Envisioning a Just and Inclusive Future 1

Convening is Still Our Calling Card 2–3

Vital Updates 4–8

Thank You, Donors 9–12

FY23 Financial Summary 13

Mark Your Calendar back

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On The Cover: (L-R) Claudel Chery and wife, Jette Mandl-Abramson, process saff on at their Wells River, VT, farm, Calabash Gardens. The largest saff on farm in the state and possibly the U.S., Calabash is part of the second cohort of the Climate Farmer Stories project, which educates the public about the positive role that regenerative agriculture plays in mitigating and adapting to climate change. Photo by Oliver Parini.

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Envisioning a Just and Inclusive Future

This year brought our 30th anniversary and the creation of a new three-year strategic plan—both of which prompted us to think about our past and potential future impact.

Through surveys and interviews over the past year with members of the Upper Valley community, we learned that people value Vital Communities’ ability to **convene a wide variety of people to generate solutions** to complex challenges such as childcare, housing, and transportation; offer expertise in such important areas as local food, economic development, and energy; and **connect communities to each other and to the region and its environment** through programs like Valley Quest, the Community Discussion Lists, and Leadership Upper Valley.

Drawing on this input and reflecting upon our role going forward, we created a **strategic plan built upon these Statements of Intent:**

- **Hold ourselves accountable** for our impact as we establish, strengthen, and heal community relationships.
- **Advance systems, practices, and policies that are just**, both internally and externally.
- **Practice continual growth** by slowing down, showing up with integrity, testing alternatives to the status quo, and listening to and trusting perspectives that challenge our own.
- **Work collaboratively to foster inclusive and welcoming communities** where all individuals have access to the resources and community support they need to live and thrive.
- **Strive to act in close reciprocity with and respect for the land, climate, and natural ecosystems.**

We aim to increase our connection to and co-creation with those who—historically and at present—have had less influence in decision-making due to systemic oppression on the basis of race, sex, class, sexual orientation, gender identity and presentation, ability status, immigration status, and religion. These partnerships are vital to achieving justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion in our region and beyond.

In addition, we’ve made an organizational commitment to projects in which community members and grassroots organizations set the agenda and lead the decision-making, creating practical, relevant, and sustainable solutions that arise out each community’s needs and preferences.

Some examples of this new way of working include **The Local Crowd Upper Valley** (p. 5), which prioritizes projects by people who have been systematically under-resourced; the **Upper Valley Resilience Network** (p. 7), in which nine community action groups drive the project; and **Leadership Upper Valley** (p 6), which is changing in response to expanding views of leadership. (See more examples at vitalcommunities.org/jedi.)

As the Upper Valley navigates challenges such as the impact of this summer’s floods and the ongoing shortage of affordable housing and childcare, and as **Vital Communities looks ahead to co-creating solutions that enable our region to thrive, we are thankful for your support and partnership.**

With appreciation,

Sarah Jackson
Executive Director
In 1993, Lisa Cashdan and Peter Stein were young parents and relative newcomers to the Upper Valley who had been recruited to join the effort that would become Vital Communities. Over the next decade and a half, they would take turns serving on the Vital Communities Board and advisory committees. In 1993, Chelsea Paige was still four years away from being born in Korea and then raised by a family in Lebanon, NH. As an adult, she’s an enthusiast for what the Upper Valley offers young people and has pursued that interest through serving on the boards of Upper Valley Young Professionals and, since 2021, Vital Communities.

We sat down one summer morning in Lebanon’s Colburn Park with these three people representing different parts of Vital Communities’ 30-year history to hear about their hopes for the Upper Valley and what they feel Vital Communities has offered and can continue to offer toward that vision.

For Lisa and Peter, Vital Communities’ foremost contribution was “convening”—bringing together people of divergent views to create solutions to complex problems—which was introduced by Vital Communities’ first Executive Director, Delia Clark. The need for convening arose first from governmental boundaries. “From the beginning, there was the issue that the Connecticut River divides the two states but nonetheless, there is this community, this region, that transcends those boundaries,” said Lisa.

“Living in Vermont and working in New Hampshire, I had to deal with this issue every day,” said Peter, whose career with Lyme Timber Company meant engaging nonprofit and public agencies in both states. “And could you come up with two states more different when it comes to government? No. And yet, we’re one

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L-R: Chelsea, Lisa, Peter
system. For instance, we have farmers in both states. Even though public policies are a little different in each and the soil is a little thinner in New Hampshire than in Vermont, the farmers were still feeding the same people."

