vital COMMUNITIES

Fall/Winter
2026-27

Enhancing Reliable Transit Options



HOUSING
Conversations

ENERGY ROUNDTABLE
Returns

LEADERSHIP UPPER VALLEY
Class of 2027

FARM TO EDUCATION
Updates

New
Upper Valley
PODCAST

CRANKSGIVING
Bike Ride + Food Drive

vitalcommunities.org | 802-291-9100

195 North Main Street, White River Junction, VT 05001

/vitalcommunities /vitalcommunities

Staff

Stacy Brown, Communications, Donor Stewardship, x108, stacy@vitalcommunities.org

Sarah Danly, Housing, Food & Farm, x105, sdanly@vitalcommunities.org

Miranda Dupre, Housing, Civic Engagement & Leadership, x102, miranda@vitalcommunities.org

Ellen Hender, Executive Director, x122, ellen@vitalcommunities.org,

Erica Hiller, Climate & Energy, Food & Farm, x119, erica@vitalcommunities.org

Anna Hubbard, Food & Farm, x127, ahubbard@vitalcommunities.org

Cameron Huftalen, Food & Farm, x123, cameron@vitalcommunities.org

Jacopo Montobbio, Transportation, Climate & Energy, x110, jacopo@vitalcommunities.org

Katie Mulkay, Administration, x107, katie@vitalcommunities.org

Dr. Kelli Perkins, Ed.D, SHRM-CP, Human Resources, Justice, Equity, Diversity & Inclusion, x132, kelli@vitalcommunities.org

Gabrielle Ratté Smith, Civic Engagement & Leadership, x114, gabrielle@vitalcommunities.org

Alice Stewart, Programs, x131, alice@vitalcommunities.org

Board of Directors

Meghan Butts, Lebanon, NH

Stacey Chiocchio, Grantham, NH

Damian DiNicola, Randolph, VT

Julia Griffin, Hanover, NH, Vice Chair

Tim Josephson, Canaan, NH

Brian Loeb, Norwich, VT

Tawanna L. Meyers, Lebanon, NH

Greg Norman, Norwich, VT, Chair

Ryan Scelza, Grantham, NH, Treasurer

David Watts, Norwich, VT

On The Cover: Vital Communities and Dismas House piloted a succesful e-bike program. In May, Jacopo, Joe, AJ, and Tom show Dismas House's newest e-bike fleet addition.

Editor: Stacy Brown

Photos: By staff except where indicated.

Printing: R.C. Brayshaw & Company, West Lebanon, NH

Interconnectedness

One of the things I love most about the Upper Valley is how we show up for each other.

Sometimes that looks like coordinated, community-wide efforts in response to a crisis, as we saw after Tropical Storm Irene and throughout the pandemic. Other times, it is smaller: a neighbor snowblowing our driveway so I can get my kids to school, splitting extra wood for the couple next door, or sharing our garden's surplus with coworkers.

These acts of care reflect what our communities need to thrive. We need safe, accessible homes; ways to get where we need to go; nourishing food and a healthy environment. And perhaps most importantly, we need connection - to people, to place, and to community.

It can be easy to see the challenges facing our region as independent problems to solve. But housing, transportation, food systems, energy, and climate all affect one another. That interconnectedness is at the heart of Vital Communities' work as we collaborate with people and organizations across the region to understand these challenges, identify opportunities, and move ideas into action. The issues are broad, but the solutions are rooted in relationships and connection.

You'll see examples of this throughout this newsletter. From the reconvened Energy Roundtable and the ongoing housing conversations to the E-bike program, Farm to ECE work and a new Leadership Upper Valley class, these efforts share a common approach: convening, listening, and working together to turn shared concerns into action.

The challenges facing the Upper Valley will continue to evolve, as will the solutions. The depth of commitment I see across our region gives me hope - with people willing to ask hard questions, learn from one another, try something new, and work together toward a better future.



With gratitude,

Ellen Hender

Executive Director

Enhancing Reliable Transit Options

Improving options for reliable, accessible, and affordable multi-modal transportation is central to Vital Communities work. Over the past few years, we have partnered with Dismas House to provide residents with a fleet of shared e-bikes and bike training with the goal of improving access to reliable and sustainable transportation, as well as increased autonomy, as they rebuild connection and community.

"It had been years since I rode a bike," AJ, a resident at Hartford Dismas House told us, but now he's using one of the five e-bikes at Hartford Dismas House frequently throughout the week. And many other residents are as well. e-bikes get used every single day, all day.

