Why is HOUSING SO HARD?

Making E-BIKES AFFORDABLE

Thank You, VOLUNTEERS

Spring Into QUESTING
Vital Communities engages Upper Valley people, organizations, and communities to create equitable solutions to our region’s challenges.

Our staff specializes in convening for change: bringing people together to size up and address our challenges. We have evolved as a hub of initiatives, resources, and working groups in such areas as business vitality, food and farming, energy, transportation, climate change, leadership, housing, and outdoor learning.

Intrinsic to this work is a steadfast commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion so that people of all backgrounds and life experiences are involved at every level; and an ongoing acknowledgment that our office is sited and our work takes place within the sovereign homeland of the Abenaki Nation and People.

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On The Cover: (L–R) Jeanne Roningen, Patrick Kennelly, and their daughter Cecilia stand by the backdoor of their Lebanon home with its accessory dwelling unit to the left, built on the footprint of a dilapidated barn. Along with income, the ADU brings them a long-time tenant they really like. Photo by Rob Strong.

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Some neighbors are unhoused and need shelter and support; others have housing but are paying an unsustainable monthly cost for it; and others, discouraged by the cost and scarcity of housing, are leaving the Upper Valley and its workforce altogether. Although they fill essential roles our communities can’t function without—teachers, firefighters, nurses, restaurant waitstaff, store clerks, social workers, tradespeople, the list goes on—their incomes aren’t keeping pace with the increasing costs of housing, making access to safe, comfortable, and convenient homes out of reach.

At Vital Communities, we think about those people every day and work with our partners to try to make things better. As anyone who shares this concern can tell you, we need housing at many levels—emergency shelters for the unhoused; long-term, supported housing for those transitioning from addiction, incarceration, or financial distress; permanently affordable rental housing; and mid-priced homes that people can purchase to start building personal wealth and security.

To get this housing, we need—and are seeing—engagement and action from people and organizations throughout the region: individuals creating accessory dwelling units; local housing committees building community consensus for “YIMBY” (Yes In My Backyard); municipalities revising zoning and using tax abatement to attract developers; and businesses and nonprofits teaming up to add to the housing supply.

We hope you’ll be encouraged by the stories we share in this newsletter and that you’ll join us in finding ways to help our region make room for current residents who shouldn’t be pushed out by unsustainable housing costs, and for new residents who will keep our economy, workforce, and communities vibrant.

With appreciation,

Sarah Jackson
Executive Director
If 19 people died in the Upper Valley in a single year as a result of flooding, our communities would go into crisis mode. Massive efforts would be deployed and resources mobilized immediately to mitigate damage and loss of life.

In 2023, 19 people died in the Upper Valley from the effects of homelessness. And that’s just one indicator of a severe shortage of housing at all lower and middle income levels. The result is that people of a range of income levels are “cost-burdened” in housing (see “Affordable for Whom?,” p. 3), forced to live far from where they work (which makes them transportation-burdened), or simply can’t locate here and join our communities and workforce.

Much is being done to address this crisis (see “What’s Being Done,” p. 4), but it’s worth asking why it is so difficult to meet our region’s housing needs in the first place.

The answer starts with the fact that housing in our country is supplied primarily through the housing market, including real estate, private developers, property owners, and landlords. That market is notoriously prone to market volatility. This means that the cost of most housing—a fundamental need on which other basic needs like food, safety, health care, and education depend—can rise and fall precipitously. This was seen in the housing crash of 2007-2008 and more recently in the steep housing cost increases due to the combination of supply chain disruption due to COVID, inflationary impacts on building costs, and a very aggressive real estate market coupled with years in which new-home creation hasn’t kept up with demand. These compounding shocks all contribute to the immediate and long-term challenges of securing housing through the private market.

“Polancos” are informal mobile home communities most common among farmworkers in California. Illustration by Alfred Twu.
GOVERNMENT HELP

Public and quasi-public programs have attempted to protect our most vulnerable community members from these market shocks. Historically, this was done through “public housing” built and owned by the government and still part of the mix of low-income housing in our country.

Upper Valley examples include properties owned and managed by the Lebanon Housing Authority such as Rogers House in downtown Lebanon and Romano Circle in West Lebanon. Our stock of public housing can’t grow, however, due to the Faircloth Amendment to the US Housing Act, which, as part of Clinton-era welfare restrictions, prohibited any net increase to the public housing stock after October 1, 1999.

**WHY IS HOUSING SO HARD?**

**FOR WHOM?**

Federal housing norms say that households shouldn’t be paying more than 30 percent of their net income on housing costs, including utilities.

Above that percentage, households are considered “cost-burdened” by housing expenses that don’t leave them enough for other needs. As stated by the Windham & Windsor Housing Trust, “A family that spends less for housing costs can afford to spend more on other items, including groceries, clothing and health care. They can also afford to save more for emergencies or for major purchases such as a car or education. This provides our whole community with greater economic, social, educational, and workforce stability.”