Cultural boundaries also needed to be transcended. Delia Clark set a standard for gatherings in which “anyone with an opinion was invited to contribute their thoughts,” said Lisa. “There really wasn’t another organization in the Upper Valley that endeavored to bring in people with different perspectives to work through complex issues and create a plan for action.”

An example was a series of meetings Vital Communities convened that eventually gave rise to the Upper Valley Trails Alliance. "Because outdoor recreation was really beginning to grow, you had competing uses on trails among motorized vehicles, hikers, runners, cross-country skiers, bird watchers,” said Peter, who was involved in organizing the meetings. "Instead of them fig ting, we asked, could they do better, and Vital Communities was a safe ground to launch that." It worked because Vital Communities, as the convener, did not take a side. "Vital Communities wasn’t saying snowmobiles are terrible because they make noise and cross-country skiers are angels because they have low impact. No, it was just bringing people together."

The catchphrase in those early years was “neutral convener,” which suggests that the organization takes no positions on issues. This has changed over time, especially as we strive to fulfill our new Statements of Intent (p. 1). For example, we actively support the creation of affordable housing—which is high on the list of concerns for Chelsea.

“I want this region to be able to attract and retain a diverse population of young people. But people can’t find places to live, and it’s holding us back. Employers say they make offers to people and hear, ‘I’m sorry, I can’t accept it because I can’t find a place to live.’

“Even as someone who grew up in this area and has a really well-developed network, when my fiancé and I were looking for a house, we had no luck for the longest time, even with offers well above asking price.”

Where should new housing be built? How can we make it affordable for all? And how do we integrate transportation and the need for farmland and forests?

To answer these complex questions, we need to keep convening, said Chelsea.

“As a community, it’s important to have those conversations and talk through various ideas,” she said. “People have diverse backgrounds and experiences, so it’s really important that we have discussions to learn different perspectives and consider other ideas that they might not have in the first place. Face-to-face conversation, whether virtual or in person, is vital to connecting people with each other and building community.”
FUND MAKES HOUSING HAPPEN

The Upper Valley Loan Fund is financing the creation of new homes in our region. Initiated by the Vital Communities Corporate Council, the fund comprises investments totaling $8.95 million from Bar Harbor Bank, Citizens Bank, Dartmouth College, Dartmouth Health, Hanover Co-op Food Stores, Hypertherm, King Arthur Baking, and Mascoma Bank, and is managed by Evernorth, a nonprofit that provides affordable housing and community investments in Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. Almost $2 million has already been committed to Riverwalk Apartments, a 42-unit affordable housing development in White River Junction scheduled to open in April 2024. Also under consideration for funding (as of August 2023) are a 60-unit Twin Pines Housing development in New London, NH, and a 25-unit project in Windsor, VT. Additionally, Evernorth has submitted an application to the U.S. Treasury Department’s Capital Magnet Fund for a grant of $5 million to increase the Upper Valley Loan Fund’s capital. Awards will be announced this fall.

Learn more at vitalcommunities.org/housing

—Ellen Hender

a series of facilitated conversations among people of different generations within the same community to develop relationships and understanding they can later bring to addressing community challenges like housing.

So far this fall, events have taken place in Tunbridge and Royalton, and this series will continue across the White River Valley. Please reach out if you are interested in attending or helping to organize one in your community!

Learn more at vitalcommunities.org/intergenerational-community-conversations

—Sarah Danly
A VOICE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

For 21 years, Tammie Hazlett has been placing family, community, and play at the center of the early childhood program she runs out of her home in Thetford, VT. In addition to many other advocacy roles she plays, she is a member of the Advocacy Workgroup of the Early Childhood Education Initiative, a Vital Communities-convened effort to increase high-quality, accessible, and affordable early childhood education in the Upper Valley.

In the nearly two years since the Initiative began, it has brought together stakeholders like Hazlett to set the project’s agenda and has provided "a voice for early childhood educators and families seeking high-quality childcare," says its lead consultant, Dr. Joanne Roberts. This has contributed to both New Hampshire and Vermont passing legislation to support early childhood education as well as projects like a proposed center owned by the City of Lebanon that will provide infant and early childhood education services for up to 200 children.

Future initiative goals include improving provider compensation, increasing the number of trained providers, and decreasing tuition costs for families.

Want to lend a hand? Learn more at vitalcommunities.org/ece-2023-update

~Anna Hubbard

CROWDFUNDING AS COMMUNITY CARE

Over the past few years, The Local Crowd Upper Valley has helped move more than $375,000 into 20 social and business efforts in this region. This crowdfunding platform has allowed thousands of local community members to support innovative and meaningful local initiatives, ranging from food access projects to celebratory community events.

