

# New Hampshire Listens

*Accomplishments, Challenges, and  
Lessons Learned*

2010–2015



# ABOUT NH LISTENS



New Hampshire Listens is a civic engagement initiative of the Carsey School of Public Policy at the University of New Hampshire.

## **Our Mission:**

To bring people together for engaged conversations

## **Our Work:**

- Create engaged community conversations on local and statewide issues
- Serve as a resource and support network for new local Listens groups
- Cultivate a network of facilitators for public engagement and action

## **Our Principles:**

- Bring people together from all walks of life
- Provide time for in-depth, informed conversations
- Respect differences as well as seek common ground
- Achieve outcomes that lead to informed community solutions

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**New Hampshire Listens**

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## Introduction

### Inside This Report

Introduction	3
Our Evolving Mission	4
Engaged Community Conversations	4
Support for Local Listens Groups	13
Increasing Facilitation Capacity	14
Coalition Building	15
Other Initiatives	15
National Partners and Dissemination	17
Funding History	17

In the winter of 2009–2010, New Hampshire Listens was founded by faculty and staff of the University of New Hampshire along with partners representing the civic and philanthropic sectors in the state. The overall purpose of NH Listens was and continues to be to enhance the capacity of local communities and the entire state to engage in inclusive, respectful, and informed public deliberations regarding a range of social and economic challenges. These deliberations are intended to inform policy makers (including elected and appointed government officials), community leaders, and “everyday citizens” about public preferences for actions needed to address those challenges. The public engagement tools utilized by NH Listens are meant to complement, not substitute for, formal decision-making, legislative, and rule-making processes.

NH Listens is built on earlier work by its founding directors and community partners, including community-based dialogue and engagement in Portsmouth (leading to the creation of Portsmouth Listens in 1999) and a dozen other New Hampshire communities, and several campus-wide dialogues. We have used small-group facilitated conversations to engage participants in intensive, informed discussions of problems or challenges identified by community members. We work at the community, regional, and state level when we are invited by multi-partisan coalitions of organizational and municipal leaders. We strive to function as trusted and impartial conveners. NH Listens does not advocate for specific outcomes or actions in any of its public engagement work.

This report summarizes the work of NH Listens since our inception over five years ago. The report is organized around the core elements of our three-part mission:

- To create engaged community conversations on local and statewide issues
- To serve as a resource and support network for new Local Listens groups
- To cultivate a network of facilitators for public engagement and action

A fourth element—coalition building for sustained civic engagement—is now in the early stages of development. For each of these goals, we offer specific evidence of our accomplishments, challenges encountered, and lessons learned. In addition, the report details related work we have been drawn into as we have interacted with state and national partners and garnered a reputation for being the only statewide civic infrastructure initiative in the country that operates to develop local community-based capacity and serves regional and state-level needs for public engagement.

We are grateful to our funding partners who have believed in the mission of NH Listens and provided both material and strategic support for our efforts. We have been fortunate to receive core funding from the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation since 2012, as well as more recently from the Neil and Louise Tillotson Fund for our work in the North Country. We have also received dozens of small and modest grants, contracts, and gifts from many other nonprofit organizations, community coalitions, municipal governments, and state agencies since 2010.

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We are also grateful for the guidance and support of the New Hampshire Listens Advisory Council. This group has met quarterly since 2013 to provide strategic advice; connect us to the changing social, economic, and political landscape in New Hampshire; and to push us to be clear about our purposes and how we measure our successes and failures. The Advisory Council consists of Mary Jo Brown, Rebecca Brown, Bryon Champlain, Lew Feldstein, Mary Kaplan, Pam LaFlamme, Marcy Lyman, and Zach Powers. Deborah Schachter has been an active *ex officio* member in her role as our program officer at the Charitable Foundation.

## Our Evolving Mission

When NH Listens began over five years ago, it was in large part a response to the increasingly uncivil, polarized public discourse that was then characterizing political debates, media commentary, and contested social issues. The “culture wars” metaphor was popular if overstated, but there was bipartisan agreement that our society was a house divided against itself on many economic and social policy issues. In 2015, this characterization remains true. Angry confrontations over short-term, narrow perspectives are more apparent than informed deliberations aimed at long-term solutions. As a matter of degree, racial tensions and despair over increasing income and opportunity inequalities are more prevalent now than five years ago. To some extent, local communities seem more able to create pragmatic, bipartisan solutions than is true at the state or federal level.

