



**AMPLIFYING  
VERMONT'S  
ECONOMIC  
RESILIENCE**

**A Community Economic  
Development Roundtables Report**

**AUGUST 2021**

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## **OFFICE OF ENGAGEMENT**

Building upon the University's land-grant mission, UVM established the Office of Engagement to serve as the university's "front door" for private, public and non-profit entities and communities looking to access UVM's many strengths and capabilities.



## **Center for Rural Studies**

The Center for Rural Studies (CRS) addresses social, economic, and resource challenges through applied research, program evaluation, community data and indicators and economic impact studies.



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- [Vermont Council on Rural Development](#)
- [Vermont Small Business Development Center](#)
- [Center for Women and Enterprise](#)
- [Vermont Professionals of Color Network](#)
- [Vermont Regional Development Corporation Network](#)
- [United Way of North Western Vermont](#)
- [Vermont Economic Progress Council](#)
- [Sudanese Foundation of Vermont](#)

# INTRODUCTION

The state of Vermont, like every other state in the country, faces unique challenges and opportunities as the result of the COVID-19 pandemic that are shaped by long-standing demographic, infrastructure and cultural realities. During the late winter of 2021, a team of researchers from the University of Vermont's Office of Engagement (OOE) and Center for Rural Studies (CRS) set out to learn from leaders to surface the impediments to economic resilience facing our state and identify solutions to overcome them. Eight roundtable sessions were convened virtually with 75 leaders representing a diverse set of interests and sectors from across the state.

The findings from these conversations will not surprise those who care deeply about the health and well-being of Vermonters. A consensus around what "successful" economic resilience looks like for our state emerged: one that sees our state's private and nonprofit sectors thriving, our poorest residents elevated to higher qualities of life, full employment, few job vacancies, affordable housing, healthcare and childcare for all, a welcoming and inclusive society where newcomers are able to make a living and a life here in the Green Mountain State.

The pathways to achieving this vision were discussed. Nuances between economic development and community development strategies were surfaced. A consensus emerged: that comprehensive approaches to community economic development are needed, ones that allow for regional differentiation but that support universal successes for all corners of our state.

In addition to contributing to state-wide discussions about the future of the state, this study informs the longer-term positioning of the University of Vermont (UVM) as a significant contributor to the state's community economic development enterprises. To address UVM's role in this space we asked our roundtable participants to talk to us about important data needs and data gaps. Our primary goal in asking this question is to ensure that the planning and investment decisions for the state of Vermont will not lack in access to the most accurate and accessible data available. To achieve this aim we recognize the need to forge new data partnerships with stakeholders in state government, regional development, business services and community engagement.

# WHY RESILIENT COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT?

To more fully encompass the sectors that engage in economic development across the state of Vermont, the standard terminology used by this study is “community economic development,” rather than simply “economic development.” Community economic development is defined as, “a comprehensive concept for changing the economic situation within a community” that is the “blending of economic development and community development as a holistic approach to community problem solving” (Shaffer et al., 2006, p.62). Community economic development, “occurs when people in a community analyze the economic conditions, determine its economic needs and unfulfilled opportunities, decide what can and should be done to improve the economic conditions, and then move to achieve agreed upon economic goals and objectives” (Shaffer et al., 2006, p.61).[1]

The term “economic resilience” is being used to characterize the ability of our state to not only “bounce back” from the pandemic, but to use the crisis to recover to a stronger position. Resilience is defined as, “the capacity of any entity- an individual, a community, an organization, or a natural system- to prepare for disruptions, to recover from shocks and stresses, and to adapt and grow from a disruptive experience” (Rodin, 2014, 3). Resilience is “multi-faceted, and includes a range of dimensions that have been variously termed as factors, capitals, resources, and strengths in the literature” (Payne et al., 2021, p.2; Jordan & Javernick-Will, 2012; Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2017) including: social, economic, institutional, ecological, and cultural resilience (Payne et al., 2021; Norris et al., 2008).

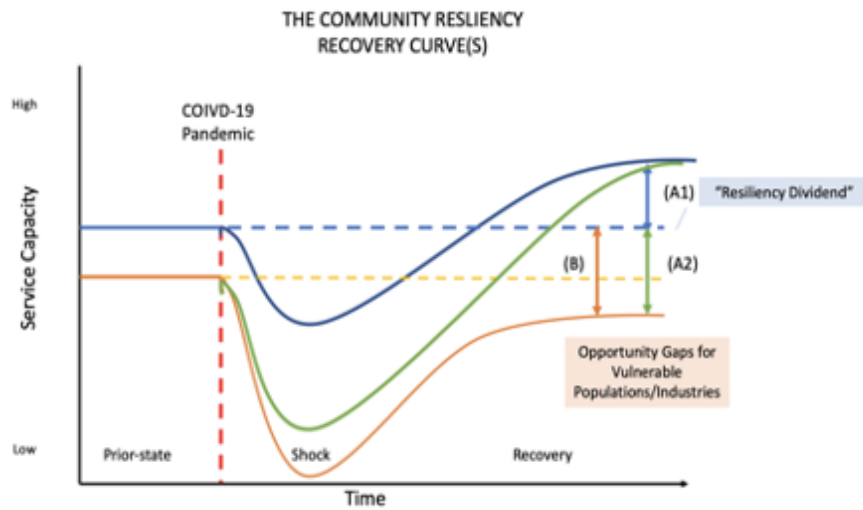


Figure 1. An equity-informed community resilience curve. Adjusted from Norris et al., 2008.

The figure above provides an adaptation of a widely circulated orientation to resiliency thinking and planning. As noted, resiliency is defined as the ability of systems to not only “bounce back” from disruptions, but to recover to a state of a higher capacity than the system was prior to the disruption. The pre-crisis states for “well off” (blue) and vulnerable (orange) populations is disrupted, in this case by the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant economic impacts. The pandemic has also highlighted the disparities in our economy that existed well before the crisis hit, as represented as different “starting” positions for vulnerable (orange) and more well off (blue) Vermonters. Roundtable respondents recognized that different populations of Vermonters were impacted at greater or lesser degrees of severity by the pandemic. Those more vulnerable, including the elderly, lower income, parents of young children, people of color, as well as struggling businesses and nonprofit, experienced a greater sense of disruption, represented in the orange line in the figure, while less vulnerable Vermonters weathered the crisis more easily (the blue line).

The challenge and the opportunity before us concern the question of how our economy, and the businesses and people who contribute to it, will recover. Will we, as a state, allow more vulnerable Vermonters to fall further behind (defined by scenario B), allowing only the more well off to recover (defined by scenario A1)? Or, can we harness the creativity and innovation needed to create a “resiliency dividend” for all Vermonters (A1+A2), and collectively achieve a higher state of economic well-being and quality of life than what we had prior to this pandemic? This study considers the ways economic success is defined through the lenses of different sectors, regions, and communities, in an effort to build back better and enhance the capacity of Vermont’s communities, industries, and sectors to thrive and achieve a sustained resiliency dividend for all Vermonters.

The OOE, in collaboration with UVM’s CRS and other key partners across the state of Vermont, is undertaking a multi-phase research study aimed at assessing the economic resilience of Vermont. This assessment utilizes a holistic community economic development framework and a mixed-methods research design to consider the key challenges and opportunities for industries and communities across Vermont. Particular attention is paid to the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and the strategies that these industries and communities can employ to build their resilience. The study engages diverse stakeholders and works across a suite of metrics to develop a common vision of what successful economic resilience looks like across Vermont’s fourteen counties. This report presents findings from the first phase of the project, Economic Development Roundtables, involving content experts from across Vermont.

# ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ROUNDTABLES OVERVIEW

The conceptualization of this project was first developed by the Vermont Futures Project, an initiative of the Vermont Chamber of Commerce. The research questions used to frame and implement the Economic Development Roundtables centered on two goals: 1) defining what successful community economic development looks like for our state and 2) surfacing the major challenges and opportunities to help Vermont's rural economy compete in a post-pandemic world. The goals, research questions, and overall objectives of the Economic Development Roundtables are provided below.

## Goals and Questions of Roundtables

### 1. Defining Success

**Observation:**

There is a "Vermont way" of defining successful community economic development.

**Research Questions:**

- What is the relationship between economic impact and other indicators of community health and well-being?
- What performance metrics should guide strategic investments?

### 1.2 Helping Vermont's Rural Economy Compete in a Post-Pandemic World

**Observation:**

Vermont is one of the most rural states with regions that are struggling to build a thriving economy after the pandemic.

**Research Questions:**

- What are the highest priority post-pandemic economic and community development initiatives?
- How can rural Vermont innovate economic development efforts to accelerate recovery?
- How has the pandemic highlighted emerging needs and opportunities?



## Objectives:

- Identify needs to support VT economic resiliency.
- Refine metrics to guide survey development.
- Develop contact lists for survey and focus groups.

To capture the broad sentiments of professionals working in organizations and sectors with a mission of enhancing economic and entrepreneurship development, workforce development, the interests of BIPOC Vermonters, public and private finance, arts & culture, government, social services, planning, arts and culture, or education and research. The distribution of the backgrounds of these participants was by no means even. We readily acknowledge the limitations posed by distribution of voices and perspectives and therefore assert that the summary of challenges, opportunities and data and metrics presented in this report is constrained to the perspectives of the people participating in the roundtables.

Participants were recruited to a 90-minute meeting via email, with a total of eight roundtables and 75 participants. A participant outreach list was collaboratively developed by the OOE and CRS teams, with input from the OOE Economic Resilience Steering Committee. Attention was paid to ensure that there was participant representation from every region of Vermont, in addition to organizations that serve the entire state.

The majority of the roundtable participants (57.3%) represented organizations that serve all of Vermont. From a regional perspective, there was representation from every region of Vermont, although not every county was explicitly represented. For example, certain organizations spanned multiple counties, including regions like the Northeast Kingdom (Caledonia, Essex, and Orleans Counties), Central Vermont (Windsor and Orange Counties), and Northwest Vermont (Franklin and Grand Isle Counties).

From a sectoral perspective, roundtable participants were classified based on the primary mission of the organization they represented. One third of participants represented organizations that worked explicitly in economic development. Most of the other participants represented community development, planning, social services, workforce development, and BIPOC service providers. Representatives from the arts, broadband, education and childcare were considered “community development”, and “entrepreneurship and finance” also included housing. A full breakdown of participants by region and sector is shown below:

Roundtable Participants by Region		Roundtable Participants by Sector	
Region	Count	Sector	Count
Addison County	1	BIPOC Service Providers	5
Bennington County	3	Economic Development	25
Central VT	4	Entrepreneurship and Finance	7
Chittenden County	7	Government	3
Franklin County	1	Planning	7
Lamoille County	2	Social Services	19
Northeast Kingdom	2	Workforce Development	9
Northwest VT	2	<b>Total</b>	<b>75</b>
Rutland County	1		
State of VT	43		
Washington County	1		
Windham County	6		
Windsor County	2		
<b>Total</b>	<b>75</b>		

## Findings

The challenges and opportunities highlighted in the roundtables will likely not surprise observers of Vermont’s economic, social and cultural landscape. Some challenges, such as the lack of adequate workforce to meet needs, the housing crisis and the lack of broadband access have been a consistent need for many years. While other topics have risen in saliency in more recent years, with an emerging consensus on childcare and universal pre-school and the elevation of social equity and racial justice as a social, cultural and economic priority. We were struck by how similar the opportunities that surfaced mirrored many of the proposition statements recently outlined by the [Vermont Council on Rural Development \(VCRD\)](#).