Looking to the next few years, we asked ourselves: How do we treat financial capital as a form of community care? As such, we have decided to focus the program on a more specific scope of projects, prioritizing folks who have been harmed by structures of economic injustice and traditionally excluded from philanthropic ventures—particularly those from BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, disabled, and low-income communities. There are limitations to Vital Communities’ role in building an equitable Upper Valley—but we aim to provide resources to those who are best equipped to do that. Watch this fall in the Vital Communities e-news and social media posts for the first campaign of this re-launch: a fundraiser to support the Abenaki Helping Abenaki food shelf.

Learn more at vitalcommunities.org/the-local-crowd

~Alana Redden and Cameron Huftalen

Feeling the spikes on a just-picked pickle at Tammie’s Day Care.

Vicki Blanchard and Darryl Peasley operate the Abenaki Helping Abenaki cider press. (Courtesy photo.)

Feeling the spikes on a just-picked pickle at Tammie’s Day Care.
AN EXPANDED VIEW OF “LOCAL FIRST”

Since it began 14 years ago, Vital Communities’ Local First program has promoted local businesses, shared the benefits of shopping locally, and spotlighted businesses that have gracefully navigated the many challenges thrown their way. During this time, we have also developed a better understanding of the brilliance and resilience of community members who have been systematically under-resourced. And this has expanded what “local first” means to us.

For this reason, our Local First program will look a little different this coming year. **We will continue to champion local businesses and are also excited to pilot and spotlight projects that strengthen the local economy—and whole communities—in other ways.** This may include libraries of things (which allow you to borrow useful items for free), timebanks, land sharing, and mutual aid networks. We are also exploring alternative ways of thinking about economics that expand beyond capitalism, such as barter and circular economies. We will develop our programming—which will likely include webinars and storytelling—through collaboration with community partners who are sharing resources in creative and innovative ways.

Learn more at vitalcommunities.org/local-first

—Alana Redden and Cameron Huftalen

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REDEFINING LEADERSHIP

The last few years have brought into focus a need for **leadership that is based on empathy and a true partnership between decision-makers and those whom the decisions will impact**—an emphasis on listening is replacing the longstanding “solitary individual” model of leadership.

This community feedback has prompted changes in **Leadership Upper Valley (LUV)**, which began more than 15 years ago as a way to equip people to become more engaged in civic life. As the new LUV Project Manager, I began updating the program during the 22-23 series—in partnership with a strong advisory board and the Upper Valley leader who helped plan LUV’s 10 sessions—and will continue that work into the future.

These updates include offering new perspectives—like that of Maggi Ibrahim, Facilitator of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for Hartford Schools, who spoke as part of Education Day. On Economy Day, the “macro” view of municipal planners and investors was complemented by small business owners who play a vital role in building the region’s economy. On Opening Day, LUV alum and Advisory Board member Angy Zhang, Program Director at LISTEN, asked participants to reflect on when they have and have not felt at home in the Upper Valley, a theme that helped frame the year.

Learn more at vitalcommunities.org/leadership

—John Drew
CULTIVATING STRONGER FOOD SYSTEMS

FEED Kearsarge is brimming with both great food and ideas. A combined effort of the Kearsarge Food Hub and a number of growers, regional nonprofits, and food pantries, the hub runs many projects aimed at making local food more plentiful and affordable and accessible for all. An example is their annual Tray-It-Forward program, which donates flats of vegetable starts along with tools, a guidebook, and a weekly newsletter to help community members grow their own food. Not only does this support food security in the region, it also encourages folks to connect with the environment and to each other.

Great ideas and programs like these come from all of the nine Upper Valley community food action groups that, like FEED Kearsarge, are current hubs within the Upper Valley Resilience Network. Convened by Vital Communities, the network’s purpose is to create a stronger food system where all community members have access to fresh, nourishing, and culturally fulfilling locally grown food, made possible through a healthy network of growers, producers, and consumers.

Over the past eight months, representatives from the nine hubs have met twice monthly to learn about each other’s work, share resources, discuss possible collaborations, and pitch ideas for problem solving shared challenges. Its member groups are dedicated to food access and regional farm viability, with the goal of cultivating community resilience to combat climate change, systemic racism, and economic inequity.

Learn more at vitalcommunities.org/uvrn
—Erica Hiller

WAY TO GO, UV PUBLIC TRANSIT!

Transit in the Upper Valley, having long been among the best in the rural U.S., is about to get even better.

Expanded services have been operating in Windsor since the beginning of the year thanks to Southeast Vermont Transit’s (SEVT) MicroMoo, an on-demand ride-hailing service that utilizes small vans and buses to make trips within the Town of Windsor. The project is fare-free thanks to a grant from the Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTTrans) and runs 6am-6pm Monday through Friday.

