

USDN | urban sustainability
directors network



2023 ANNUAL REPORT



THE HEART OF USDN: THE PEOPLE



At the core of USDN is a belief in the power of relationships. Relationships build trust, unlock creativity, catalyze collaboration, and accelerate change. Add a toolbox of key services, resources, and partnerships, and you've got an impact network. This model proved itself 15 years ago and remains a core component of advancing local action.

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.

USDN BY THE NUMBERS

330
communities

3,000+
practitioners

110M+
residents in communities served

100+
calls hosted



WELCOME FROM OUR **BOARD CHAIR**



JESSE KING
Board Chair

In laying the foundation for the future, we have embarked on several groundbreaking initiatives that will shape the trajectory of our organization and the communities we serve.

Dear USDN Community and Partners,

At my core, I believe we do this work because we are striving to gift our future generations and communities a world that is more equitable, resilient, and sustainable than today's.

As we reflect on 2023, I am filled with pride and gratitude for the remarkable progress we have made together as a network of members, partners, staff, and funders. Our collective dedication to the USDN mission and principles has not only driven our initiatives but also strengthened our resolve to build a more sustainable and flourishing world. In essence, we stand as change agents and futurists, committed to making a positive impact for generations to come.

Last year was marked by significant leadership transitions that reflect our commitment to growth and evolution. We welcomed new leaders who bring fresh perspectives and renewed energy to our mission. Their innovative ideas and strategic vision are already propelling us forward, ensuring that USDN remains at the forefront of a movement grounded in equity sustainable development.

Our growth is not just in numbers but in the depth and breadth of our impact. We have expanded our networks, fostered new partnerships, and enhanced our collaborative efforts. These advancements have enabled us to tackle more complex challenges, champion equity, and create more resilient communities. Our members' unwavering dedication to equity, community engagement, and sustainability has been the cornerstone of these achievements, driving us to continually push the boundaries of what is possible.

In laying the foundation for the future, we have embarked on several groundbreaking initiatives that will shape the trajectory of our organization and the communities we serve. From innovative climate action plans to cutting-edge research in sustainable practices, our efforts are setting the stage for long-term success. We are building the frameworks today that will support a sustainable and equitable future for all.

As we look ahead, I encourage each of you to continue imagining yourselves as future ancestors. Let us envision a time when our descendants look back at our efforts with pride and appreciation. Every decision and step we take now is a building block for the future. Together, we are not only addressing the immediate needs of our communities but also laying the groundwork for a legacy of sustainability and resilience.

Thank you for your unwavering commitment and your tireless efforts. As we move forward, let us remain united in our mission, inspired by the vision of a better world, and dedicated to the values that define us. Together, we embody the true spirit of seventh generation thinking, and together, this network will continue to make a lasting impact.

With gratitude and anticipation,

Jesse King

WELCOME FROM OUR CHIEF MEMBER EXPERIENCE OFFICER



LAURENE HAMILTON
*Chief Member
Experience Officer*

**In the spirit of renewal,
let's recommit to our purpose.
Our planet depends on it, and future
generations deserve nothing less.**

Dear Members and Friends,

As we continue our journey with each new year, I want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to our USDN family for its unwavering commitment to sustainability. Your passion, dedication, and collective efforts have made a significant impact, and I am truly inspired by the positive change we continue to create together.

For the past 16 years, USDN has worked hard to fill a key gap in the field of urban sustainability: Supporting local government sustainability practitioners. Its networks have grown and USDN has created a unique space for its members. While centering equity in its sustainability work, USDN continues to develop engaging and inspirational programs, services, and resources. While

we have weathered transition over the past year, we have much to celebrate and we have achieved remarkable things, and together, we'll continue to reach new heights.

As we look ahead, I encourage you to reflect on our purpose and the vital role we play in shaping a more sustainable future:

- 1. CELEBRATE OUR PROGRESS:** From reducing emissions to promoting sustainable practices, our collective actions matter. Let's celebrate these wins and use them as fuel for the journey ahead.
- 2. STAY RESILIENT:** The path to sustainability is not always smooth. Challenges will arise, but our resilience will carry us through. Let's face adversity with determination, knowing that every setback is an opportunity for growth.
- 3. AMPLIFY OUR IMPACT:** Each small step matters. Whether it's advocating for renewable energy, supporting local initiatives, or educating others, our individual contributions add up. Let's amplify our impact by inspiring those around us.
- 4. COLLABORATE AND INNOVATE:** Sustainability thrives on collaboration. USDN has access to invaluable insights provided by members themselves allowing us to keep a finger on the pulse on how local sustainability efforts are going in cities across the country.
- 5. LEAD BY EXAMPLE:** As members of this network, we are ambassadors for sustainability. Let's lead by example—whether it's reducing waste, conserving resources, or championing ethical practices.

