



Strengthening Vermont's Rural Technical Assistance System

Recommendation Pursuant to Act 181 of 2024, Section 67

*Prepared by the **Department of Housing and Community Development**
and the **Vermont Evaluation of Rural Technical Assistance Steering Committee***

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Acknowledgments and Thanks

The Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), within the Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD), worked with the Vermont Evaluation of Rural Technical Assistance (VERTA) Steering Committee throughout 2025 to guide and advise the University of Vermont's Center for Rural Studies (CRS) in assessing what state agencies and their partners can do to increase capacity and improve the state's technical assistance system, as required by Act 181.

This work was made possible by generous support from the University of Vermont's Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships, whose funding provided the staff and expertise necessary to engage stakeholders across the state, review peer models from other states, evaluate Vermont's system of strengths and gaps, and develop actionable recommendations.

A key part of this effort was the Reimagining Rural Capacity Summit, which brought together 250 Vermont-based state policymakers, elected officials, municipal leaders, technical assistance (TA) providers, funders, state agencies, and regional partners. The Summit featured an engaging, interactive game-show format designed to create a fun, collaborative environment—not just to share findings but also to test and improve implementation ideas from the research. Through guided design exercises and hands-on problem-solving, participants transformed CRS's research insights into practical strategies that helped shape the Steering Committee's recommendations.

DHCD extends its sincere appreciation to the members of the VERTA Steering Committee, whose expertise and sustained engagement shaped this work:

- Northeastern Vermont Development Association (representing RDCs)
- Northern Borders Regional Commission
- Preservation Trust of Vermont
- Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies (representing RPCs)
- Vermont Community Foundation
- Vermont Council on Rural Development
- Vermont Housing & Conservation Board
- Vermont Land Access & Opportunity Board
- Vermont League of Cities and Towns
- Vermont Agency of Administration, Office of Disaster Recovery
- Vermont State Treasurer's Office

DHCD sincerely thanks the many Vermonters who serve in municipal government—often in part-time or volunteer roles—yet still took the time to participate in interviews, surveys, focus groups, and stakeholder sessions, and to attend a day-long summit in support of this effort. Their willingness to share hard-earned experience while managing daily responsibilities of local governance reflects the strong public service ethic that upholds Vermont's small towns and villages. DHCD also appreciates peers from other states who

contributed their time and expertise, offering valuable insights into how rural states across the country are tackling similar challenges.

DHCD further thanks the University of Vermont's Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships and Center for Rural Studies staff and students, along with our facilitator, Rebecca Stone of Community Workshop, for their thoughtful leadership and collaboration. Their efforts ensured this work was analytically rigorous, grounded in the real-world experiences of municipal service, and engaging and enjoyable throughout the process.

Ongoing Commitment to Advancing Implementation

The VERTA Steering Committee will reconvene in January 2026 to discuss its capacity to actively advance solutions, troubleshoot implementation challenges, and support early action on priority recommendations. In parallel, DHCD will continue conversations with the Northern Borders Regional Commission (NBRC) and the University of Vermont's Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships to design and launch pilot efforts that test new approaches, leverage regional and academic capacity, and deliver tangible support to municipalities. These ongoing commitments are intended to move quickly from planning to implementation, generate practical lessons, and scale strategies that can strengthen local capacity and coordination across Vermont.

Why Legislative Action Is Needed

Vermont's municipalities vary widely in size, staffing, fiscal capacity, and administrative resources. While some communities have full-time professional staff and the capacity to pursue complex projects, many—particularly small, rural towns—rely heavily on part-time staff, volunteer leadership, and state or regional technical assistance providers to manage increasingly complex responsibilities.

Under Vermont's current technical assistance system, **municipalities** interact with one or multiple state agencies to support or achieve local goals and priorities. Still, they often must rely on a wide array of technical assistance providers to initiate, manage, and close out a single community project. At any given time, a municipality may be juggling multiple projects, each involving different agencies and providers, creating a fragmented and administratively heavy process.

State agencies have complex interactions with municipalities, serving as funders, technical assistance providers, regulators, and more. Each agency designs and manages its own set of resources, guidelines, and requirements, and operates under different legal authorities.

TA providers, including state government, regional planning and economic development corporations, and non-profit partners, can navigate and assist municipalities in engaging

with state agencies and may also provide the missing professional skill sets needed at the local level. The technical assistance (TA) providers each have different authorizations, regional coverage, and professional expertise, resulting in no single common TA structure.

These disparities create uneven access to state programs and funding, not because of differences in need, commitment, or even relative population size, but because lower-capacity municipalities face greater barriers in navigating administrative requirements, securing matching funds, and planning and implementing long-term projects.