“Affordable housing” has come to mean housing that’s affordable for people whose income is 60 percent or less of the Area Median Income (AMI)—the income level at which half the population of an area has a higher income and half has a lower income. In Upper Valley counties, 60 percent of the AMI comes to between $42,000 to $54,000 annually.

“Workforce housing” has come to mean housing that’s affordable for people earning from 60 percent to 100 percent or more of the AMI, with variations in New Hampshire and Vermont. Workforce housing is commonly targeted at a community’s “essential workers,” such as police officers, firemen, teachers, nurses, medical personnel. Some communities define “essential” more broadly to include service workers, as in the case of resort communities where one finds high real estate costs and a high number of low-paying service jobs essential to the local economy.

Over the past several decades and especially since the start of the pandemic, the cost of housing has risen much faster than incomes. In Grafton County, the median rent for a two-bedroom apartment rose by 82 percent from 2018 to 2023 (NH Housing). Throughout the Upper Valley, about half of all renter households and about 25 percent of homeowner households are considered cost-burdened, according to Vermont and New Hampshire housing data.

In the absence of a robust public housing effort in the United States, affordable housing is currently being provided through a number of government subsidies. These subsidies can be provided directly to a tenant in the form of a voucher toward their rent, or they can be applied to a particular unit or development. Leading among these development subsidies is the Low-income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC), a tax incentive program that encourages private investors to build housing for lower-income households. Navigating the LIHTC process takes skill. In the Upper Valley, housing trusts like Twin Pines Housing, Windham & Windsor Housing Trust, and Downstreet Housing & Community Development are experts at setting up and guiding development partnerships that utilize the tax credit and add to our supply of affordable housing. All currently have new projects in their pipelines.
THE MISSING MIDDLE

What if you have too high an income to be eligible for affordable housing? People at the middle income level have had to rely on the real estate market—which has failed to produce an adequate supply in that price range. Over the past several decades, developers have found they can’t make a profit on middle-income housing and have tended more to high-end projects. Why? The main contributing factors are the increased costs of the “5Ls”: labor, lending, laws, land, and lumber (materials).

This means developers gravitate toward projects that can turn a profit, such as large, multi-family apartment complexes or high-end homes—not the smaller homes sought by people of middle incomes. This has led to the so-called “missing middle.”

WHAT’S BEING DONE

What’s being done to try to provide Upper Valley residents with housing they can afford, despite the mighty forces making this hard to do? Here are some strategies being pursued throughout the Upper Valley by our partners, many of whom we convene through the Vital Communities Housing Advisory Committee, Corporate Council, and Municipal Leaders group.

ZONING REFORM

Along with high interest rates, supply chain issues, and labor shortages, local hurdles can add to the cost of creating new homes—including outdated or restrictive zoning or burdensome approval processes. For example, in many parts of Vermont and New Hampshire, most of the land is zoned for single-family homes.

This is changing as many communities adjust their zoning to facilitate more types of housing, including multi-family, duplexes, and accessory dwelling units—allowing for greater density with less sprawl.

While each town decides on its own zoning (and some have none), state laws have impact. In Vermont, the HOME Act, enacted last June, removed some restrictions to building ADUs and multifamily units, making it easier to build both. It also prohibits “character of the area” appeals in conditional use reviews for all designated areas for residential development—often used as a “NIMBY” (Not In My Back Yard) tactic to block affordable housing development.

Even before HOME passed, regional planning commissions helped Upper Valley municipalities reform zoning to allow more housing density. In Vermont, both the Two Rivers Ottauquechee Regional Commission (TRORC) and the Mount Ascutney Regional Commission have been working with member towns, using planning and bylaw modernization grants from the state.

In New Hampshire, Upper Valley Lake Sunapee Regional Planning Commission obtained an InvestNH grant to offer towns in the Kearsarge area the services of Housing Navigator Renee Theall, and the towns of Wilmot, Newbury, and New London opted to work with her. Her work started with engaging community members in the issue of housing, which has led to some zoning changes in those towns. Last spring, in Lebanon, voters passed major zoning revisions aimed at encouraging development of manufactured homes, cluster homes and ADUs.
In Claremont, the city is more than a decade into a downtown transformation that enabled smaller and more varied housing units, and further zoning changes being discussed would allow for “cottage courts” (multiple small homes on a single lot); greater density in residential areas; increasing allowances for ADUs; and decreasing the parking requirements for residential units in the downtown area, said Nancy Merrill, Director of the City’s Planning and Development Department.

What’s being done to try to provide Upper Valley residents with housing they can afford, despite the mighty forces making this hard to do?

Vital Communities staff and members of the Housing Advisory Committee are encouraging these and other transitions by showing up to municipal meetings and speaking up for housing development and zoning reforms.