In 2024 I pass the baton to our new CEO, Deneine Christa Powell. I am eternally grateful to all who have been so supportive during this interim period. You have helped USDN maintain consistent, quality programming and engagement thereby ensuring organizational vibrancy during our leadership transition.

I'm excited to welcome and collaborate with a leader who has what it takes to persevere and remain responsive to the ever evolving challenges of our industry, to lead with integrity and humility, and to inspire our teams and network to remain passionate in their daily grind of project implementation. Deneine Christa comes as USDN begins to envision the next evolution of our strategic plan which has guided the organization over the last 2 years to focus it on deepening engagement with members across the network, supporting practitioners as they transform sustainability practice through experiential learning, and leveraging USDN's position for large-scale systems change.

In the spirit of renewal, let's recommit to our purpose. Our planet depends on it, and future generations deserve nothing less. Thank you for being part of this incredible journey, remember that it's your dedication and spirit that make USDN so special.

Sincerely,

Laurene Hamilton

DOLLARS FOR DEPLOYMENT: GETTING FUNDING TO THE GROUND

Local governments are collaborating with communities to build transformative sustainability programs, but often lack the resources to get started. USDN seeds new ideas through its innovation funding programs and helps local governments secure funding at scale from federal grants and philanthropic initiatives.

Member-Led Collective Action: Resilient Southwest Building Code Initiative

With seed funding from USDN's Emergent Learning Fund and technical support from USDN's Federal Funding Program, the City of Tucson, AZ convened state and local governments with industry, workforce development organizations, and community-based organizations to win a \$3.5 million grant from the Department of Energy. With this funding, the Collaborative will develop more efficient and resilient building codes across Southwest: that means lower utility bills and less air pollution for all residents, especially those prioritized by the Justice40 initiative.

Spreading Best Practices for Energy Efficiency, Nationally

USDN is part of the [National Energy Codes Collaborative](#), a nationwide network that empowers states and jurisdictions to implement updated, cost-effective building energy codes. USDN's role: amplify lessons and best practices through our network of local government staff by using digital tools, workshops, and in-person meetings; coordinate local implementation of these new building standards; and train future leaders in energy efficiency through fellowship programs.

Building Climate Resilience, Strengthening Communities

Building on long-standing relationships with community groups in Cambridge, MA and Oahu, HI, USDN helped secure \$6 million dollars in federal appropriations to support their local Resilience Hubs—trusted community sites that help meet people's needs year-round, and build proactive resilience while also serving communities during extreme weather events and disruptions. These significant investments will help the Cambridge Community Center Resilience Hub upgrade to a clean, resilient electrical system and will enable Oahu to begin site development and implementation.



“Putting together a federal grant application with 36 partners was challenging, but we leveraged existing relationships between USDN members to build a coalition, connected through USDN with potential technical partners, and benefited greatly from the grant writing assistance USDN provided. This project demonstrates the incredible reach and value of collective action among communities that USDN exists to facilitate.

— Leslie Ethen, Tucson (AZ)



Reconnecting Communities Separated by Highways

With \$61 million from the Department of Transportation, the Connecting New Orleans East for Pedestrian and Bicyclist Safety and Mobility project will create safer pedestrian and bike passages across I-10 for the historically disadvantaged communities fragmented by the highway's construction. Supported with 45 hours of USDN Technical Assistance, the project will also connect residential communities with increased access to commercial retail, job opportunities, and public services on both the north and south sides of I-10 in New Orleans East.



Improving Housing for Indigenous, Rural, and Low-Income Communities

With USDN assistance, Missoula County won an EPA Environmental Justice Government to Government grant to create a vital one-stop shop resource of comprehensive and hands-on assistance to Missoula County residents, including its rural, low-income, and Indigenous communities that are disproportionately impacted by climate change. By providing comprehensive and in-person assistance to navigate resources and funding options, the one-stop shop will empower residents to take action to protect their health and homes.





