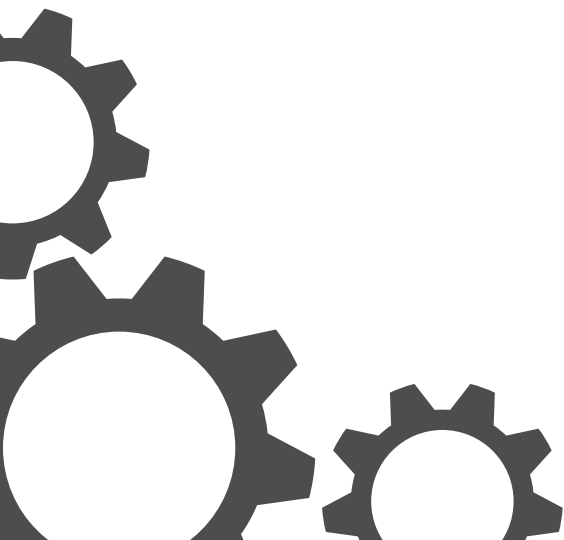




WORKING COMMUNITIES CHALLENGE  
**VERMONT**  
FALL 2022 INITIAL REPORT

working   
communities  
challenge



**PREPARED BY:** Vermont Council on Rural Development

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2019, Vermont has invested in the Working Communities Challenge (WCC) to catalyze the power of grassroots, community-driven economic development across more than 60% of our towns. This report provides an overview of the WCC program and keys to the initial success of 8 regional teams approaching long-standing challenges in new ways.

The WCC is a well-researched collaboration and learning experiment between the State of Vermont and the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. Community and regional teams across Vermont are setting audacious goals to better the lives of people experiencing intergenerational poverty and disenfranchisement. These teams are building trust among organizations from the private, nonprofit, public and social service sectors. They are creating the right conditions for collaboration and change alongside people with lived experience and their families, not FOR them, but with them.

## KEYS TO SUCCESS

- ▶ Collaborative teams are provided with the necessary resources (staff, time, expertise and focus) to work across sectors (public, private, and nonprofit) and across boundaries (towns, regions) to support community-driven economic development.
- ▶ Long-term systems change solutions are developed in partnership with people with lived experience.
- ▶ Solutions to problems are created with a learning agenda by providing patient capital for experimentation.

The Vermont Working Communities Challenge is a unique partnership between state and local leaders, the public and private sectors and among Vermonters looking to improve economic outcomes for their communities. Over the next two and a half years, these teams will create better economic opportunities for their residents and propose systems change solutions for long-term success: we hope you will join them.



# INTRODUCTION

## Dear Decision Makers and Community Builders,

This is the first in a series of writings to you, and Vermont's general public, about the power of effective cross sector collaboration when it is applied to housing, transportation, childcare, the benefits cliffs, racial equity, resource navigation, workforce development and other interconnected systems.

This report is a product of the **Vermont Working Communities Challenge** Steering Committee. Launched in 2019 and expanded in 2021, the Working Communities Challenge initiative supports diverse, local teams of leaders as they tackle complex challenges facing their communities. With a focus on economic opportunity for communities and residents with low incomes, this unique three-year program is supported by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, the State of Vermont, national and local philanthropy, and private sector employers.

Collectively, the Steering Committee and the eight regional WCC teams represent a new approach to locally-driven system change within Vermont, with the teams innovating at the local or regional level and the Steering Committee positioned to identify, scale, and support new approaches to long-standing challenges. With the support of a neutral facilitator in the Vermont Council on Rural Development, these teams are building new networks and trusted relationships, exchanging ideas with each other and the Steering Committee, bringing new voices into policy discussions, drawing on different resources, and developing new solutions.

We all know that policy, government, and funding resources flow in silos. Communities struggle to find and match funding to their needs, navigate policy, and stay in compliance with various regulations because we have separated interconnected problems into fragmented solutions. But communities and their challenges don't work in silos.

Over the course of the next two years, the WCC will document the teams' progress and show the results generated by those affected by the systems they are working to reform and improve. Fundamentally, these reports will show how – when we are bold enough to break down barriers and undo harm caused by business as usual – we can achieve incredible transformation.

To build a stronger economy, we need housing. To fill a workforce, we need new Vermonters. To build community vitality, we need an easy way for people to get from one side of town to another. The Working Communities Challenge creates cross-sector leadership, and empowered voices of lived experience, as foundational aspects of ways in which the program was designed. With these as cornerstones of the program, communities and regions in Vermont are tackling some of the biggest, most complex problems facing this and future generations of workers and their families.