This context helps to frame the primary impacts we are aiming for, which include:

- Engaged and equitable communities
- Increased participation in public life
- Improved community problem solving

We achieve these broad aims through a variety of processes, tools, and initiatives. These include community conversations at the local, regional, and state level; support for Local Listens groups; coalition building; and facilitator training. Each of these activities is summarized below.

### Engaged Community Conversations

#### *Accomplishments*

NH Listens has supported statewide, regional, and local community conversations on a wide range of topics since 2010. The table below provides a summary of those conversations, the number of participants, and topics. The “purpose” column categorizes the aim of each initiative as either 1) to increase shared knowledge and understanding (UND), 2) to identify near-term actions (NTA), or 3) to provide long-term guidance to community leaders (LTG). In some cases, a community conversation served more than one purpose.

Title	Locations	Dates	Sponsor/Partner	Number of Participants	Purpose
Strong Schools: Strong Community	Pittsfield	August–September, 2011	Pittsfield Youth Workshop	113	UND LTG
Outdoor Recreation in New Hampshire	Berlin Portsmouth Manchester Keene North Conway W. Lebanon Laconia	October, 2011	NH Office of Energy and Planning	171	LTG
Pembroke Hill Road Intersection	Pembroke	January, 2012	Pembroke Select Board	110	NTA
How Can We Make Raymond a Better Place...	Raymond	March, 2012	Positive Raymond	62	UND LTG
The Future of Water	Berlin Greenland Manchester New London Keene	May, 2012	NH Water Sustainability Commission	135	LTG
Concord Complete Streets	Concord	November, 2012	City of Concord	133	NTA
Granite State Future	Claremont Dover Plymouth Keene Manchester Berlin Pembroke Nashua Laconia Kingston	November, 2012–May, 2013	NH's Regional Planning Commissions	120 in focus groups  528 in community conversations	UND LTG
Floods, Rains, and Rivers: Climate Adaptation Plan for Exeter	Exeter	April, 2013	Exeter Planning Department & National Estuary Reserve Research System	65	UND LTG

Title	Locations	Dates	Sponsor/Partner	Number of Participants	Purpose
Balanced Transportation System for NH	Dover Gorham Keene Laconia Manchester W. Lebanon	April–May, 2013	Transport NH	141	LTG
Legislative Priorities for the North Country	Whitefield	October, 2013	NH Charitable Foundation	18 legislators, bi-partisan	UND
All Walks of Life: A Statewide Conversation on Mental Health and Substance Abuse	Berlin Concord Nashua Keene Plymouth Portsmouth	November, 2013	New Futures, NAMI-NH, NH Community Behavioral Health Association, NH Providers Association NH Psychological Association	327	UND LTG
Addressing Alcohol and Other Drug Problems	Berlin Concord Derry Keene Laconia Lebanon Manchester Nashua Portsmouth Rochester	February–May, 2014	New Futures	154	UND LTG
State Government—Efficient, Transparent, Innovative	Concord Conway Manchester Peterborough Warner Whitefield	June, 2014	Governor’s Commission on Innovation, Efficiency, and Transparency	283	UND LTG
Madison Library Community Conversation	Madison	August, 2014	Madison Library	20	LTG
Future of Marston Farm Property	Nottingham	October, 2014	Nottingham Board of Selectmen	93	NTA

Title	Locations	Dates	Sponsor/Partner	Number of Participants	Purpose
Supporting Youth, Supporting Community	Milton	October, 2014	Milton School District	42	UND LTG
Milton Youth Voice Day	Milton	December 18, 2015	Nute Middle High School	350	UND LTG
The Future of Education for Newmarket	Newmarket	November, 2014	Newmarket Common Ground	72	LTG
Building Trust, Increasing Safety	Dover Durham Rochester	March–April, 2015	Dover, Durham, Rochester, UNH Police Departments	146	UND LTG
Good Neighbors	Keene	April, 2015	Keene College/City Commission	71	UND LTG
Our Children, Our Community, Our Future	Whitefield Jefferson Littleton	May–June, 2015	North Country Listens, White Mountains Regional School District, and Coos Coalition for Young Children and Families	53	UND LTG
When Opportunity Stops Knocking	Berlin Concord Laconia Nashua Manchester Plymouth Keene Lancaster Lebanon Portsmouth Pittsfield Rochester	May, 2015	Our Kids NH	333	UND LTG

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## Examples of Impact

Each of the initiatives included above had particular goals related to community change, improvement, long-range planning, or policy. Those goals were identified by our partners and determined the nature of the discussion guides, information, and summary reports that were prepared. Selected examples of impact related to the primary purposes of NH Listens (engaged and equitable communities, increased participation in public life, improved community problem-solving) are listed here:

- *Strong Schools, Strong Community.* This is our most sustained effort in a local community, working in partnership with Pittsfield Youth Workshop (PYW). Since this work began in 2011, we have assisted PYW in the development of Pittsfield Listens, provided guidance for community conversations and other civic engagement activities, worked with the Pittsfield School District on internal communications and problem-solving, and partnered with Pittsfield Listens to develop youth engagement strategies that have since been adapted in several other local Listens communities (Milton, Nashua, North Country). The community engagement work has been an important part of the significant improvement in high school outcomes over the past few years, changes in school practices such as parent-teacher conferences and report card formats, stronger community and student participation in school governance, and successful applications to the Nellie Mae Educational Foundation for continued funding of this work. This multi-year effort has led to achievements related to all three of NH Listens' goals of equity, increased participation, and improved problem-solving.
- *Concord Complete Streets.* Two well-attended community conversations carried out in partnership with the Concord Planning Department and the Concord Main Street steering committee led to the identification of key priorities for the redesign and reconstruction of North and South Main Street. These conversations helped to balance the competing interests of merchants, pedestrians, bicyclists, legislators, people with mobility impairments (including parents with strollers), and public safety concerns. Input from the conversations was incorporated directly into final design decisions, resulting in a significant public works project that had widespread public engagement and a greater sense of shared investment. This focused initiative is a good example of improved community problem-solving, with direct impacts on local decision-making related to capital investments.
- *Floods, Rains, and Rivers: Climate Adaptation Plan for Exeter.* This effort involved a close partnership between NH Listens, hydrogeology and environmental scientists from UNH, and town government officials in Exeter. Public input regarding ways to respond to increased flooding, projected changes in weather and Great Bay characteristics, and how to weigh community preservation goals against cost considerations over the long run, was linked to scientific models regarding stormwater flows, ecosystem impacts, and changes in sea level. The resulting plan is at the forefront in the area of knowledge transfer that reflects public values, scientific knowledge, and local political realities. This work has led to increased knowledge on the part of residents and decision makers, leading directly to better problem-solving around a complex issue.
- *Supporting Youth, Supporting Community.* In Milton, residents and school and town officials were concerned about the results from recent Youth Risk Behavior Surveys, especially with respect to how young people perceive their value in the community and the frequency of risky behaviors related to mental health and substance use. An initial community conversation on these topics led to the creation of Milton Matters, a local Listens organization. An in-school conversation with all students in the middle-high school gave young people a chance to have their own input directed at school and town officials. Subsequent community events, dinners, and other celebrations have continued efforts to understand how best to



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support youth and take action. The community is challenged to find the resources needed to create youth programming, but it now has a clear sense of purpose and direction resulting from the community engagement process. NH Listens' contribution has helped to increase equity for young people and brought more residents into the problem-solving process than has been the case in the past.

- *Building Trust, Increasing Safety.* NH Listens was approached by law enforcement officials in Strafford County in the wake of national incidents involving police officers and community residents, particularly those from minority neighborhoods. Seeing the potential for misunderstandings and tensions in light of the growing diversity of local towns, the county sheriff and chiefs from Durham, UNH, Dover, and Rochester worked with us to design community conversations intended to bring officers and residents together to get to know each other, learn about police practices and residents' perceptions of police, and identify specific steps to strengthen community-police relations. Results include changes in officer training (including at the state level) and new and better relationships between departments and minority communities. Our goals of equity and increased participation in public affairs are being achieved in these initiatives.
- *Our Children, Our Community, Our Future.* Working with North Country Listens, SAU 36, and the Coos County Coalition for Young Children and Families, we designed community conversations in three towns—Whitefield, Jefferson, and Lancaster—to gather public input regarding ways to support early development and education. Strong leadership from all three partners and a sense that it is possible to make significant impacts on all children living in the area (given the relatively small numbers), as well as ideas for concentrated efforts to support young children and their families, have emerged. The use of focus groups to augment the community conversation helped to involve stakeholders (providers, law enforcement, clergy, business leaders, health providers) in both problem identification and design of solutions. An action forum was held in October 2016 to determine next steps.
- *Governor's Commissions and State Agencies.* NH Listens has worked with several Governor's Commissions and state agencies since 2010. In each case, we were asked to develop strategies for wider and deeper public input on policy issues than is normally obtained in formal public hearings. Our work with the NH Water Sustainability Commission, the NH Office of Energy and Planning, and the Governor's Commission on Innovation, Efficiency, and Transparency provided broad-based input to each and directly informed recommendations for short- and long-range planning on natural resources, parks and recreation, and state government operations. In each case, the NH Listens summary report was integrated directly into the commission's or agency's final reports to the Governor.
- *Statewide coalitions.* Several of our statewide conversations have involved partnering with ad hoc or standing coalitions of professionals and government officials. This work has focused on mental health, substance use, transportation, regional planning, and the growing opportunity gap. In each case, residents who might not otherwise have been aware of these issues or how to make their concerns known became better informed, had the opportunity to share personal stories about the topic, and came into contact with alternative points of view and opinions that they would not otherwise have encountered. These efforts informed the policy positions of each coalition and led to greater awareness among the general public about emerging challenges facing the state.

