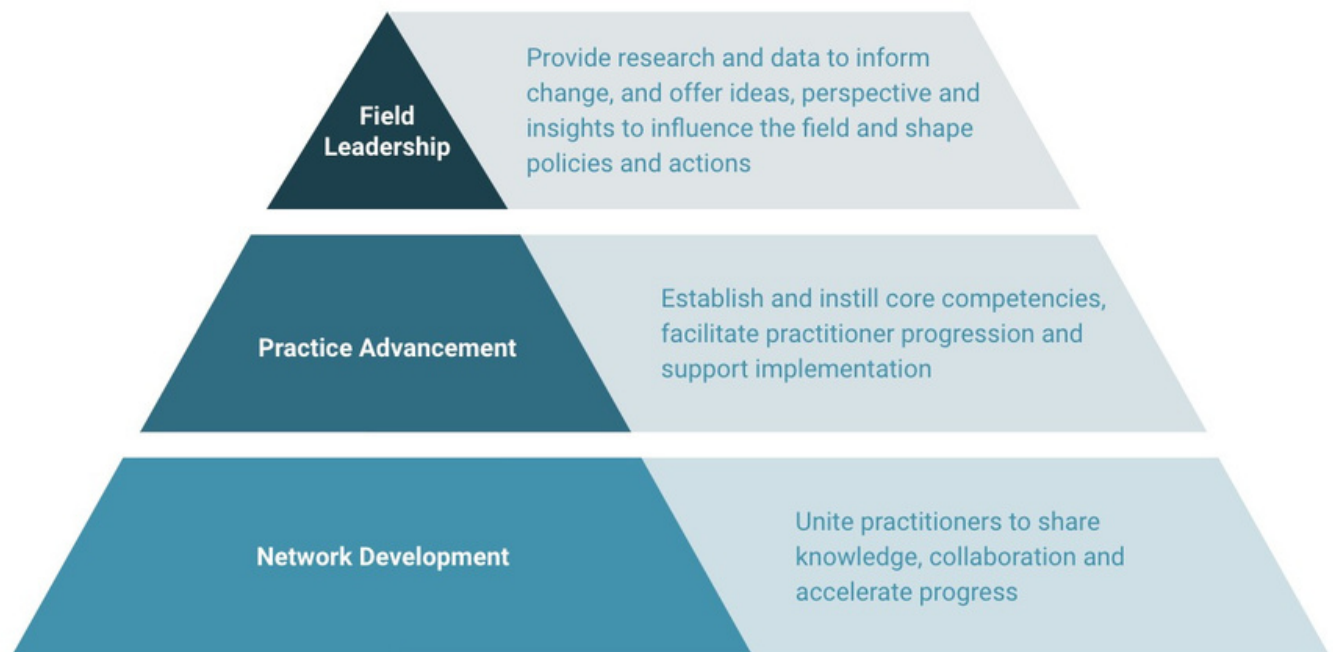
### Member Audience

Local government practitioners working to address issues of equity, resilience, and sustainability in cities and counties in the U.S. and Canada

### Partner Audience

Adjacent stakeholders with vested interest in creating equitable, resilient, and sustainable communities (e.g., community groups, partner networks, technical partners, funders)

## Core Functions



## Services

Function	Services	Description
<b>Field Leadership</b>	Field Intelligence	Data aggregation and analytics sourced from the network and used by the organization to inform change and build support for local government action
	Thought Leadership	Cultivating, harvesting, and strategically sharing insight, perspective, and innovation to evolve the field
	Mobilization	Focused opportunities to share knowledge and insight to influence policy and action at other levels of government
<b>Practice Advancement</b>	Capacity Building	Training experiences to help practitioners build and deepen foundational skills and applied practices to accelerate equitable and impactful local climate action
	Direct Support	Directing support to local governments to test and implement transformative practices and solutions through coaching, technical assistance, and other project support
	Partnership Facilitation	Connecting local governments to other networks and partners to support work
	Regranting	Providing incentive, accountability, and publicity via competitive awards to local governments and/or their community groups that support peer learning, partnership building, and creative, field-advancing work
<b>Network Development</b>	Member Network	An engaging, inclusive, and responsive community where practitioners can connect and access the knowledge, resources, collaboration, and support they need to drive change.

## Organizational Attributes

**Values-Driven** USDN is driven by its core belief that a diverse, inclusive, and equity-centered climate movement is essential to achieving our ambitious goals for equitable, resilient, sustainable communities.

**Collaborative** USDN leverages its knowledge, experience, and deep relationships within the field to build practitioner effectiveness, identify opportunities, and strengthen alignment.

**Focused** USDN directs its limited resources toward efforts that produce the greatest impact for the network and the field. The scale and urgency of today’s sustainability issues require targeted action.

**Adaptive** USDN is continually enhancing the value of the network, listening and responding to the needs, challenges, and goals of its members.

