

Organizing Rural & Reservation Communities for Dialogue and Change

A Quick Guide



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Everyday Democracy thanks:

Project Lead:

Sarah vL. Campbell,
Senior Program Director
Patrick L. Scully,
Deputy Director

Writers:

Gloria Francesca Mengual,
Program Director
Barbara Yasui,
Senior Associate

Editor:

Molly Holme Barrett,
Program Liaison and Editor

Design Assistance:

Carrie Boron,
Deputy Communication Director and
Operations Manager

Research and Editorial Assistance:

J. Nicholas Connell,
Community Assistance Associate,
Will Ehrenfeld,
Research Assistant

Project Coordinator:

Rona Roberts, Roberts & Kay, Inc.

Horizons Partners

State-Level Partners

- Iowa State University Extension
www.extension.iastate.edu/horizons/
- Montana State University Extension Service
www.horizonsmt.org
- North Dakota State University Extension Service
www.ag.ndsu.edu/horizons/vision.htm
- South Dakota State University Cooperative Extension Service
<http://sdces.sdstate.edu/cil>
- University of Idaho Extension
<http://extension.ag.uidaho.edu/horizons>
- University of Minnesota Extension
www.extension.umn.edu/community/horizons
- Washington State University Extension
<http://horizons.wsu.edu>

National Partners

- Everyday Democracy, www.everyday-democracy.org, supports the study circles component.
- Pew Partnership for Civic Change, www.pew-partnership.org/lpinstitute.html supports the LeadershipPlenty® program of community leadership development.

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Introduction

Congratulations on becoming a Horizons community! The work you are about to begin offers the promise of increased community vitality, greater involvement of local people, and real change. The Horizons program, designed collaboratively by the Northwest Area Foundation (NAAF) and 11 organizations, links four community activities aimed at reducing poverty and boosting prosperity.

This guide provides advice on how to carry out successful study circles—the first step in the 18-month Horizons program. The document is a summary of the lessons that Everyday Democracy staff learned in their work with Horizons communities and is designed to help you work effectively.

The Horizons Program

Horizons offers communities specific benefits and learning opportunities, as well as tools they can use for community-change projects in the future. Throughout the 18-month process, communities receive coaching and assistance from their “Delivery Organization” (DO).

- Through planning and completing **study circles**, communities learn how to gather people from all parts of the community to think, talk, and work together to reduce poverty. Then, action groups start to work on activities where they can make an immediate difference. This lays a foundation for the rest of the Horizons work.
- Through **LeadershipPlenty®**, communities expand their base of leaders and make a commitment to using shared leadership to tackle reducing poverty and other important, long-term community change efforts.
- Through **community visioning**, each community builds a shared picture of its future that includes increased community wealth and well-being, and agrees on practical ways for its residents to work together to make the positive dreams come true.
- During **community action to reduce poverty**, communities receive guidance as they complete initial goals. In addition, communities receive grants to help them carry out plans for action that require external financial support.

Once communities complete all parts of the Horizons programs, they use their new tools and connections to continue working toward positive community change.

How to Use This Booklet

Study circle organizers and Horizons coaches can refer to the organizing advice on pages 6-15. Although the organizing steps are listed in numerical order, they often happen simultaneously, or in a different order. Do what works best in your location. Use the list to double-check your work and to make sure you've thought through the most important points.

The quotations in this booklet are the voices of former Horizons organizers and participants. Sources for the quotations are the QED Study Circles Evaluation Report and interviews conducted by Everyday Democracy staff and associates.

For further information, visit www.everyday-democracy.org, particularly *Organizing Community-wide Dialogue for Action and Change*, located at www.everyday-democracy.org/en/Resource.39.aspx.