Seed Funding for Capacity Building

USDN's Emergent Learning Fund provides seed funding for projects focused on capacity building between local governments, community-based organizations, and private partners around local climate work. Here are a few examples of initiatives this Fund helped launch in 2023:

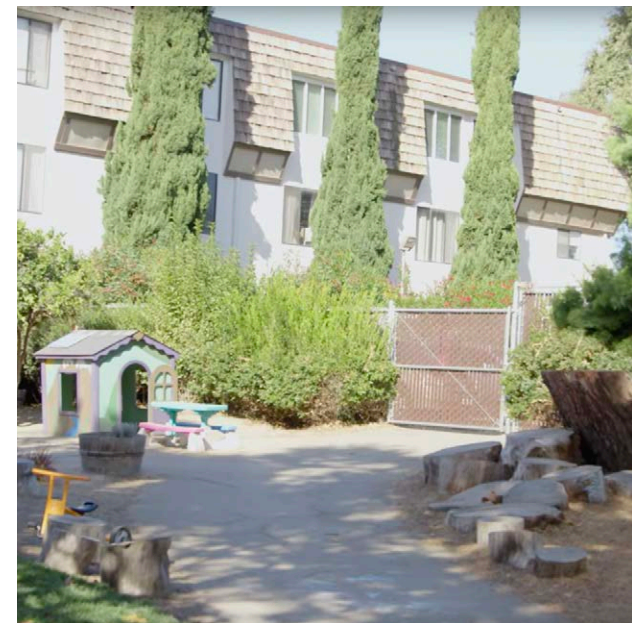
Increasing Capacity for Community Engagement

- The City of Philadelphia expanded its capacity to mitigate historical harms in the city's food system, increasing the community's engagement and ownership in climate work and in how successful climate work is measured.
- Yolo County, CA approved a compensation policy to engage more community voices in climate planning.

Launching Equitable Sustainability Programs

- The City of Richmond, VA created its first Urban Forest Master Plan and worked with CBOs to host new workforce development programs.
- Milwaukee developed an online tool for residents to navigate citywide programs and determine what resources and support are available to them.
- Anchorage created incentives for low and middle income residents to electrify their homes.
- Sacramento launched a Home Energy Equity Pilot, delivering energy efficiency improvements and electrification retrofits to low-income households.

In 2023, USDN closed out 19 grants totaling over \$500,000 and awarded another \$185,000 to 14 grantees. These investments have yielded dramatic returns in terms of outcomes as well as funding leveraged. Recipients whose projects closed in 2023 went on to secure over \$19 million in additional funding from other sources.





LEADING WITH EQUITY: TRANSFORMING LOCAL GOVERNMENT PRACTICE

Creating a resilient and sustainable future for all requires leading with equity. USDN supports local governments in their efforts to forge stronger relationships with community partners and weave equity into their work.

An Equity Course Tailored to Local Government and Sustainability

In 2023, participation in USDN's newly-released second edition of its Equity Foundations series scaled dramatically with nearly 200 people completed or in the process of completing the training. Equity Foundations helps sustainability practitioners in local government analyze the systems and power dynamics they work within and integrate equity principles and practices into their work. USDN hosted 18 racial caucus sessions, allowing participants to discuss takeaways from the course and have peer support in applying these learnings to their work. More than 40 practitioners completed the comprehensive training in 2023, with 150 more currently in the course. Over 90 percent of those who completed the training said it helped them take action on a process, policy, or project; most common topics were on Climate Action Plans, community engagement, white supremacy/culture, and discussions of race and equity issues. 80 percent of them said they are now confident in their ability to engage in racial equity work.

Using the Nexus Framework for Building Trust Between Government and Community

Building trust between local government and community members is an important step in creating equitable climate solutions. Through the Nexus program, USDN offered individual coaching to seven communities and local governments, then facilitated collaborative spaces for discussion. The result: governments found ways to begin shifting power to community members who have historically been left out of government decision making.