We invite you to learn more about the 62% of Vermont towns involved in a Working Communities Challenge project and how they've responded to those difficult questions. Over the next three years, we will present their findings and policy recommendations to you at regular intervals. Whenever you're ready to partner with us, we're ready to begin reimagining a Vermont where everyone who wants to live and work has what they need to thrive.

In partnership,

## VERMONT WORKING COMMUNITIES CHALLENGE STEERING COMMITTEE

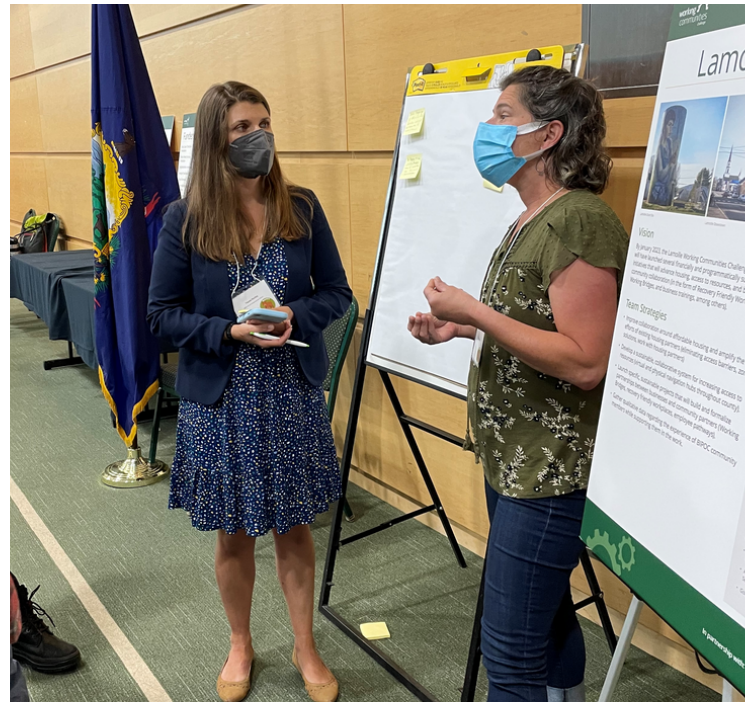
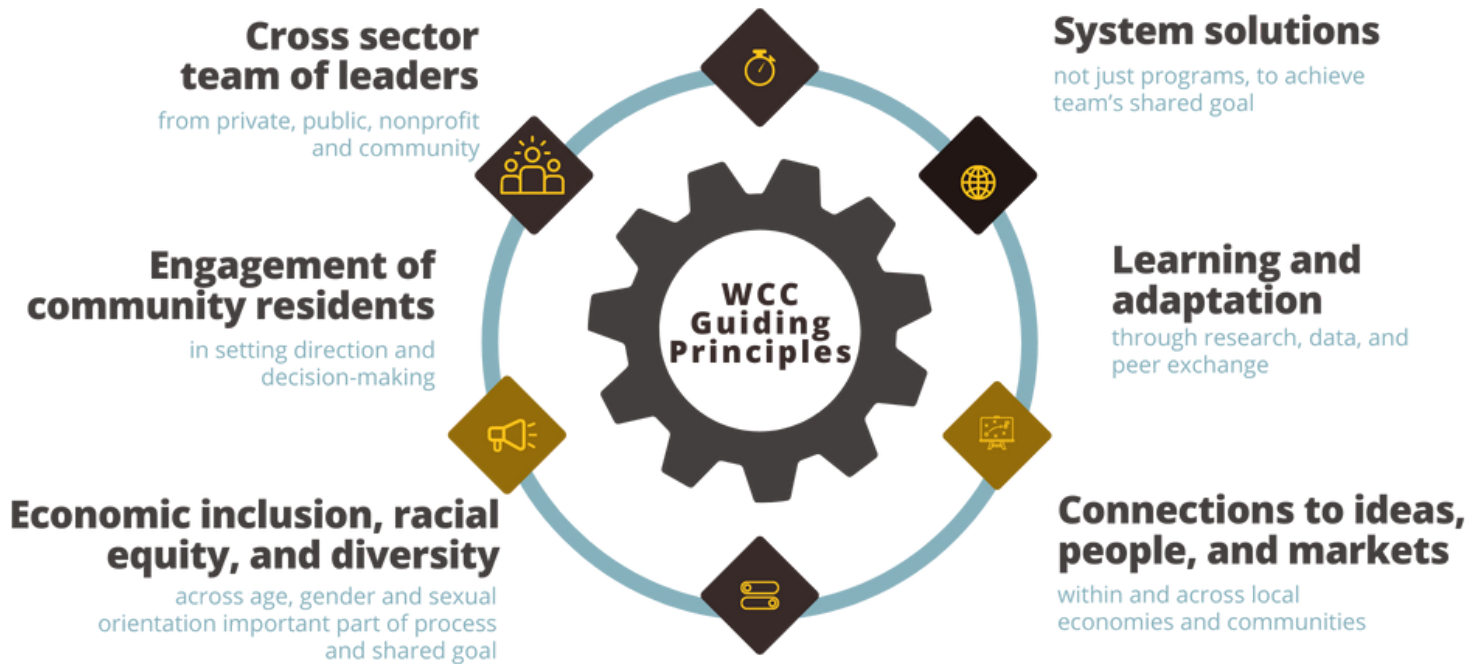
**Katrina Badger**, *Robert Wood Johnson Foundation*  
**Becca Balint**, *Vermont State Senate*  
**Rumeli Banik**, *Doris Duke Charitable Foundation*  
**Ted Brady**, *Vermont League of Cities and Towns*  
**Tom Donahue**, *BROC Community Action*  
**Ben Doyle**, *Preservation Trust of Vermont*  
**Rebecca Foster**, *Vermont Energy Investment Corporation*  
**Gary Halloway**, *Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development*