Learn More

- See "Frequently Asked Questions" on page 16.
- Visit www.nwaf.org to read more about Horizons and the Northwest Area Foundation. Visit communityblogs.us to see profiles of Horizons communities.
- Visit www.everyday-democracy.org to read articles about some of the Horizons communities' dialogue-to-action efforts.
- Visit www.pew-partnership.org/lpinstitute.html to learn more about LeadershipPlenty® and success stories from communities that have completed this community leadership development course.

Launching Effective Study Circles

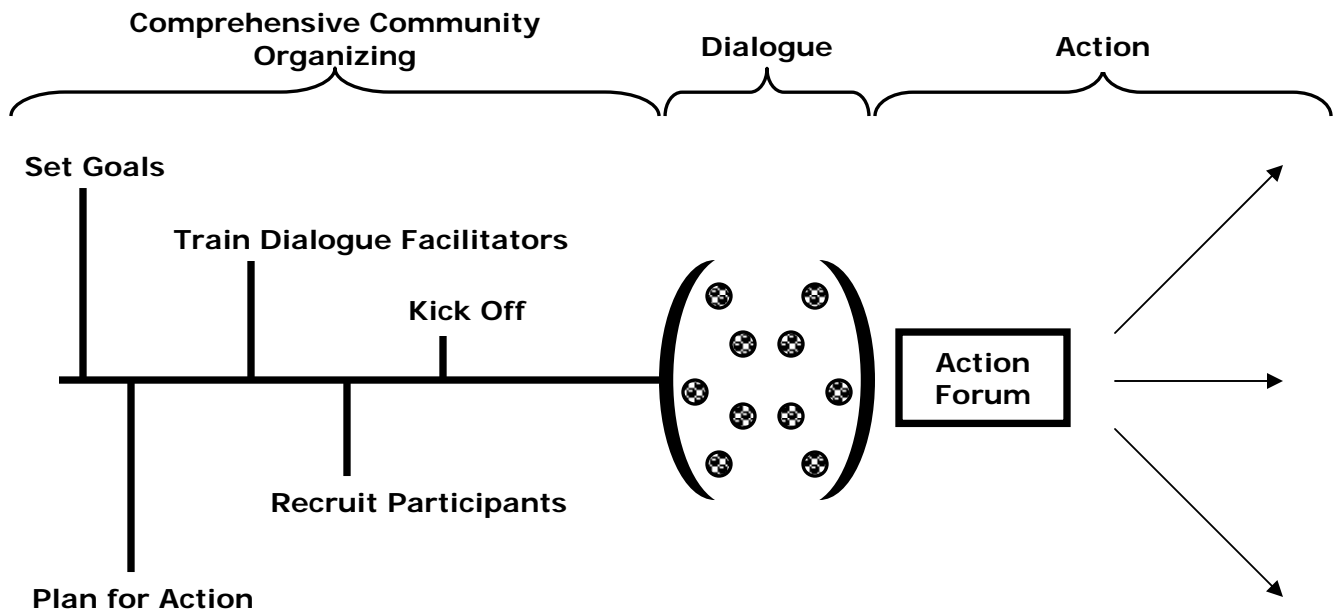
Behind most successful study circle programs is a strong group of community members who come together to drive the effort. What draws them together is a shared commitment to help people from every part of the community work together to address a particular issue.

This group's job is to plan, implement, and sustain a program where dialogue leads to action and change in the community. Most Horizons communities call this group the "local steering group."

Successful organizing groups mirror their community's demographics and include all kinds of people. A diverse steering group sends the message that every voice is needed—and welcomed—in the conversation.

How do study circles work?

- Community members come together to set goals, launch community conversations, and support action ideas that follow.
- Many small groups meet to discuss a common concern.
- The talk leads to concrete ideas shared at an Action Forum.
- Everyday people and leaders form teams to carry the work forward.



1. Lay the foundation carefully.

Before any public dialogue takes place, organizers—especially if they are from outside the community—need to build relationships, find out what residents think about their community and its needs, and understand more about what is already in place.