ACCESSORY DWELLING UNITS

Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) are like victory gardens in World Wars I and II: a small-scale solution an individual can undertake in response to a big threat. Small residences that share a single-family lot with a larger, primary dwelling, ADUs can be created by adding on to the primary home, converting some space within the home to an apartment, or building a smaller detached home on the same lot as the primary home.

Their advantages are many: An ADU can provide rental income to homeowners. They can enable family members to live on the same property while having their own living spaces—or provide housing for a hired caregiver—thus allowing someone to “age in place.” They offer a way to include smaller, relatively affordable homes in established neighborhoods with minimal visual impact and without adding to an area’s sprawl.

Vital Communities and partners that include TRORC and the Town of Hartford have been encouraging the creation of ADUs through a series of events such as Home Creators Expos last spring and this June, with workshops on building and owning an ADU.

AN ACTIVIST TEAM

Upper Valley residents Conicia “CJ” Jackson of Lyme and Julius Turner of Lebanon have been making a difference in housing through a collaboration with Vital Communities and Mascoma Bank aimed at helping Black, Indigenous, and People of Color put down roots in the Upper Valley, including buying homes.

Launched this spring, the project’s first move has been to create and fill the position of a Community Navigator to assist current and prospective BIPOC residents in the Upper Valley with home and business ownership and the community knowledge and connections that help make those things happen.

CJ and Julius have been working on housing on a number of fronts. CJ serves on the board of Livable Real Estate Cooperative, a new group pursuing a do-it-themselves approach to creating accessible, affordable, comfortable, safe, and sustainable housing. Julius serves on the board of Twin Pines Housing, a 33-year-old organization dedicated to increasing access to quality housing and supportive services for the Upper Valley community.

“If we truly believe in providing the feeling of belonging, a feeling of being happy and comfortable as part of the Upper Valley, then it begins with building welcoming and accepting relationships with other members of the community,” said Turner. “This effort would have prevented several of my BIPOC friends from leaving the Upper Valley due to the inability to own a home, expand their existing business, or just feeling welcomed and accepted by others in the community.”

Learn more at vitalcommunities.org/community-navigator
Forming a housing committee is one strategy a town can employ, and many Upper Valley towns have. One purpose of these committees is to build community consensus to share responsibility for addressing the housing crisis in the region. “There’s a lot of work to be done in advocating and showing the need for housing,” said Kyle Katz, a TRORC regional planner. “This can diminish the pushback that housing development often gets, such as the standard complaint of, ‘This doesn’t fit with the character of the town.’”

Housing committees also can undertake innovative projects. The town of Chester, for example, obtained a municipal planning grant to explore the development of the town-owned land on Route 103 South and is considering using a town revolving loan fund to contribute to development.

Vital Communities’ Corporate Council brings together representatives of the region’s major employers, and a primary concern they share is attracting and retaining employees. Increasingly, Council members have reported losing recruited employees because they were not able to find housing they could afford.

This concern gave rise to the Upper Valley Loan Fund, in which eight employers (Bar Harbor Bank, Citizens Bank, Dartmouth College, Dartmouth Health, Hanover Co-op Food Stores, Hypertherm, King Arthur Baking Company, and Mascoma Bank), working with the housing nonprofit Evernorth, created a fund of $10 million for housing that’s affordable to low- and median-income people. To date, this fund is being invested in three different projects that will lead to nearly 200 homes that will be permanently affordable for those earning between 50 and 80 percent of the region’s average median income. The first of these, Riverwalk in White River Junction, is slated to open this April with 42 units. The investors receive a 1.5% return on their investment.

Residents begin moving in this spring to Riverwalk Apartments, the first completed project of the Upper Valley Loan Fund. Staff photo.

Housing is a frequent topic of the monthly Municipal Leaders meetings convened by Vital Communities and open to municipal managers and select board members of all Upper Valley communities.

Last year, the group held sessions on a homelessness study commissioned by the City of Lebanon as well as emergency shelter projects in Lebanon and White River Junction, hearing from Lebanon Human Service Director Lynne Goodwin and Upper Valley Haven Executive Director Michael Redmond.

At a future meeting, the group will hear about Lebanon’s “pattern zoning” study, which will examine the feasibility of the City adopting zoning regulations that would offer pre-approved blueprints for ADUs.
Of the many Upper Valley municipalities that have been taking steps to create more housing, Lebanon offers a shining example. Innovative revisions of the zoning ordinance to ease the path for denser development, tax incentives, city-led projects on city-owned land, and the swift creation of an emergency winter shelter are among the recent hallmarks of the city’s commitment to creating the homes the Upper Valley needs.

What’s the city’s secret sauce? “We have a very clearly progressive council that wants to see things move forward in housing, from homeless to high-end,” said Nathan Reichert, planning & development director. “That leadership is shared by Shaun [Mulholland, City Manager] and the manager’s office, predecessor David Brooks [now deputy city manager], and all the people who work in planning, who work way too many hours and see all this work through.”

