Breakout: Building Welcoming Communities - December 7, 2021
Facilitator: Xusana Davis
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What are you most excited about in this arena today? Where are there successes and bright spots/opportunities?

Town-adopted Inclusion Statements are a good place to start.

There are some great models around the state and the country that we can learn about.

Seeing a variety of ages/genders/races "at the table" on municipal and organizational boards in the Rutland area. Community leaders have stepped forward to recognize the importance of connections and confidence.

R.E.A.L. in Lamoille County, coming together to create change in the community.

Burlington School District bringing children and parents together at school events. Good opportunities to meet people of different racial/ethnic backgrounds.

Recovery funds are giving communities an opportunity to reposition themselves on community needs and projects.

National change in immigration policy and the opportunity to resettle refugees in Vermont. The speaker thinks we are doing it well. We didn't NEED to, but we did.

Growing level of work to structurally include anti-racist and equity oriented language in policy on school boards/districts. Hiring, curriculum, etc.

Restaurant Revitalization Fund had a focused period for applications from women/veteran/minority-owned businesses, and the up-take was heartening.

Communities celebrating Pride for the first time.

Experiences meeting new "Vermonters by Choice." Seeing people who recently moved here taking advantage of opportunities to meet others in the community.

There's a lot of excitement from VT communities about becoming more welcoming and helping everyone understand what this means, and a lot of work being done for DEI across the State. Vermonters want to get involved, which is very exciting!

Seeing evidence of a process in communities and organizations to build new structures to share resources and opportunities.

Bennington middle schoolers have been actively engaging with the community around youth mental health, substance-use prevention and addressing the need for safe and inclusive spaces for our LGBTQ and Students of Color.

What are your concerns/questions about how to move forward?

Vermont is not a racially or ethnically diverse state. It can be difficult to know where to get started in a Welcoming effort.

Towns are small; capacity can be limited.

Dealing with language barriers when trying to make contact with groups.

Vermont has catapulted into national awareness during the pandemic with a perception as a safe place during the pandemic and climate change. The rush to move here has put a strain on resources and housing with potential negatives for equity.

Employers are trying to expand their hiring processes, yet there are concerns about the ability to retain community members with different backgrounds. There is a fear that good intentions may backfire. Fear of making mistakes.

New leadership opportunities also bring higher visibility and potential for harassment. What can we do to protect people?

You can still see that the "Good Old Boys" network is alive and well in VT communities.

Trepidation about using new acronyms and labeling people. Words matter.

Noticing more divisions and different groups not talking to each other any more. Not having spaces for people to gather.

Concern: lack of space/opportunity/facilitation for many communities to gather, know one-another, surface common goals and work through differences.

There are inequities in "working class" infrastructure. Childcare, housing, transportation, etc. Is the discussion about race/ethnicity drowning out a much-needed conversation on class differences?

There's some resistance from Vermonters and misinformation about being welcoming. We need to have open spaces to allow everyone to become more familiar/comfortable with terminology and to talk about DEI.

There has been a growing realization of how unwelcoming Vermont communities can be.

How do we maintain these efforts and keep them from being the "flavor of the month?"

Seeing sectors getting "stuck" after making an inclusionary commitment/statement. Can we bring sectors together to share tools, resources and what is working?

Vermont is "community-rich" and "information-poor." Need to find new ways to get information out to different groups of people.

What do you and/or communities need to be successful in this arena in the future?

Intentions are good, but specific action steps seem to be hard to come by. A clearinghouse of tools/assistance would be amazing.

Continued conversations, especially in smaller groups, that allow us to explore the steps we're taking/intending to take, obtain feedback about intentions vs outcomes, and learn.

Allow organizations and municipalities engaging in DEI for the first time to make some mistakes and learn as they go. Maintain lines of communication as well as constructive criticism.

This is a powerful conversation tool that may be helpful: https://turningtowardseachother.medium.com/turning-towards-each-other-embracing-the-gifts-of-conflict-for-social-change-ea28502016b7

Space to come together, talk, make mistakes, learn, and take action.

Xusana hinted at some resources that the State is working on that will be of assistance in the arena.

From a marketing/communications background, Vermont (as a whole) and our individual communities need to find new ways to market Vermont to different groups of people.

Improved partnership with municipal leaders.

Civic training on how do we ensure we are fully engaging with everyone in our community, including the historically marginalized and underrepresented groups. What questions should we be asking before we make community decisions? Put ourselves in the framework of who we want to be in the future.

Reaching out specifically to faith communities who should be promoting social justice and inclusivity. Also, conflict resolution skills can be taught and implemented by the many in VT who have such skills.

Hold some Interactive educational/experiential based training on equity for leaders of communities would be really helpful. It needs to happen in spaces where they feel comfortable. At first leaders can be open, but then they get scared and don't understand and pull back.

Renewed support and elevation of the role of schools as centers of community. Schools should be centers of creativity, innovation, community-building, inclusion and revitalization.

Encourage organizations to consider the Declaration of Inclusion.

VLCT Equity Resources page. https://www.vlct.org/equityresources.

Statewide group where those of us working on equity challenges can access education and training for ensuring efficacy and getting past barriers. Perhaps a working group that meets periodically.

Dedicated funding for communities and organizations to engage in this work, e.g. hiring interpreters, accessing trainings, etc.

The Local Fiscal Recovery Funding each town received can be used on equity work.

Alex Beck: We've been doing a lot of this work here in Windham County as a town, County, and region. I'd be happy to share more with anyone interested.
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Increase broadband access to increase equitable access to information and resources.

More intersectional conversations on traditional community development topics such as housing and transportation so that equity goals and equity educational resources are incorporated into the conversation and resulting action plans.