Here are some key areas to address in the early planning:

- **Ask people in your community what they need, rather than *telling* them.**
When you begin your work, invite people to say what *they* want to see done. This is a way to demonstrate that everyone has a voice and it will help people take ownership of the program.
- **Assess community readiness to tackle poverty.**
Find out if residents are concerned about the issue and willing to work together to solve problems. It's also important to know if people in elected positions are interested.
- **Explain program goals frequently.**
The goals of Horizons are established by the DOs and NWAf. Sometimes, these goals may not be clear to organizers and participants. It is important to explain these goals clearly, during the early stages of organizing. Look to the DO for more information.
- **Connect with existing community initiatives.**
There may be others in the community who are working on the same issue, and they may be looking for ways to gain support and create more public interest. Invite them to team up with you on the project.

"One project in town has been sitting there and nothing has happened for I don't know how long. ... We started the study circles and it's like all of a sudden it was back on the table ... it was in the newspaper ... it was the main topic of the City Council meeting."

- **Link your topic—poverty—to related issues.**
Think about ways to demonstrate how poverty affects things like education, transportation, health care, and social or cultural isolation.
- **Assess the community dynamics.**
Talking together about all these questions will help you find ways to organize in your own community:
 - ✓ Who has power and influence?
 - ✓ How do decisions get made in the community?
 - ✓ Are certain people or families in control?
 - ✓ How can we make sure that race, culture, and language are considered?
 - ✓ Are there rival groups or factions? For example: How do newcomers and long-time residents get along? Are there racial tensions?
 - ✓ If this is a one-company town, what is the relationship between employees and employers?
 - ✓ How much influence do older people have?
 - ✓ What role do young people play?
 - ✓ Does the faith community have a strong presence here?

- ✓ Is there a history of conflict or cooperation?
- ✓ Should we consider the views of people who work in the community or send their children to our schools, even if they don't live here?

[In this community,] "they have to be people whose parents were here and grandparents were here and great-grandparents. Those are the people who are listened to and respected. The people who aren't from here will be seen as people from the outside trying to change our town."

2. Consider cultural factors.

Plan ahead. From the start, address any barriers to participation. Find ways for people from all cultures, faiths, professions, and income levels to feel welcome at the table. This should happen during every phase of the work—the planning and organizing, launching the dialogues, and working on action.

During the organizing process, take the following cultural factors into consideration:

The impact of race on community issues

- Racism is rooted in our country's history and is embedded in our culture.
- In many communities, racism can be a significant barrier to solving all kinds of public problems and to fulfilling the promise of our democracy.
- Addressing racial barriers is part of any effective community change process.

- **When you name and design the program, honor the cultures and traditions represented in the community.**

"We, the Latinos, are a young community that is starting to feel that we have to contribute to our communities."

- **Point to the similarities between dialogue and the community's cultural values. For example:**

- ✓ Native American people have a long tradition of dialogues—often called 'talking circles'—and shared work.
- ✓ A number of cultures rely on ground rules or other protocols for public meetings.

"The Talking Circles model is really the way that we did things for centuries and that's why I really believe in Talking Circles ... and getting people to realize they have important gifts."

- **Consider cultural factors when planning the dialogues. For example:**

- ✓ Different cultures observe long-held traditions in public meetings. For example, in some cultures, people must be given the right to speak; others may rely on "Robert's Rules" to maintain order.
- ✓ The traditional role of elders, or "leaders," is very important. It's wise to get their blessing before you proceed.
- ✓ Silence may be a sign of respect, not an absence of "voice," or opinion.

- ✓ Cultural attitudes about time vary greatly (promptness, length of meetings, etc.)
- ✓ Women in some cultures are expected to defer to men.
- ✓ The way leadership is practiced varies in different cultures.
- **Because the word “poverty” can carry a stigma, be sensitive about recruiting and the language you use.**
 - ✓ The phrase “struggling to get by” has worked well in some communities.
 - ✓ Take care not to create an “us-vs.-them” dynamic. Avoid categories like, “poor people,” or “wealthy people, or “haves” and “have-nots.”

