



Virtual Community Visits

Vermonters know that local action makes our communities vibrant. But local action often needs support from regional, state, and even federal resources to achieve goals for prosperity. The Vermont Council on Rural Development's (VCRD) **Community Visit Program** is a way for towns to engage and bring together their residents, set common goals and directions in a neutral and facilitated structure, and access resources that will help them take action on those goals. In a time when local leadership and community action are more important than ever, the program gets citizens engaged in working for their communities and connects them to the resources they need to be successful.

How It Works

The Community Visit program is a three-month series of public meetings, bringing together a broad mix of community members virtually with a **Visiting Team**, made up of state, federal, non-profit, and philanthropic experts, to create intensive partnerships and tailored work plans for long-term local success. VCRD provides the structure and neutral facilitation each step of the way. The Visit begins with a series of virtual public forums and targeted focus groups that engage the entire community in discussion (STEP 1) followed by a community wide discussion where residents champion their ideas for the future of their town and choose their priorities (STEP 2). Then, interested community members join local task forces to work forward on the goals set through the process (STEP 3). Each task force has a *chairperson* who manages meetings and keeps work moving forward. A local *Community Visit chairperson* ("chair of the chairs") helps to keep the community informed and involved as the program progresses. While the program is provided to towns for free, residents are expected to assist with logistics and outreach; and the Town is expected to cover the costs of a mailed invitation to residents.

Community Visits during Covid

VCRD has built a model for delivering Community Visits in an age of social distancing using virtual meetings and digital tools.

Tools used to gather input and select priorities for action include:

- Zoom meetings
- Online surveys
- Community Vision / Ideas Board in a public outdoor location
- Virtual polls to narrow down choices and select action items

VCRD will also develop a local webpage that includes links to meetings and surveys, meeting notes and action ideas, and shares next steps and task force group formation and progress.



Roles

Steering Committee: Community members representing diverse interests of the community meet once – a month before Community Visit Day – to brainstorm Forum topics, logistics, “focus groups” of key constituencies to bring together, and outreach strategies.

Community Members: All decisions rest in the hands of the community. Community members participate each step of the way and have the opportunity to join Task Forces to take action on selected priorities.

Community Visit Chair: A community member serves as the local point person and helps to keep the community informed and involved as the program progresses.

Visiting Resource Team: a Visiting Team of state, federal, business, non-profit, and philanthropic leaders attend Community Visit Day and Resource Day and act as listeners, advisors, and resources for the Community. They help Task Forces develop action plans for the best chance of success and are available as resources as the work moves forward.

Vermont Council on Rural Development: VCRD provides the overall structure and neutral facilitation of each meeting, and manages an extensive invitation process to ensure that all members of the community are welcome, encouraged to attend, and are heard.

What Does a Community Visit Produce?

The Community Visit program is built from the priorities that a community decides together, so results vary from town to town. Overall, towns report energized volunteers, better community engagement, and new connections to state, federal, and regional resources. For some towns, the Visit creates community goodwill and celebrations, such as *Rutland’s Friday Night Live* series; outdoor each summer week with live music, food and shopping opportunities. For others, it is used to leverage funds or planning resources, such as *Pownal’s affordable housing project* or *Johnson’s downtown redesign*. For some towns, the Visit provides a mechanism to talk about important issues and begin long term work for the future, as in *Killington’s 4-season tourism planning*, or *Vernon’s village revitalization*. And for still others, it is a chance to help the community get healthier; *Troy, Westfield, Jay, and Woodstock built and advertised new walking trails* and *Brighton started a recreation program*.

Find out more about the Community Visit program:

<http://vtrural.org/programs/Community-Visits>.

“I have never seen as much activity, excitement, and accomplishment in our town. VCRD is doing meaningful work that will improve the quality of life in Vermont towns for generations to come. I will always be grateful.”
~ Sandy Kilburn, Swanton Resident

“I have been hearing such a great buzz today after all of the fun yesterday. Thanks again for helping our community get reinvigorated. I really believe in the task forces that have been formed and their determination and ability to better serve our community.”
~ Emily Maclure, Craftsbury Community Visit Chair