There’s also a sense of community support, he said. “The reality is, people’s sons and daughters are coming back from college and want to live here and can’t afford the housing. Also, there are a lot of people who are looking at their tax bills and the wildly increasing real estate values and worry about not being able to afford to live in the place they’ve called home. Our businesses can’t find people to work for them. Not having enough housing leads to economic problems, social problems, and having to get onto airplanes to go see grandchildren. I think people get that.”

Size also helps. Lebanon has a large enough staff to write grant applications, a daunting task for a small-staffed town. These grants include $440,000 from the state-funded grant program Invest NH, which Lebanon will use to partially fund the construction of “pocket neighborhoods” of clustered small, affordable homes on three city-owned parcels.

In addition, regional connections help. Mayor Tim McNamara sits on the Vital Communities Housing Advisory Committee, which meets every other month and brings together developers, employers, financial institutions, health and social service representatives, regional planners, and renter representatives.
CHAMPIONING RESIDENT-OWNED COMMUNITIES

Resident-owned communities, or ROCs, are New Hampshire’s unique contribution to fair and affordable housing in the US. A tried-and-true approach in which owners of manufactured homes belong to a cooperative that owns the land on which their homes sit, ROCs began in New Hampshire in the 1980s with the help of the New Hampshire Community Loan Fund and have since caught on nationwide. According to the organization ROC USA, 146 of the 321 ROCs in the US are in New Hampshire—including several in the Upper Valley.

Without a ROC, mobile homeowners are as vulnerable as renters to rent increases or the park being sold. Because it costs $5,000 to $10,000 on average to move a mobile home, owners often have little choice but to stay, even when faced with higher rents, worse maintenance and higher restrictions often imposed by new landlords.

“Manufactured housing can be affordable, but the only place I would put it is either on my own property or in a cooperative park because of the degree of control the owners have. The members themselves have the authority.”

Vital Communities has championed ROCs as an exemplary housing model, including co-organizing a tour of several Upper Valley ROCs. On the tour, residents spoke about the affordability and security of their community. “If you’re trying to buy a home, how do you do that, especially if you are low- to medium-income or on a fixed income?” said Mike Sampson, president of the Mascoma Valley Cooperative.

SHARING YOUR HOME

People have long made their own roommate arrangements, but this can feel uncomfortable for some, especially those who are older and have had their own space for decades. But the benefits can be great. The nonprofit HomeShare Vermont has proved helpful.

HomeShare Vermont serves as a matchmaker for people, particularly elders, who want to share their homes but want assurances that the housemate they choose will be compatible and trustworthy. Started 40 years ago in Burlington, HomeShare Vermont now operates in all or part of eight counties, including Orange and Windsor. A host offers a private bedroom and shared common space in exchange for rent, help around the home, or a combination of the two. HomeShare Vermont interviews and does background checks on both the hosts and would-be tenants and matches and introduces pairs that seem compatible. There’s a trial period followed by creating a match agreement outlining rent and other mutual expectations, plus ongoing support if issues arise.

HomeShare Vermont has been a part of numerous “home creator” events that Vital Communities has run or partnered.
EMERGENCY SHELTERS

For our neighbors who are unhoused, two bright lights have recently appeared: two emergency shelter projects, one that opened in Lebanon to serve through mid-April and one a year-round, 24-hour facility approved by the Hartford Planning Commission, slated to open in 2025 if all goes well.

The 15-bed Lebanon facility, while owned by the City of Lebanon, is staffed and operated by the Upper Valley Haven, the Wilder-based nonprofit that has provided temporary housing for families and adults since 1980. The 20-bed Hartford facility will be both owned and operated by the Haven. Both projects will involve many other partner organizations.

"Once folks have stable housing, they are more likely to be able to address other areas of need in their lives," said former Hartford Selectboard Member Ally Tufenkjian, for whom housing and homelessness have been a priority. "I’m grateful that both municipalities have taken important steps to make those shelters a reality."

ROCHESTER HOUSING COMMITTEE

Local housing committees are an important piece of the housing-solution puzzle (see “What’s Being Done,” p. 4). One particularly active committee was formed in 2021 in the towns of Rochester, Hancock, Granville, Pittsfield, and Stockbridge—combined population of 3,000—during a community engagement process facilitated by the Vermont Council on Rural Development.

Meeting monthly, with members taking on work in between, the committee sponsored a welcoming event called "Hey Neighbor!" which reacquainted residents—both new and old—with the local resources available after the isolation of the pandemic. They created a brochure outlining various forms of DIY housing creation—such as building accessory dwelling units, rehabilitating or adapting buildings into multiple units, and opening up space in your home to renters. The group developed and ran an event series to encourage their fellow community members to find resources to create homes, including a January 2024 gathering at which would-be home creators could consult one-on-one with experts on home creation. The committee is also exploring the state Neighborhood Designation tax incentive program and working with Two Rivers Ottauquechee Regional Commission on an infill visualization for the village of Rochester.