# DEFINING ECONOMIC SUCCESS IN VERMONT

The earlier sections of this report highlight the key challenges and opportunities Vermonters face as we navigate recovering from the community and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the stated challenges mentioned by roundtable participants had accompanying opportunities tied to them, including ideas, initiatives, and programs geared towards allowing Vermont to “bounce back” and prioritize the wellbeing of its residents, communities, infrastructure, and environment. Roundtable participants were explicitly asked about their vision for economic success, away from the tangibles of challenges and opportunities. Those responses are summarized below.

Each roundtable discussed the theme of prosperity and wellbeing as moving beyond livable wages towards “true economic security.” Roundtable participants noted that while livable wages provide a basic start for individuals and households, a true indicator of success is an individual or household’s ability to “...move beyond intergenerational poverty” and having their choice of health care options, housing, neighborhood, and jobs. One roundtable participant quipped, “It’s not just about having basic housing, it’s having housing that someone has chosen, that is integrated into their community...” Moreover, the reduced need for essential programs and services, such as the Vermont Foodbank, is another indicator of successful economy for roundtable participants. For the roundtable participants, the ability for an individual or household to “thrive” and grow beyond the basic needs and services is a key success indicator.

Participants also saw higher salary and wages as a key factor to success in Vermont. It was noted in several roundtables that, on average, Vermont salaries are lower than that of neighboring states, while the cost of living is significantly higher. The provision of “beyond basics” salaries and wages helps to attract and retain young workforce members who are looking for a both stability and opportunities. There is also a clear gap between rural-metro wage rates within the state of Vermont.

Many roundtable participants spoke to the ability for youth and young adults to access education in ways that create career pathways whether individuals pursue higher education or emerge from secondary education ready to enter the workforce. Noted one roundtable participant: "...our education system fails a lot of kids now. We need to figure out how to capture them so that everyone who completes the 0-5 and K-12 system is able to participate in the economy in any way they want to..." Roundtable participants also noted that the ability for youth and young adults to choose their career pathways and placement in the workforce based on the access to educational resources was also a key factor to success.

Those in the business sector felt that many Vermonters do not see business "as a force for good" as evidenced by the opposition of large-scale businesses. However, this opposition to growing and large-scale business also impacts support for small businesses, like "mom-and-pop" shops, the local grocer, and similar businesses through the provisions of services. Likewise, those in the non-profit sector reported the perception that they are not considered to be a significant contributor or employer within the Vermont economy. One roundtable participant noted, "We're looked at as just providing services and that's all."

Visions of economic success vary from each individual perspective. In the economic development roundtables, we were able to hear the unique perspectives while recognizing the common threads. Many participants sought after a resilient economy with a range of players, including larger businesses, a strong non-profit sector, and thriving small businesses and micro-enterprises. A resilient Vermont economy would offer employment opportunities to employees that align with their skills and interests while supporting a high quality of life for all members of the workforce. Each of these sectors would be recognized and feel appreciated for their contribution to economic vitality in Vermont. An emphasis on equity and belonging would add to the vibrancy of the state, and a cultural shift toward creating a more welcoming Vermont would assist in building resilient workforces, economies, and communities.

# KEY CHALLENGES

The following section outlines challenges and threats to economic resilience in Vermont that were raised over the course of the nine roundtable sessions. Data from sources across the state that provide some context to these challenges is also included.

## Workforce

### Workforce-employer gaps lead to high levels of job vacancies in a state where unemployment rates are historically among the lowest in the country

A repeated theme in the roundtables concerned the lack of availability of willing and able workers that align with current workforce needs. Roundtable participants discussed this deficit being fueled in part by low population density (Vermont's small scale). The basic premise that Vermont's population must grow in order to grow the economy and fill open positions and attract businesses to the state was the central challenge of workforce ... Additional factors include: lack of utilization or awareness of training and skills development opportunities, lack of counseling and education concerning existing employment opportunities available to Vermonters, or insufficient wages to incentivize workers- especially in light of associated costs like transportation costs or childcare costs that can come close to or surpass wage rates. Specific areas of greatest need for workers raised include: advanced manufacturing, cyber security, management, and entrepreneurship. From a workforce perspective, potential occupation gaps can provide insight into projected supply shortfalls by integrating forecasted occupation demand growth to the local population growth and projected educational attainment of those residents. Job openings across occupation groups for the State of Vermont is provided in figure 4:

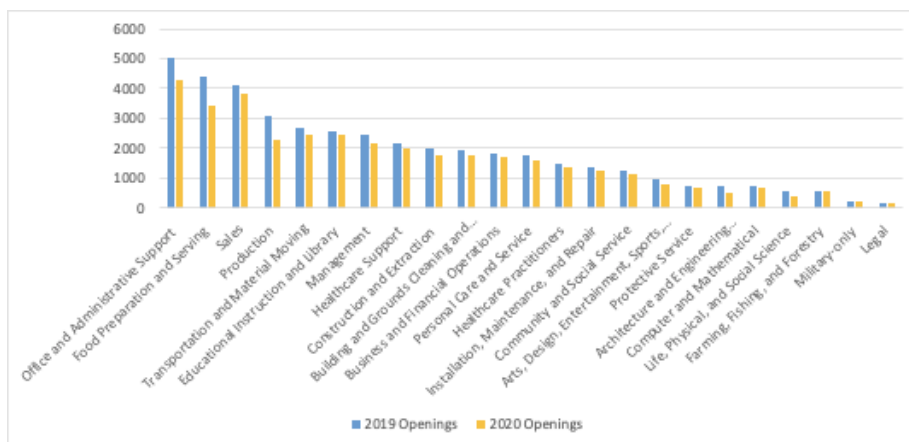


Figure 4. Vermont's Job Openings by Occupation. Retrieved from EMSI, July 21st, 2021.

The above graphic indicates that the bulk of job openings in Vermont between 2019 and 2021 have been concentrated in office and administrative support occupations, food preparation and serving, and sales, all of which saw a decline in openings during 2020, likely due to business closures from the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the industries with the largest number of job openings also align with the lowest-paying occupations in Vermont, as displayed below:

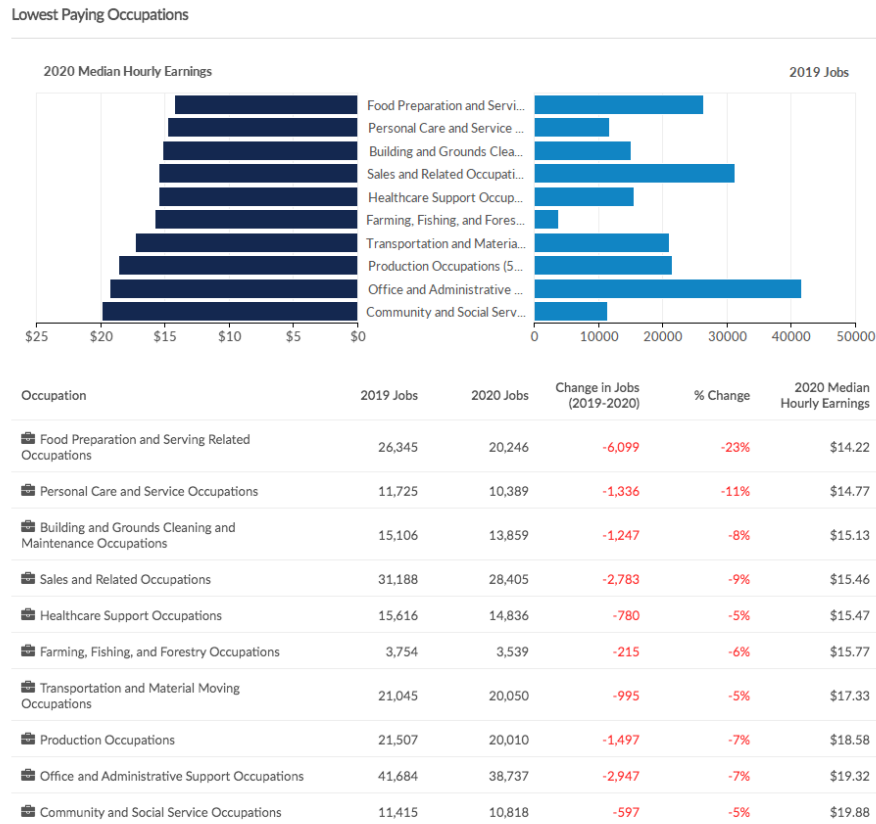


Figure 5. Lowest paying occupations in Vermont. Retrieved from EMSI, July 21st, 2021.

It is also apparent that the greatest volume of job vacancies occur in occupations with low wages. Occupation groups including food preparation and serving, sales, and office and administrative support had some of the lowest wages, and experienced a contraction in employment between 2019 and 2020, likely due to the pandemic. Anecdotal evidence from communities in Vermont indicate that there is a high demand and low supply for workers in most of these low-paying occupations.

## Equity

### Lack of social equity, cultural diversity, and inclusivity stifles economic development and innovation

Time and again, the roundtables raised the need to cultivate a culture and climate of welcoming, belonging and anti-racism across all of Vermont. It was widely recognized that the future economic resiliency of the state hinges on its ability to attract and retain a diverse workforce. In several roundtable sessions it was specifically noted that although the state of Vermont is often described as a progressive place, the persistence of systemic racism and anti-immigrant sentiments and behaviors leads to a depleted and increasingly insulated workforce, stifling creativity and innovation, and perpetuating patterns of exclusion. To put it succinctly, Vermont cannot overcome its workforce shortage without addressing systemic racism. The roundtable participants also noted that accessibility to opportunity can be a barrier to economic success for BIPOC Vermonters, noting that a lack of access to capital, or a lack of engagement around resources often occurs.

***"IT WAS WIDELY RECOGNIZED THAT THE FUTURE ECONOMIC RESILIENCY OF THE STATE HINGES ON ITS ABILITY TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN A DIVERSE WORKFORCE"***

A key issue raised was a persistent sentiment that BIPOC Vermonters do not feel welcome in their communities, even if they had spent their entire lives there. This sentiment was also emphasized in the **Report of the Executive Director of Racial Equity for Vermont**, published in January 2021. In it, Executive Director Xusana Davis noted that, "many people across Vermont hold strong biases based on whether or not someone is 'from Vermont or a 'real Vermonter'" (Davis, 2021). Additionally, both roundtable participants and the report from the Executive Director of Racial Equity noted that communities of color in Vermont experienced higher rates of COVID-19, due in part to limited infrastructure geared towards keeping communities of color safe and healthy. This is verified by the **Vermont Racial Justice Alliance data dashboard**, which indicates that Vermonters of color contracted COVID-19 at a much higher rate than their white neighbors. Data from this source has also indicated that Vermonters of Color experience significantly lower homeownership rates than white Vermonters, and higher rates of unemployment, as indicated in figure 6:

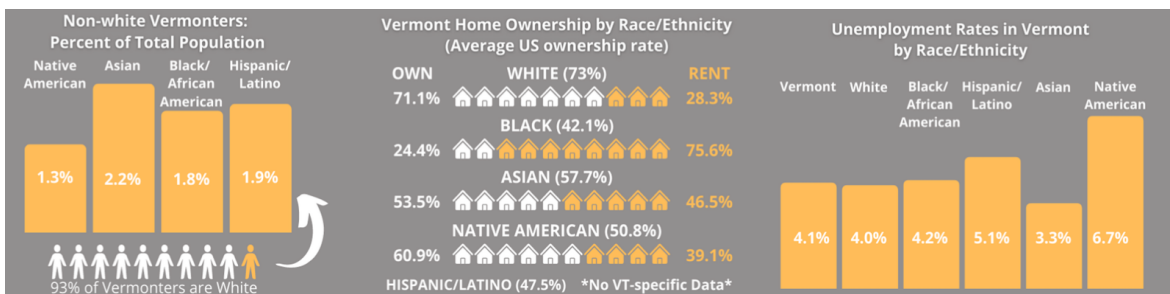


Figure 6. Vermont's race and ethnicity population breakdown, homeownership rates, and unemployment rates. Retrieved from the **Vermont Racial Justice Alliance, 2021**.