A strong, well-coordinated TA system is essential to ensuring that all municipalities—regardless of size or capacity—can access state and federal resources, advance locally defined priorities, and participate fully in Vermont’s economic, housing, infrastructure, and climate-change-related initiatives. This need is becoming more urgent as federal funding programs, including disaster recovery, grow more competitive or are eliminated, and federal agency staffing and direct support to communities declines, placing greater responsibility on states to help municipalities navigate complex requirements and secure available resources.

Statutory Charge and Research Foundation

Act 181 directed the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) to evaluate Vermont’s rural technical assistance system and develop recommendations to strengthen municipal capacity, coordination, and access to resources.

With funding from the University of Vermont’s Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships, DHCD partnered with the University of Vermont’s Center for Rural Studies to conduct the Vermont Evaluation of Rural Technical Assistance (VERTA). The research drew on surveys, focus groups, and interviews with municipalities, regional organizations, technical assistance providers, funders, and state agencies, as well as a national scan of peer models.

The VERTA Steering Committee—representing municipalities, regional organizations, state agencies, funders, and technical assistance providers—reviewed the CRS research findings and the ideas, actions, and recommendations generated at the Summit and developed the recommendations that follow.

Summary of VERTA Research Findings

The research points to a set of consistent, system-wide challenges:

- **Capacity is the binding constraint.** Most Vermont towns lack staff time, project management skills, and technical expertise to advance priority projects, including time spent engaging with TA providers and programs.
- **Administrative burden blocks access to resources.** Fragmented programs, duplicative applications, and complex reporting disproportionately deter small and low-capacity municipalities.
- **Coordination failures are systemic.** Municipalities, TA providers, and state agencies report unclear roles, poor information flow, and missed opportunities for collaboration.
- **Program design matters as much as funding levels.** Rigid eligibility, unnecessarily constrictive project execution timeframes, match requirements, and competitive grant structures limit access—particularly as costs rise and federal support declines, including support that underlies Vermont’s TA provision system itself.
- **Evidence from other states points to coordinated solutions.** States with centralized coordination and regional capacity models serve small and rural communities more effectively.

Translating Research into Action

Together, these findings underscore the need for practical, phased actions that improve coordination, reduce administrative burden, and expand capacity where it is most constrained. The Steering Committee organized its recommendations around four priority areas:

Priority Area 1: Increase State Agency Participation in Solving Local Challenges

Municipalities face fragmented state systems and inconsistent agency involvement. While relationships are strong, coordination remains informal, uneven, and difficult to sustain due to staffing constraints and frequent turnover among elected officials and volunteers. This can also result in state agencies producing resources, materials, and even technical assistance programs that are too siloed or restrictive to be helpful to municipalities, particularly smaller ones with limited capacity.

Priority Area 2: Municipal and Regional Shared Services Tools

Many Vermont municipalities face similar challenges but lack the tools, incentives, and governance structures needed to share services, staff, and equipment across town and regional boundaries, as well as the capacity to engage in shared services conversations.

Priority Area 3: Local Engagement and Leadership Development

Vermont's reliance on volunteer governance is increasingly strained, with limited pipelines of new leaders and uneven access to training, education, and support for engagement.

Priority Area 4: Increasing Local Capacity and Flexible Resources.

Municipalities lack sufficient staff capacity and flexible funding to move projects from concept to completion—particularly in small and rural communities.

Recommended Legislative Actions

The Steering Committee recommends that the Legislature consider a coordinated package of actions in this biennium, combining near-term improvements with longer-term structural reforms to strengthen Vermont's rural technical assistance system.

Near-Term Actions

1. Fund and support improved coordination across state agencies

- Support regional, municipality-based problem-solving convenings that are designed around state agency participation.
- Encourage the Agency of Administration to convene state grant administrators to align timelines, requirements, and municipal-facing practices where practical.

2. Invest in shared services and practical tools for municipalities

- Fund development of shared services engagement, templates, toolkits, and a shared services platform to help towns share staff, services, and equipment.

3. Strengthen local leadership and volunteer capacity

- Expand leadership training and toolkits for municipal officials and volunteers.
- Support volunteer-matching tools and a Vermont Community Capacity Fair to connect community needs with volunteer interests.
- Support the convening of local leadership.

4. Expand and better coordinate municipal technical assistance

- Increase funding for existing programs such as the Municipal Technical Assistance Program (MTAP), the Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI), Municipal Planning Grants (MPG), and the Resilience Initiative for Vermont Empowerment and Recovery (RIVERS).
- Provide state leadership and governance to coordinate TA providers and deliver wraparound support aligned with municipal priorities and varying local capacity levels.