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## *Challenges and Lessons Learned*

Since 2012, we have systematically collected evaluation data from participants in the community conversations listed above. We have data from 1,791 participants, based on an overall survey return rate of 77.6 percent. The highlights of the data are below:

- Since 2012, we have hosted NH Listens conversations in 85 towns across the state. Communities with 5 or more conversations over three-and-a-half years include Concord, Keene, Manchester, Laconia, Berlin, Nashua, and Portsmouth.
- Since January, 2013, 2,974 participants have attended NH Listens events. The Granite State Future conversations attracted the most attendees (528 in 10 communities). The Opportunity Gap conversations attracted the second highest number of participants (333 in 12 communities).
- When participants are asked to evaluate their experience at a community conversation, responses are very positive. For example—
  - Virtually all participants judged facilitators to be prepared (97 percent), able to assure that everyone took part (85 percent), and maintained a neutral stance (97 percent).
  - The discussion guides used to support community conversations were viewed as useful to the participants (91 percent agreed or strongly agreed).
  - Ninety-five percent believed that their small groups discussed the most important issues on the topic at hand; 96 percent believed that everyone had an equal chance to express his or her views; 88 percent learned new things about the topic from other group members; 87 percent felt better informed as a result of the conversation; 74 percent had a better understanding of those they disagreed with; 98 percent felt respected in the conversation; and, 83 percent understood how the conversation would inform next steps in problem-solving.
- We collected data on demographic and political characteristics of participants.
  - The ages of participant ranged widely, from 12 years to 85 years old; the mean age was about 52, compared to the state average of 41.
  - Two-thirds of participants have been women, one-third men, but this has varied across individual conversations depending on topic and location.
  - Participants tended to be relatively well-educated, with about 70 percent holding a bachelor's degree or higher (this is about twice the state average for educational attainment). About 10 percent of participants had a high school education or less (similar to the statewide average).
  - On average, participants identified themselves politically as moderate (36 percent) to somewhat liberal (26 percent). Seventeen percent described themselves as somewhat conservative or conservative, and 21 percent as liberal.

- There is variation within specific community conversations that is worth noting.
  - Some events were more gender balanced than others. For example, events like the Opportunity Gap and New Futures drew similar gender dynamics compared to averages for all NH Listens events, where more women (61.5 percent) than men (38.5 percent) attended.<sup>1</sup> However, at the Community-Police events, there was a statistically significant gender difference, with more men (62.1 percent) than women (37.9 percent). Though it seems likely that this gender difference is reflective of a male skew in the criminal justice sector, it could also indicate that males are more interested in police-community issues than are females.
  - Some events drew younger participants than others. Both the New Futures statewide conversations on mental health and substance use and the Community-Police events drew younger participants overall, with a mean age of 43 years of age for Community Police and 45 years of age for New Futures,<sup>2</sup> compared with the general event average age of about 52 years. In contrast, the Opportunity Gap events yielded a mean age of about 53, which was not significantly different from age averages for all events.
  - Some events drew a wider range of political viewpoints. For instance, the Opportunity Gap event attracted a more liberal crowd, with 59 percent identifying as liberal or somewhat liberal, compared to 47 percent for all events.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, at the Community-Police event, only 24 percent of participants identified as liberal or somewhat liberal, 45 percent as moderate, and 31 percent as conservative or somewhat conservative.<sup>4</sup>

What do these data tell us about the quality of NH Listens' community conversations?

First, the experience of participants in the conversation, overall, was quite positive. Our goals to create a respectful, informed conversation about the topic under consideration, to assure that all voices are heard, and to deepen understanding of different points of view are met for the large majority of participants. We can say that one of primary purposes when we established NH Listens in 2010—to offer an antidote to the divisive, hostile, win-lose climate of political and public discourse that prevailed then (and still does to a large extent)—has been achieved within the context of our facilitated conversations. Our focus on personal experiences, values, and objective information, attending to both the differences among participants as well as the potential for common ground, seems to create a productive, action-focused climate that is different from other forms of public meetings. In general, our facilitators are rated very highly for their ability to create an effective and safe space for deliberation of a range of issues.