Fellowships to Train Future BIPOC Sustainability Leaders

USDN's Equity Diversity Inclusion Fellows program places the next generation of sustainability leaders in local government and increases staff capacity to focus on equitable climate solutions. Evanston (IL), Fort Collins (CO), and the District of Columbia hosted fellows in 2023. Projects included environmental justice storytelling efforts, strengthening community partnerships, and supporting a racial equity impact assessment.



“Equity Foundations 2.0 was a great start to think about how equity is connected to the work we are doing. We are now starting to update our green building policy and have equity as a key piece. This course has brought understanding of terminology that should be incorporated in the process and also has brought back some of that information to my team and sparked regular discussions on equity going forward.

— Alara Brinton, Winnipeg, Manitoba



“Advocating for justice in predominantly white spaces that have historically been Anglo serving can be mentally and emotionally draining. The fellowship provided a support network of people who understood these struggles. This made the experience not just bearable but rejuvenating. The shared understanding gave me a renewed sense of resilience and purpose for the work ahead.

— Caesar Garduno, Fort Collins (CO)



People of Color Peer Support Initiative

USDN strongly believes in the power of building relationships among sustainability practitioners in local government, and this is especially true for BIPOC sustainability practitioners working in a white-dominated field. Nearly 50 participants from more than 40 different communities participated in 2023. USDN held an in-person session at its Annual Meeting for POSCI participants to discuss collective care and build camaraderie.

FROM LEARNING TO ACTION: TURNING SKILLS INTO IMPLEMENTATION



USDN brings together local governments that face similar challenges alongside experts in the field. Together, they disseminate known solutions and generate novel approaches. As a member-led organization, we invest in the creativity and leadership of practitioners and help them spread their knowledge effectively. Training programs meet the needs of practitioners and help them apply their skills to accelerate equitable and impactful local climate action.



Making Clean Energy Accessible and Affordable

The burden of high energy bills on low income households means that, to be equitable, local governments must consider the economic impacts of launching new clean energy programs. In 2023, USDN launched the Energy Equity Learning Group for members. It supported over 50 local governments by hosting monthly calls to discuss energy efficiency, affordability, rental, and low- to moderate-income housing and showcased concrete examples of how communities were able to advance energy equity. One example: City of Sacramento was able to help low and moderate income households save on their energy bills by installing more efficient home appliances and, did so with the help of a \$60k seed grant in 2022.



Helping Local Governments Engage on Utility Policy

Local governments increasingly look to engage their local utility companies as they work to meet their city and counties' emission reduction goals. To help, USDN and the Southeast Sustainability Directors Network co-hosted the US Energy Utility Regulation 201 mini-series, which provided knowledge and best practices on engaging with local utility companies to over 80 practitioners. These monthly workshops were supported by the Regulatory Assistance Project and topics covered so far have included gas utility reform and how to better involve communities in government decision-making.



Securing Resources to Propel Equitable Climate Action

Local governments and community organizations want to seize this moment to secure unprecedented federal funding for equitable climate action, but they need help. USDN's Federal Funding Program provides skill building and technical assistance from the beginning to the end, from teaching members foundational grants strategy and prioritization skills to providing 1:1 coaching and technical assistance to get competitive grants over the line. We produce key tools and resources that are grounded in local governments' real experiences and approaches to help spread lessons learned and prevent people from reinventing the wheel. Over the last year, members won \$135,492,372 in federal funding.

CATALYZING INNOVATION: INCUBATED INITIATIVES



USDN creates spaces for sustainability experts to share ideas and goals, often leading to collaborations and broader initiatives. These groups and efforts scale innovative climate solutions and partnerships, creating impact on communities across North America.



Expanding the Community of Practice for Resilience Hubs

Resilience Hubs are trusted community sites that help meet people's needs year-round, and build proactive resilience while also serving communities during extreme weather events and disruptions. In 2023, USDN launched the Resilience Hub community of practice and offered direct coaching and connected peer communities to help them develop these critical facilities. USDN also hosted a Resilience Hub workshop in Seattle, bringing together 40 local governments and community-based partners from the Cascadia Network, helping participants start or continue developing Resilience Hubs by fostering collaboration between local governments and their community partners.