# Strategic Plan

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## Strategic Goals



### Advance the Network

Deepen engagement to advance equitable and impactful sustainability action



### Transform Practice

Empower practitioners to accelerate local change



### Influence System Change

Leverage organizational position for large-scale progress



### Build a Thriving Organization

Strengthen USDN's culture and operations

## Strategies and Actions



### Advance the Network

*Deepen engagement to advance equitable and impactful sustainability action*

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#### Strategy 1 - Expand USDN membership to be a more diverse and inclusive representation of the field

1. Refresh the network's identity and branding
2. Develop and implement a member diversity, recruitment, and retention strategy as part of a member experience plan

#### Strategy 2 - Deepen member engagement and alignment through enhanced tools, resources, and supports

1. Develop and begin implementing an enhanced member experience plan
2. Enhance member-facing tools and introduce new value-adding features and resources (i.e., website, knowledge base, news hub, etc.)
3. Revamp and deploy a new process for identifying, prioritizing, designing, and delivering member-facing programs and services

#### Strategy 3 - Strengthen systems for member communication and connection

1. Establish a network voice and supporting communication standards and objectives
2. Develop and implement strategies to help the network feel smaller and more intimate
3. Pilot and begin implementing new approaches for in-person events
4. Restructure member leadership and input models



## **Transform Practice**

*Empower practitioners to accelerate high impact, local change*

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### **Strategy 1 - Institute and nurture formal communities of practice for members who share common goals, similar challenges or like interests, and/or geography (i.e. regions, states, and Canada)**

1. Implement strategies to partner with regional and affiliate networks to advance practitioner learning and regional mobilization
2. Pilot new formats for bringing peer sets together for knowledge sharing or collaboration

### **Strategy 2 - Instill core competencies in foundational practices throughout the network**

1. Define core competencies in foundational practices for local government sustainability practitioners in ways that align with USDN's High Impact Practices
2. Deliver programming based on an established curriculum for building those competencies

### **Strategy 3 - Equip the network with the skills and resources needed to advance high impact, equitable climate action in local contexts**

1. Adopt or develop adaptive tools that guide local government opportunities for implementing sustainability actions and track their implementation over time
2. Design and deliver training, other professional development, and/or access to resources to strategically support practitioner readiness and action

### **Strategy 4 - Promote and provide direct support to scale proven or promising practices and interventions**

1. Identify and secure resources for USDN to support member piloting and implementing of promising and proven practices
2. Directly support the implementation and testing of promising and innovative approaches
3. Lift up promising practices to drive awareness and adoption within the field



## **Influence System Change**

*Leverage organizational position for large-scale progress*

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### **Strategy 1 - Mobilize the network to influence policy and action at all levels of government**

1. Deploy the Federal Engagement Program to help members secure resources for local action and inform federal policy during this critical recovery period
2. Develop and deploy opportunities to deepen partnerships between local governments and community based organizations to maximize equity impacts of local action



3. Develop and deploy strategies to enhance members' ability to influence state level policy
4. Forge partnerships with other organizations in the ecosystem to amplify local government needs and priorities to advance climate and equity goals
5. Develop frameworks for regional and state organizing models

**Strategy 2 - Use organizational voice and knowledge to create system progress**

1. Develop a focused agenda and supporting thought leadership strategy
2. Improve systems for collecting and sharing critical data and information sourced from the network
3. Develop an org-wide collaborations and partnership strategy that advances field-level priorities



**Build a Thriving Organization**  
*Strengthen USDN's culture and operations*

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**Strategy 1 - Deploy a People Operations initiative**

1. Operationalize the new organizational structure and culture norms
2. Establish new structures for cross-functional communication and alignment
3. Develop performance management and accountability systems
4. Institute professional training and development plans
5. Develop organizational values that support a shared commitment to creating a supportive, equitable, inclusive, and collaborative work environment.

**Strategy 2 - Grow and diversify revenue sources**

1. Restructure the network membership and dues model
2. Institute a formal development function and related strategy for revenue diversification and financial sustainability; explore opportunities to maximize earned revenue
3. Enhance the process for delivering strong proposals
4. Determine and formalize development partnerships with peer networks

**Strategy 3 - Build operational efficiency and effectiveness to ensure highest and best use of resources**

1. Develop and launch processes for work prioritization
2. Facilitate org-wide change management through development and training on policies, tools, and standard operating procedures
3. Institute cross-functional coordination practice
4. Develop and begin to implement a technology roadmap to support the maturing of USDN's operations and internal workflows while adding value for members, funders, and other external stakeholders

**Strategy 4 - Strengthen data and measurement practices**

1. Establish key performance measures and embed in organizational culture, including metrics that enhance accountability to our diversity, equity, and inclusion commitments.
2. Develop and apply impact tracking for foundational and applied programs, direct services, and innovation initiatives
3. Improve systems for gathering and leveraging information about member interests, needs, activities, value received, etc.



# Thank you for reading!

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For more questions or more detail about the strategic plan, how USDN is implementing the plan, or general questions about USDN, please contact [support@usdn.org](mailto:support@usdn.org).

Thank you,  
Team USDN

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