Second, the community conversations that we support tend to draw older, more educated participants than would be found in the general population. As we noted above, this varies somewhat with particular topics and locations, but it remains a concern that requires a focused and energetic response. Although we have used a range of strategies to attract younger participants and others who may have lower levels of civic participation, we have not yet been fully successful on this metric.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gender means at the Opportunity Gap and New Futures events were similar to our gender means overall, and there was no statistically significant difference between either of these events and events overall.

<sup>2</sup> The police mean of 42.81 and the New Futures mean of 45.41 were both statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .

<sup>3</sup> Twenty-eight percent of participants identified as moderate and 13 percent as conservative or somewhat conservative.

<sup>4</sup> Both the Community-Police mean score (3.02) and the Opportunity Gap mean score (2.24) were statistically significant at  $p < .05$ . The New Futures average score (2.65) was slightly more moderate than the overall mean, but was not statistically significant. To provide context, the political scale categorizes liberal at 1, moderate at 3, and conservative at 5.

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This is a challenge that our colleagues in the field of deliberative democracy face across the nation. In response, we are moving toward alternative formats, venues, and tools that are more accessible and attractive for those who don't often participate in public meetings or deliberations. We are using more place-based approaches, taking the conversation to where people feel most comfortable and are more likely to be with others they can identify with; gathering input through interactive public art activities; and experimenting with technology-based platforms such as Text, Talk, Act and Text, Talk, Vote. For example, we have held successful in-school conversations focused on middle- and high-school age youth, co-facilitated by a teacher and a student.

We are working with local and statewide partners to frame conversations in ways that are inclusive to a variety of interests and backgrounds from the onset. Creating a strong mix of voices reflective of a community's demographic profile continues to be a challenge, one that does not have simple answers and that will demand our attention on an on-going basis.

We are also developing clearer criteria for accepting invitations to work with local and statewide partners, to be sure our tools are the appropriate ones for the problems being addressed. Examples of such criteria include:

- A shared commitment to recruiting the widest mix of participants, with an emphasis on reaching those who do not traditionally attend such events.
- Endorsement by the relevant decision makers and community leaders, to ensure that the results of the conversations will be considered in subsequent policy making or other actions.
- The presence of an effective coalition of partners made up of diverse stakeholders to frame the conversation, connect with decision makers, and support the transition from talk to action at the conclusion of the public conversations.
- Adequate resources (people, in-kind donations, cash as needed) to cover expenses related to staff time, facilitator stipends, and publication of discussion guides and final reports.
- The potential of our tools to catalyze action and change, based on an assessment of community readiness to engage, the presence of partners and key community leaders who are committed to finding common ground and practical solutions, and confidence that the conversation is about what really matters (rather than peripheral issues).

One challenge encountered in recent years, particularly around the Granite State Future project carried out with nine regional planning councils, was the presence of small numbers of individuals who attend a community conversation with the intention of being disruptive or driving a particular point of view in ways that are meant to inhibit or suppress other perspectives. Managing participants who are suspicious of the process is a regular part of our work. Occasionally, this suspicion is hard to overcome. We found that preparing facilitators for such intentional disruption or derailing, making clear our group agreements and enforcing them, responding in respectful, non-confrontational ways, and recording the statements made by such participants in the same way that we accept and record input from all others were the most effective ways to manage these incidents. By being transparent in our work (including fully complying with a burst of FOI requests in the middle of the Granite State Future project), occasionally speaking directly and respectfully with leaders of such groups, and "staying on the high road," we were able to diffuse the confrontations that were being sought. While we still encounter such individuals at some of our events, they are far less frequent at this point, and our facilitators are better equipped to respond constructively as needed. These are exactly the kinds of incidents that intimidate local leaders and citizens, and our role has been influential in carving out productive spaces.

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<sup>5</sup> Data from the New Hampshire Civic Health Index, consistent with national data, indicate that those with less than a college degree, those who are in the bottom 20 percent of income groups, and those in the adolescent to young adult age range are generally less likely to vote, to attend public meetings, or to join community volunteer efforts.

