

USDN Peer Learning Exchange: The Field-Building Power of Convening

USDN's core value of peer learning manifests itself in this funding mechanism as USDN members share and spread initiatives.

At a Glance: Peer Learning Exchange (PLE) grant opportunity.

The purpose of the PLE is for 2 or more USDN core members to convene to share, teach, or learn about a highly specific practice in one of the cities so the other city(ies) can adopt it. Proposals are accepted quarterly (March, June, August, and November). Awards are typically for \$7,000 or less, and the ensuing convening can take up to 3 months to complete. PLE area of strength in the Innovation Pathway: Adoption Accelerator.

Small and Mighty. The PLE grant opportunity is the smallest of the three USDN funds, but it is consistently ranked as highly valuable in USDN annual surveys. Supported by the Summit Foundation and JPB Foundation, PLE is a critical funding mechanism for members as it pays for USDN member exchanges. This allows them to share the implementation details of urban sustainability innovations that are in any stage of the innovation pathway – from ideation to widespread adoption.

Accessible. The PLE funding opportunity is intentionally designed to be highly accessible. The point is to get members in the mindset of collaborative learning around policies and practices - without the time-consuming commitment of a full-blown and iterative RFP process. Once USDN members have experienced the value of peer exchanges, they can consider taking next steps with the project partners they have connected with and listened to. The relationships and trust that have been developed provide a foundation for the work to build upon. This is an undeniably powerful yet “intangible” impact of the PLE fund.

A Gateway. Convening around a successful initiative, learning how to do it well, and understanding what mechanisms must be in place for the idea to succeed elsewhere can lead to further collaborative development of that innovation. Often, PLEs lead to follow-on work that other USDN funds support.

For instance, one of the incoming fall proposals to the USDN Innovation Fund (IF) is a direct result of a PLE between two west coast cities collaborating around the market uptake for electric vehicles. In some instances, a PLE award topic will later manifest within the USDN Innovation Fund as a separate award, sharing grant participants and sometimes leads. Energy benchmarking, district energy, innovations in waste management, and equity are just some of the many overlapping projects and participants between these two USDN funding mechanisms.

Sometimes, PLE helps disseminate a project from another USDN fund. For instance, one exchange allowed cities to learn from each other on how best to train staff on climate change preparedness. The training development was funded from a previous USDN IF grant. PLE participants were able to observe the training conducted in three southeastern cities. They learned about program design, lessons learned, and success stories. The host city also obtained feedback on the training, as well as suggestions for building capacity and future employee engagement.