Dismas House serves as a critical community resource for individuals returning to Hartford following incarceration. By providing stable housing and a structured recovery-oriented environment, Dismas House helps residents address barriers to recovery, employment, healthcare access, and long-term stability. Reliable access to transportation is important to allow residents at Dismas House to achieve their goals.

In April 2026, Vital Communities provided two new e-bikes and servicing to the existing fleet of five, thanks to a Mobility and Transportation Innovations grant that we received from the Vermont Agency of Transportation. We bought two small cargo e-bikes, with front and rear load capacity (up to 450 lb), to allow riders to carry extra gear and groceries. We picked models with full fenders, larger tires, and built in lights, as these bikes get used year-round and at any time of the day. After three months of use, odometer readings showed that each of the new bikes had traveled over 600 miles.



Joe heads to a jobsite on the e-bike with his specilized tree care equipment .

Assistant House Manager, Gale, says that within a day and a half of posting a new e-bike sign-out sheet, it is usually fully booked. Unlike using public transportation, the e-bikes let residents travel according to their own schedule needs. For those with recurring appointments, this has been incredibly helpful.

Joe started a Tree Care business while residing at Dismas House and was able to load equipment on the e-bike and ride to jobsites. It could be pretty tough to get to the specific residential sites on public transit routes, while lugging all the gear around on foot. With an E-bike, he's able to go as far as Plainfield and Enfield (from Hartford), with the specialized gear he needs. "The bike put me back in business!" he says.

Beyond helping folks make it to appointments and jobs, the bikes provide exercise and recreation opportunities for residents as well. Tyler said that he finds himself a lot more active now; Joe and AJ both agree. Joe shared that he feels like he's gotten stronger from using the bike as often as he has. Aches and pains from daily activities like going up and down the stairs are gone, and he credits it to the bike for strengthening his leg muscles. AJ, who had just had back surgery when Dismas House first got this set of bikes, said using the bikes "has been like physical therapy" for him, and being able to get out and about in a supported way with the e-bike helped him gradually recover.

As far as using the bikes to enjoy the Upper Valley, residents shared with us that they like to use them to get to local fishing spots to spend time together enjoying the outdoors. Joe shared that he was taking an e-bike for the weekend to go camping with his girlfriend. He loaded up the bike for a photo op with us to show how he can pack his tent, sleeping bag, and other essentials onto it no problem.

While there are still challenges – bike transportation is always a little trickier in the winter, and with fewer bikes than residents, careful coordination is needed to share the bikes and ensure everyone gets where they need and want to go, when they need and want to – we can definitely say the bikes are a hit. "Having access to bikes

continued on page 5

Important Housing Conversations

Vital Communities collaborates with communities and partner organizations to support the development of more housing options in the Upper Valley through education, sharing resources, and targeted conversations and technical assistance.

While the annual Housing Breakfast is Vital Communities' main housing event of the year, bringing together more than 150 attendees, we also host targeted conversations throughout the year.

With Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) now allowed in both Vermont and New Hampshire, they are frequently uplifted as an important component in housing creation, particularly in rural areas where attracting larger or even mid-size development is challenging for many reasons. However, many homeowners who might have the space, whether in their existing structure or on their land, need support to create ADUs both in terms of technical assistance as well as access to financing.

In April, Vital Communities launched the first of a series of conversations focused on the financial barriers to ADU development. This gathering brought together traditional finance agencies, housing advocates, regional planners, municipal officials, and more for a conversation exclusively focused on ADU finance.

A second gathering in May continued to build on that thread while also expanding conversation to include small, infill development more broadly. Over the course of two hours, the group dug into the details of some of the challenges that communities are experiencing in their efforts to support development projects under 20 units, a scale which is desperately needed in addition to the larger development efforts.

These conversations have helped advance two ongoing projects: 1) **The Upper Valley Home Creators Utility** which provides technical assistance around ADUs and other infill development, through collaboration among Vital Communities, Upper Valley Lake Sunapee Regional Planning Commission, Mount Ascutney Regional Commission, and Two Rivers-Ottauquechee Regional Commission (TRORC), and 2)**The White River Valley Consortium ADU Program**, a collaborative project of Vital Communities, TRORC and Green Mountain Economic Development Corporation, which is working to create a revolving loan fund for ADU construction.

The conversations have also generated interest in working together on other projects such as identifying "orphaned lots" across the region that could be coordinated under one development project. Sharing across sectors, municipalities and state lines provides greater insight into the challenges and the possibilities for housing creation, and we look forward to continuing these conversations and identifying next steps.