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In addition to measuring the impact of community conversations on participants, we have created interview protocols to obtain the views of local partners and decision makers regarding the usefulness of NH Listens' work over the long term. We have begun to pilot these six- to nine-month follow-up interviews to determine what actions resulted from the conversations, whether the initiative led to sustained changes in levels of engagement and participation by residents, and whether new groups of participants are more likely to be engaged than prior to the conversations (such as younger residents, newcomers, or members of minority groups). We are in the early stages of applying these protocols.

### Support for Local Listens Groups

In addition to the conversations supported directly by NH Listens, local Listens groups have organized several local or regional engagement efforts. Forms of support have included initial recruitment and organization of local Listens steering committees, identification of partners to serve as host organizations, assistance with design of locally-sponsored community conversations, and ongoing guidance to assure sustainability. Annually, NH Listens invites all our local partners to a Learning Exchange, sometimes in conjunction with Advisory Council meetings, to share knowledge, refine skills, and identify potential cross-community collaborations.

Our work with local Listens groups draws on several different forms of engagement. As a means to support efforts that meet the specific needs of these communities, we have created three specific types of initiatives for local engagement:

- *Community Builders*: These are intended to bring residents together in informal ways to strengthen social networks, connect people who don't normally gather in the same venues, and spark discussions that could lead to more formal and sustained conversations. We have designed "warm cookies and community" events that are open invitations to gather and share stories about a community's history or emerging challenges. We design public art activities that can be used at annual festivals such as Old Home Day or Apple Harvest Festivals, and TED-like talks to spark conversations and connections.
- *Civic Information*: In order to strengthen their effectiveness as participants in governance, residents need easy access to information and decision makers. Candidate forums have been used successfully in several communities (Pittsfield, Portsmouth, Dover, Berlin), and are being adopted in new ones each election cycle. These forums offer a more interactive and authentic opportunity for residents to speak to candidates and to hear their positions than traditional panel presentations. We have engaged soon-to-be and new voters in these forums with good results (for example, one young person not yet old enough to vote brought her mother to a candidate forum, and the mother subsequently voted for the first time in her life). We are now adding citizen academies as another means to inform residents about how their local government works, how budgets are developed, and how they can access municipal leaders directly.
- *Problem Solvers*: When a community is stuck on a particular issue, or highly divided on a topic, or wants to create long-range visions of a preferred future, we support community conversations using our typical small-group facilitated model of engagement. Topics for these community conversations have ranged widely, including many of the projects listed previously.

As of late 2015, we have worked in almost a dozen communities across the state to establish local Listens capacity. Our most active partners are in Dover, Milton, Nashua, Portsmouth, Pittsfield, and the North Country. Aspiring but not yet fully developed local Listens organizations are found in Concord, Keene, Newmarket, and Rochester. A Lakes Region coalition was active with the support of the Lakes Region United Way, but changes in the United Way have put that effort on hold for now.

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## Challenges and Lessons Learned

Over the past few years, we have seen several patterns associated with the success of local Listens organizations. These include:

- The presence of a respected, legitimate, capable partner or coalition of partners that is closely connected to local officials and media and represents a cross-section of community identities and interests.
- An existing base of civic infrastructure and social capital from which community engagement can be grown (for example, strong volunteer networks, a “can-do” approach to problem-solving, and trusted civic leaders who can mobilize energy and action).
- A willingness to take the long view, so that short-term challenges or divisive experiences (such as changes in elected bodies, an acute problem that creates divisions in a community, or disruptive actors who oppose collective action) don’t derail sustained efforts to create inclusive and engaged publics.
- The availability of cash or in-kind resources to partially match NH Listens investments of staff time and material resources and to support local part-time staff who can dedicate time to a local Listens initiative.

## Increasing Facilitation Capacity

One of the primary purposes of NH Listens is to build capacity for civic engagement through the training and support of a capable facilitators network. Over the past several years, we have developed a statewide network of about 150 individuals who have completed at least one daylong training in facilitation for public engagement. These folks are located across the state and are involved in both local conversations and statewide initiatives. Based on the results of participant evaluations, we are confident that the large majority of those who we have trained are effective. We review evaluations after each conversation to identify facilitators who are less effective in order to provide feedback and support their development. In some cases, we no longer use facilitators who are unable to improve their practices. The various types of training we offer are described below.

