

Collaborating for Climate Preparedness: Insights from a 2015 Workshop

Overview

With support from the Kresge Foundation, USDN hosted a Workshop on Collaborating for Climate Preparedness in conjunction with the National Adaptation Forum (NAF) on May 11, 2015 in Saint Louis, MO. This full-day workshop convened 33 local government and community organization representatives from 17 cities to discuss how they can better collaborate within local communities to enhance climate preparedness and equity.



Twenty-five of the 33 workshop participants received critical travel support funding via USDN provided by a grant from the Kresge Foundation. Participants were required to apply in teams of at least one local government and one community organization representative from each community. A team of USDN members from Seattle, Baltimore, Aspen, and Salt Lake City along with NGO partners from Oakland and Seattle worked with USDN staff to plan the workshop.

The workshop content was designed to expose all 17 teams to examples of collaboration from other communities, and to engage participants in discussions about building relationships and partnerships, addressing equity issues, and creating opportunities for community leadership in the context of climate preparedness. Ten participants (six from community organizations, four from local government) were invited to kick off the workshop by sharing brief stories of their work and thoughts on opportunities for collaboration. Presenters from Seattle and Oakland – cities with robust partnerships between local government and community organizations – shared deeper stories to set the stage for a dynamic group discussion. Participants then spent time in small group discussions before ending the day discussing how to apply what they had learned with their local partners.

This workshop provided a unique opportunity for dialogue and learning. Participants rated its value highly, and departed with enthusiasm and new ideas to strengthen their collaborations for climate preparedness. Below are highlights from the workshop discussions.

Key Takeaways: Secrets to Successful Collaboration

- **Invest in Collaboration** – Enhancing climate preparedness and equity are broad goals requiring nuanced understanding of community assets and opportunities, and engagement with many stakeholders. Local governments and community organizations working toward these goals can benefit significantly from working together. Deep collaboration most likely to lead to success requires an investment and commitment from all parties to the process of collaboration itself.
- **Start with Relationships** – Trusted relationships create a foundation for effective collaboration. Get to know your potential collaborators before diving into a planning process.
- **Connect with Community Leaders** – Community leadership exists in many forms associated with the various ways that community members relate to each other (e.g., by neighborhood, faith, interests, school district). Connect with community leaders to seek advice and explore collaboration potential.

- **Acknowledge Context** – All communities involve unique historical context, priorities, perspectives, personalities, and important areas of consensus, difference, and nuance. Staff seeking to build trust and work on climate preparedness issues should be prepared to acknowledge and discuss local context first, even if they have not been directly involved in that context.
- **Demonstrate Respect** – Demonstrate respect for your potential collaborators throughout the process. Reach out with a clear purpose and show that you value their time. Explore opportunities to efficiently leverage their existing meetings and modes of working. Pair with other offerings that your community will value.
- **Engage to Listen** – Frame conversations around the felt experiences and ideas of the community, and internalize the work of translating what you hear into the language of your planning process. Focus on listening. Simply giving a presentation on a draft plan and asking for comments does not constitute effective collaboration.
- **Share Power** – Moving beyond asking for input into deeper collaboration requires trusting and investing in collaboration itself and enabling all parties to have power to shape that collaboration. Approach potential collaborators in a manner that allows you to develop the process plan together. Consider tools such as formal partnership agreements, co-chair roles, sharing power to set agendas, and using neutral facilitators. Forge process agreements before programmatic agreements.
- **Support the Capacity of Local Organizations** – Local organizations can bring tremendous value to collaborations for climate preparedness, but often have limited capacity and flexibility to participate in the absence of new resources. Ask about their capacity and needs and explore practical opportunities to resource their participation. Help each other to identify connections between resilience and their work.
- **Support the Participation of Community Members** – Reduce the barriers to community participation by providing food, childcare, transportation, and language translation where appropriate.
- **Value the Knowledge and Perspectives of Frontline Communities** – Engage community members to develop a deep and nuanced understanding of community members, assets, vulnerabilities, opportunities, and capacity for resilience. Invest in hearing from frontline communities about the challenges they face, ideas for enhancing resilience, and how to prioritize next steps. Community organizations may have opportunities to engage in more honest and nuanced conversations.
- **Consider Creative Engagement Methods** – Consider using art or unconventional means of attracting attention, educating, and communicating your message. Use tools to help community members and government planners develop a shared visual perspective of community assets and priorities.
- **Use Tools to Focus on Engagement and Equity** – Apply tools to ensure your planning process considers issues of key importance to the community, such as equity, accessibility, and affordability. Bay Localize has developed a checklist for potential use by grantors and policy makers aimed at fostering inclusionary processes and consideration of equity issues in decision making.
- **Respect Each Other's Approaches and Needs** – Climate preparedness planning is often a new area of work for both government and community partners. Each may feel pressure to approach the process or communicate about the process in specific ways. Devise a process where your respective roles play to your strengths and work for all parties.



