



USDN Peer Learning Exchange Grant Program 2014 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 pro-active, 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.

2014 USDN Peer Learning Exchange Committee Members:

- Jacqui Bauer; Bloomington IN, *co-chair*
- Peter Nierengarten; Fayetteville AR, *co-chair*
- Brenda Nations; Iowa City IA
- Brendon Slotterback; Minneapolis MN
- Katherine Mortimer; Santa Fe NM
- Michael Armstrong; Portland OR
- Sarah Coulter; Park Forest IL

As of December 2014, the Peer Learning Exchange grant program has awarded \$51,745.50 to fund 13 exchanges, with a total of 61 participating cities. 34% of all USDN members have collaborated on proposals.



January 2015 Texas Exchange on Climate Planning, via City of Dallas on [Twitter](#)

2014 Grants and Impacts

The Peer Learning Exchange grant program has become a key network priority in its second full year of operation. USDN members value this opportunity to meet in person to transfer in-depth experience with a particular program, provide peer reviews on a member program or policy, or exchange ideas.

In 2014, the USDN Peer Learning Exchange grant program provided over \$38,000 to fund 7 in-person exchanges. After the 2014 USDN Annual Meeting, 19% of the membership signed onto 6 proposals, requesting nearly \$39,000 in total funding – more than was available for all of 2014. In July 2014, when describing the USDN activity that has had the highest impact on their work, more members cited a Peer Learning Exchange than any other USDN-led activity, even though the grant program was relatively new.

Best Practice Dissemination Exchanges

Twenty USDN members and their staff from nine cities and counties convened in January 2014 in Portland OR for a peer learning exchange on equity in sustainability. Participants learned about Portland's Equity Toolkit for considering equity in decision-making and sustainability programming. All participants indicated they came away with a greater understanding of equity concepts and with tools to put those concepts into practice. One member wrote, ["I can communicate the issue with more clarity and have been able to build momentum behind the idea that we need to begin explicitly considering social equity at least in our large scale planning."](#)

Peer Review Exchanges

In December 2014, sustainability directors from Boston, Philadelphia, and San Francisco traveled to the City of Los Angeles, and Vancouver engaged virtually, to provide feedback on their first-ever Sustainable City Plan. Attendees reviewed a draft plan and provided input on its framework and launch strategy. The plan, slated for release in 2015, was revised to incorporate the recommendations from the exchange. One participant wrote, ["While our cities are quite different, we have similar recommendations for developing a sustainability strategy. I imagine that many other cities could benefit from having a SWAT team of other cities help them as they develop their plans, or implement them."](#)

In-Depth Exchanges

In February 2014, five major cities in the Northeast United States – Baltimore, Boston, New York City, Newark, and Philadelphia – convened to share their lessons learned from Superstorm Sandy and with FEMA flood insurance and mapping. One member wrote, ["Our biggest success came from the multi-city meeting held in NYC this winter. We learned a great deal \[...\] and came up with suggested next steps to help make the FEMA program work better for major cities. It is my understanding that many folks from the NYC sustainability office are no longer there, which is tragic because they had the most experience and knowledge about this topic area because of Sandy." Because of the exchange, members were able to capture this institutional knowledge before these city staff members left their positions.](#)



May 2014 Exchange with San Jose and Toronto on waste and energy issues, via Jo Zientek (San Jose)

Peer Learning Exchange Grants Awarded in 2014:

- Bloomington IN received \$2,729 to travel to Fort Collins to learn about the FortZED [business development district](#), as well as exchange information on approaches to waste diversion, technology, and innovative energy solutions.
- Fayetteville AR received \$2,465 to travel with Columbia to Lawrence to learn about ways individual cities can promote community gardens and develop successful [urban agriculture](#) policies.
- Burlington VT received \$7,295 to convene with Washington DC, Vancouver, and Baltimore in Philadelphia to share [green infrastructure](#) best practices, including financing tools, regulatory requirements, implementation challenges, and integrated stormwater management plans.
- Denton TX received \$4,997 to bring together 7 sustainability directors from Texas cities – Austin, Dallas, Denton, El Paso, Houston, Plano, and San Antonio – to develop background information, strategies, and steps needed to move ahead with their [resiliency and climate mitigation planning](#) and to discuss future regional collaboration.
- Burlington VT received \$5,000 to travel to Vancouver with Boulder to learn from the host city’s experiences with [district heat](#), including the financial, political, and technical challenges and opportunities of implementing district heating programs.
- Los Angeles received \$5,000 to bring in leaders from Boston, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Vancouver to provide a peer review of their [draft sustainability plan](#).
- Phoenix received \$5,000 to travel with Boulder, Burlington and Pittsburgh to Cambridge and Boston to identify barriers to and mitigation strategies for successful [energy benchmarking ordinances](#), producing a “checklist” of actions and a sample workplan for managing a project.

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