“We have a recruiter who runs the Food Shelf in town...She needed to make sure that they understood that if they participate, people aren't going to single them out as poor, stupid people.”

3. Create a diverse group to steer the project.

The best way to make progress on a community issue is to bring together a steering group with different perspectives, backgrounds, and life experiences. Their job is to organize the effort. The most successful steering groups include people who mirror *all* groups in the community.

- **Invite representatives of community organizations to get involved.**
Having official and unofficial community leaders on your team lends credibility to the program.
- **Include a mix of people.**
Aim for a good mix of experienced leaders and people with leadership potential who want to play a bigger role in community life.

“Obviously, there's the typical people that you go to when you want to look for leadership, but I think this program is going to help us reach out and find new leaders and get more people involved.”

- **Include people who have never been invited to participate.**
 - ✓ Look for people who are trusted and respected by their peers, but may not hold “official” leadership positions.
 - ✓ Include young people; this is a way to help them develop and practice leadership skills and have a voice in community decisions.

“Everybody says the same thing ... That this is the first time that we're being involved with this stuff and this is the first time that anybody has come to us and asked us our opinions and our issues.”

4. Communicate clearly.

Communication cuts across all of your work. It will help build momentum in the community, increase participation, and spread the success stories.

- **Build community awareness.**
Personal, one-to-one communication is a great way to create awareness and interest.
 - ✓ To start a “buzz” in the community, spread the word in casual conversations.

- ✓ Mention the program to everyone you meet—friends, neighbors, family, your hairdresser, teachers, etc.
- **Work out a strategy for communications.**
 - ✓ To develop simple core messages, answer these questions: What are our goals? Who is our audience? What do we want them to do? What's in it for them?
 - ✓ Develop talking points.
 - ✓ Use examples and written materials to describe program goals.
 - ✓ Use a variety of ways to reach out to people: the local cable channel; post cards; flyers; written and face-to-face invitations.
 - ✓ Develop a template for news releases.

"I did a Public Service Announcement [on a Hispanic radio station] to invite community people to be a part of the program. I got about 10 people. This was all done in Spanish."

- **A communications challenge: Poverty is a loaded word.**
The word, "poverty" can be an obstacle; the challenge is to help people understand that these discussions are about finding solutions to poverty. So, choose your language carefully. Acknowledge the problem and, at the same time, emphasize the positive—you're working together to build a "thriving community."

"Let's quit saying 'the poor people'. I think there's so much division with income or material things."

- **Explain how different parts of the Horizons program link together.**
(Please see the Introduction, on page 4)
- **Talk about how this approach has worked in other places.**
 - ✓ When you're making a pitch for study circles, use examples from other Horizons communities.
 - ✓ Tell stories about how people have used this approach to address a range of issues.
 - ✓ Visit www.everyday-democracy.org and communityblogs.us, where you can find articles about communities that have used study circles to address all kinds of issues, including education, youth issues, immigration, racial equity, community-police relations, and others.
- **Talk about the promise of improvement and change.**
Evidence from Horizons programs demonstrates that:
 - ✓ People are willing to work on a difficult issue like poverty.
 - ✓ The possibility of change is greater when many people get involved.
 - ✓ Small investments by foundations in rural and reservation communities yield large returns.
 - ✓ Leadership can be found within each of us.
 - ✓ Change can be a slow process; successes energize communities for longer term work.

"I think that was the most positive thing that came out of the study circle is that we actually got to see ... what kinds of talents ... [people] can contribute."

- **Keep elected leaders and public officials informed.**
 - ✓ Assure them that the purpose of the dialogues is to bring many voices into the conversation to solve problems, not to attack community leaders.
 - ✓ Relay information about the public's concerns that may be "news" to public officials.