The committee works in coordination with and is supported by the White River Valley “Working Communities Challenge” program managed by Vital Communities, which offers administrative support and additional professional connections.

One key to the committee’s success is the commitment and passion of its members, who represent a wide variety of expertise, including a Planning Commission member, small business owners, a retired contractor, and diverse resident perspectives. “Housing affects every aspect of the socio-economic structure in our community. We need housing for our town to survive and grow, for families, for employers and employees, for our town’s vitality,” says Beth Kennett, co-chair of the Committee and owner of Liberty Hill Farm.
Leg Up for E-Bikes

In the three years it has taken her to pay back a zero-interest loan for her e-bike, Sue has put 729 miles on the vehicle. From mid-April to mid-October, weather permitting, she rides numerous times a week.

“I love it. I live in Brownsville and ride the bike to Windsor all the time. It’s a 20-mile round trip but I do it if I have to run to the grocery store or I have a doctor’s appointment—whatever. If I have to go to Windsor, I take the bike.”

Sue received her loan through a program by Vital Communities, Mascoma Bank, and the Vermont Department of Transportation that has awarded subsidies or zero-interest loans to help some 15 households pay for e-bikes and necessary accessories. Like other loan or subsidy recipients, Sue—a retired flight attendant on a fixed income—would not have been able to buy her bike at that time without the ability to spread out the payments.

Choosing the right model for her needs was tricky but was made easier by trying various models through the Upper Valley E-Bike Lending Library, a Vital Communities program that will return this summer, and conferring with local bike shops.

Now she’s a committed fan. “If you want to help save the planet in a small way or just discover just how big and beautiful your local backyard is, ride an e-bike whenever you can.”

Interested in acquiring an e-bike but not sure you can afford it? Go to vitalcommunities.org/e-bike-assistance

Want to try an e-bike and see if it fits your needs? Check out the Lending Library at vitalcommunities.org/uvell

One year of free e-bike maintenance from Cowbell Mobile Bike Shop is part of the support for program recipients. Sta photo.

“Cleaner” Travels

To reduce the greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to climate change, our communities need to transition to “clean transportation”—including electric vehicles, public transit, carpooling, and walking or biking. Significant state and federal resources are being dedicated to this effort. How can we use those resources so everyone is part of this transition—including people who, historically, have been often left out of planning and investment?

This challenge is the focus of Community Transportation Transitions, a two-and-a-half-year project by the Upper Valley Lake Sunapee Regional Planning Commission and Vital Communities. The local program is part of a larger project involving one other Vermont region and two in Connecticut, led by Northeast Energy Efficiency Partnerships, a Boston-based nonprofit, and funded by a grant from the Vehicle Technologies Office of the US Department of Energy.

This spring, the project managers have been interviewing and surveying the community to learn more about their challenges and desires related to getting around the Upper Valley.

Interested in participating? Go to vitalcommunities.org/community-transportation-transitions
Crowdfunding Update

The Local Crowd is a national platform that allows community members to support local community initiatives through donations big and small. Vital Communities is proud to host the Upper Valley chapter (TLCUV), which has raised over $370,000 for local businesses and initiatives.

At press time, TLCUV was wrapping up its first campaign for 2024, raising $1,830 to help the NH-based group Abenaki Helping Abenaki complete a community gathering place with upgraded equipment for cider making, syrup boiling, and seed saving—all of which feeds into the group’s Contoocook food pantry.

The goal is to build community through food, said Darryl Peasley, one of the leaders of the AHA Food Pantry and other food security programs. “[These projects and their efforts directly benefit our food security program through our food pantry. The proceeds from these products allow us to feed more people and offer Abenaki-produced, nutritious food items.”

Learn more at vitalcommunities/tlcuv

Childcare Stories

An ECE program licensed for 125 students that has only 27 enrolled—with a current staff of five compared to as many as 18 before COVID. A parent who has to work days rather than a more lucrative third shift because she can’t get overnight childcare. The DIY childcare solutions of years past, including giving a kid a quarter and sending her to the Hartford public pool for the day. A list of adjectives to describe early childhood education providers: “Aside from passionate and caring and dedicated, they are tired.”

These are among the diverse perspectives and stories Vital Communities has been collecting and sharing to help show that our child care crisis affects us all—kids, families, providers, employers, and communities—and its solutions need community-wide support.

To learn about your neighbors’ varied experiences with childcare in our region or to get involved with the Early Childhood Education Initiative, visit vitalcommunities.org/early-childhood-education
Farm To ECE

Since 2021, Vital Communities has been coordinating efforts to support early childhood education (ECE) programs, their staff, and the families and employers who rely on them. Last spring, at a retreat for childcare program directors, a clear message emerged: Help us provide healthy food for the kids we care for.

