



## Cultivating Welcoming Communities

“Welcoming communities” are those in which visitors, new residents, and longtime residents alike feel invited, accepted, and encouraged to contribute. The Northern Forest Center gathered three people with experience in helping create Welcoming Communities to talk about the process. **Nicky Hylton-Patterson**, then director of the [Adirondack Diversity Initiative](#) (ADI), **Maire Folan**, founder of the Northeast Kingdom chapter of the [Vermont Welcome Wagon Project](#), and **Amber Lambke**, founder and CEO of [Maine Grains](#) and a community leader in Skowhegan, shared their insights.

**Fundamentally, welcoming communities are places where all people feel a sense of belonging, where they “see themselves in the community,”** as Nicky said, and feel safe around people who are different. Yet raising questions about whether one’s community is welcoming to everyone can sometimes make longtime residents feel defensive. This group talked about the importance of honest conversations across different perspectives as a community begins to ask itself what needs to change to become more welcoming, or why being a welcoming community is important. They suggested that conversations between neighbors and “radical listening” – listening fully without judgment or interruption – are effective ways to address conflict.

Making people feel welcome is valuable for its own sake. But the group noted that because of out-migration, economic decline, and aging populations across the Northern Forest, communities that welcome new people may also have an economic advantage. Of course, retaining those new visitors or residents is just as important.

“We need to work hard at welcoming people in, so they feel like they fit in as quickly as possible. People who don’t feel like they fit in don’t stay.”

**Amber Lambke, Founder and CEO of Maine Grains**

**The panel suggested that community members seeking to welcome newcomers should work with local employers and use word of mouth to know when new people have moved to a community.** Connecting people with volunteer opportunities, neighbors, and local events are tangible ways to get new people connected to the community early on. The group also encouraged people to use signs, banners, and other symbols to show that their community is welcoming, and to make use of bulletin boards (physical and virtual) to let people know what’s going on.

In whichever ways community members connect, it’s important that they seek to tell positive stories about the community and not fixate on a negative narrative or “language of despair,” as one panelist called it. This will help them think about the community as a place of connection, opportunity, and belonging.



*The Community Learning Briefs summarize the Northern Forest Center’s 2021-2023 “Building the New Forest Future” webinar series. The Cultivating Welcoming Communities webinar and others in this series are available [here](#). This project has been supported in part by USDA Rural Development.*