Supporting Member-Led work on Urban Agriculture and Environmental Justice Urban Agriculture

The production, processing, storage, distribution, and sale of agricultural products within urban areas sits at the intersection of land, housing, racial and environmental justice, and resilience and can play a key role in building more sustainable communities. Recognizing this potential, a group of USDN members formed the Urban Agriculture Directors Network, which advances justice by building local food systems that support resilient and sustainable communities. More than 40 local government influencers have participated in this network so far, which has covered topics like the intersection between affordable housing, land use planning, and urban agriculture.

Supporting the Growth of Regionally-Specific Peer Networks

Cascadia Network supporting and advancing regionally-specific networks is one of many ways that USDN works to maximize the impact of local climate action. Finding an opportunity to provide deeper support to the Pacific Northwest, USDN worked closely with the Cascadia Network to create opportunities to learn and collaborate. In June 2023, a Cascadia meeting focused on peer exchange and collaboration, including a session on federal funding and possible collective organizing activities in the region. And in December 2023, USDN helped convene 40 local governments and community-based partners to build more momentum for resilience hubs in their communities.

“As someone who applied for Technical Assistance for Resilience Hubs through USDN's partnership with CEG, I want to express my gratitude for the accessible and incredibly helpful process! We are just getting started, but it's already been a wonderful experience, and we are looking forward to their ongoing support.

— Jenna Ortega, Flagstaff, AZ

PARTNERING FOR IMPACT: FUNDING COLLABORATIONS AT SCALE



USDN leverages the power of its network to help deploy the large-scale funding that philanthropy and the federal government are directing toward climate action.

Making Environmental Justice Grants More Accessible with EPA

USDN, in partnership with International City/County Management Association, the Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals, National League of Cities, and the National Forum for Black Public Administrators, was selected in 2023 to serve as a National EPA Environmental Justice Thriving Communities Technical Assistance Center.

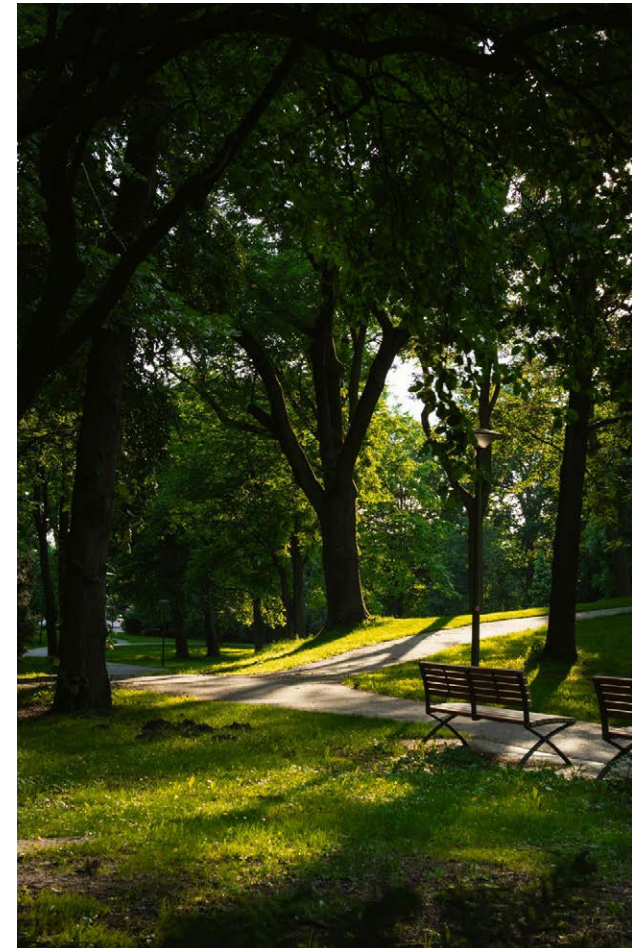
Through this partnership, USDN will help local and Tribal governments and community organizations by providing assistance, training, and capacity building to advance environmental justice goals. Through the EPA's Environmental Justice Thriving Communities Grantmaking program, USDN will also work with the Institute for Sustainable Communities, Emerald Cities Collaborative, Groundwork USA, Trust for Public Land, and the River Network to reduce barriers and improve efficiencies so that community-based organizations have greater access to further federal environmental justice funding.

