

## Concept Note: Building an Engaged Maine Network

Written by Quixada Moore-Vissing, PhD and Mark Hews

*Note: The Maine Network of Engaged Communities is a work in progress that is co-sponsored by the Maine Development Foundation and the George Mitchell Center for Sustainability Solutions at the University of Maine. We are hoping to launch some statewide engagement opportunities in 2020. Below is information about our initial concept, which is still in a development process and may continue to evolve. For questions about the Maine Network of Engaged Communities, please contact Jan Kearce at Maine Development Foundation, Linda Silka at University of Maine, or Quixada Moore-Vissing at Public Engagement Partners*

Incivility in America has reached epidemic proportions. In far too many instances rudeness, disrespect and hostility sideline collaboration and compromise. Maine's communities are experiencing the same level of discord and many residents want solutions.

Currently there is momentum in Maine to improve civic engagement, and that momentum presents a golden opportunity to build strong statewide civic infrastructure that can serve and strengthen communities, build democracy, and enable us to effectively problem-solve when crises arise. One such initiative that is contributing to that momentum is Maine Revives Civility. Maine Revives Civility (MRC) serves as a catalyst to get groups and communities thinking about a different kind of outcome for public dialogue. Maine Revives Civility is creating a framework, complete with tools and resources, to prepare citizens to be active participants in their own governance. MRC helps foster an open exchange of ideas and expression of values that can lead to better problem-solving, more effective government, and inclusive and engaged communities.

However, civic engagement initiatives in Maine and local civic action are not connected across the state, and as a result, we lack an overall statewide civic strategy. This may lead to duplication of work, competition with each other rather than collaboration, and missed opportunities to partner and learn with each other. If we can build a Maine Network of Engaged Communities, we can work faster and smarter, reach more Maine residents, connect current engagement work and collaborate together to inspire new engagement. Such collaboration helps us to be forward thinking and responsive to the challenges Maine faces, including a small and declining youth population, balancing tourism with affordability for Maine natives, harnessing the wisdom of and caring for a surge of older people, and responding positively to growing diversity in refugee populations and beyond. Further, a Network of Engaged Communities prepares us to prevent or minimize national trends of escalating political polarization, increased incivility, discrimination, and violence here in Maine.

Nevertheless, there is a dynamic tension between developing a comprehensive statewide network and the fiercely independent nature of Maine communities. There appears to be a lot of early enthusiasm and agreement to build civic engagement but to date that has not resulted in any new collaborations or a set of communities joining forces to collectively learn from one another. Keeping all the work in Maine that is currently being done separate is inefficient both in time and money. It is no longer enough to provide personal assistance or fund one community to build civic engagement. The best solution is to develop a comprehensive statewide civic engagement network to not only better meet the needs of current programs and community participants but to truly expand this work statewide.

A Maine Network of Engaged Communities would include

- An *Engagement Guidance Team*, which includes
  - A *Civic Advisory Council* composed of 10-15 leaders throughout the state who value collaboration and understand the broad swath of community issues facing Maine.
  - A *Team of Engagement Leaders*, including about 10 civic engagement experts who reside in Maine.
- *Actively Engaged Communities*, who are currently conducting civic work in their local communities or region (for example the Town of Bar Harbor and Healthy Northern Kennebec).
- *Emergent Engagement Communities*, who have the interest in going deeper with local civic engagement but are at the beginning of their process.

The Maine Network of Engaged Communities would connect civic organizations, initiatives, and local work across the state so that Mainers are able to engage in training and professional development together, share learnings, identify opportunities for collaboration, problem-solve engagement challenges, and create a statewide strategy for civic engagement. The Engagement Guidance Team would provide training, such as workshops about how to conduct effective engagement; coaching, consisting of advice about how to conduct engagement in a particular community; develop resources, such as discussion guides about topics important to Mainers; and convene and connect the network as a learning community in regular conferences and meetings.

Activity	Description	Goal
Training	Workshops, webinars, and conferences that support community learning about civic engagement	To support a more statewide network that is knowledgeable about what constitutes effective civic engagement
Coaching	Engagement experts can work with communities to provide customized advice about how to approach engagement opportunities and challenges at the local level, including strategies, messaging, and engagement events	To support communities to build capacity at the local level for authentic civic engagement
Resources	Provide local communities with civic engagement assessments and evaluation materials to determine assets and areas of development, provide tool kits for engagement, discussion guides about topics pertinent to the state of Maine such as protecting our waterways, balancing nature, tourism, and economic development, considering assets and needs of an older population, etc.	To support communities with the tools they need to conduct engagement
Learning Community	Encourage communities to learn from each other, identify areas of collaboration, share resources, and create partnerships.	To connect engagement across the state of Maine
Statewide Strategy	The Engaged Network will work together to create a statewide strategy for civic engagement in Maine, with goals and indicators.	To create a comprehensive civic engagement effort that harvests and aligns all the local work taking place in Maine.

# Maine Network of Engaged Communities

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Concept for developing a statewide network of people, organizations, and communities to create a comprehensive civic engagement strategy for Maine.