5. Restart and reimagine the Vermont Funders' Collaborative

- Provide modest resources to align state, philanthropic, and federal funding and fill gaps in early-stage and flexible capacity funding.

Medium- and Longer-Term Structural Reforms

6. Authorize exploration of a statewide municipal services coordination hub or office

- Support planning and potential implementation of a centralized “front door” for municipal technical assistance, including coordinated intake and referrals.

7. Support regional governance and shared services research

- Reauthorize the regional governance and shared services study, which has been paused, to identify viable long-term models.

8. Pilot new approaches to community-driven planning

- Fund a “Planning for the People” study and pilot to test more accessible, grassroots planning approaches that complement statutory planning requirements or reflect emerging local priorities.

9. Modernize municipal planning requirements

- Direct DHCD, RPCs, VLCT, and municipalities to assess which planning requirements could be made more flexible or optional and propose statutory changes as appropriate.

10. Align and simplify state funding streams

- Provide direction and authority for agencies to explore back-end alignment or pooling of compatible funding programs to reduce duplication and administrative burden.

How the Recommended Actions Work Together

These recommendations are designed to function as a coordinated package, not as isolated initiatives. Together, they aim to:

- Improve coordination across state government
- Reduce administrative burden on municipalities
- Expand capacity in low-staffed and volunteer-run towns
- Promote equitable access to state and federal resources
- Better align public, private, and philanthropic investments

The package balances low-cost, near-term actions that can be implemented quickly with structural reforms that require planning, coordination, and sustained investment.

Detailed Recommendations

The following section provides additional detail on each recommendation, including implementation partners, legislative needs, and resource requirements.

Priority Area 1: Increase State Agency Participation in Solving Local Challenges

Problem statement: Municipalities face fragmented state systems and inconsistent agency involvement. While relationships are strong, coordination remains informal, uneven, and difficult to sustain due to staffing constraints and frequent turnover among elected officials and volunteers. This can also result in state agencies producing resources, materials, and even technical assistance programs that are too siloed or restrictive to be helpful to municipalities, especially the smaller ones.

Lower Effort Actions

1A: Create regional, town-based problem-solving convenings with state agency participation.

To improve coordination, reduce back-and-forth, and help municipalities move more efficiently from planning to implementation, request state agencies attend structured, place-based gatherings hosted by RPCs, RDCs, or other regional partners where municipalities can directly engage with relevant state agencies and TA providers.

Convenings should focus on:

- municipal priorities and constraints like housing or infrastructure;
- identifying available grants and technical resources; and
- clarifying next steps and gaps requiring state or legislative attention.

Likely implementing partners: RPCs, RDCs, ACCD, ANR, VTrans, VHCB, VCRD, other agencies, and TA providers.

Legislative support needed: Direction and funding.

Resources needed: Modest facilitation and training, event and travel funding.

Medium Effort Actions

1B: Convene a statewide community of practice for state grant administrators.

Request the Agency of Administration to convene state grant administrators and program staff twice annually to:

- share best practices;
- align grant timelines and requirements where feasible; and
- receive direct feedback from municipal grantees.

Likely implementing partners: Agency of Administration, ACCD, ANR, VTrans, VLCT, and RPCs.

Legislative support needed: None.

Resources needed: Modest funding for convenings and professional development.

Higher Effort Actions

1C: Establish a statewide municipal services coordination hub or office.

Authorize and fund the exploration and implementation of a centralized hub or office that serves as the “front door” to state-provided municipal technical assistance. Functions should include:

- a centralized portal for grants and programs;
- coordinated intake and referral across agencies; and
- back-end coordination with non-state TA providers.

Likely implementing partners: Agency of Administration, Agency of Digital Services, DHCD, Governor’s Office, the Community Investment Board, VLCT, RPCs, RDCs, and other TA providers.

Legislative support needed: Funding and staff.

Resources required: IT development, ongoing staffing, and operational support.

Priority Area 2: Municipal and Regional Shared Services Tools

Problem statement: Many Vermont municipalities face similar challenges but lack the tools, incentives, and governance structures needed to share services, staff, and equipment across town and regional boundaries, as well as the capacity to engage in shared services conversations.

Lower Effort Actions

2A: Develop and disseminate shared services templates and toolkits.

Direct the State, RPCs, and VLCT to compile and create standardized templates (MOUs, contracts, procurement guidance) and step-by-step guides to support shared services, shared staffing, and cooperative purchasing.

Likely implementing partners: Agency of Administration, Agency of Digital Services, DHCD, RPCs, VLCT, and TA providers.