Accelerating Urban and Community Forestry Programs with USDA

USDN, in partnership with the Center for Regenerative Solutions (CRS) and the Trust for Public Land, was selected to administer and oversee a \$28 million grant as part of the USDA's Forest Service Urban and Community Forestry program. CRS, which began as a working group hosted under USDN and is now a fiscally sponsored project of the organization, will strengthen the field of urban forestry, increase equitable access to urban tree canopy in disadvantaged communities, and broaden community engagement over the course of the five-year grant cycle.

Greening American Cities with the Bezos Earth Fund

USDN launched a partnership with the Bezos Earth Fund to play a key role in the Earth Fund's Greening America's Cities initiative, which will increase and develop green spaces in underserved urban US communities. USDN began working with local government officials in Los Angeles, Atlanta, Chicago, Albuquerque, and Wilmington to provide technical expertise and support as they work in partnership with community organizations to advance local greening.



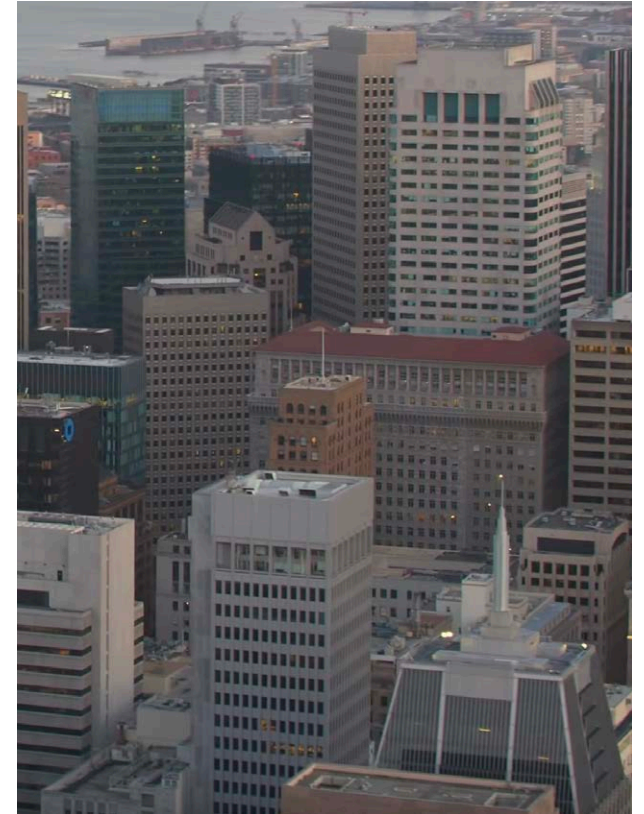


Accelerating Equitable Solar Energy

USDN served as a key partner in an initiative to help low-income households and small businesses transition to clean energy through the installation of solar systems. USDN worked with local government and nonprofit partners in three cities – Phoenix, Salt Lake City, and Sydney, Australia – to install solar systems on homes and businesses, reducing the burden of high energy bills and making these families and business owners more resilient to environmental hazards that may impact their power supply. Using projects in Phoenix as a pilot, the State of Arizona won over \$156 million from EPA’s Solar for All Program to expand its existing low-income solar programs.

Advancing Equity, Sustainability, and Black Wealth with Bloomberg American Sustainable Cities Initiative

USDN is participating in the Bloomberg American Sustainable Cities Initiative, which will turbocharge over two dozen US cities’ efforts to leverage historic levels of federal funding to build equitable, energy-efficient and resilient communities and increase Black wealth. USDN coached cities applying to the initiative and organized finalist cities at the 2023 Annual Meeting to share knowledge and resources on topics like federal funding, tax credits, job creation, and addressing racial wealth gaps to advance climate action. The BASC initiative continues through 2023 with USDN helping five cities build a federal funding strategy and access resources to achieve their goals.



Maximizing Impact and Efficiency with City Networks

City Climate Partnership is a collaboration between USDN, C40 and Climate Mayors that is now in its second year. As city-facing networks, we are combining our unique skills, strengths, and audiences to streamline the experience of local governments seeking to build their capacity, utilize federal funding, and advance equitable climate action. Over the last year, the Partnership has helped dozens of local governments via workshops, webinars, and technical assistance. We also advance the field by giving consolidated feedback to agency partners and publishing reports and resources.

