



Community Engagement: Listening to People in Place

Community engagement has always been central to the Community Development Finance Authority's (CDFA) mission. CDFA's approach goes beyond fund deployment, ensuring a comprehensive support system throughout all stages of project development. By providing technical assistance, network building, compliance support, and data analysis, CDFA ensures the long-term success of the projects, organizations, and communities it supports.

Molly Donovan, CDFA's Director of Economic Development, praises the organization's ongoing efforts to engage more deeply with communities than what is traditionally required. "Many view engagement as the required public meeting process. At CDFA, our projects are engaging community members in project concept, initiation, and development," she explains.

"We are engaging with and in the community by going into communities to learn, attending conferences to network, and doing one-on-one meetings with community leaders, elected officials, and volunteers for potential applications for our funding," adds Donovan. This broad community engagement leads not only to better-supported projects but also projects that are better developed to meet community needs.

Shaping Funding Priorities Through Community Feedback and Insights

CDFA's engagement provides invaluable insights from the communities it serves. Donovan describes this as a "loop of listening, learning, and integrating feedback while grant-making." Whether through public meetings, targeted outreach sessions, surveys, or one-on-one conversations with local leaders, this direct interaction gives CDFA insights into the unique challenges and opportunities faced across the Granite State.

"It's not just a top-down agency approach," adds Kirstin Barton, CDFA's Housing Specialist and primary relationship manager for housing programs. "These conversations help us understand what the evolving community needs are and uncover things that are already happening and are established within New Hampshire's structures," she says.

This community feedback is coupled with data to guide CDFA's funding priorities. In 2019, CDFA launched an initiative to enhance its data collection, analysis, and visualization capabilities, which included the development of a new "Core Data Index" that uses up-to-date, varied data sources to measure community needs.

Additionally, the organization created a public data visualization platform to display these community indicators in an accessible, user-friendly format. This tool allows CDFA, its partners, and community members to see a clearer picture of local needs and progress, reinforcing transparency and supporting more informed, strategic planning.

Inviting New Voices Through Outreach and Network-Building

A recent partner and customer survey highlighted the need for CDFA to expand its engagement with historically underserved populations across New Hampshire. Since 2020, CDFA has been deliberately seeking input from individuals, nonprofits, and community leaders who represent a broad spectrum of experiences, geographic locations, and cultural identities.

One of the key ways to engage more diverse voices is through outreach efforts, such as sponsoring and participating in the state's Multicultural Festivals. Kirsten Barton reflects on the importance of listening to the people she meets at these cultural events: "Connecting with people is crucial as we move forward. It's about understanding, 'Are we meeting their needs? Where do they see their community heading, and how can we support them in getting there?'"

Network-building is at the core of inviting new voices to join the conversation. Outreach allows CDFA to expand awareness of its programs, grant opportunities, and services to communities that may not yet be aware of the support available, making it easier for them to access resources and funding. Molly Donovan, CDFA's Director of Economic Development, emphasizes that "we're doing outreach to listen, understand, and create lasting

connections. Our goal is to ensure we have more diverse applicants in the future and that we're prepared to meet their needs.”

Empowering Grant Applicants Through Training and Capacity-Building

In addition to increasing the diversity of grant applicants, CDFA’s community engagement efforts focus on ensuring that grantees are well-equipped to succeed. By providing ongoing technical assistance, application guidance, compliance support, and training, CDFA ensures that applicants understand the technical requirements of the grants and are prepared to align their proposals with community needs. Additionally, in response to community feedback about the complexity of CDFA’s administrative processes, the organization is simplifying its grant application and management processes.

The Community Center Investment Program (CCIP) is an example of how CDFA prioritizes capacity-building for applicants, especially those new to federal funding. “We’re very serious about pre-application meetings because we want to support, coach, and listen to applicants,” recalls Molly Donovan. “If they tell us they need something, and we’re offering something else, we have to ask ourselves—why aren’t we funding what they truly need?”

Makers Mill: Community Engagement in Action

Makers Mill, a nonprofit community maker space and vocational hub located in Wolfeboro, NH, is an inspiring example of CDFA’s community engagement ethos. CDFA supported Makers Mill through every phase of development, beginning with a capacity-building grant for a feasibility study and a strategic plan.

Joshua Arnold, Executive Director of Makers Mill, shared how this process was community-centric from the start, involving numerous community visioning nights and focus groups, where residents could share their ideas for the space. “We hosted ‘hard hat tours’ and made them interactive by putting big pieces of paper on the walls for people to write their ideas,” Arnold recalls. Their input led to unexpected features, like metal smithing and leatherworking studios, which became popular parts of the facility.

Makers Mill also received pre-development tax credits, which enabled them to engage architects and engineers to ensure that the maker space truly reflected the needs and interests of the local community. CDFA’s support facilitated a series of field trips to other maker spaces across the Northeast, helping residents envision what was possible and further strengthening community involvement.

Beyond planning, the construction of the facility, made possible with Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) and Community Center Investment Program (CCIP) funds, was supported by local input. For example, high school students in vocational metal and woodworking programs contributed by designing and building the main stair entry. The hands-on community involvement continued throughout the implementation phase, where volunteers contributed to painting and final build-outs, creating a sense of ownership and connection to the space.

Makers Mill exemplifies how CDFA’s funding and commitment to community engagement can help turn local vision into reality. By fostering engagement throughout the capacity building, planning, and implementation stages of development, CDFA empowers communities to shape projects that reflect their unique needs and drive real change.