5. Recruit, train, and support dialogue facilitators.

Effective public dialogue depends on well-trained facilitators. Good facilitators come from all age groups, ethnicities, and walks of life. Some have previous training; many do not. What they share is a desire to develop their own skills to guide conversations so they can help groups have productive experiences and improve communities.

- **Facilitators should reflect the community's diversity.**
 - ✓ Recruit some bi-lingual facilitators.
 - ✓ Aim for a mix of backgrounds—for example, small business owners and employees, and government workers.
 - ✓ People of all ages and both genders should be included on the facilitator team.

"Someone who is good at speaking both languages: Spanish and English...This would be a good way to include the Anglos and Hispanics to work together."

- **Co-facilitators for each study circle work best.**

Pairing facilitators is a way to assure balanced, neutral facilitation.

 - ✓ Pairs should reflect the diversity in the community.
 - ✓ Ask people who are different from one another to work together (a young person and a senior citizen; a farmer and a merchant; a woman and a man).
 - ✓ Ask an experienced facilitator and a beginner to work together.
 - ✓ Encourage teamwork and mentoring.
 - ✓ Ask pairs to support one another and make time to offer feedback after each meeting.
- **One-on-one recruitment works best.**
 - ✓ Ask people who are passionate about the issue to recruit facilitators
 - ✓ A personal invitation is often the key to successful recruiting.
- **Train young people as facilitators.**
 - ✓ With guidance and support, young people can be outstanding facilitators. They work well with people their age, or with people of all ages.
 - ✓ Facilitating study circles gives youth a legitimate role to play in the community and helps develop confidence and leadership skills.
 - ✓ Young people add energy, new ideas, and a different "flavor" to study circles.
- **Provide high quality facilitator training—don't skimp!**

Allow plenty of time for the training—eight hours, if possible (twelve would be even better).

"I felt confident enough to be in front of all those people and to lead a discussion. That was pretty neat. So I think that the training is just a really big thing...giving people the confidence to feel like they can do it."

- **Extend support to facilitators beyond the training.**

- ✓ Set up meetings for facilitators to debrief, support one another, and share ideas and examples about what works, and what doesn't.
- ✓ If facilitators need a chance to air their own opinions, encourage them to participate in another circle.
- ✓ Keep in mind that low-income volunteers have limited resources. Offer to cover expenses for travel, food, child care, and supplies.
- ✓ Some people have held conference calls to support each other.

6. Recruit participants from all parts of the community.

The goal in recruiting participants is to involve as many different kinds of people as possible. When people from different backgrounds and walks of life work together to find solutions to common problems, they form new relationships and networks, and come up with innovative ideas.

- **Invite people, in person.**

- ✓ Face-to-face invitations are the most effective way to recruit participants. This works best when recruiters invite people they know.
- ✓ Good publicity may inspire people in the community to spread the word and ask their friends to get involved.
- ✓ Recruiting people from low-income groups is a challenge because you don't want them to feel "labeled." Ask social workers and school guidance counselors to help you recruit, or go to Head Start, or the churches. They know who is struggling to get by, and have built relationships with them.

"The school secretary and Para-educator were able to identify low-income people, because they really knew the families and invited them to participate. Low-income people don't want to be singled out."

- **Recruit people from every walk of life.**

- ✓ Reach out to people of all ages, especially young people.
- ✓ Recruit people from all income levels.
- ✓ Include old timers and newcomers.
- ✓ Invite people who don't speak English. (If possible, issue the invitation in their language! Discussion guides are available in Spanish.)
- ✓ Make sure to include people of different races and cultures.
- ✓ Recruit unemployed people.
- ✓ Recruit people who earn their living in different ways: laborers, teachers, doctors, farmers, nurses, merchants, etc.

- **Use existing groups or networks to recruit participants.**

Make a list of the groups in town, and meet with them to explain about study circles.