- **Leverage Relationships** – In some communities, local organization leaders may have more influence with certain stakeholders (e.g., large private sector companies) and even elected representatives than local government staff. Collaboration may create opportunities to leverage that influence.
- **Value Community Collaboration and Equity in the Culture of Local Government** – Embed principles of equity and community collaboration into local government job descriptions, hiring criteria, performance reviews, departmental progress reports, and professional development for staff. Pursue culture change within government to overcome institutional racism and legacy issues. Offer in-person trainings to provide staff with opportunities to explore these issues together and in the context of their roles and projects.
- **Foster Community Leadership and Coalitions** – Collaborations can be even more effective when coalitions of community organizations engage, bringing more diverse perspectives and connections with the community into the process. Local organizations may also be able to leverage resources and support each other’s participation.
- **Partner to Seek Funding** – Consider opportunities to help community organizations obtain resources to support their work on climate preparedness. Formal partnership agreements and roles may enable collaborative engagement with local philanthropic partners and programs such as [Partners for Places](#).
- **Foster Social Cohesion** – Strong social cohesion can help communities be resilient to challenging events, especially during and in the immediate aftermath of disaster-scale events. Strong social cohesion can also make it easier for organizations and government to engage and collaborate with the community in planning and delivering services.
- **Embrace Opportunities to Create Multiple Benefits** – Wherever possible, look for opportunities to meet other community needs and priorities while working to enhance climate preparedness, and explore opportunities to grow collaborations through those lenses.

Examples of Collaboration for Climate Preparedness

Collaboration between local governments and community organizations can take many forms. Below are select examples mentioned at the 2015 workshop.

- **Community Listening Sessions and Preparation Workshops** – The City of Baltimore held community meetings to inform its preparedness planning in which staff did not give presentations but rather held conversations and asked questions such as: “When we had that big rain storm recently, how did that impact your life?”. These sessions helped the City understand residents, assets and vulnerabilities and developed trust to advance the planning process. The City provided buses, childcare, and food. The City also hosted workshops with the theme [Make a Plan. Build a Kit. Help Each Other](#) to empower residents to plan and prepare for climate impacts.
- **Neighborhood Ambassadors** – In a collaboration with the City of Cleveland’s Office of Sustainability, local community development corporations and other groups, [Cleveland Neighborhood Progress](#) is hiring 16 [neighborhood climate ambassadors](#). These ambassadors will work in four neighborhoods to support community engagement on climate issues in their neighborhoods. Ambassadors will receive stipends for their work, and will be supported by a climate resilience coordinator.



- **Community Inclusion in Planning Committees** – The City of Baltimore included many community members in the formal committee structure that shaped its climate preparedness plan.
- **Community Engagement Partners** – The City of Seattle is partnering with local organizations to lead community engagement in development of its climate preparedness plan.
- **Community Coalitions** – The [Oakland Climate Action Coalition](#) formed from more than 30 community-based, faith, labor, and environmental advocacy organizations to engage with the City in development of its climate change plans with a strong and unified voice. The City benefited from opportunities to engage with these organizations in an efficient, coordinated fashion.
- **Technical Training for Government Staff** – In Ann Arbor, the Huron River Watershed Council (HRWC) has delivered technical training for local government and agency staff with responsibilities related to stormwater management, urban forestry, river flows, hazard mitigation, and emergency response. HRWC is also developing a stormwater resource guide for these professionals.
- **Community Engagement Training for Government Staff** – In Seattle, the City has partnered with local organizations to provide training for City staff to enhance their understanding of local communities, with an emphasis on issues of equity and vulnerability. This training is designed to enhance the effectiveness of local climate preparedness planning.
- **Leadership Training for Grassroots Leaders** – The San Francisco Bay Area [Resilient Communities Initiative](#) supports grassroots leaders from communities most impacted by climate change in learning about resilience advocacy, and trains agency staff on best practices in partnering with community groups.
- **Community Resilience Toolkit** – Oakland-based Bay Localize developed the free [Community Resilience Toolkit](#) to help individuals, community groups, teachers, and municipal planners in all communities think about local climate impacts and opportunities to enhance resilience.
- **Work Plans for Community Engagement and Equity in Climate Preparedness Planning** – Bay Localize drafted the [Mapping Our Future](#) report as a work plan for community engagement and considering social equity in San Francisco Bay Area regional climate adaptation planning. Its recommendations are based on consultation with regional grassroots social justice, public health, engagement, and other community leaders through a survey and a workshop. The online survey was offered in English and Spanish and distributed by 55 Bay Area community and social service organizations throughout the nine counties, obtaining responses from more than 400 residents.
- **Public Education Through Museums and Interactive Exhibits** – Philadelphia’s Franklin Institute is collaborating with the City to create opportunities for public education around climate change. The Institute has created exhibits in its museum space and at events in other areas of the community to bring informal science education to the community.



More Examples: The Kresge Foundation’s [Climate Resilience and Urban Opportunity Initiative](#) is supporting the capacity of community-based nonprofit groups in more than a dozen U.S. cities to influence local and regional climate resilience planning, policy development, and implementation in ways that better reflect the needs of underrepresented people.

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