Combining their knowledge of ECE and local food and farmers, Vital Communities project managers Anna Hubbard and Cameron Huftalen set out to find out what ECE providers need to make it easier and more affordable to serve healthy food, including goods from local farms. Do they need help with acquiring federal reimbursement? Better kitchen equipment? Prepared meals versus raw ingredients?

Their next step is to develop a pilot project that addresses these needs, removing one stressor from already overburdened ECE providers and combating hunger among our community’s children—all while opening a new market channel for our local farmers and producers.

Learn more about this project at vitalcommunities.org/farm-to-ece

Comings and Goings

Two people joined our staff in the past few months. Grants manager Alice Stewart came from Mt. Ascutney Hospital and Health Center’s Community Health Department where she was Grants and Projects Manager. She is “motivated by the collective power that comes from people working together, in collaboration and creativity, to make positive change across our region.”

Kelli Perkins, Ed.D., is our new Director of Human Resources. Coming to us from an all-girls boarding and day school outside of Washington, DC, where she was Dean of Student Life & Culture, she will work closely with all staff on an HR strategy and practices that align with the our Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion goals and support staff as whole humans. She believes “Vital Communities’ work of bringing together people to convene change in their own communities is an exemplary guidepost for how to keep pressing forward in advancing equity and operationalizing justice for all.”
A Growing Network

The Upper Valley Resilience Network (UVRN) is comprised of nine grassroots-minded community projects, initiatives, and organizations all working toward cultivating a more resilient and just food system for the Upper Valley.

Over the past year, project “hub” representatives along with various technical service providers have been meeting to learn from one another, share resources, and hold trainings on communications and other aspects of their work, and collaborate on equity-centered projects.

These projects cover a variety of food systems work including helping local food shelves upgrade their infrastructure to be more accessible, delivering Veggie Van Go boxes to more rural communities, distributing Grow Your Own Garden kits, nurturing food forests, and supporting local farmers and producers while educating consumers about where their food comes from!

Learn more about these hubs and how you can support their work, and sign up for a newsletter at vitalcommunities.org/uvrn.

Our Board welcomed Emma Wolfe, the Vice President of Government and Community Relations at Dartmouth College. As someone relatively new to the Upper Valley, she said she has been “struck by the number of people throughout the Upper Valley who are devoted to the work of Vital Communities and all the connections, efforts, and opportunities it provides.”

We said goodbye and big thanks to Sarah Brock, whose accomplishments in her 10 years at Vital Communities included our hugely effective Weatherize and Solarize campaigns; Development Director Arianne Arnold, whose passion for Vital Communities and great fundraising skills contributed significantly to our work; and Andrew Deaett, a project manager dedicated to place-based education, whose sphere included Farm to School. That program is now being overseen by Anna Hubbard, most recently working with our Early Childhood Education Initiative.
Thank You, Volunteers!

Clay Adams  |  Shari Boraz  |  Andrea Cass  |  Martha Dickinson
Jessica Adams  |  Mary Bouchard  |  Hannah Celi  |  Damian DiNicola
Liane Allen  |  Paul Boynton  |  Dellie Champagne  |  Rachel DiStefano
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Stella Bale  |  Kate Burke  |  Jackie Cowell  |  Manuel Espitia
Kelly Barger  |  Kerstin Burlingame  |  Elizabeth Craib  |  Judith Falk
Bri Barnes  |  Justin Burrows  |  Joshua Cray  |  Barbara Farnsworth
Erin Barnett  |  Elizabeth Burrows  |  Elyse Crossman  |  Erika Farnsworth
Barbara Barry  |  Jo Busha  |  Ben Cushing  |  Scott Farnsworth
Yolanda Baumgartner  |  Meghan Butts  |  Judy Danna  |  Kate Farren
Kelly Beaupre  |  Chris Byrne  |  Andrea Daunhauer  |  Rudy Fedrizzi
Kerry Belknap Morris  |  Bill Cable  |  Melva Davidson  |  Corey Fitch
Lauren Ben-Ezra  |  Mary Beth Cahalan  |  Samantha Green  |  F.X. Flinn
John Benjamin  |  Alexis Camacho  |  Mariah Davis  |  Diane Foulds
Michael Bennett  |  Steve Campbell  |  Tom Debalsi  |  Traci Fowler
Kristiana Birmingham  |  Adams Carroll  |  Terri Decker  |  Ashley Frantz
Rayna Bishop  |  Brian Carroll  |  Dawn Dextraze  |  Lois Frazer
Kendra Booth-Maslowski  |  Christiane Carroll  |  Susan Dicken

ALISHA ROBINSON, PROGRAM ADVISOR

Alisha Robinson (she, her) moved to the Upper Valley three years ago to join the Alice Peck Day Memorial Hospital staff where she is now Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Program Coordinator and HR Business Partner. Her first task was to learn her work environment. But soon she felt curious about the broader community, so different from her home state of Washington. Governance, for instance: “I had never encountered the way things work around here. The idea of going to a town meeting and putting something on a ballot was all new to me.”