Legislative support needed: Funding and staff capacity.

Resources required: IT development, legal review, and staff.

Medium Effort Actions

2B: Create or expand a municipal shared services platform.

Support partnerships with the State and TA providers to expand an online platform where municipalities can:

- identify shared service opportunities;
- engage with communities;
- access templates and guides; and
- connect with peer communities.

Likely implementing partners: VLCT, RPCs, and state agencies.

Legislative support needed: Funding.

Resources required: Platform development and ongoing maintenance staffing.

Higher Effort Actions

2C: Restart and complete a regional governance and shared services study.

Reauthorize the paused regional governance study to evaluate viable models for shared municipal services, staffing, and administration, based on the VERTA research report and examples from other states.

Likely implementing partners: VLCT, RPCs, RDCs, VCRD, DHCD, UVM, and the Vermont Bond Bank.

Legislative support needed: Authorization and funding.

Resources required: Facilitation, staffing for research support

Priority Area 3: Local Engagement and Leadership Development

Problem statement: Vermont’s reliance on volunteer governance is increasingly strained, with limited pipelines for new leaders and uneven access to training, education, and support for engagement.

Lower Effort Actions

3A: Expand leadership training and toolkits for municipal volunteers.

Support the development and delivery of standardized leadership curricula, toolkits, and cohort-based trainings for municipal officials, volunteers, and emerging leaders.

Likely implementing partners: VCRD, VLCT, PTV, RPCs, Up for Learning, and the Civic Health Index.

Legislative support needed: Funding.

Resources required: Curriculum development and training delivery.

Medium Effort Actions

3B: Expand volunteer matchmaking and engagement infrastructure.

Support the development of statewide and regional tools—including online platforms and in-person convenings—to better connect community needs with volunteer interest. This includes hosting a Vermont Community Capacity Fair, where local leaders can connect, match with interested volunteers, and build practical skills in volunteer recruitment, engagement, and management.

Likely implementing partners: TA providers, Front Porch Forum, and Vermont 211

Legislative support needed: Staff and funding.

Resources required: Technology development and funding for events.

3C: Create a “Planning for the People” study and pilot on grassroots planning.

Steering Committee members and Summit participants expressed interest in developing a study to pilot a reimagining of planning—and the Town Plan in particular—as a more place-based, grassroots, and community-driven process. This work could build on existing models such as Community Visits, Town Meeting Day engagement, and the Preservation Trust of Vermont’s bus tours, and leverage the interagency and multidisciplinary expertise of the Community Investment Board to deepen direct public participation and better connect locally grounded priorities with implementation resources.

Likely implementing partners: DHCD, RPCs, municipalities, VCRD, other TA providers, and funders.

Legislative support needed: Funding.

Resources required: Facilitation and pilot grants

Higher Effort Actions

3D: Modernize municipal planning requirements.

Direct DHCD, RPCs, and municipalities to assess which state planning requirements could be made optional or more flexible, and propose statutory changes as appropriate.

Likely implementing partners: ACCD, VLCT, RPCs, and municipalities.

Legislative support needed: Statutory changes and funding.

Resources required: Funding for consultants and staff to engage with municipalities.

Priority Area 4: Increasing Local Capacity and Flexible Resources

Problem statement: Municipalities lack sufficient staff capacity and flexible funding to move projects from concept to completion—particularly in small and rural communities.

Lower Effort Actions

4A: Restart and reimagine the Vermont Funders' Collaborative.

Support a renewed funders' collaborative that brings together state agencies, federal partners, and philanthropic organizations to align funding programs better, coordinate investments, and deploy more flexible capacity funding in response to municipal priorities. The collaborative would focus on reducing duplication, filling gaps in early-stage and nontraditional funding needs, and leveraging public and private resources to support high-priority community-driven projects.

Likely implementing partners: DHCD, VTrans, ANR, VHCB, VCRD, VLCT, VCF, UVM, USDA-RD, and foundations.

Legislative support needed: Funding.

Resources required: Staff coordination capacity and support for participation.

Medium Effort Actions

4B: Continue and expand municipal technical assistance.

Building on the Municipal Technical Assistance Program (MTAP), the Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI), Municipal Planning Grants (MPG), Resilience Initiative for Vermont Empowerment and Recovery (RIVERS), and related efforts, the State could design and support a coordinated technical assistance approach that provides direct funding to municipalities, funding to TA providers for capacity-building activities, and flexible resources to support consultants and other professional services. Eligible uses could include grant writing, project management, and pre-development activities such as assessments, design, and feasibility studies. The State could also establish a funding and governance structure to coordinate participating TA providers better and deliver wraparound support aligned with municipal priorities and varying local capacity levels.

