EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY

- Everyday Democracy (formerly the Study Circles Resource Center) is a project of The Paul J. Aicher Foundation, a national, nonpartisan, nonprofit operating foundation, whose mission is to advance deliberative democracy and improve the quality of public life in the United States. Since 1989, we have worked with more than 600 communities across the United States on many different public issues.

- The mission of Everyday Democracy is to help communities develop their own ability to solve problems by exploring ways for all kinds of people to think, talk and work together to create change. We work with neighborhoods, cities and towns, regions, and states, helping them pay particular attention to how racism and ethnic differences affect the problems they address.

- To achieve our mission, we (1) build the capacity of individual communities to solve problems equitably & inclusively, & (2) shape the conditions in which communities operate through systematically strengthening the democracy reform movement. We are committed to learning from the communities we assist, and to applying the lessons to our own work and advice. We've documented hundreds of lessons and stories, and have created tools that other communities can use and adapt free of charge. We also work with national and regional organizations and networks. Major initiatives can entail preparing guides on important public issues, providing technical assistance for sponsors and organizers of civic engagement initiatives, offering issue-specific or general regional orientations, and/or developing training strategies and curricula for organizations that aspire to strengthen the civic engagement aspects of their work. We will also partner with other organizations in order to strengthen and bridge the fields of deliberative democracy, community problem solving, racial justice, and the larger movement to strengthen democracy.

ABOUT OUR WORK:

Since our founding almost twenty years ago, we've worked with hundreds of communities across the United States on issues such as: racial equity, poverty reduction and economic development, education reform, early childhood development and building strong neighborhoods. We work with national, regional and state organizations in order to leverage or resources, to expand the reach and impact of civic engagement processes and tools. For example, over the last several years, the Northwest Area Foundation has provided funding for us and for state-level delivery organizations in eight states of the Pacific Northwest so that engagement processes can be imbedded in hundreds of small rural and tribal communities with high levels of poverty. As a result, people in close to 300 communities have learned about poverty, worked together to reduce poverty and build financial assets, and begun to create sustainable change. Over the life of this project, more than 10,000 people have participated in ongoing dialogue and action. We have trained 1,500 facilitators to help carry out this work at the local level.

The communities we serve and others who could benefit from these processes are the focal point of our work. Our ultimate aim is to help create communities that value everyone's voice and work for everyone, and to help create a strong national democracy that upholds these principles. We act as a catalyst and coach for communities, knowing that the people of each community are best suited to carry out and sustain the work that will make a difference. Thus, the most important thing we can do is to support capacity building and community change, and help link the energies of various community change processes to larger change efforts. In that vein, our most important accomplishments are:

- Using lessons from communities to create tools and advice that can be readily used and adapted by coalitions of nonprofits, government and informal community leaders. Some of these are "how-to" tools focused on how to engage the community, how to frame issues, how to facilitate dialogue. Some are issue-specific tools that help communities apply these skills and processes to specific community problems.

- Helping communities know how to engage those who are not typically involved in community affairs. This has led to our deep work in racial equity and socioeconomic equity, and to many of the dialogue and change tools we have created. Our work is at the intersection of community problem solving, strengthening democracy, and strengthening racial and socioeconomic equity.

- Nurturing a strong national network of communities of all sizes, linking to common democratic principles, working on various issues.

- Learning from grass-roots efforts, and translating the lessons for others. We have worked with researchers and evaluators to learn how engagement can lead to measurable outcomes on some of the toughest problems communities face, and also on how to sustain and imbed dialogue into community governance and institutional practices.

- Developing a wide diversity of leaders, of all backgrounds and ages. We train organizers and trainers, so that effective civic practices can be replicated. Our diverse cadre of senior associates around the country helps us provide training to communities and state-level organizations.

- Helping communities tell their stories, via a wide range of media and social media. As people tell stories of personal transformation and community change, others are inspired to bring people together across difference, for productive dialogue, for sustained trust building, and for collaborative problem solving.

OUR STRATEGIC DIRECTION:

We have just updated our strategic plan, to create a plan that will help guide our efforts through 2017. Our plan builds on much of the work we have done in partnership with our local community partners as well as other national foundations like Northwest Area, C.S. Mott, Annie E. Casey, and W.K. Kellogg foundations on community capacity for civic engagement and problem solving, racial equity, closing gaps linked with race/ethnicity and assets/income levels, and strengthening democracy at all levels.

Our plan lays out our efforts to focus our work in the following six strategic areas:

1) Broadening and deepening our support for linking dialogue to problem solving, especially in closing racial/ethnic and income/assets disparities. We will focus more intensive learning and assistance in communities and regions that face the toughest challenges. We will also be finding ways to broaden the availability of resources – for example, through anchor institutions -- while we deepen and innovate.

2) Building our capacity to link equity – with explicit attention to racial equity, but not exclusively – to community change efforts and the larger movement to strengthen democracy. In particular, we will work with communities to deepen our own approach to equity, to listen to them, and to support them in the equity goals that are most important to meeting their overall goals.

3) Weaving collaborative leadership development throughout our work, with a particular focus on community-owned leadership, to include those who are often marginalized. We will incorporate leadership development into our community assistance. This has been a frequent request from our community partners.

4) Expanding and deepening our contribution to the national movement to strengthen democracy. Many of our communities experience disparities of opportunity which manifests in various aspects of community life and large gaps among community members. These inequities are future magnified by structures and systems that exacerbate the disparities that hinder the ability of our democracy to work for all people.

5) Build our capacity to tell stories of community change and democracy building, through new media and diverse community voices.

6) Expanding the resources available to carry out our work. It is our aim to work with strategic partners to build anchor networks to leverage resources and support for communities to obtain sustainable funding and support, to expand and sustain community- based engagement throughout locales, towns, neighborhoods, cities, regions, and states.