APD President and CEO Sue Mooney recognized Alisha’s passion for the community and suggested she ask APD to sponsor her for Leadership Upper Valley, a year-long Vital Communities program that immerses participants in a range of aspects of the Upper Valley—from justice to the arts, from human services to livable communities. Alisha became such a fan of the program, she now has joined its Advisory Board. In that role, she hopes to help increase diversity of the program’s presenters and activate the network of LUV alumni.

“The foundational knowledge I gained about my environment was tremendous. I would say that for someone like me who’s new to the area but wants to be a leader, wants to effect change, it’s almost essential.” For instance, while she wants to see better public transit in the Upper Valley, LUV gave her “a better understanding of why our public transit is the way it is. It made it better for me to advocate because I knew more about what I was advocating for.”

Learn more about Leadership Upper Valley at vitalcommunities.org/leadership-upper-valley.
From our Board of Directors to Leadership Upper Valley presenters to Valley Quest box monitors, our volunteers are essential. This list of volunteers has been prepared with care. However, if we’ve inadvertently omitted someone, please let us know!

LAURA GINSBURG, SUPPORTING SYSTEMS CHANGE

It’s obvious what Laura Ginsburg brings to her volunteer work as a member of the Vital Communities Board of Directors, which she joined in 2021.

She knows farming: Before moving to Vermont in 2017, she and her wife, Connie Surber, ran a small, diversified live-tock farm and ice creamery in Montana. She knows farm policy: In Montana, she served on the policy committee of the Montana Farmers Union and represented that union to the national union policy committee. Currently, she is Dairy Development and Innovation Lead for the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets Division and leads a ten-state program supporting forward-thinking and market-driven approaches to developing the dairy sector.

So, what does she get from serving on the board, including its Finance Committee? For one, she likes the diversity of the board. "I’ve gotten to work with people from all over the region that I wouldn’t otherwise have had the opportunity to meet—non-ag-sector people, which is not a space I exist in professionally.”

In addition, Vital Communities’ scope intrigues her. “The work of the organization is comprehensive in a way that I find very engaging—thinking about whole systems change rather than just one facet and bringing together stakeholders that wouldn’t otherwise work together to find common solutions.”

In the areas of energy and housing, for example, “The organization is spending time and effort in these difficult collaborative conversations that are resulting in actual behavior changes, such as getting businesses to invest in housing for their employees.”

| Ted Frazer | Megan Hagge | Linda Kahl | Karen Liot Hill |
| Brooke Freeland | Joan Haley | Tom Kahl | Cara Liu |
| Scott Frew | Linda Hallock | Isabella Kam | Steve Liu |
| Rick Frey | Sharron Harrington | Peyton Kanaly | Brian Loeb |
| Carolyn Frye | Julia Hautanieri | Maddie Katona | Betsy Luce |
| Nick Gaffney | Rebecca Haynes | Karl Kemnitzer | Keisha Luce |
| Holly Gaspar | Reggie Hazel | Robin Kilfeather-Mackey | Jennifer Lynn |
| Kevin Geiger | Tammie Hazlett | Meredith Kendall | Jenni Lund |
| Hannah Getroth | Chris Hebb | Lindsey Klecans | Jenny Macauley |
| Sarah George | Leila Hennessy | Sara Kobylenski | Linda Machalaba |
| Kim Gibbs | Jamie Hess | David Kotz | Daniella Malin |
| Will Gilman | Lori Hibner | Wendy Kozak | Greta Marches |
| Laura Ginsburg | Erika Hoffman-Kies | Eula Kozma | Rachel McCarroll |
| Nancy Glynn | Allison Hopkins | Lori Kraemer | Susan McCaslin |
| Sandy Gmur | Niko Horster | Sally Kraft | Julie McConnell |
| Susan Goodell | Cellissa Hoyt | Don Kreiss | Patricia McGovern |
| Jeff Goodric | Janet Hunt | Joy Kubit | Gail McPeek |
| Amy Grasmick | Katharine Hurst | Cindy Kudlik | Sunnie McPhetres |
| Emery Gray | Carolyn Isabelle | Amy Lappin | Joslyn Meier |
| Faye Grearson | Concia Jackson | Jill Larson | Lelia Mellen |
| Greg Greene | Linda James | Maria Laskaris | Nancy Merrill |
| Grote Gretchen | Kelly Jarosz | David Lavie | Brenda Metzler |
| Linda Grey | Katie Jenks | Dan Leavitt | Rick Mills |
| Julia Gri | Julia Johns | Joanne Lendaro | Vicky Mishcon |
| Arlene Guest | Amber Johnston | Nicole Leonard | Soumya Mitra |
| Doreen Guitette | Judith Jones | Matt Levin | Bryton Moeller |
| Ryan Haac | Tim Josephson | David Libens | Erika Moen |
| Bob Hagan | Amelia Kahl | Bill Limoges | |

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RYAN HAAC, E-BIKE LIBRARY HOST

A decade or so ago, Ryan Haac lived in a Virginia college town and rode his bike everywhere. After he and his wife moved to Sharon and had two kids, this stopped. “There was this hole in my life of not being on my bicycle because I had children, and if I were going somewhere, they needed to come with me, and I couldn’t do that on a bike.”