**Molly Lambert**, *Lambert Consulting and Mediation*  
**Emma Marvin**, *Butternut Mountain Farm*  
**Ellen McCulloch-Lovell**, *EML Consulting*  
**Beth Rusnock**, *National Life Group/  
National Life Group Foundation*  
**Dan Smith**, *Vermont Community Foundation*  
**Joan Straussman Brandon**, *NeighborWorks America*  
**Sarah Waring**, *USDA Rural Development*

# SYSTEMS CHANGE THROUGH CROSS-SECTOR LEADERSHIP AND COLLABORATION

The Working Communities Challenge advances local collaborative efforts that build strong, healthy economies and communities in Vermont's rural towns, regions, and smaller cities.

Research and national practice point to a number of core principles that are central to strong multi sector leadership teams advancing long term economic change and outcomes for people. Our engagement with communities centers on these guiding principles:



# VERMONT TEAMS & GOALS

## **Northwest Vermont**

*Attract and retain talent by addressing regional housing challenges.*

**Backbone to the leadership team:**

[Northwest Regional Planning Commission](#)

## **Northeast Kingdom**

*Reduce intergenerational poverty through hubs of financial stability.*

**Backbone to the leadership team:**

[NEK Collaborative](#)

## **Lamoille**

*Build sustainable systems of collaboration to reduce systemic barriers to employment.*

**Backbone to the leadership team:**

[United Way of Lamoille County](#)

## **Winooski**

*Ensure that the people making community decisions accurately reflect the demographics of our community by bringing new voices to the table throughout decision-making.*

**Backbone to the leadership team:**

[City of Winooski](#)

## **Greater Barre**

*Lower the rate of single female head of households in poverty by 15% in 10 years.*

**Backbone to the leadership team:**

[Green Mountain United Way](#)

## **White River Valley**

*Attract and retain entrepreneurs and young workers through housing.*

**Backbone to the leadership team:**

[Vital Communities](#)

## **Springfield Area**

*Increase workforce participation in the Springfield region by creating a sustainable, collaborative workforce development pipeline to focus on recruitment and retention.*