## Equity

### Women in Vermont face equity challenges in the workplace and the community

Recently, a study carried out by the National Women's Law Center found that the average Vermont woman makes 91 cents for every dollar earned by the average white, non-Hispanic man (National Women's Law Center, 2021). While this statistic indicates strong progress, due in part to Vermont's equal pay laws, there are still challenges faced by women across Vermont that can be identified through a look at the data. For example, women, and in particular women of color and women living with disabilities in Vermont, make up a disproportionate share of Vermonters who live in poverty, and those same groups experience a more pronounced gender wage gap. The wage gap can in part be attributed to gender bias, cultural expectations, discrimination, time spent out of the workforce, intimate partner violence, and sexual harassment. The gap is also evidenced by the discrepancies in wages between traditionally "male" and "female" fields, which is visualized below in figure 7 (Change the Story, 2019).

**Wages are lower in "female" fields.**  
Median annual wages in occupations where VT women and men constitute significant majorities (75% or higher) are strikingly different.

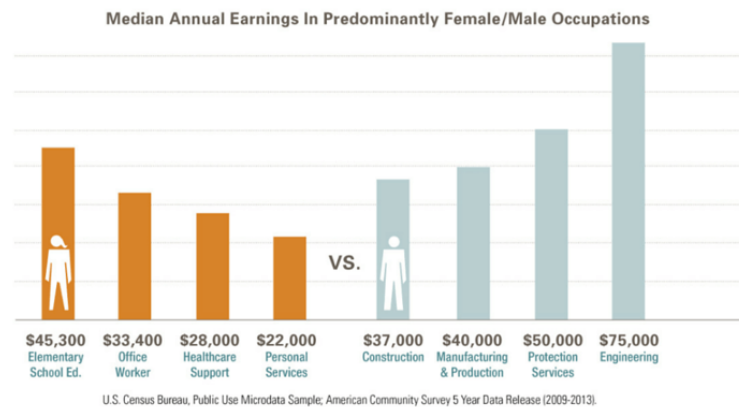


Figure 7. Median annual earnings in predominantly female/male occupations. Retrieved from **Change the Story Vermont, 2019**.

Additionally, the disproportionate impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on women in the workforce exemplifies the limits of considering pay as the only metric of equity. Women are more likely to have their work impacted by the pandemic in Vermont, and are more likely to be delivering services deemed "essential." In Vermont, 91% of nurses are women, and 82% of other health care workers are women. Women make up 82% of personal care workers, including child care professionals, and constitute 81% of the state's tipped workers (Vermont Commission on Women, 2021).



## Affordability

### Low wages cause affordability challenges

Many roundtable participants noted that the comparatively low wages and benefits cliff prevalent in Vermont lead to affordability challenges for residents. This thread re-appeared in conversations about housing, childcare, and other issues impacted by the challenge presented by low wages and high cost of living. In Vermont, most major occupation groups have a lower median annual wage as compared to the rest of the country, with minor exceptions in lower-wage occupation groups like farming, fishing, and forestry occupations and food preparation and service. High-wage occupation groups, including management and legal occupations, have significantly lower median wages as compared to the rest of the country. The full visualization of this comparison is provided in figure 8:

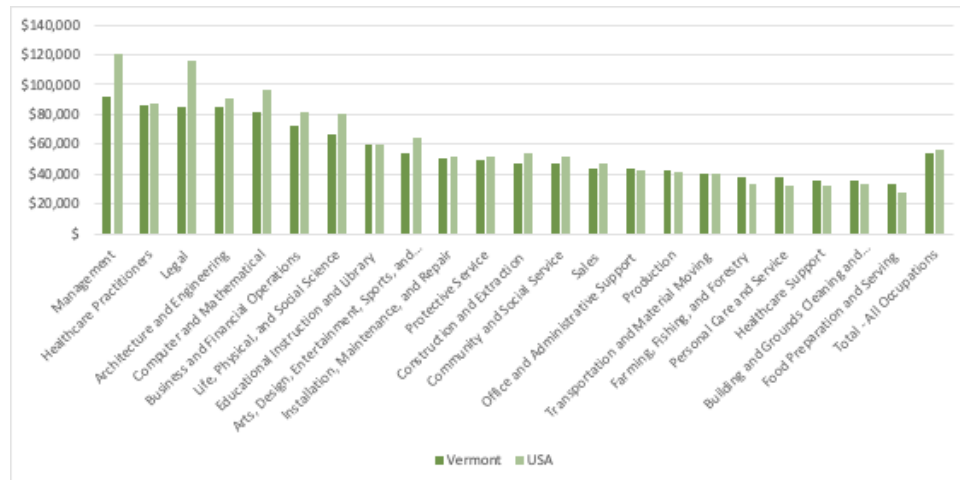


Figure 8. Vermont and USA median wages across occupation groups. Retrieved from JobsEQ, July 22nd 2021.

## Affordability

### High economic and environmental costs of heating and cooling hamper Vermont's affordability

The high costs of heating and cooling are added financial burdens for many Vermonters. This was also cited as a deterrent for new Vermonters, who do not account for the high cost of heating when they budget for a move to the state. A 2019 report from Efficiency Vermont indicated that on average, Vermonters spend 10% of their income on energy expenditures, with households in the Northeast Kingdom spending between 15 and 20% of their income on energy expenditures (Efficiency Vermont, 2019). It should also be noted that reliance on fossil fuels for heating contributes to carbon emissions and climate change, a subject that is currently the focus of the Vermont Climate Council.

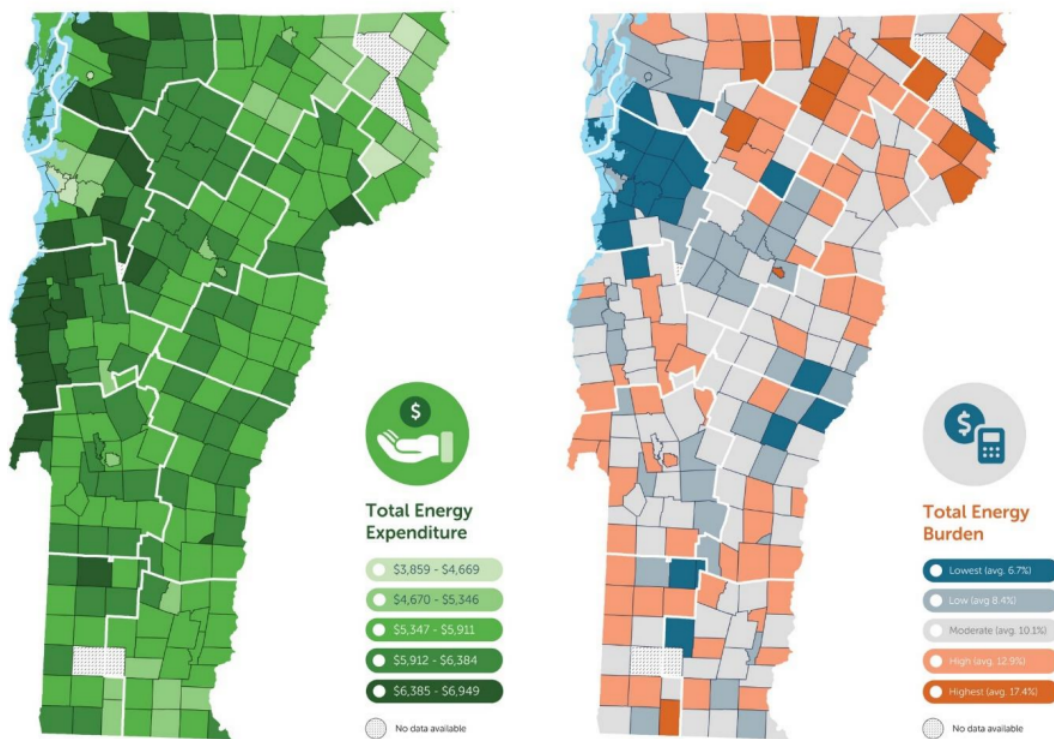


Figure 9. Total energy expenditure and total energy burden of Vermont municipalities. Retrieved from [Efficiency Vermont, 2019.](#)

## Investment

### Limited levels of public and private investment, and risk and patient capital within rural communities challenge innovation

Many roundtable participants acknowledged a lack of certain types of capital available to Vermont start-ups and those businesses looking to expand particularly in the STEM and agriculture sectors. As a small rural state, it was noted how difficult it can be to attract investors to the state. In addition, it was noted that different types of investment capital are needed, ranging from risk capital to support promising technology start-ups with ambitious exit strategies to established enterprises looking to expand their operations in a deliberate manner. Finding the right type of capital for a low margin business can be challenging, and a lack of resources to direct entrepreneurs to varied sources of funding was acknowledged. Some roundtable participants noted the low levels of investment and limited resources afforded to regional development corporations. The differences between STEM start-ups and exit strategies baked into them and the smaller scale entrepreneurial opportunities that, as one steering committee member aptly noted "start in the back of someone's pick-up truck," needs to be recognized. Thus, investment strategies need to be tailored to meet the needs of very different types of entrepreneurs. A graphic developed by Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund outlines the risk scale associated with capital investment resources in Vermont (see figure 10 below).

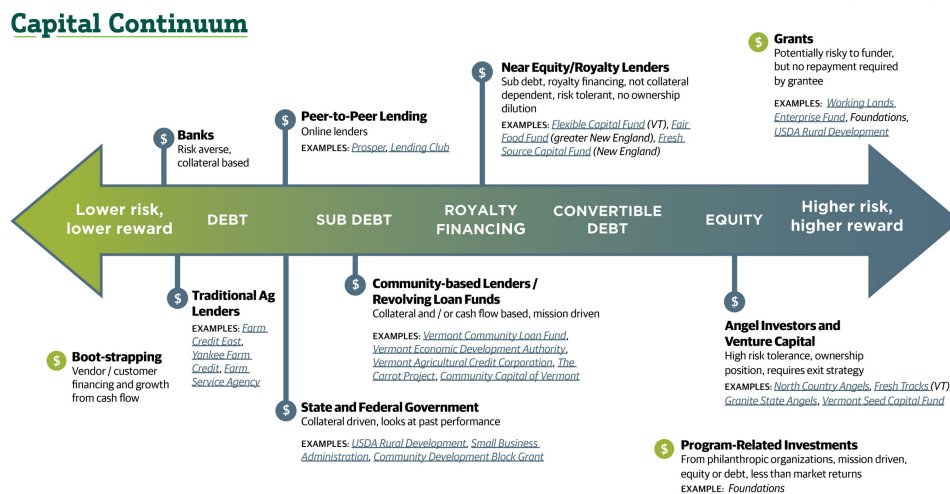


Figure 10. Capital continuum of Vermont investment opportunities. Retrieved from VSJF.

## Education

### Educational systems are not sufficiently designed for preparing Vermont's young people to find meaningful and well-paying career pathways

Several roundtables turned their attention to Vermont's public education system, and the need to better align our secondary and technical education centers around pressing workforce development needs and opportunities. Stronger integration of public education and higher education, and increased micro-credential opportunities for young people were suggested. Additionally, there was an acknowledgement of underutilized digital education opportunities, leading to persistent rural education gaps where students could not access the same offerings as their peers elsewhere in the state.