Three years ago, as the chair of the Sharon Energy Committee, Ryan hosted the Upper Valley E-Bike Lending Library, a Vital Communities/Lebanon Public Libraries program that lets people try several models of e-bikes for free overnight. He tried a Radwagon cargo bike. “It was a gateway experience into owning and using an e-bike and letting me understand how an e-bike could fit into my specific needs and improve my quality of life.” He got one for his family.

“Once we had the cargo e-bike, the task of picking up the kids from school was no longer a chore. It was an enjoyable part of the day. Instead of going straight home, we might even ride up the river a bit, just for fun. It’s also let me explore my town and the backroads in a way you can’t always do walking.”

Ryan has hosted the library every summer since and will do so again this summer. It’s been particularly rewarding to take the loaner e-bikes to the local middle and high schools so kids can try for themselves this form of “active transportation.” The kids love it, he said.

See the 2024 E-Bike Lending Library schedule at vitalcommunities.org/uvell
Mark Your Calendar

APRIL 4-JUNE 23

Portraits of Resilience: Farming in a Changing Climate

Billings Farm & Museum, Woodstock

Original portraits, informational panels, films, and events focused on farmers in our region using climate-friendly agricultural practices.

vitalcommunities.org/climate-farmer-stories

APRIL 6, 10 AM-NOON

Week of the Young Child Kick-Off Celebration

Coburn Park, Lebanon

Early childhood educators, kids, and families: Gather for fun and treats in gratitude to those who teach and care for our youngsters!

vitalcommunities.org/early-childhood-education

MAY 2024

Celebrate Active Transportation!

Hitch a ride on National Bike Month with local events that include Lebanon Bike to Work Day, Vermont Park Your Carbon Week, and CommuteSmart NH’s month-long challenge. Details at link below.

vitalcommunities.org/active-transportation-may-2024

MAY 31, 8 AM

Housing Breakfast

Hilton Garden Inn, Lebanon

Be in the room where housing happens! The Housing Breakfast brings together employers, developers, advocacy groups, elected officials and others to share their perspectives and discuss ongoing and proposed housing measures.

vitalcommunities.org/upcoming-events

MAY-NOVEMBER 2024

Upper Valley E-Bike Lending Library

Try out a selection of e-bike models for free and see which type could fit your needs and make you less car-dependent. Locations and schedule at link below.

vitalcommunities.org/ebike-library

JUNE-OCTOBER 2024

Climate Farmer Stories Traveling Exhibit

Learn about climate-friendly farming practices and meet some of the farmers in our region using them! Combining farmer portraits by VT and NH artists, photos, audio interviews, and information from local soil and farming experts, the exhibit tells a true story of hope and resilience! Locations and schedule at link below.

vitalcommunities.org/climate-farmer-stories
Cedar Circle Farm Quest

Spring is the time to take a Valley Quest—a self-guided tour that teaches you about a special place in the Upper Valley while you follow clues to reach a treasure box.

One of those special places is Cedar Circle Farm & Education Center in East Thetford for which a Quest was created in 2007 and revised numerous times since then.

The Cedar Circle Farm Quest introduces you to the regenerative agricultural practices used at the farm to help mitigate climate change while growing delicious, nutrient-rich plants.

Here are some excerpts from the Quest:

Wander along the edges of fields and  
Our methods of farming will soon be revealed.

See those mixtures of plants, not in rows, that are growing?  
Into our Farmstand is not where they’re going!  
They are what farmers call “Cover Crops,”  
Used so that the cycle of growth never stops.

Cover crops hold onto and feed the soil,  
So farmers and plants together toil (that means work!).

What’s also important, we think you should know,  
Is that we want more and more plants to grow!  
Even if some plants are not grown to eat,  
They still can store carbon right under our feet!

Use your map to walk past the Strawberry Shack and  
See large brown mounds that no farm should lack.

That’s compost—which people sometimes call “black gold”  
Because of the nutrient wealth it can hold!

To view or download the complete Cedar Circle Farm Quest,  
go to vitalcommunities.org/quest/cedar-circle-farm-quest

From Top: The Cedar Circle Farmstand; a roller-crimper used for managing cover crops; crops in full bloom, which help sequester carbon and improve soil health.

FREE GUIDED QUESTS! Saturday, May 18, 10 am & Wednesday, September 18, time TBD

Join a Cedar Circle farmer for a one-hour tour highlighting the farm’s no-till and regenerative practices, perennial native plants, crop rotation, land conservation, and wildlife habitat! Register at vitalcommunities.org/upcoming-events