**Backbone to the leadership team:**

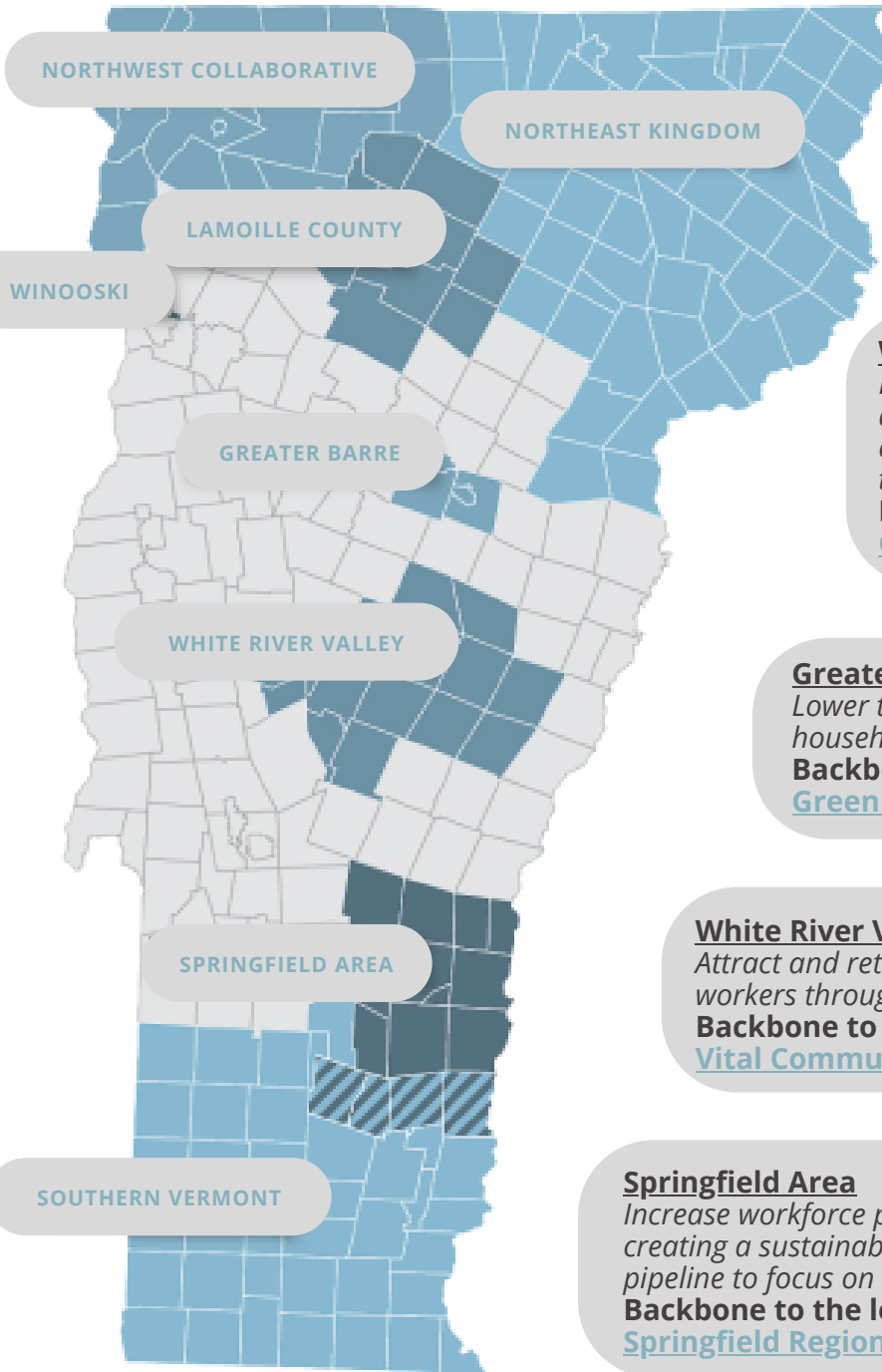
[Springfield Regional Development Corporation](#)

## **Southern Vermont**

*Attract and retain a new workforce through building a diverse, welcoming community.*

**Backbone to the leadership team:**

[Brattleboro Development Credit Corp.](#)



# KEYS TO SUCCESS

## PLANTING SEEDS FOR POLICY CHANGE

The WCC approach is purposefully different. It offers support, patient capital, and a blueprint not just for community-defined economic success but also for systems and policy transformation so that all Vermont communities can experience this success.

Many of the organizations and members of the eight teams around the state have been working together in new ways for more than three years at this point. In that time, they have found a **few keys to this collaborative approach. We are planting these “seeds” with you as you consider our future policy recommendations.**

▶ **Collaborative teams are provided with the necessary resources (staff, time, expertise and focus) to work across sectors (public, private, and nonprofit) and across boundaries (towns, regions) to support community-driven economic development.**

### Example of success:

From the Southern Vermont team: “While all of the organizations are in the public/nonprofit sector, our target beneficiaries and foci are diverse. We have social service, academic, economic development, regional planning, and public transit groups participating. The variety of perspective and expertise led to innovative solutions like the VanPool program for workers, the Ethnographic Interview project, etc.”

### Why this matters:

As one team puts it: “Meetings take time and cost organizations real capacity to participate in. The funding and overall structuring of the WCC teams creates the space and time for this work to be done more collaboratively.” These teams are mostly regional in nature, and those regions are defined by who needs to be at the table to address the goals, not some imposed or arbitrary boundary. Additionally, the teams often emerge from naturally developing grassroots networks which are inspired to take action based on an emergency, long-standing problem that isn't being solved, or other call to action.