According to Advance Vermont, a statewide multi-sector partnership committed to promoting equitable educational attainment, 100% of Vermont's high-growth, high-wage jobs through 2028 will require a post-secondary credential. They have also found that 88% of people in Vermont would be willing to take advantage of education or career advancements if offered (Advance Vermont, 2021). A visualization of certification gaps across the state of Vermont are provided below in figure 11, and indicate that certifications with the greatest gaps include certified nursing assistant, licensed professional counselor, and commercial driver's license.

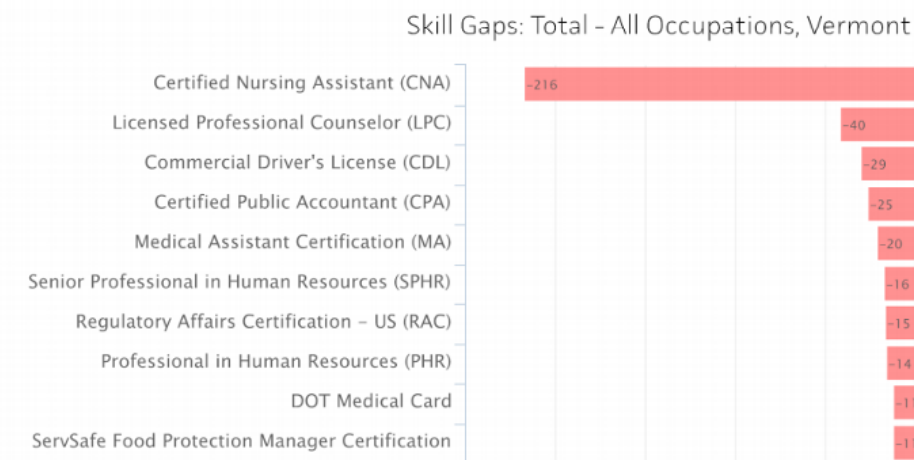


Figure 11. Selected sample of certification gaps in Vermont. Retrieved from JobsEQ, July 23rd, 2021.

It was also noted that in addition to the availability of training and education programs, the matter of accessing these opportunities was also highlighted. The low population of Vermont, again, leads to limited supplies of willing and able students. In addition, the location and frequency of trainings offered across the state may not match where the supply of available labor may actually lie. Greater coordination across programs is needed.

**AS ONE STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBER NOTED:**

***“THE IRONY IS THAT IT IS REALLY EASY TO MOVE PRODUCTS FROM ONE SIDE OF THE STATE TO THE OTHER, SO SUPPLY CHAINS ARE BIGGER THAN THE SUB-REGIONS WE OPERATE WITHIN. BUT MOVING A 17 YEAR OLD WHO WORKS 50 HOURS A WEEK FROM DOVER, VT TO RANDOLPH, VT FOR A CLASS THEY NEED FOR AN APPRENTICESHIP 2X/WEEK” IS NEXT TO IMPOSSIBLE.***

## Education

### Cost of universal early childcare and preschool places burdens on working and young parents

A prominent theme in the roundtables concerned the need for more affordable early child care and pre-schooling opportunities. The challenge was further accentuated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when families had to manage finding alternative childcare, managing work from home, and in the case of essential workers, often having to choose between childcare and employment. There was an acknowledgement that increased investment in childcare and preschool would have a positive rippling effect on economic development in Vermont, with short-term implications for the workforce, particularly for women, and long-term implications for the education and wellbeing of young Vermonters.

According to the Vermont organization Let's Grow Kids: "the US Census Bureau estimates that approximately 71.5% of Vermont children under age 6 have all available parents in the labor force, meaning that they're likely to need some form of childcare while a parent is working. This means that approximately 21,225 children under the age of 5 in Vermont are likely to need some form of child care" (Let's Grow Kids, 2021). In a report on the early childhood system's needs, Building Bright Futures notes a series of statistics that present the various challenges faced by Vermont families. For example, 36% of children under the age of 6 live in households with income below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level. A full graphical representation is provided below, in figure 12:

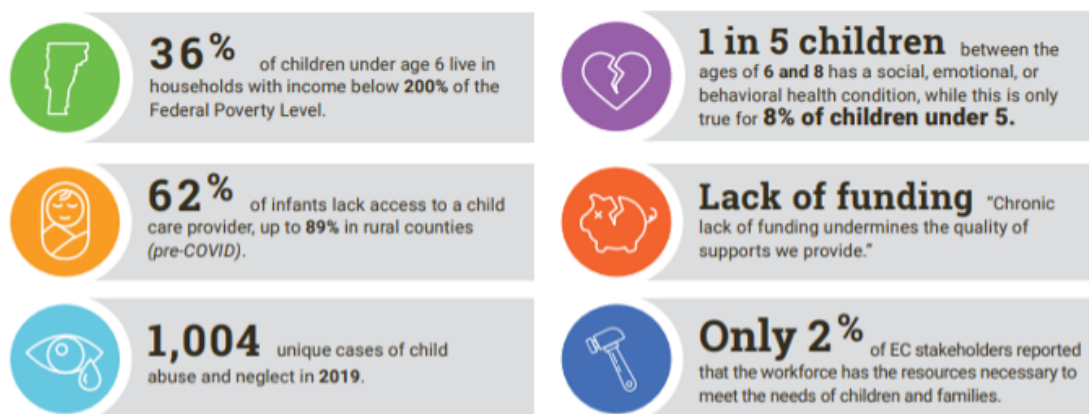


Figure 12. Early childhood system needs assessment overview. Retrieved from **Building Bright Futures, July 22nd, 2021**.

## Broadband

### Poor broadband access hinders Vermonters' abilities to work and learn from home, and limits the capacities of small rural businesses

One of the most prominent community economic development issues in Vermont is inconsistent access to broadband across the state. The lack of broadband access "to the end of every dirt road," or "last mile" was consistently cited as a key lever for enhancing long-term economic resilience for the state. With the long-term prospects for remote work and artisanal additive manufacturing, the ability of Vermonters to access high speed internet is viewed as a required feature for every corner of the state. There are also issues of equity related to broadband access, particularly for students who were not able to adequately participate in online learning due to poor broadband access.

At present, Vermont ranks 47th in the United States for state broadband access, with 79.0% terrestrial broadband coverage in the state. Additional information about Vermont's broadband coverage is provided below in figure 13:

#### Broadband Speeds

<b>87.6%</b>	of Vermonters have access to broadband 100mbps or faster.
<b>18.0%</b>	of Vermonters have access to 1 gigabit broadband.

#### Wired Coverage

<b>99.1%</b>	of Vermonters have access to wireline service
<b>23.4%</b>	of Vermonters have access to fiber-optic service
<b>82.9%</b>	of Vermonters have access to cable service
<b>97.4%</b>	of Vermonters have access to DSL service

Figure 13. Broadband speeds and wired coverage in Vermont. Retrieved from [Broadband Now, July 22nd, 2021.](#)

## Digital Economy

### The emerging “digital economy” is leaving rural communities behind

Although the emergence of innovation hubs, maker spaces, co-working spaces, and the like in towns across Vermont was identified by roundtable participants as a welcome sign of interest and growth of innovation and new technology enterprises, the ability to build entrepreneurial ecosystems within town centers across the state of Vermont requires more attention and investment capital. It was noted that there should be a special focus on Vermont's rural communities who are often left out of these opportunities due to lack of adequate infrastructure, both physical and financial. The bulk of future digital jobs will lie in one's home. To make a home a useful center of business operations requires access to high speed internet.

The relationship between a “digital economy” and remote work opportunities are linked. At present, remote jobs in Vermont are concentrated in bookkeeping, personal service managers, accountants, and software developers (JobsEQ, 2021). This likely fails to capture the full extent of at-home workers over the course of 2020.

At the Center on Rural Innovation, a Vermont-based rural development initiative, the tool “Scouting rural digital economy opportunities” allows for the mapping of opportunity zones, where low-income census tracts receive tax incentives to boost investment. A map of Vermont's opportunity zones is provided in figure 14.

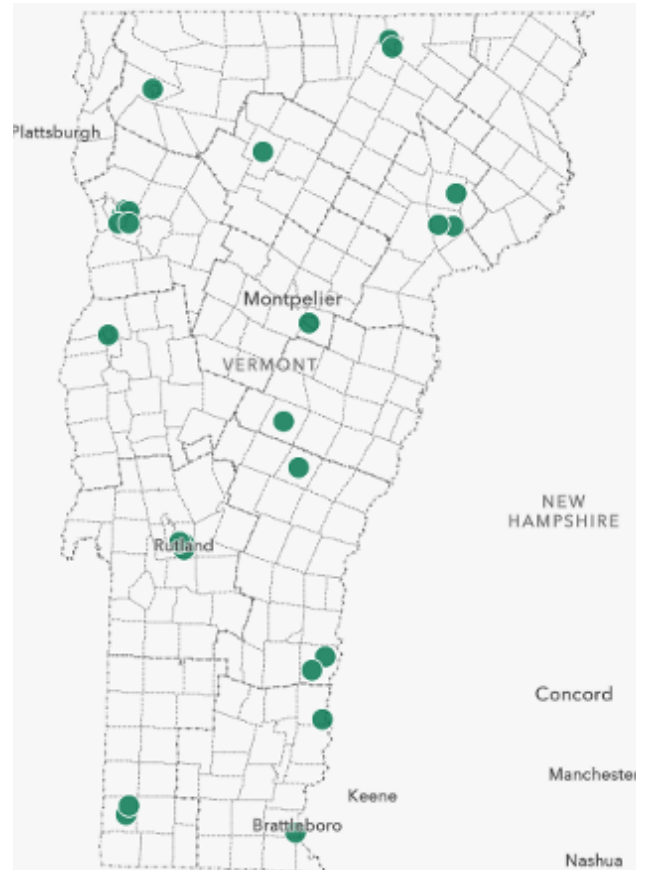


Figure 14. Vermont's opportunity zones. Retrieved from [Vermont Center for Geographic Information, July 22nd, 2021.](#)



## Housing

### Chronically poor housing availability limits population growth and creates inequitable access to affordable housing

A common conversation in the roundtables centered around the lack of affordable housing across the state of Vermont. A recently released report by the **Vermont Futures Project** displayed the connections between housing and economic growth, noting that inclusion, diversity, and equity are also key components of a thriving Vermont economy (Vermont Futures Project, 2021). Additional components of fortifying Vermont's housing market include addressing affordability, availability, and suitability, as noted by roundtable participants and verified by the Vermont Futures Project. Additionally, the **2020 Vermont Housing Needs Assessment** noted that Vermont's average annual growth of Vermont's year-round housing stock has been consistently decreasing, visualized in figure 15:

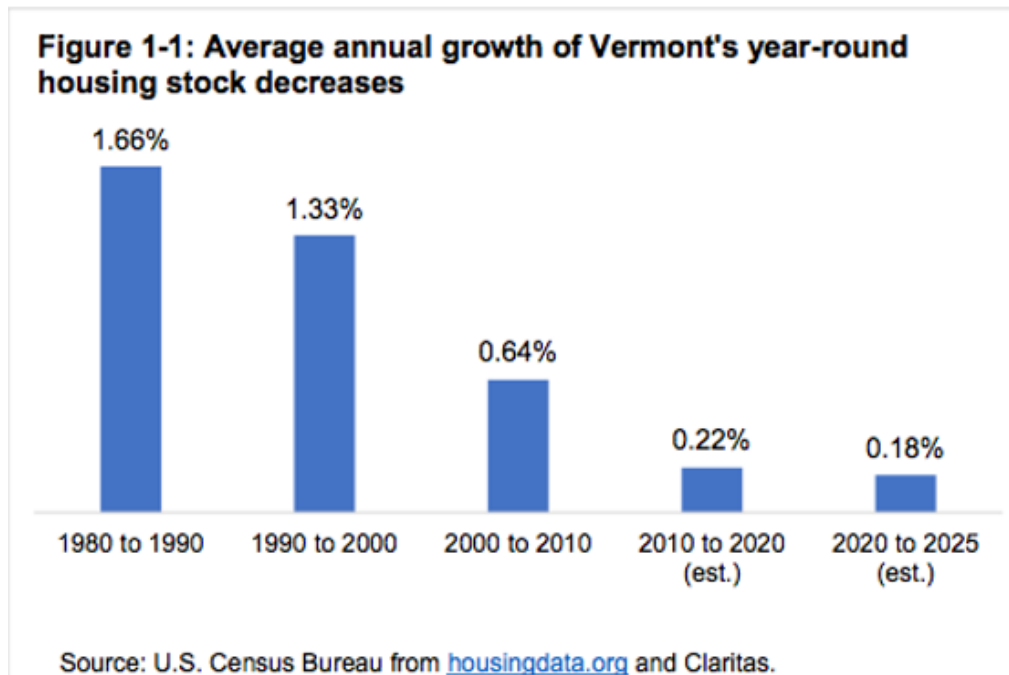


Figure 15. Average annual growth of Vermont's year-round housing stock. Retrieved from the **Vermont Housing Needs Assessment, 2020.**

## Infrastructure

### Aging infrastructure in Vermont communities and town centers serves as a limiting factor for sustainable growth

A need to invest in downtown infrastructure was cited as a critical factor in growing Vermont's workforce and economic ecosystem. Non-existent or aging water infrastructure, including wastewater treatment and sewage, drinking water treatment facilities and storm water infrastructure within Vermont's small towns were regarded as impediments to the growth of downtowns as residential and commercial centers. It was also repeatedly noted how new remote workers are seeking the amenities of downtowns — coffee shops, restaurants, arts and cultural venues and retail establishments. Stories surrounding the infrastructure challenges faced by villages across Vermont was covered by the **New York Times, whose interview with Winhall, VT** town staff acknowledged that, "officials are hard pressed to keep up with the burst of growth...the post office ran out of P.O. boxes in mid-June [2020]. Electricians and plumbers are booked until Christmas...and as far as the dump is concerned, the closest word I can tell you is 'sheer pandemonium.'"

A 2019 report from the American Society of Civil Engineers gave Vermont a "C" grade with respect to its current infrastructure. The authors of the report utilized criteria including capacity, condition, funding, future need, operation and maintenance, public safety, resilience, and innovation to assess Vermont's infrastructure. A breakdown of the grades received by different components of Vermont's infrastructure is provided in figure 16.

Figure 16. Vermont's 2019 infrastructure report card. Retrieved from **American Society of Civil Engineers, 2019.**



## Environment

### Threatened working landscapes and waterways can spoil one of Vermont's greatest virtues

Drawing on Vermont's natural capital and aesthetic appeal was also raised as a critical factor in most roundtables. Threats to the state's working landscapes and waterways included the consolidation of the dairy industry and increased fragmentation of former farmlands into five-acre lots that threaten the aesthetic appeal of the state's rolling hills and lush valleys. It was clear that economic resilience and environmental resilience cannot and should not be divorced from one another. Additionally, the appeal of Vermont's natural landscape has been widely cited as a key variable for new arrivals to the state, **according to a survey of new arrivals to Vermont carried out by the Center for Research on Vermont and the Vermont Future's Project.**

In western Vermont, the health of Lake Champlain is a key indicator of the relationship between society and nature. The Lake Champlain Basin Program publishes the "State of the Lake" report, which outlines the phosphorous loads across different portions of the lake, fed by a variety of sources including development, agriculture, and sewage overflow. A visualization of Lake Champlain's annual average phosphorous concentration is visualized below, in figure 17:

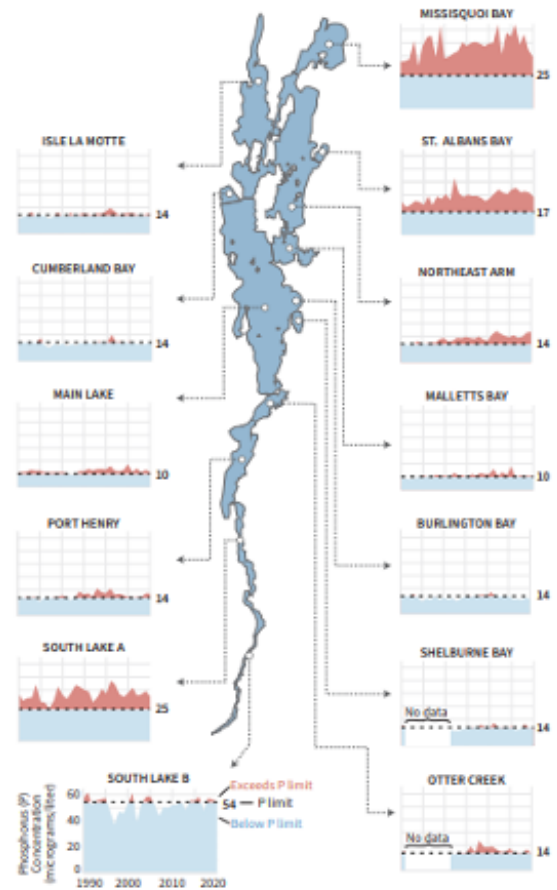


Figure 17. Annual average phosphorous concentration by lake segment. Retrieved from the **Lake Champlain Basin Program, 2021.**

## Demographics

### Vermont's aging demographic trends contribute to labor shortages and increased demands on services

Further demographic challenges have persisted in the state of Vermont for decades, namely the aging population. Interestingly, this topic was not a prominent theme of the 2021 roundtables. However, the challenges associated with a lack of adequate workforce is informed by the aging population, as entry level positions, particularly in advanced manufacturing fields, go unfilled because there are not enough young people. The needs of the elderly Vermonters are also placing stresses on the opportunities for "aging in place." Access to healthcare, social services, affordable housing and a sense of connection and community was viewed as a critical feature of successful community economic development.

In Vermont, the demographic breakdown of the state points to this alarming trend, shown in figure 18 below. The rate of Vermonters who are soon to retire is above the national average, while the number of millennials is below the national average.

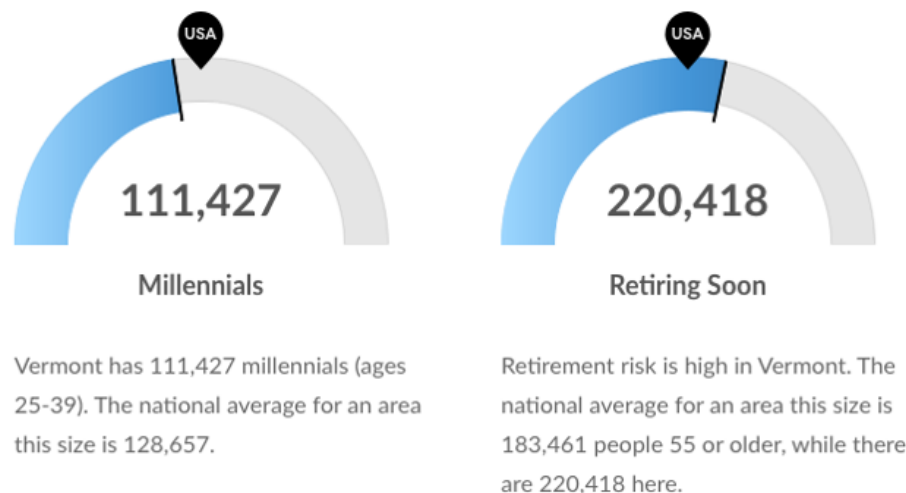


Figure 18. Vermont's millennial and retiree demographics. Retrieved from EMSI, June 4th 2021.

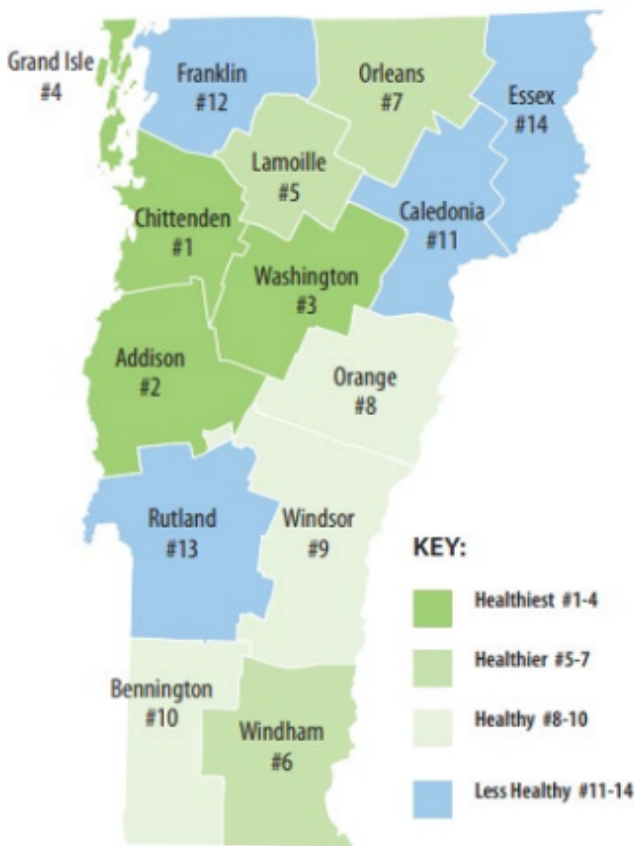
Governor Phil Scott cited Vermont's aging population as a demographic crisis in his 2020 State of the State address. Roundtable participants raised the dualistic challenge of allowing Vermont's elderly population to age in place with dignity, and the need to increase the population of younger folks to fill the roles that Vermont's aging population have vacated.

## Healthcare

### Lack of access to healthcare contributes to poor health outcomes for rural communities and low-income households in Vermont

Ensuring that Vermonters have access to high quality and affordable health care was a consistent stated “given” in most roundtables. The role of the state’s healthcare industry was viewed as a major contributor to the state’s economic status, with the overall health of communities being essential to ensure the economic resilience of the state. Continued investment in the healthcare industry of the state was viewed as a “force multiplier”- providing jobs and economic stimulus, while also improving the quality of life of Vermonters.

Participants also noted that the uptick of telehealth opportunities provided a positive opportunity for the state’s most rural and low-income residents, and that measures should be taken to retain these opportunities after the pandemic ends.



In Vermont, the less populated and most rural counties have the oldest residents and have the poorest health outcomes. The Vermont Rural Health Services Task Force generated a map of Vermont counties that indicated relative health of the communities there, showing the Northeast Kingdom and Rutland as the least healthy communities in Vermont, with rankings based on health behavior measures, clinical care measures, socio-economic factors, employment, income, family/social support, and environmental measures. This map is provided in figure 19.

Figure 19. Vermont's comparative wellbeing. Retrieved from the [Vermont Green Mountain Care Board, 2020.](#)

# Transportation

## High transportation costs and inadequate public transportation infrastructure hampers Vermont's affordability

The rural nature of Vermont brings serious challenges to the state's transportation infrastructure. Whether it be the large percentage of gravel roads, the distributed nature of Vermont housing and commercial properties, or the sheer lack of amenities in many parts of the state, Vermonters' reliance on cars and fragmented public transit systems was noted as a serious challenge. With additional concerns about the importance of reducing carbon emissions and ecological damage from inadequate road systems, participants in several roundtables recognized there is a strong need to invest in a middle 21st century rural transit system that supports resilience for Vermonters and the environment at large. Additionally, the idea to locate more housing in proximity to jobs, schools and services would cut down on transportation costs.