Learn more at vitalcommunities.org/housing

Introducing LUV's Class of 2027

The Leadership Upper Valley (LUV) Class of 2027 met for Opening Day on September 9th at beautiful Ohana Family Camp. This year's class is one of the largest: 28 participants, 16 from New Hampshire and 12 from Vermont, and representing many different careers in nonprofits, businesses, municipal government, and health care. Thanks to generous support from funders and donors, six received scholarships to support participation.

This year's program managers are Gabrielle Ratté Smith, returning for a second year, joined by a new co-manager, Miranda Dupre, who has been a program manager at Vital Communities since 2024. Both are graduates of LUV, Gabrielle in 2024 and Miranda earlier this year. Gabrielle is thrilled to be partnering with Miranda: "With her LUV year fresh in her mind, Miranda is going to bring so much lived and learned experience, wisdom, talent, and energy to this role." Miranda also serves as the BIPOC Community Navigator, supporting a project aimed at helping Black, Indigenous, and People of Color put

Energy Committee Roundtable Returns

One of the ways that Vital Communities helps to build climate-resilient communities is through support for local energy and climate action groups, including town energy committees across the Upper Valley.

A lot of energy was in the room on June 4th for the return of the annual Upper Valley Energy Committee Roundtable. Seventy people from across the Upper Valley and beyond turned out for this event designed to foster connections, share ideas, and explore potential collaborations across town energy committees.

Vital Communities tailored the event content based on energy committee input. With extremely high interest in heat pumps across the board, the event included a feature presentation on heat pump system design, sizing, and load management by charismatic presenter Matt Christie of TRC Companies, who was able to deftly speak to all technical levels in the room.

Energy committee members know that replacing fossil-fuel fired heating systems with heat pumps is one of the biggest levers we have to reduce our carbon emissions, and recent advances in cold-climate heat pumps now make it possible to use them as a home's only, or primary, heating appliance. These systems are still relatively new and energy committee members, municipal managers, homeowners, and even contractors are all still catching up to recent changes. This was a particularly timely topic as New Hampshire is gearing up for a big heat pump push as part of the New England Heat Pump Accelerator program, and Vermont is continuing to work on its own heat pump adoption efforts



Roundtable participants were energized to connect and share progress and challenges.

The Roundtable also included a lightning round of topic introductions including residential energy coaching programs, plug-in solar, energy insecurity, community resilience, clean energy finance mechanisms (e.g. C-PACER), and more. In the months since the Roundtable, a few working groups have formed to build on the conversations started at the event.

Learn more at **vitalcommunities.org/climate-energy**

down roots in the Upper Valley, including buying homes and starting businesses.

For almost 20 years, Vital Communities has been graduating classes of leaders who are spread throughout the Upper Valley, drawing on the knowledge, skills, and networks they built in the program. With over 350 alums, staff have started to offer workshops and host a listserv to facilitate learning and connections among alumni and between past graduates and current class members.



Leadership Upper Valley Class of 2027 on Opening Day. Photo credit: Rob Strong

Learn more at **vitalcommunities.org/leadership-upper-valley/**

Farm to Education Updates

Vital Communities' Food and Farm team collaborates with partners to support both farmers and schools in efforts to produce, purchase, and educate about healthy & locally grown food as part of our work to cultivate a food system that is accessible to all.

Early Childhood Education Food Procurement Pilot: In 2025, the Vital Communities Food and Farm team began working with a dedicated group of seven early childhood education (ECE) providers; nonprofit partners at Shelburne Farms, Let's Grow Kids, Hunger Free Vermont, and the Early Care and Education Association; and food distributors with the goal of easing the financial and time stress ECE providers experience while procuring food for their meal programs. Over the year, we sourced over $25,000 worth of food for ECE meal programs. This year, we are working to fine-tune the project to be more in alignment with ECE provider values, such as increasing purchases of locally produced foods.

This summer, we were able to start purchasing food in partnership with the Co-Op Food Stores, who offer more than 4,000 products grown or made within a 100-mile radius of their stores in the Upper Valley! This shift allows providers to purchase items in retail sizes, as opposed to large food service sizes from our previous distributors, while taking advantage of bulk discounts and making use of community-oriented programs the Co-Op offers, such as their "Food for All" program.

In the Co-Op's own words -- "fresh, healthy food shouldn't be a luxury item" and that is why we are so excited to be working with [the group] on this project. This transition has allowed providers to purchase food that is organic, local, and exactly what they want to feed the kids in their care. Vital Communities is excited to see how we can bring this program to more ECE programs in the region, and share the model with other ECE providers, nonprofits, and grocery retailers throughout New England. As of October, we have completed 10 deliveries from the Co-Op to ECE programs across the Upper Valley.



Anna organizes food for distribution to ECE providers.