In addition, this fall Advance Transit (AT) is extending its service hours, operating two hours later on weekdays on the Blue, Red, Green, and Orange routes and offering Saturday service on most routes.

Expansions like these are supported by the Upper Valley Transportation Management Association, convened by Vital Communities. The association brings together workplaces, transportation providers, municipalities, and planners to share resources, ideas, and planning on ways to reduce Upper Valley residents’ dependence on cars for getting to work, school, needed services, and fun.

Learn more at vitalcommunities.org/transportation
—John Haner

Kearsarge Food Hub board member Andy Jeffreyc with Tray It Forward starts. (FEED Kearsarge photo.)
GOODBYE AND BIG THANKS TO ...

Nancy LaRowe, Vital Communities Director of Food, Farms, and Local Economy who joined Vital Communities in 2014 and managed a wide array of programs, collaborated with a long and diverse list of Upper Valley people and organizations, and elevated any and all meetings with her strong senses of humor and justice. She is now the Director of Organic Practices with Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont. Nancy’s projects and networks have been transferred to staff members Erica Hiller, Cameron Huftalen, and Alana Redden, who also work on climate projects.

Vital Communities board members Barbara Barry, Nancy Merrill, and Rick Mills, who each completed two three-year terms, from 2017–2023. A Woodstock resident, Barbara is a retired innkeeper who also was a founding board member of Sustainable Woodstock. Nancy, a resident and former city councilor in Lebanon, is the Director of Planning and Economic Development for the City of Claremont. A resident of Strafford, Rick was part of the board while Executive Vice President at Dartmouth College.

We also said goodbye to last year’s Revers Fellows from Dartmouth’s Tuck School of Business, Liz Barry and Andrew Key, and we welcome two new ones, Marcus Bailey and Laura Knapp. Both are MBA candidates.

ADVANCING DEI

Addressing inequity, lack of diversity, and barriers to inclusion in the Upper Valley is essential to becoming the vital community we aspire to be. The nonprofit sector makes up over 18% of the workforce in the Upper Valley and can play a disproportionate role in addressing structural and systemic causes of health, economic, and wellbeing disparities experienced by too many people in the region.

Earlier this year, a group of nearly 30 people from seven nonprofits, including Vital Communities, took part in the Upper Valley Equity Exchange (UVEX), a six-month pilot program designed for teams from each organization to learn and then act on foundational concepts and plans related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Led by Jermaine Moore, Principal Consultant from the Mars Hill Group, the group met for monthly content sessions which addressed topics like “Inclusive Language and Bias,” “Progress and Pain Points,” and “Implementing this Work.” During monthly coaching sessions, participants had the opportunity to bring up obstacles to their current work or raise questions about changes they are trying to implement in their organizations.

Participants agreed that Moore helped them consider DEI issues from new perspectives and gain access to valuable tools to shape this work, such as the Collective Impact Racial Equity Toolkit, and the Meyer DEI Spectrum Tool. Said one participant about their organization, “We are already moving forward with a detailed plan to implement [new] policies and procedures and to examine all our current policies ... [Making] sure our leadership and board are actively involved is key to keep things moving forward. We are also looking at how to establish clearly measurable goals and collecting metrics that will tell us how we’re progressing toward those goals.”

~ John Drew

Jermaine Moore center addresses the 1st UVEX session.

Nancy

Barbara

Rick

Liz

Andrew

Marcus

Laura

8
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...And keep the old. We’re always thrilled to hear from donors who have supported our work in the past. But this year we are especially excited to welcome so many new donors among the more than 500 households and 60 businesses that gave to our Vital Fund. See profiles of several of them in these donor pages!

Whether you’re a newcomer or a returning donor, your generous contributions played a pivotal role in helping us achieve an ambitious fiscal year 2023 goal of $850,000 (ending June 30, 2023). Alongside government and foundation grants, your support keeps our mission alive. Thank you!

This list has been prepared with care. However, if we’ve inadvertently omitted your name, please contact us!
What inspired AppCast to give to Vital Communities?
Recognizing the pressing challenges such as food and housing insecurity faced by children and other vulnerable populations in the Upper Valley, Appcast sought to support an organization that shared its values and goals. Vital Communities, being a nonprofit organization with a strong focus on these causes, emerged as a natural choice for collaboration. By contributing to Vital Communities, Appcast aims to amplify its efforts in addressing these critical issues to create a brighter, more secure future for the community.