One of the key challenges outlined by the Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans) include the lack of available public transportation for rural communities in Vermont. The challenge of public transportation routes across the state is evidenced by the map which displays just how limited service is in Vermont.

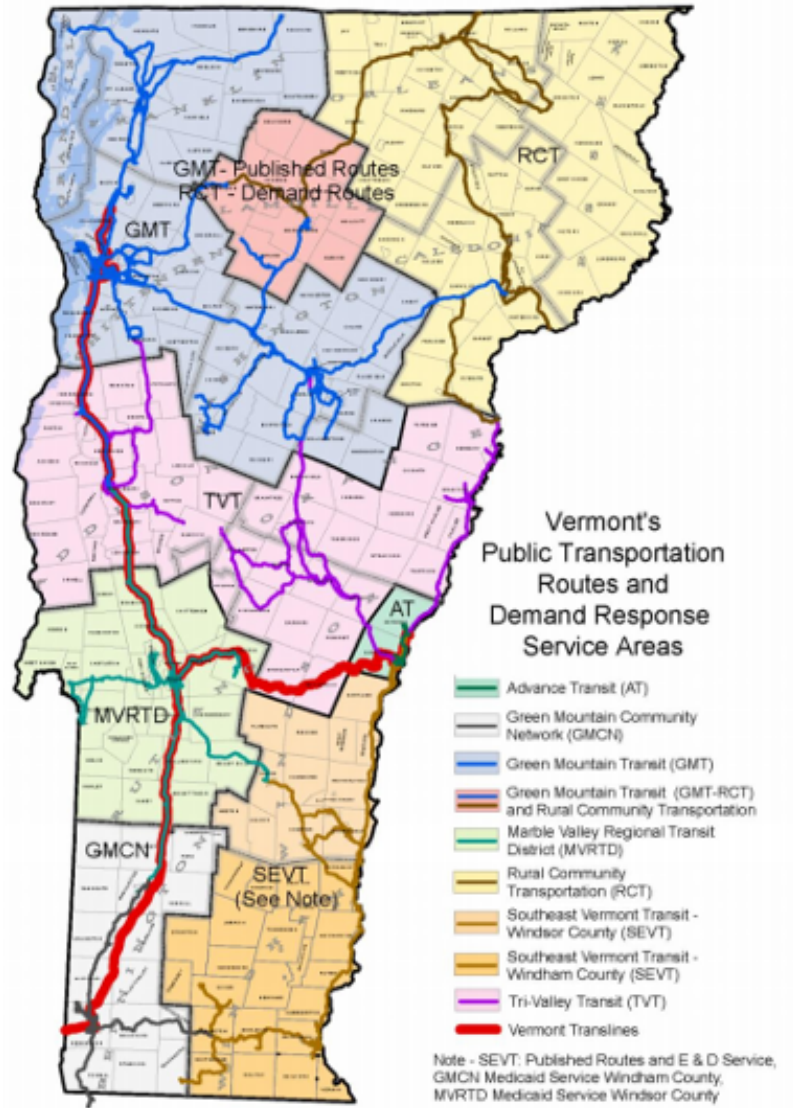


Figure 20. Public transportation routes in Vermont. Retrieved from [VTrans, 2021.](#)

## Coordination

### **Gaps in coordination and governance created to address prior conditions are not well suited to address present challenges**

A repeated theme across virtually all roundtables concerned the challenges of coordination and implementation that have historically posed challenges for the state.

Local control of zoning hampers the ability to undertaken regional planning initiatives that lead to planned, sustainable development. Under-resourced regional organizations, state agencies and nonprofit service providers make it difficult to establish sustained economic and workforce development programming. This lack of coordination extends to the high education community as well. Several roundtable participants spoke of the need for better integration across sectors.

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## KEY OPPORTUNITIES

Roundtable participants were asked to identify emerging opportunities in community economic development for Vermont. In addition to outlining participants' views on key opportunities, this section also provides important links to reports and initiatives from around Vermont that are building on these opportunities. It should be noted that many of these opportunities are already widely recognized and the subject of many initiatives currently being undertaken in Vermont. We have included some preliminary recommendations that surfaced during the roundtables and highlight initiatives and programs already underway to leverage and support achieving goals in these key opportunity areas. Some areas, such as the physical infrastructure investments, demand deeper examination and detailed plans. We note that many of these areas, including both the social and physical infrastructure, are presently receiving a great deal of attention and potential infusion of resources through federal pandemic recovery funding.

## Invest in growing a skilled workforce

Participants strongly emphasized the challenge and opportunity of re-skilling and up-skilling activities to address the dynamic needs of employers, while also providing individuals with stable and secure employment opportunities. One participant noted an opportunity to provide professional development for employees to gain solid management skillsets that would enable business owners to reallocate their energy towards higher-level thinking while managers handle the day-to-day operations. It was also noted that offering entrepreneurs the ability to connect with each other for support in confidential spaces was an important experience during the pandemic that could be further formalized. The growth of a skilled workforce begins (and then continues to rely on) the skills of the entrepreneur at the outset to create a sustainable business/environment for growth, indicating that developing entrepreneurial skills is of key importance. Finding ways to specifically support the workforce development needs of businesses with 20 or fewer employees would serve the vast majority (19,000 of 21,000 private firms) of businesses located within the state.

Additionally, providing technical assistance to business owners for transition planning could allow for strategic thinking for growth of employee-owned or cooperatively-owned enterprises. Increasing access to information regarding legal requirements and financial resources was identified as a specific opportunity to support the creation of BIPOC-owned businesses within the state. We must empower the public sector to be responsive to the needs of businesses with more flexibility, mobility, innovation, and trust. A final component of growing a skilled workforce as recommended by roundtable participants and partners is a focus on equity for women in the workplace, and providing spaces where women are welcome and treated as equals.

Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, there is a clear and compelling need to grow the size of the Vermont population. As one roundtable participant noted, "all of the available training in the world will not solve our workforce crisis if we have limited supplies of willing and able workers." Innovation and effective programs designed to incentivize relocation to the state of Vermont are needed, but they need to be evaluated and assessed for effectiveness.



## Invest in growing a skilled workforce

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- DEVELOP JOB ATTRACTION PROGRAMS THAT INCLUDE ATTRACTING WORKERS IN LOWER WAGE POSITIONS, TYING INCENTIVE PROGRAMS TO TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES.
- ENHANCE COORDINATION BETWEEN WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS AND INSTITUTIONS, SHARED RESOURCING, AND PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS.
- CREATE THE RIGHT MIX OF PLACE-BASED, FACE-TO-FACE LEARNING EXPERIENCES, HANDS-ON LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES, AND CREATIVE AND EFFECTIVE ONLINE OFFERINGS
- UNDERTAKE "ECONOMIC GARDENING" AND SUPPORTING TARGETED RECRUITMENT PROGRAMS
- DEVELOP ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS TO CREATE SUSTAINABLE BUSINESSES AND AN ENVIRONMENT FOR GROWTH

### CURRENT INITIATIVES AND PROGRAMS:

- CONTINUING EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AT VERMONT TECH
- VERMONT TALENT PIPELINE MANAGEMENT
- VERMONT WORKS FOR WOMEN
- ADVANCE VERMONT
- CHANGE THE STORY VT
- VERMONT SMALL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT CENTER
- COMMON GOOD VT
- WORKING BRIDGES

## Focus on racial equity and building inclusion and belonging in communities

In every roundtable, the issue of race, equity, inclusion, and belonging arose as a key element of community economic development in Vermont. In an effort to amplify and center the voices of Vermont's communities of color, one roundtable meeting was held specifically for BIPOC service providers and BIPOC leaders in Vermont. A key challenge raised that BIPOC Vermonters didn't feel welcome in their communities, even if they had spent their entire lives in the state. This sentiment was also emphasized in the Report of the Executive Director of Racial Equity for Vermont, published in January 2021. In it, Executive Director Xusana Davis noted that, "many people across Vermont hold strong biases based on whether or not someone is 'from Vermont or a 'real Vermonter'" (Davis, 2021). Opportunities to encourage and support community economic development amongst Vermont's communities of color include revising housing and land use policies to ensure equitable distribution of ecological assets and burdens, reducing the number and distribution of food deserts and food swamps, and reducing unnecessary law enforcement contacts, particularly in overpoliced communities whose crime data doesn't warrant such presence (David, 2021). The roundtable participants also noted that accessibility to opportunity and capital can be a barrier to economic success for BIPOC residents of Vermont, noting that a lack of access to capital, or a lack of engagement around resources often occurs. A recent poll of Vermonters conducted by the UVM Center for Rural Studies found that 52% saw prioritizing "policies and programs addressing racial inequity in Vermont" as important or very important, while 26% of Vermonters polled deemed this objective unimportant or very unimportant.

## Focus on racial equity and building inclusion and belonging in communities

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- COMMIT TO CREATING WELCOMING, INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES THROUGH PROGRAMMING, TRAININGS AND INCENTIVES
- ADVANCE OPPORTUNITIES TO COMPENSATE BIPOC SERVICE PROVIDERS FOR THEIR INSIGHTS INTO POLICY AND PROGRAMMING
- OFFER MORE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN TRAINING PERTAINING TO IMPLICIT BIAS AND CULTURAL COMPETENCY
- SUPPORT PROGRAMMING AIMED AT ADVANCING OPPORTUNITIES FOR BIPOC ENTREPRENEURS AND LEADERS

### CURRENT INITIATIVES AND PROGRAMS:

- BURLINGTON RACIAL EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND BELONGING OFFICE
- THE ROOT SOCIAL JUSTICE CENTER
- STATE OF VERMONT RACIAL EQUITY ADVISORY PANEL
- VERMONT PROFESSIONALS OF COLOR NETWORK
- VERMONT RACIAL JUSTICE ALLIANCE
- VERMONT WELCOME WAGON PROJECT

## Build investments for entrepreneurial enterprises

The ability to leverage the growth in innovation hubs, enterprise accelerators, maker spaces and co-working spaces that are emerging across the state was viewed as a critical opportunity to build upon. Growing a network of such facilities, fueling them with data, expertise and capital, and expanding their scope to include emerging technology, the arts and culture, and other small business enterprises including downtown hardware stores and food markets, restaurants, arts centers, coffee shops, and retail outlets were suggested in several roundtables.

Additionally, increased investment in the state's entrepreneurial ecosystem was cited as an important component of Vermont's community economic development. There is currently state technical assistance administered through multiple avenues, including the Vermont Small Business Development Center. Increasing access to public capital through loans and grants, and private capital through risk and patient capital is essential to fortifying the economy of Vermont, and developing healthy, fruitful communities around the state. Statewide and regional approaches to capital administration are needed to equitably distribute resources.

## Build investments for entrepreneurial enterprises

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- SUPPORT THE GROWTH OF CO-WORKING SPACES, ARTS & CULTURE AND AMENITIES INFRASTRUCTURE, AND RURAL INNOVATION HUBS.
- CONSIDER THE ROLE THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY CAN PLAY IN KEEPING INVESTMENTS LOCAL AND TIED TO LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT.
- SUPPORT CREATIVE REIMAGINING OF DOWNTOWN SPACES.
- DEVELOP INNOVATIVE CAPITAL INVESTMENT FUNDING THAT REWARDS RISK-TAKING, SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT, AND PATIENT CULTIVATION OF PRIVATE AND NONPROFIT ENTERPRISE.
- ESTABLISH STATEWIDE "INNOVATIONS" AWARDS.