▶ **Long-term systems change solutions are developed in partnership with people with lived experience.**

### Example of success:

The Greater Barre team has created a Circle of Support for single women who are the head of their households: this group directly informs both immediate supports (such as increasing food access programs through their employers) and the long-term systems change needed (providing benefits cliffs tools and training to social support resources and employers, hopefully leading to an elimination of the benefits cliffs in Vermont)

### Why this matters:

From the Winooski team: “Socioeconomic status and ability to be heard are major factors. Systems are built to listen to the privileged. It takes a lot of effort and trust-building to get the perspectives of marginalized community members. We have to think strategically about how not to tokenize.”

▶ **Solutions to problems are created with a learning agenda by providing patient capital for experimentation.**

### Example of success:

The Lamoille County team emerged from the county's pandemic response, which coordinated public information and provided needed connections to resources. This work was done first virtually through a robust crowd-sourced newsletter which was then replicated on a resource page on the United Way website. As the team heard from the public and stakeholders, they learned that an in-person mobile rural resource navigator was needed to complete the system of resource navigation in Lamoille. The team will learn from the resource navigation what systems in the region (delivery of job training and coaching, workplace practices, public benefits) need to change to better achieve economic success for Lamoille workers, businesses, and residents.

### Why this matters:

From the Springfield team: “The advantage of the WCC is being allowed to experiment, potentially fail, try again, and then share all of that with each other.” The teams share these experiences with their leadership tables and each other; the learning is now being shared with decision makers (you!).

# EMERGING AREAS OF STRATEGY AND CHALLENGES

Key areas of strategy are emerging regardless of a team's goals:



**Workforce Development**  
(Job Quality, Employer Support, Training & Education Access)



**Transportation**



**Childcare**



**The Benefits Cliffs**



**Housing**



**Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**

These issue areas are interconnected, and so the policy recommendations that emerge will be as well. They will focus on removing silos, connecting and collaborating among organizations across sectors, and making access to resources comprehensive, thoughtful and as inclusive as possible. **Consider inviting the teams to speak with you about these areas of strategy: they have lots to share even now.**

The challenges that teams are facing in the first year or two of implementation are not surprising or unexpected. Keeping momentum and focus while tackling both immediate and long-term challenges, post-COVID burnout and fatigue, and building trust among all levels of leadership are just a few of them.



# PARTNERS IN THIS WORK

The WCC is a unique partnership between the **State of Vermont**, **Federal Reserve Bank of Boston** (FRBB), private sector companies, philanthropy, and the people of the eight regions of Vermont. These partners invest in, learn from, and support the work of the Working Communities Challenge as a way to drive stronger, durable economic outcomes in Vermont communities.



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The State of Vermont and Governor Scott's Administration have been a founding partner in inviting the WCC to the state and investing in its success. Likewise, the FRBB helped establish the founding principles and design of the WCC to fit the needs of the state and is supporting multi-year implementation of the WCC through staffing and organizing technical assistance with the communities.



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A diverse group of local and regional corporate philanthropy, national philanthropy, and statewide philanthropy has come together to pool their investments and align their strategy to support the WCC. Their support funds significant grant awards to the communities to do the work, supports evaluation of progress, and enables delivery of technical assistance and consulting expertise when needed.

The Vermont Council on Rural Development is a neutral facilitator and convener supporting the locally-defined work of the WCC teams.

Most important, it is the commitment, capacity and leadership of the people of the eight communities that make this partnership rich and dynamic. It is their expertise that is the foundation of the WCC.



IMAGE © FEDERAL RESERVE BANK OF BOSTON



# WHAT COMES NEXT

Goals set for each of the teams are different. Some are focusing on housing while others are creating access to employment. Others are looking at specific populations such as single female head of households, or New Vermonters. Regardless of the goal, they are **creating the conditions for systems change** through a long-term commitment of funding for human capital, providing the space and support for people's time to show up for each other, building trust and making it so that whatever audacious goal or complex problem comes next, they can tackle it, together.



**Our initial request is for you to get involved, learn alongside the 8 Vermont teams, and engage them in the co-creation of systemic policy change.**

We need you! At a local or regional level, these teams will show us new ways of solving our most complex obstacles to success, but they can't do it alone. They will need policy change at the state and even national levels to scale the impact of their work, allowing for systemic change that benefits every Vermonter.

We look forward to working with you.

**For more information or to get involved, visit [vtrural.org/working-communities](https://vtrural.org/working-communities) or contact Jessica Savage at [jessica@vtrural.org](mailto:jessica@vtrural.org)**