What are your concerns about the Upper Valley? One of the largest and most deleterious issues we see is a lack of affordable housing. This single issue has a knock-on effect that impacts almost all aspects of both the present and future success of individuals, families, and our community as a whole. Stable, well-sited, affordable housing, on the other hand, contributes to healthier and more financially stable individuals and families, more diverse, resilient, and cohesive communities, and greater local economic growth and employment possibilities.

What gives you hope? While there are many challenges that face the Upper Valley, we are continuously encouraged by how much time, thought, and effort goes into addressing those challenges at the individual, NGO/Non-Profit, and government levels of our community. Having organizations like Vital Communities, which operate as powerful force multipliers, activating so many people across so many different disciplines and backgrounds inspires tremendous hope that we as a community can make a meaningful positive impact. The sheer number of individuals, both in their personal and professional capacity, that are committing time and resources to solving the challenges facing the Upper Valley is incredible. If you can put a man on the moon, then with enough effort you can certainly put a roof over every head!
Lurz (kneeling) and Ramos with their dog, Stevie Nicks.

ARTURO RAMOS AND JOHN LURZ
Hartland, Vermont

What inspired you to give to Vital Communities? When building our home in the Upper Valley, we thought about ways we could be an active part of the community and help promote its economic well-being. We saw the impact that Vital Communities’ work has in this area, and we wanted to contribute to it.

Concerns about the Upper Valley? Housing in the Upper Valley is a real challenge. Without affordability, neither the region’s residents nor its businesses can prosper. Finding creative ways to increase and improve the housing stock near job centers is crucial.

What gives you hope? We’ve been really struck by how willing neighbors and community members have been to lend a hand as we get settled into the area. The collaborative and industrious spirit of its residents feels like the Upper Valley’s greatest resource.

GOVERNMENT

Town of Comish
Town of Enfield
Town of Hanover
Town of Hartford
City of Lebanon

Town of Norwich
Town of Plainfield
Town of Rochester
Town of Sharon
Town of West Fairlee

New Hampshire Housing Finance Authority
Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Foods & Markets
United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)
Expenses (FY23)

- 9% Fundraising
- 11% Administration
- 80% Program Support*

*Program Support represents the combined expenses of all our areas of work including Climate and Energy, Food and Farm, Local Economy, Housing, Transportation, Childcare, Leadership, and Place-Based Education. We have merged these categories because our projects almost always involve more than one of these areas of work.

Income (FY23)

- 56% Individuals and Foundations
- 28% Government
- 13% Businesses
- 3% Other*

*Endowment Income, Program Income, Service Fees

The financial information above has not been audited; the audited numbers will be available at vitalcommunities.org by January 1, 2024.
Mark Your Calendar

**OCTOBER**

**Walktober**
Watch the Vital Communities e-news and social media feeds for inspiration to make walking a greater part of your daily routine!

**OCTOBER 13 (8 AM TO 3:30 PM)**

**Upper Valley Teaching Place Collaborative Fall Conference**
Lake Morey Inn, Fairlee, VT
Connect with other educators and gain teaching ideas. Co-hosted by the Sullivan County Conservation District, Four Winds Nature Institute, Vermont Institute of Natural Sciences, and Shelburne Farms. Sponsored by the Wellborn Ecology Fund of the NH Charitable Foundation.

**SEPTMBER–NOVEMBER**

**Upper Valley E-Bike Lending Library**
Try out a selection of models for free to see which type could fit your needs!
- September 28–October 11: Orford, NH
- October 12–18: Hypertherm (staff only)
- October 18–25: Reading, VT, Recreation Commission
- October 25–November 1: King Arthur Baking Company (staff only)

**Climate Farmer Stories Exhibit**
Multimedia exhibit about climate-friendly farming practices and some of the farmers in our region that use them!
- September: Hartland Public Library, Brown Public Library (Northfield, VT)
- October: Tunbridge Public Library, Latham Library (Thetford, VT), JAM Space (White River Junction, VT)
- November: Fiske Free Library (Claremont, NH)

**OCTOBER 21 (ALL DAY)**

**Farm to Film Fest**
JAM Space and Briggs Opera House, White River Junction, VT
Celebrate the farmers and farming practices that are working toward a livable climate! Scrumptious local eats, a stunning art show, thought-provoking films, live music, square dancing, and hands-on activities for kids and families. Co-hosted by JAM (Junction Arts & Media) and King Arthur Baking Company.

Need a Calendar to Mark?
Place your order for the 2024 Climate Farmers calendar! Featuring the Climate Farmer Stories portraits, interviews, and information on climate-friendly farming, gardening, and yard care.

Learn more and order at vitalcommunities.org/2024-farmer-calendar