Tool Library: As our team continues to build relationships with educators in the Upper Valley, two needs have come up consistently: a need for equipment/tools to teach about the food system, and technical assistance on how to use those tools. The tools needed range from books that aid in teaching curriculum to broad forks to turn the soil over in the school garden at the end of the year. They are tools that schools and ECEs may not have a need to own if there is an option to borrow them once or twice a year, may not have the space to store, or may lack the funds to purchase.

This summer, Vital Communities' intern, Ada Gardner, worked with our project manager, Anna, to purchase and assemble the tools educators said they most needed and to develop an online tool library with a local business, MyTurn, who specializes in tool library software. So far, our tool library includes:

- Child and adult broad forks
- A wheelbarrow
- Gloves
- Pruners and loppers
- A building kit
- Multiple cooking kits
- A tilther
- Cooking ranges
- A microgreens growing kit
- A slow cooker
- Tarps
- And more!

Check out the Farm to School and Early Childhood webpage to reserve a tool for your school or ECE program: **https://vitalcommunities.org/food-and-farm/farm-to-school-and-early-childhood/**

Learn more at vitalcommunities.org/food-and-farm

Enhancing Reliable Transit Options (continued)

Following the success of the e-bike pilot program with Dismas House, we will be expanding our program to three more Upper Valley organizations - The Hartford Community Restorative Justice Center, Turning Point Recovery Center of Springfield (VT), and SHARe.

has given the guys a lot of independence. Not having a bike for everyone has actually led to the guys working together cooperatively to figure out how to make a small fleet work for everyone - they just make it



Joe loads an e-bike up for a weekend camping trip.

work, and I stay out of it!" noted Dismas House Director Tom.

Most residents were interested in looking into using e-bikes as a main form of transportation beyond their time at Dismas House, especially if they stayed in the Hartford area where e-bike transportation gets them everywhere they want to go. Other residents thought returning to using cars would be the best fit for their rural locations, but noted that they'd be interested in e-bikes they could use for some of the daily trips, recreationally on trails to enjoy time outdoors.

Following the success of this pilot program, three other organizations are receiving e-bikes and bike training from us this fall: The Hartford Community Restorative Justice Center, Turning Point Recovery Center of Springfield (VT), and SHARe. And, we are ready to add more bikes to the Dismas House fleet!

In addition to the VTRANS grant, our team is appreciative of support from Omer & Bob's and Cowbell Bikes for servicing the bikes, in-house tuneups by AJ and other Dismas House residents, and Vital Communities' private donors.

Happy Pedaling!

Learn more at **vitalcommunities.org/transportation**

A New Podcast for the Upper Valley



Curious about the pocket of communities in Vermont and New Hampshire that make up the "Upper Valley"? What makes our towns and villages thrive? Who are the people who make it feel like home? Join your hosts, Jimmy Coleman of the Upper Valley Welcome Wagon, and Miranda Dupre of Vital Communities' BIPOC Home and Business Ownership Program, as we dive into the area's unique characteristics, culture, and, most importantly, the people who make our region so special!



The Second Annual Upper Valley Cranksgiving



While food and item donation isn't a long-term solution for true food sovereignty, it IS something we need to rely on while we build more sustainable systems. We have partners working tirelessly in our community to step into that food access support role, and we want to do our part too!

Join us for the second annual Upper Valley Cranksgiving: The world's largest food drive on two wheels! Part bike ride, part food drive, and part scavenger hunt.

On November 14 at 10am, riders will get a list of stores in the Upper Valley and a list of items the Upper Valley Haven needs the most for their food pantry. At the ring of the bell, they will ride off to string the stores together and return to the start with purchased items.

All you need is a bike, a bag, and a lock! Cranksgiving is grassroots-organized in over 100 cities, entirely volunteer-run, and entirely pedal-powered. No entry fee goes anywhere but the food.

There will be:

- E-bikes available to use for the ride for free (including Cargo bikes!),
- Warm coffee and pastries at the start, and soup at the end,
- Prizes for the heaviest load and fastest rider,
- And so much more!

Regsiter at **https://cranksgiving.org/directory/event-listing/hartford-vt/**

Become a Monthly Donor

Join us in building a thriving Upper Valley by becoming a monthly supporter of Vital Communities! Our work depends on neighbors like you engaging with us, whether by participating in projects like the E-Bike Lending Library, serving as a Box Monitor for Valley Quest, or offering financial support.

Monthly donations offer Vital Communities a more predictable revenue stream and give you an easy way to fund our work year-round.

Visit our website to sign up to become a monthly supporter at vitalcommunities.org/donate.

THANK YOU TO ALL OUR DONORS AND FUNDING PARTNERS!