Likely implementing partners: DHCD, VHCB, VCRD, VLCT, RPCs, and other TA providers.

Legislative support needed: Funding.

Resources required: Program funding and staff coordination capacity.

4C: Create municipal or regional project management fellows or shared coordinators.

Fund state-level, shared project management positions, including University of Vermont-based fellows, housed locally or regionally to support multiple municipalities with project management, particularly for complex housing, infrastructure, and climate adaptation projects.

Likely implementing partners: DHCD, VLCT, RPCs, RDCs, RCAP Solutions, UVM, VCF, and municipalities.

Legislative support needed: Funding.

Resources required: Multi-year staffing support.

Higher Effort Actions

4D: Align and, where appropriate, merge state funding streams.

Direct state agencies to explore back-end alignment or pooling of compatible funding programs to simplify applications, reduce duplication, and support coordinated TA delivery.

Likely implementing partners: Agency of Administration and state agencies.

Legislative support needed: Direction and potential statutory changes.

Resources required: Staff time to support systems alignment.

Appendix 1: Organizations Referenced in VERTA Recommendations

Abbreviation	Organization	Organization Type	Web Page
ACCD	Agency of Commerce and Community Development	State Agency	https://accd.vermont.gov
ANR	Agency of Natural Resources	State Agency	https://anr.vermont.gov
AoA	Agency of Administration	State Agency	https://aoa.vermont.gov
CRS	Center for Rural Studies (University of Vermont)	University / Research	https://www.uvm.edu/crs
DHCD	Department of Housing and Community Development	State Department (ACCD)	https://accd.vermont.gov/housing
LAOB	Vermont Land Access & Opportunity Board	State Board	https://vhcb.org/land-access-opportunity-board/ https://finance.vermont.gov/content/municipal-technical-assistance
MTAP	Municipal Technical Assistance Program	State Program	https://finance.vermont.gov/content/municipal-technical-assistance
NBRC	Northern Borders Regional Commission	Federal–Regional Commission	https://www.nbrc.gov
NVDA	Northeastern Vermont Development Association	Regional Development Corporation	https://nvda.net
PTV	Preservation Trust of Vermont	Nonprofit	https://ptvermont.org
RCAP	Rural Community Assistance Partnership	National Nonprofit	https://www.rcap.org
RDCs	Regional Development Corporations	Regional Entities	https://www.vapda.org
REDI	Rural Economic Development Initiative	State Program (VHCB)	https://vhcb.org/redi/ https://accd.vermont.gov/community-development/planning
RPCs	Regional Planning Commissions	Regional Entities	https://accd.vermont.gov/community-development/planning
UVM	University of Vermont	University	https://www.uvm.edu
VCF	Vermont Community Foundation	Nonprofit	https://vermontcf.org
VCRD	Vermont Council on Rural Development	Nonprofit	https://www.vtrural.org
VHCB	Vermont Housing & Conservation Board	Quasi-Public State Entity	https://vhcb.org
VLCT	Vermont League of Cities and Towns	Nonprofit / Municipal Association	https://www.vlct.org
VT211	Vermont 211	Nonprofit Service Provider	https://www.vermont211.org
VTrans	Vermont Agency of Transportation	State Agency	https://vtrans.vermont.gov

Appendix 2: VERTA Implementation Table

VERTA IMPLEMENTATION TABLE			
Priorities	ID	Actions	Effort
1. Increase State Agency Participation in Solving Local Challenges	1A	Create regional, town-based problem-solving convenings with state agency participation.	Lower
	1B	Convene a statewide community of practice for state grant administrators.	Medium
	1C	Establish a statewide municipal services coordination hub or office.	Higher
2. Municipal and Regional Shared Services Tools	2A	Develop and disseminate shared services templates and toolkits.	Lower
	2B	Create or expand a municipal shared services platform.	Medium
	2C	Restart and complete a regional governance and shared services study.	Higher
3. Local Engagement and Leadership Development	3A	Expand leadership training and toolkits for municipal volunteers.	Lower
	3B	Expand volunteer matchmaking and engagement infrastructure.	Medium
	3C	Create a “Planning for the People” study and pilot on grassroots planning.	Medium
	3D	Modernize municipal planning requirements.	Higher
4. Increasing Local Capacity and Flexible Resources	4A	Restart and reimagine the Vermont Funders’ Collaborative.	Lower
	4B	Continue and expand municipal technical assistance.	Medium
	4C	Create municipal or regional project management fellows or shared coordinators.	Medium
	4D	Align and, where appropriate, merge state funding streams.	Higher