- *Facilitating for Public Engagement:* This daylong workshop is designed to give participants an understanding of the critical role of facilitators in the broad spectrum of public engagement work. We spend time locating the work in local and statewide projects, walking through a typical “talk to action” process, and emphasizing the principles that guide our work.
- *The Facilitation Laboratory: An Active Exploration of the Practice of Facilitation:* The Facilitation Lab is an opportunity to experiment with the power of interactive practice in sticky facilitation moments. Even after years of experience in community facilitation or public meetings, a tough participant can still make a seasoned facilitator’s heart race. We work with UNH Theatre professor David Kaye and his group, Power Play Interactive Development, to gain new insights, techniques, and skills.
- *Facilitation Lab for Chairs of Public Meetings:* Many people feel alienated from public life, but the good news is that public officials have the power to address many of the frustrations driving people away from being engaged. In this interactive lab, we practice real life scenarios, learn about best practices, and give public officials tools for creating meetings that deal with conflict in a healthy and professional manner. Despite years of experience in community facilitation or public meetings, a tough participant can pose a challenge even for the most experienced of facilitators. UNH Theatre professor David Kaye and his group, Power Play Interactive Development, share new insights, techniques, and skills to help in these situations.
- *Advanced Facilitator Workshop on Being a Facilitator: Making Certain Neutral Does Not Mean Passive:* Many of us are trained to remain “neutral” when we serve as facilitators. However, that doesn't mean we are passive in the face of misunderstandings. This workshop helps enhance confidence to remain neutral, productively address issues, encourage, and move conversation in a constructive manner. This training is hosted with our partners at Everyday Democracy.

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### *Challenges and Lessons Learned*

Our facilitator training work has received high praise. We like this range of offerings and are not planning to expand at this time. We are asked to host these trainings out of state and sometimes say yes both to share our knowledge and to generate revenues for our core operations. We occasionally encounter would-be facilitators who are looking for a place to contribute but for whom balanced and skilled interaction is difficult. We are reviewing facilitator evaluations to identify common areas of challenge that deserve “in-service” feedback and to ask those who are less effective to help our efforts in other ways.

### Coalition Building

#### *Nashua Immigration Integration Initiative*

In response to a call from the Endowment for Health, the United Way of Greater Nashua asked NH Listens to facilitate the planning phase for stakeholders to create a focused plan to improve health equity in Greater Nashua by enhancing integration and social inclusion efforts. Building on prior investments in Nashua—including the Gate City Immigrant Integration Initiative and Positive Street Art —the planning team created One Greater Nashua, an effort to harness the community’s strengths and value its growing diversity by focusing on leadership capacity, economic vitality, and community engagement. Over the course of three years, One Greater Nashua proposes to:

- Establish and sustain a strong One Greater Nashua Coalition
- Promote social inclusion and cross-cultural interaction at the middle school level through youth leadership development, community service, and family engagement strategies
- Create a cultural navigators program that helps newcomers with the skills they need to succeed economically and socially in Greater Nashua and expands opportunities for them to engage in the mainstream community by sharing their skills, talent, and ideas
- Diversify civic leadership and engagement in Leadership Greater Nashua (LGN), and use LGN to promote culturally effective organizations
- Establish Nashua Listens as an on-going forum for discussing community issues that affect all Greater Nashua residents

#### *Cheshire System of Care*

During the work in Nashua, we were coached by colleagues at Everyday Democracy. With the Cheshire System of Care work, we are embarking on a coaching project that involves assisting the planning phase facilitator and coordinator in leading local diverse teams in leadership, strengthening community networks, and creating a sustainable coalition of service providers, parents, and advocates concerned with children with significant emotional and mental health challenges.

### Other Initiatives

Over the past five years, NH Listens has participated in a number of additional initiatives related to civic engagement that are connected to our mission and that have often been short-term, sometimes experimental efforts to respond to immediate needs or test alternative approaches to engagement. These are listed below.

#### *Leadership NH*

Beginning in the fall of 2012, we began a sustained partnership with Leadership NH (LNH), designing and delivering curricula related to civic engagement for participants in each year’s LNH cohort. For each of the past three cohorts and currently, we participate in about one-third of all the LNH monthly sessions to convey information about civic engagement and help the participants acquire basic facilitation skills. Since 2012, 120 leaders from across the state and across sectors have participated in this opportunity. We provide this service to LNH at no cost.

