



Empowering Young Leaders

The success of rural communities depends on civic engagement, which most often comes from older residents. But since decisions made today will directly impact younger people for years to come, and since younger residents' current needs and priorities may differ from other residents' needs and priorities, it's important that rural communities find ways to encourage the next generation to lead – and for members of that generation to take the plunge.

Five younger leaders working in different leadership contexts shared their experiences in a recent panel discussion. They included **Tyler Adkins**, chair of the [Monson, ME](#) Select Board; **Jordanna Mallach**, supervisor of the [Town of Harrietstown, NY](#); **Chloe Maxmin**, [former Maine State senator](#), rural political organizer, and author of *Dirt Road Revival: How to Rebuild Rural Politics and Why Our Future Depends On It*; **Sam Mayne**, a Conservation Commission member in [Lancaster, NH](#); and **Michael Olio**, administrator of the [Town of Richford, VT](#).

The group agreed that young people often have no idea that there are local opportunities to get involved as leaders and committee members – it isn't something taught or shared in schools. They've observed that once people know that they can get involved, many do. The panelists said that young people like thinking about the potential of what could be and that their concerns about readiness and acceptance are not always warranted. "Show up at your town hall and ask whoever you can find there, how do I get involved with 'x' in my community," recommended Sam. "Everyone is so enthusiastic to get you involved – at least that's been my experience." As another leader said, "Just get involved! You're qualified!" Being a committed community resident is qualification enough for civic participation.

Young people may face different barriers to participation and leadership than older ones. Towns that want to encourage younger leadership should consider making changes such as providing childcare at meetings and offering remote participation options to accommodate challenging schedules and home demands. Increasing wages for paid positions would make local service a more viable career for young people to pursue.



“I love working at the local level. I have the opportunity to directly see the work that I’m doing, and to interact on a daily basis with the people that I’m impacting. That’s what keeps me motivated and keeps me engaged.”

Jordanna Mallach, Supervisor of Harrietstown, NY

Panelists said it’s important for younger leaders to acknowledge that they have a different perspective and experience than older people, and to gently point out that doing something differently doesn’t make it wrong. Building relationships with older generations and responding to their needs and interests – along with those of peers – is key. Leaders need to work on the issues and activities people care about and should make government as accessible as possible. As one panelist noted: “You can accomplish a lot in a short period of time at the local level when the community is engaged.”

The panelists underscored that by serving as community leader in any capacity, from volunteer board to paid management to elected official, young people can make a significant impact on how well their towns function now and how they will evolve into the future.



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