### CURRENT INITIATIVES AND PROGRAMS:

- CENTER FOR AN AGRICULTURAL ECONOMY
- CREATE IN VERMONT COWORKING SPACES
- VERMONT CENTER FOR EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES
- VERMONT COMMUNITY FOUNDATION
- VERMONT COMMUNITY LOAN FUND
- VERMONT CREATIVE NETWORK
- VERMONT GENERATOR
- VERMONT SMALL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT CENTER

## Promote and sustain a remote workforce while maintaining thriving town centers

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many Vermonters to work-from-home for a certain length of time while also enabling others seeking refuge from places outside of the state to work remotely for their employers. While this experience was required in response to public health measures, it also highlighted the opportunity for employers and employees alike to experiment with remote working arrangements. Building from this pandemic experience going forward, Vermont businesses could offer their employees flexibility with work-from-home arrangements using a hybrid approach that is mutually beneficial for both parties. Likewise, the pandemic has enabled newcomers to the state to retain employment with businesses in other states while living in Vermont. One participant noted, "to the extent that remote work will be more acceptable post-pandemic, Vermont could be and remain more attractive to those who are able to bring their job with them. New arrivals could be a source of community development investment." Leveraging this experience resulting from COVID-19 to invest in the necessary infrastructure to support a range of remote work is a key opportunity for community economic development stakeholders.

Shifts in real estate uses, particularly downtown retail enterprises and commercial offices that could result from shifting workplace dynamics, could lead to the "hollowing out" of town centers, leading to higher vacancies rates and lost small businesses and amenities.

Some key challenges in this arena, though, include infrastructure and community challenges to investing in these new arrivals. For example, a lack of social equity, cultural diversity, and community standard of inclusivity acts as a barrier to attracting and retaining new arrivals. Many initiatives geared towards attracting new people are centered around Chittenden County, which could be mediated by the advent of statewide language access, including translation and interpretation services, to make information more accessible.

## Promote and sustain a remote workforce while maintaining thriving town centers

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- EXPAND BROADBAND ACCESS ACROSS THE STATE.
- GROW THE STATE POPULATION.
- ADDRESS AGING INFRASTRUCTURE THROUGH GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE SOLUTIONS TO ADD TO THE SUSTAINABILITY AND LIVABILITY OF SMALLER COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE STATE.
- INVEST IN INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS THAT ATTRACT AND WELCOME NEW VERMONTERS AND HELP THEM INTEGRATE INTO THEIR NEW COMMUNITIES.
- SUPPORT ONGOING WORK-FROM-HOME PROTOCOLS AMONG BUSINESSES.

### CURRENT INITIATIVES AND PROGRAMS:

- VERMONT ROOTS MIGRATION
- VERMONT WELCOME WAGON PROGRAM

## Leverage Vermont's quality of life as a critical feature in jobs attraction

The "Vermont lifestyle" is increasingly attractive given the conditions of the pandemic. A recent survey of individuals and families "sheltering in place" in Vermont due to COVID-19 showed that of 226 survey results, one-third of respondents indicated that they were "likely" or "very likely" to remain in Vermont after the pandemic. Key factors that encouraged remaining in Vermont included nature and outdoor access, quality of life, an ongoing ability to work remotely, and COVID-19 safety. Barriers to remaining in Vermont included winter weather, lack of affordable housing, lack of economic opportunity and jobs, high cost of living, lack of diversity, poor internet quality, and a need to return to their previous homes to return to work and school in-person (Center for Research on Vermont, 2020).

Similar sentiments were heard during the roundtable meetings. Participants indicated that there was strength in Vermont's outdoor recreation opportunities, and that there was an opportunity to draw new residents to rural communities by emphasizing the high quality of life accompanied by proximity to nature. Some roundtable participants encouraged continued diversification within the sector, including framing outdoor recreation as a public health strategy.



## Leverage Vermont's quality of life as a critical feature in jobs attraction

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- LEVERAGE SCIENCE AND DATA TO INFORM DECISION MAKING, PRIORITIZING INVESTMENTS AND LAND USE POLICIES.
- REIMAGINE THE WAY VERMONT COMMUNITIES USE THEIR DOWNTOWN SPACES.
- ENGAGE VERMONTERS OF ALL AGES IN CIVIL SOCIETY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT.
- INVEST IN VERMONT'S OUTDOOR RECREATION INDUSTRY AND OUTDOOR SPACES.
- INNOVATIVE USES OF TECHNOLOGY AND SENSORS CAN BE USED TO SUPPORT BEST WATER QUALITY AND LAND USE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES.
- RE-ENVISION THE USE OF PUBLIC SPACES TO FOSTER GREATER SENSE OF COMMUNITY AND PLACE.
- FOCUS ON CONCENTRATED DEVELOPMENT AND COMPACT SETTLEMENT PROJECTS.
- REPURPOSE BUILT SPACES FOR NEW USES.
- INVEST IN THE CREATIVE ECONOMY TO ATTRACT YOUNG PEOPLE, CULTURAL DIVERSITY.

### CURRENT INITIATIVES AND PROGRAMS:

- VERMONT OUTDOOR BUSINESS ASSOCIATION
- VERMONT PROPOSITION
- VERMONT WORKING LANDSCAPE PARTNERSHIP

## Appreciate the role of the non-profit sector as a critical feature of the Vermont economy

Vermont has one of the highest number of non-profits per capita in the country. The state's non-profit sector is an important provider of social services and civic infrastructure while also providing meaningful employment for a large number of Vermonters. This sector also serves as incubator of social innovation and entrepreneurship. The non-profit community also acts as a foundation for the arts and the creative economy of Vermont, which are vital arteries of the tourism industry, in addition to a significant contributor to Vermont's high quality of life.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- INVEST IN NON-PROFIT EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING FOR CURRENT AND FUTURE ORGANIZATIONS ACROSS THE STATE OF VERMONT.
- CONSIDER ALTERNATIVE METRICS TO MEASURE THE IMPACT OF NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS, SUCH AS COMMUNITY OR INDIVIDUAL IMPACT.
- COMMUNICATE THE VARIED CONTRIBUTIONS OF VERMONT'S NON-PROFIT SECTOR.

### CURRENT INITIATIVES AND PROGRAMS:

- COMMON GOOD VERMONT
- UNITED WAYS OF VERMONT
- UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT MASTERS IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION
- VERMONT CREATIVE NETWORK
- COMMON GOOD VERMONT DATA
- NORWICH UNIVERSITY MASTERS IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

## Invest in education, childcare, and preschool

The economic repercussions of inadequate childcare and access to education were a prominent theme amongst roundtable participants. From a challenge perspective, many roundtable participants indicated that Vermont's educational system fails a significant number of young people. One roundtable participant asked: "How do we keep these students in Vermont?" Addressing the needs of Vermont's younger population is indelibly linked to workforce development, and can lead to better understanding the interests and capacities of students across Vermont. Ensuring that young Vermonters have access to quality educational offerings from preschool through high school, and into any post-secondary paths they may wish to pursue. Investing in a variety of pathways to productive, meaningful employment that align with young Vermonters interests has the capacity to positively impact many facets of society in the state.

Additionally, participants highlighted the need for affordable childcare, as it is fundamental to building upon other issues, particularly for women and people of color. Access to available, affordable childcare stimulates the economy and provides a long-term return on investment, and serves as the foundation for Vermont's future. Attracting new people and businesses to Vermont is contingent upon access to childcare and education.

Roundtable respondents from across sectors agreed that more needs to be done to understand and appreciate the role that educational institutions like our public schools, technical centers, colleges and universities play in the economic development of the state. It is critical to understand their roles as engines of workforce development and, for higher education, attractors of talent to the state, as well as drivers of innovation and economic development in their own right.

## Invest in education, childcare, and preschool

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF INNOVATIVE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMING GEARED AT ASSISTING HIGH-SCHOOL AGED STUDENTS ENTERING THE WORKFORCE.
- ENCOURAGE THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN EDUCATIONAL WORKFORCE. DEVELOPMENT CONSORTIUM INVOLVING HIGHER EDUCATION, SECONDARY EDUCATION AND TECHNICAL CENTERS.
- SUPPORT PROGRAMMING THAT CELEBRATES STUDENTS ENTREPRENEURIAL MINDSETS.
- AMPLIFY THE CONNECTION BETWEEN CHILDCARE AND WORKFORCE AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT.
- INVEST IN LEGISLATION AND PROGRAMMING THAT SUPPORTS INCREASED ACCESS TO CHILD CARE AND PRESCHOOL.
- USE ONLINE, INTERNSHIP AND DUAL ENROLLMENT STRATEGIES TO EXPAND EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS.
- SUPPORT EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING FOR CHILDCARE CENTERS TO STRENGTHEN THEIR BUSINESS MODELS, EXEMPLIFIED BY THE PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN THE VERMONT SMALL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT CENTER AND LET'S GROW KIDS.

### CURRENT INITIATIVES AND PROGRAMS:

- LET'S GROW KIDS
- BUILDING BRIGHT FUTURES
- ADVANCE VERMONT
- VERMONT SMALL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT CENTER

## Invest in broadband, housing, transportation, water, and energy infrastructure

A continued challenge for Vermont communities is poor availability, quality, and cost of housing and commercial properties. New investment mechanisms for concentrated, mixed-use development, and thoughtfully designed downtowns and neighborhoods could mediate this issue. One roundtable participant raised the issue of the hidden costs of relocating to Vermont, which includes high utility payments during the winter season. A recently released report by the Vermont Futures Project displayed the connections between housing and economic growth, noting that inclusion, diversity, and equity are also key components of a thriving Vermont economy.

Closely linked to housing is public transportation, which has limited availability in Vermont's more populous areas, and is very limited in the rural parts of the state. Limited public transportation options present critical barriers to some of Vermont's most vulnerable residents, including older adults and low income, and has implications for childcare and education, healthcare, and environmental degradation. Some potential opportunities in this space include developing rural public transit solutions. An interesting example of experimentation in this space is the UVM's Transportation Research Center. A project team is designing a pilot to purchase and deploy small electric buses to serve 1-2 of Vermont's rural school systems and their surrounding communities (UVM Transportation Research Center, 2021).

## Invest in broadband, housing, transportation, water, and energy infrastructure

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- INVEST IN LAST MILE BROADBAND SOLUTIONS, INCLUDING EXPANSION OF ONLINE SERVICES AND FLEXIBLE WORKPLACE INFRASTRUCTURE.
- DEVELOP RURAL, GREEN RENEWABLE ENERGY OPPORTUNITIES.
- EXPLORE RURAL PUBLIC TRANSIT SOLUTIONS, INCLUDING MICRO TRANSIT, "RURAL UBER", AND AUTONOMOUS VEHICLES.
- FOCUS ON CONCENTRATED DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS.

### CURRENT INITIATIVES AND PROGRAMS:

- ENERGY CO-OP OF VERMONT
- UVM TRANSPORTATION RESEARCH CENTER
- CONSERVATION BOARD'S STATEMENT ON NATURAL CAPITAL AND THE ECONOMY

## Pursue a collective impact approach to economic and workforce development, rooted in social equity

The networks of service providers working across the state to support economic development, public financing, arts and culture, social service delivery, planning, education, and workforce development provide an opportunity to build a shared vision of economic success. The interconnectedness of economic and community life in Vermont requires a new approach to considering developmental paths forward that “lifts all boats” and positively impacts the lives and well-being of all Vermonters, with a focus on our most marginalized communities.