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### *Text, Talk, Act and Text, Talk, Vote*

Supplementing the national dialogue on mental health and substance abuse that took place in 2013 and 2014 following the tragic shootings in Newtown, Connecticut, national partners in Creating Community Solutions designed and tested Text, Talk, Act (TTA), a technology-mediated (smart phone) small group dialogue tool aimed especially at high school and college-age youth. NH Listens supported TTA events at UNH and at other sites around the country, following the All Walks of Life statewide conversations listed in the project table earlier in this report. Subsequently, we worked with the National Institute for Civil Discourse, Everyday Democracy, Tisch College of Tufts University, and the Deliberative Democracy Consortium to create a similar platform—Text, Talk, Vote (TTV). The purpose of this effort has been to create a user-friendly, self-facilitated, and technology-mediated conversation on voting, especially for young adults. Reasons for voting (or not), the preferred characteristics of political leaders, and other forms of civic participation were the subjects of the conversation. We piloted TTV in classes at UNH and participated in the national evaluation of the pilot with the other coalition partners. We are now working with our national partners to refine the script and implement TTV during the fall 2016 election season.

### *NH Department of Environmental Services*

During 2013, we were asked by the senior management in NH DES to design and facilitate internal staff conversations and to train staff in small group facilitation techniques. The goal was to create internal capacity for engagement across agency lines in order to support staff conversations on intra- and inter-agency cooperation and problem solving.

### *Keene State College*

We have engaged in several projects with Keene State College, in addition to the “Good Neighbors” community conversation included in the table on pages 5-7. We have been asked to facilitate campus conversations related to: faculty-staff and faculty union relationships (2012), the redesign of the KSC School of Graduate and Professional Studies (2014), the merging of the departments of geography and geology (2014), and the restructuring and redesign of KSC teacher preparation programs (2015).

### *Buffers*

This two-year project is in partnership with the Great Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve to make a difference in preventing degradation to and/or enhancing water quality, habitat, and flood mitigation thorough protecting buffers. NH Listens will serve as engagement specialists to set up the team to be true partners to the communities. The focus will be on providing the best available science, simplifying how to get good technical and policy information, and helping communities assess what would work for them considering political, economic, and cultural factors.

### *State Employees Union*

In 2015, we were asked to facilitate internal conversations among State Employees Union (SEA) staff in Concord in response to a request from SEA management to provide input for strategic planning and organizational improvement. On two separate days, we led half-day conversations focused on internal relationships, work climate, communication, clarity of roles and responsibilities, and related issues. Our intention was not only to assist SEA in this internal work but to demonstrate effective engagement processes that SEA leadership could use as it carries out its mission.

### *Endowment for Health Leadership Equity Series*

In the fall of 2015, we designed and conducted a pilot project for a cohort of twenty-two leaders from diverse sectors and locations on the topics of racism and white identity. This intensive dialogue series, involving twenty-two hours of small group conversation over four sessions, is intended to improve the ability of leaders to understand their own implicit biases, the effect of systemic and structural racism on New Hampshire’s social and economic climate, and strategies for creating more equitable and inclusive organizations and communities. Two additional cohorts will be conducted in the spring and fall of 2016.



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## National Partners and Dissemination

NH Listens works closely with a number of national organizations concerned with civic engagement and strengthening democracy. We are a national anchor partner of Everyday Democracy, working closely and mutually with staff and senior associates on design, implementation, and evaluation of civic engagement initiatives, with a particular focus on equity of participation as well as outcomes.

We also partner through membership on advisory boards or in collaborative project design with the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, the National Institute for Civil Discourse, AmericaSpeaks (until its demise in 2014), Tisch College of Tufts University, and the Bridge Alliance.

Each year, NH Listens participates in the design of the annual meeting of Frontiers of Democracy (with Tisch College and DDC), and we offer workshops at the meeting to disseminate our work to other academics and practitioners across the country. We have also made presentations at national convenings of the Sustained Dialogue Institute (Washington, DC), the Engaged Scholarship Conference (Penn State University), David Mathews Center for Civic Life (University of Alabama), and the Bridge Alliance (Boston).

We have disseminated the work of NH Listens in scholarly journals including the *Journal of Public Deliberation* (*The compost of disagreement: Creating safe spaces for engagement and action*), and the *New Directions for Higher Education Series* published by Jossey-Bass (*Practicing what we preach: Democratic practices in institutional governance*).

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- NH Department of Administration
- NH Office of Energy and Planning
- NH Water Sustainability Commission
- New Futures
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, US Department of Health and Human Services through a coalition of NH mental and behavioral health organizations
- Keene State College
- City of Keene
- White Mountains Regional School District
- Madison Public Library
- Town of Nottingham
- Nellie Mae Education Foundation (through Pittsfield Youth Workshop)
- Neil and Louise Tillotson Fund
- Durham, Dover, and Rochester Police Departments
- Transport NH
- Town of Exeter
- National Estuary Research Reserves (NOAA)
- Milton School District
- City of Concord
- Cheshire System of Care (NH DHHS)
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