

Bringing Equity to the Center of Sustainability Practice

The Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN) has emerged as an incubator for field development, including bringing an equity lens to sustainability work. Partners for Places (P4P) – a funding program formed by USDN and the Funders’ Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities (TFN) – is a primary source of support for cities and place-based foundations.

The history of the USDN and Partners for Places collaboration to support USDN member work on equity in sustainability offers one view of what it takes to develop the field of urban sustainability:

- **2011 Launching Early Peer Learning.** Members voted at the 2010 USDN Annual Meeting to launch a peer-learning group to strengthen a focus on equity in environmental sustainability work. This peer-learning group, which includes about 30 cities, continues today.
- **2012 Providing Financial Support for Experimentation.** Partners for Places (P4P) made one of its first grants to Portland OR to develop “Tools for Climate Equity,” one of the first processes to bring an equity lens to climate action planning.
- **2013 Fostering Deeper Peer Learning.** USDN enabled deep peer learning about Portland’s Tools for Climate Equity through its Peer Learning Exchange grant program. Nine communities sent staff to Portland to learn how to integrate equity into climate action planning.
- **2013 Gathering Emerging Knowledge.** By 2013, there was a healthy level of experimentation to bring an equity lens to local government sustainability work. USDN and its members attracted funding to complete a “Scan of Local Government Best Practices for Equity” – available for download [here](#).
- **2014 Funding Cities to Apply New Equity Knowledge.** P4P made more than twice as many grants addressing equity in sustainability in 2014 as 2013.
- **2014 Agreeing on Collective Action to Address Challenges.** At the 2014 USDN Annual Meeting, members formed a Sustainability Diversity User Group to explore ways to bring more people of color into sustainability positions in cities. They also created a focused professional development opportunity to learn how to apply an equity lens in their work.
- **2015 Training 50+ Cities To Apply An Equity Lens.** USDN and partners developed the USDN Equity Professional Development Program, a holistic curriculum of readings, videos, and worksheet and a facilitator’s guide for five workshops. The curriculum is available online [here](#).
- **2015 Broadening Funding for Equity Experimentation.** By 2015, 75% of P4P grants addressed equity in sustainability or climate action. In addition, P4P created a separate \$1 million Equity Pilot Project to support USDN members to implement projects developed through the USDN Equity Professional Development Program and broadly share what works. About 33% of 2015 USDN Innovation Fund had an explicit equity component. The USDN Innovation Fund also made a special allocation for multi-city collaborative equity projects. For example, a group of cities received support to develop guidance for applying an equity lens to energy efficiency program development.
- **2016 Launching a Fellowship to Support Local Government Equity Goals.** USDN launched its Building Diversity Fellowship, which provides grants for USDN members to hire a summer fellowship positions to help them meet their equity and inclusion goals.

While about half of USDN members have been involved in education, peer exchange, and experimentation to add an equity lens to their work, there is still a huge distance to go. USDN members and Partners for Places staff continue to be focused on this work. The USDN Equity User Group is continuing to meet in 2016. The Partners for Places team is reviewing new equity in sustainability and climate action grant proposals. Staff members for the Partners for Places Equity Pilot Project are culling additional lessons for how to apply an equity lens. The Building Diversity Fellowship this summer will reveal ways to increase capacity for equity work in the sustainability field. USDN members will use their network to spread the lessons and scale what works.