Roundtable participants noted that there can be a tendency to operate in “issue-bound” silos, that can lead to pitting one need against another. By applying a community economic development lens, it is believed that this more integrated approach to economic and workforce development for the state may be undertaken. The “collective impact” approach to network development and management may be taken, as evidenced by figure 21. The successes of the Vermont Farm-to-Plate Network and the Vermont Small Business Development Centers to utilize a collective impact approach may be undertaken.

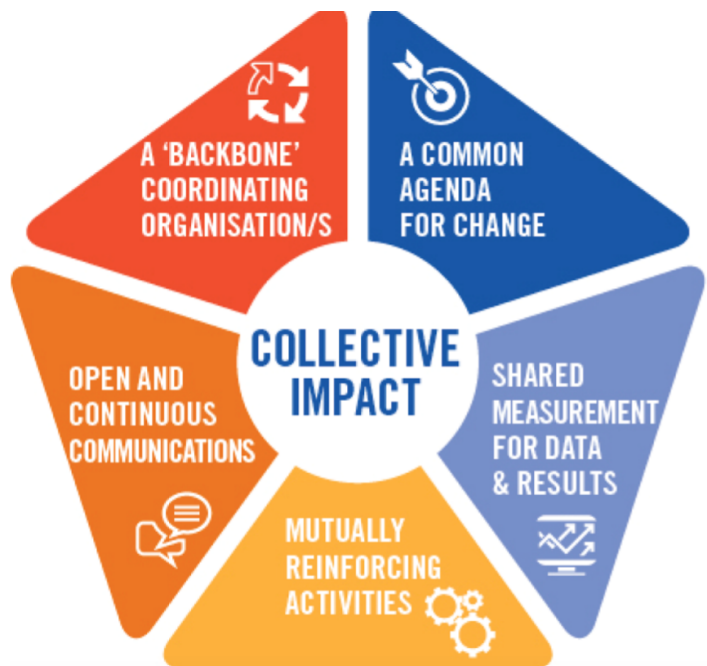


Figure 21. Collective impact framework. Retrieved from [USC Student Affairs, 2018.](#)

## Pursue a collective impact approach to economic and workforce development, rooted in social equity

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- UNDERTAKE A COLLECTIVE IMPACT APPROACH TO CROSS SECTOR/CROSS ISSUE AREA COORDINATION.
- CREATE AN INVENTORY OF EXISTING PROGRAMS AND ORGANIZATIONS ACROSS THE STATE, IDENTIFY GAPS IN SERVICE DELIVERY AND COORDINATED ACTION.
- BUILD UP THE STATE'S DATA INFRASTRUCTURE TO PROVIDE TIMELY AND ACCURATE DATA TO INFORM PROGRAM AND PROJECT DEVELOPMENT AND INITIATIVES.
- GENERATE A SET OF STATEWIDE AND REGIONALLY SPECIFIC BENCHMARK DATA INDICATORS TO TRACK PROGRESS OVER TIME.

### CURRENT INITIATIVES AND PROGRAMS:

- UVM EXTENSION
- UVM OFFICE OF ENGAGEMENT
- VERMONT SOCIAL EQUITY CAUCUS
- UNITED WAY OF NORTHWEST VERMONT



# DATA AND METRIC NEEDS

Data, information and knowledge products will be needed to address the challenges and opportunities surfaced by the roundtable participations. Roundtable participants were asked to describe the “data needs” that, when addressed, would help advance the work of community economic development in the state of Vermont. Responses generally fell into two categories: (1) identification of specific “indicators of success” for which data may or may not exist or be readily accessible, and (2) identification of data infrastructure, systems and processes to be considered or to be improved upon.

## Indicators of Success

Roundtable participants were asked to describe what the indicators of success are for Vermont's community economic development. These indicators varied across subject areas and included themes relating to affordability and cost of living, economic diversity & resiliency, equity, local investments & infrastructure and community & population wellbeing.

## AFFORDABILITY METRICS

Roundtable participants most often mentioned wanting data to better quantify aspects of affordability in Vermont. This theme focused both on the costs of doing business, and costs-of-living that directly impact workforce supply. Roundtable participants identified a desire for data that could provide accurate comparative business cost metrics, for example, those related to obtaining and heating physical space in Vermont. Most responses, however, were focused on outcome metrics related to affordability for Vermont's population and workforce. Vermont businesses understand that their success is dependent upon a workforce population that has access to affordable housing, transportation, childcare and other necessary infrastructure and services. Better awareness and tracking of what is considered a livable wage in Vermont is needed to help industries consider how they may attract and retain workers.

## WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT METRICS

Another prominent community economic development indicator of success brought forth through the roundtables included metrics pertaining to workforce development focused on workforce skills, employment trajectories and productivity. Vermont's relatively small scale means that opportunities for workforce skills development and advancement may require particular attention beyond that of purely market-driven services found in larger population centers. Workforce metrics need to be stated in terms of regional trends.

## METRICS OF WELL-BEING

A third metrics framework surfaced by roundtable participants pertained to indicators of health and well-being, with particular attention paid to generational disparities and childhood poverty. Many participants cited indices that measured happiness and genuine progress as an effective model for Vermont. Similar research has been carried out by CRS.

## INVESTMENT METRICS

It was widely noted that data pertaining to the volume and location of outside investments into the state are lacking. Vermont does have many private and public investment funds, but these investments are not tracked at aggregated levels. Understanding how and where investments are being made can better track gaps in funding and re-direction of investments into areas of emerging need and opportunity. Roundtable participants also described measurements of success that quantify investments in businesses and infrastructure, with emphasis on understanding the impacts through Return on Investment analyses for these.

## COMMUNITY RESILIENCE METRICS

The final suite of metrics mentioned during the roundtables pertained to the need to develop cross sector/scale/issue indicators of community resilience that cross the other metrics frameworks and provide for the anticipation of future shocks and hazards. These metrics include indicators of social, cultural and environmental capital and can place emphasis on the adequacy of critical infrastructure.

Numerous population demographic indicators are being tracked through the Vermont Futures Project Dashboard, which provides a comprehensive approach to monitoring. In addition to the data available through this tool, roundtable participants identified numerous other indicators to be collected or communicated for their work. These include:

- Inventory of outdoor recreation infrastructure
- Food insecurity metrics
- Rental and housing and commercial property vacancies
- Fossil fuel consumption levels for business and home

## Data Infrastructure

Roundtable participants across several sessions noted that there is limited local capacity for tracking, modeling and facilitating the use of the broad range of indicators deemed useful to their work. The services provided by the State Agencies of Commerce and Community Development and the Department of Labor were nearly universally applauded, but were viewed as not sufficient enough to respond to the daily, localized data needs of economic developers and planners across sectors and regions in the State.

Responses relating to data analyses, systems and processes ranged across subject areas. They included stated desires for better data infrastructure for collecting data, storing and adding value to data, and communicating and visualizing information in readily accessible ways. In addition, more in-depth economic impact assessments of particular industries and sectors and Return on Investment analyses to help decision-makers better quantify the outcomes of economic development investments is desired.

Roundtable comments relating to data infrastructure included critiques of existing systems considered to be antiquated and inadequate such as the state's aging patchwork of disconnected data collection systems and the subsequently inconsistent accessibility to data. Data communication comments centered around increasing access to more granular (region, industry and/or occupation specific) and longitudinal data utilizing new tools like public-facing dashboards and data analytics programs like EMSI/Burning Glass and Jobs EQ.

***“THE STATE OF VERMONT NEEDS A 21ST CENTURY IT SYSTEM” -ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANT***

# TOWARD A COLLECTIVE ACTION APPROACH TO COMMUNITY ECONOMIC RESILIENCY

We recommend that the findings of this analysis be used to support a systems-thinking approach to the challenges and opportunities facing Vermont. Our roundtable participants noted that more could be done to communicate, track and coordinate to support a cross-sector, multi-scalar approach to community economic development. The mobilization of networks of stakeholders across sectors and scales have been proven to be quite effective at advancing coordinated actions. Vermont has found success using a “collective impact” approach to intentional network cultivation and management. These include: **The Vermont Farm to Plate Network**; **the Energy Action Network**; etc.

The five facets of a successful collective impact initiative include: cultivating flows of regular communication between actors; a common agenda with mutually reinforcing benefits; shared definitions of success (anchored by tracking performance metrics); some form of back-bone infrastructure; and, likely the most important for success- mutually reinforcing activities (Kania and Kramer, 2011).

Below we offer up some action steps that can be taken to support a collective impact approach to community economic development for a post-Covid Vermont.

## CULTIVATING COMMUNICATION FLOWS

### **Communications Hub of Information Regarding the Challenges and Opportunities Facing Vermont**

Communication of both the challenges and the opportunities that lie before us using a community development lens, e.g. one that takes a comprehensive approach to proactive efforts to support economic and workforce development is needed. A consistent presence on the web tracking these and other opportunity areas that emerge would be an initial step in forming such a cross-sector and multi-scale communications hub. Alignment with existing communications platforms, like the Vermont Futures Project can be considered.

## COMMON AGENDAS

### **Collect and Develop Common Cross Sector and Multi-Scale Agendas**

We found room for common agendas in every roundtable. We may even go as far as to assert that there was a “Vermont consensus” to emerge around specific action items. Common agendas are actively being pursued already and may be cited in the communication hub discussed above. More common agendas may be formed through intentional planning processes involving diverse sets of stakeholders. Frameworks for common agendas that host Vermont-wide initiatives already exist, including VCRD’s Vermont propositions; DoLs workforce development vision document; and Vermont Future’s Project’s dashboard and reporting framework.

## SHARED METRICS

### **Develop a Set of Performance Measures to Track and Triangulate—Generated for State, Regional and Local Scales**

A range of evaluative data is available to aid in setting goals, tracking change over time, and developing systems of shared accountability. Some of the characteristics of these metrics is found in the section above. Data bases, data dashboards, and data infrastructure is needed to store, track and visualize the performance metrics that matter most to Vermonters. Drawing on the other facets of the collective impact approach, we believe that using performance metrics to track and guide progress to be essential.

## ROBUST INFRASTRUCTURE

**All successful collective impact will...**

### **Develop an Integrated Data and Research Infrastructure for Community Economic Development**

Through data partnerships, develop the capacity for the state of Vermont to have extensive access to data across scales and sectors. This data infrastructure can aid in decision making, programming, and initiatives aimed at building community resilience around Vermont.

### **Clarify and Empower the State's Convening and Facilitation Infrastructure**

Models for the development of state-wide coordination mechanisms exist for Vermont, with a long list of coordinated state-wide initiatives. A Collective Impact approach will require empowering one or more organizations to provide convening and facilitation services. These services may be provided through a coordinated "work group" model.

### **Codify a Coordinated Funding Infrastructure**

At least some coordination of public and private investments would benefit the state such as: the coupling of federal funding for entrepreneurial ecosystems, public loans and grants, social impact bonding and other innovation in policy tools, and private investment (venture to patient capital).

## MUTUALLY REINFORCING ACTIVITIES

Describing the full range of mutually reinforcing activities currently practiced to support community economic development in Vermont lies beyond the scope of this research. But it should be noted that there already exists a vibrant and effective set of coordinated actions being undertaken. The challenges lie in meeting the needs for sustaining them, evaluating them, and evolving them.

Drawing on the data from our roundtable discussions we find a daunting set of challenges that can be addressed with a variety of opportunities, the biggest of which may have been harder to see in the winter of 2021 when we were still in the tight grips of the pandemic: the infusion of federal funding to support economic and workforce development initiatives.

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