ANNUAL MEETING

400+ attendees at the Annual Meeting

After four years, USDN welcomed back members to USDN's full network, in-person gathering in the City of New Orleans. It was the largest annual meeting yet, with more than 430 attendees representing 184 local government jurisdictions over three days of programming. Consistent with the overall diversity make-up of the network, nearly one-third of annual meeting attendees identified as BIPOC. More than half of attendees have been USDN members for less than three years, indicating that the network has grown tremendously in recent years. One fourth of attendees have been members for more than seven years, also reflecting a rich history and deep commitment of members to the network.

Attendees strengthened relationships, built new knowledge, and exchanged ideas to advance sustainability goals in their communities. Several sessions centered on the historic amount of federal funding now available to communities as a result of the Inflation Reduction Act and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. With support from C40, the Sabin Center for Climate Change Law, and Lawyers for Good Government, USDN hosted sessions to help members develop projects, work with community



organizations, and secure grant funding and funding through IRA tax credits. One session was the starting point for cohorts to support dozens of communities secure IRA tax incentives for clean energy projects.

Other topics included community engagement, accelerating urban nature-based climate solutions, effective communication tactics, and building decarbonization. Attendees also met new practitioners from other communities who work on similar issues and built strong relationships in regionally-specific organizing spaces. Members also experienced the culture and environmental infrastructure of New Orleans through tours held on the final day of programming.

I was excited about how to better incorporate racial equity as opposed to generic equity — that hit strongly. I also got a few other ideas of ways to incorporate equity into our existing initiatives.

— Robyn Byers, Charlotte, NC



I came away with a deeper knowledge about federal grants, and a better framework for evaluating opportunities. But, what was really great was a chance to focus on work, but also pick my head up, look around and connect with new people and a new place.

— John Wasiutynski, Multnomah County, OR

THANK YOU: SUPPORTERS



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USDN is grateful for the opportunity to serve as fiscal sponsor for the following organizations:

CENTER FOR
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SOLUTIONS 

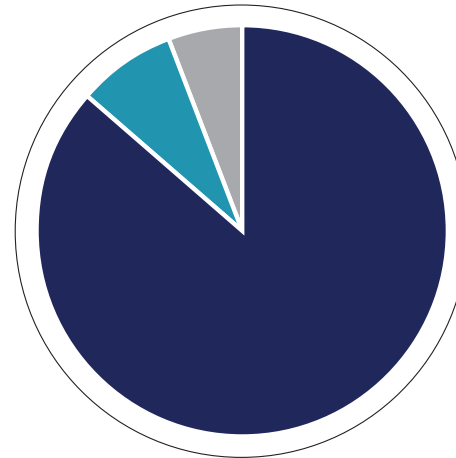


SSDN SOUTHEAST SUSTAINABILITY
DIRECTORS NETWORK

USDN FINANCIALS

REVENUE

	2023	2022
Grants	\$13,639,346	\$5,545,299
Membership Dues	\$1,244,266	\$1,106,678
Other Earned Income	\$893,303	\$307,078
TOTAL	\$15,776,915	\$6,959,055



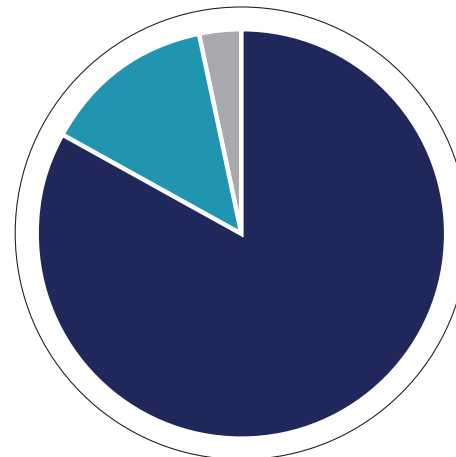
Grants – 86%

Membership Dues – 8%

Other Earned Income – 6%

EXPENSES

	2023	2022
Programs	\$9,360,464	\$7,316,675
Management	\$1,558,316	\$1,294,094
Fundraising	\$346,215	\$314,757
TOTAL	\$11,264,995	\$8,925,526



Programs – 83%

Management – 14%

Fundraising – 3%



“Thank you for being part of this incredible journey, remember that it’s your dedication and spirit that make USDN so special.”

– LAURENE HAMILTON, *Chief Member Experience Officer*

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