- **Go to natural gathering places to recruit.**
Visit the places in your town where people go—the grocery store and drug store, the unemployment office, the Post Office, the Laundromat, diners, and playgrounds.
- **Identify recruiters who can reach different groups.**
 - ✓ Build a group of recruiters whose lives touch different parts of the community.
 - ✓ Recruiters are most successful when they promote study circles in groups where they are known and trusted.
- **If you don't have a link to a particular group, reach outside your comfort zone.**
 - ✓ If necessary, go door-to-door!
 - ✓ Make “cold calls”—invite people you don't know.

“... You have to bust your butt, bend over backwards, just really bust it, if you are going to get ANY low income people to take part. They are enough accustomed to not being included that they won't bite on a casual invite. Organizers must not think that just handing out leaflets to Head Start parents will do it.”

7. Arrange logistics to suit participants' needs.

The key is to plan ahead and think through the potential needs of different groups within the community. Often, it's the little details—the things that seem to be insignificant—that make the difference between a well-run program and one marred by missteps and mistakes.

- **Hold study circles at times that meet different scheduling needs.**
Think about what will work in your community.

“[In our community,] study circles were conducted in various ways, including five two-hour segments, two or three segments, full-day sessions, and in various other combinations.”

- **Make it easy and fun for people to participate.**
Think about things that will make it possible for people to take part:
 - ✓ Transportation—In some communities “gas cards” help participants with transportation costs. Car pools help, too. In some cases, volunteers give people rides to the circles.
 - ✓ Provide childcare.
 - ✓ Provide incentives. Let people know that this experience will combine work and fun. Socializing is a good way to help participants feel at ease with one another
 - ✓ Provide food/refreshments—Pizza, pizza, pizza!
 - ✓ Offer door prizes.
- **Hold dialogues where people already go.**
Choose meeting sites that are easy for people to get to; they should be places where people can feel at ease:
 - ✓ The community room of a low-income project.
 - ✓ A room at a local social service agency.

- ✓ Head Start location.
- ✓ Senior Citizen facility.
- ✓ Churches.
- ✓ Move the meeting around to various locations in mixed communities—from white residential areas to Native or Latino communities.
- ✓ Schools are sometimes a good place to meet. Find out if people in your community would be comfortable meeting there.

"I go to school to learn English. They offered the Horizons circles groups right there at my school. It worked well for us this way because we had a good size group . . . I enjoyed it."

8. Link dialogue to action, and sustain momentum.

Action is critical. People want to see results! It's a way for people and communities to prove that they can make a difference.

"Thriving Communities is about tilling the soil, getting more things going."

- **Act quickly.**
 - ✓ Start with easy, energizing projects.
 - ✓ Take on small projects so people can see results.
- **Link actions to poverty reduction.**

It's important to keep reminding people of the larger goal, to reduce poverty.

 - ✓ Keep asking, "How will this activity reduce poverty?"
 - ✓ Choose activities that give people new ways to work together and build new networks.
 - ✓ Think about how to link study circle action ideas to LeadershipPlenty®.

"In one community, they formed a Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and a small farmers market."

- **Use public dialogue to consider a range of issues.**
 - ✓ Once people understand how the dialogue-to-action process works, they can use it to address a wide range of community issues.
 - ✓ Offer study circles through adult education programs, or the schools. Some schools have added study circles to their curriculum.
 - ✓ Use this approach to tackle issues like racism, immigration, education, town budgets, and employment and jobs.
- **Be sure activities include people who are, "struggling to get by."**

"... Maybe I'm looking at it more broadly. I used to think of economic development. Now I include things like housing, child care slots, and after-school programs."

- **Form community partnerships to increase reach and impact.**
 - ✓ Invite new partners to support and expand the work of the steering group.
 - ✓ To avoid duplication, combine your efforts with organizations that are doing related work.
- **Open the Action Forum to the whole community.**

Invite everyone to the Action Forum. It's a great way to get more organizations involved and to attract volunteers for action projects.
- **Provide support and leadership for long-range results.**
 - ✓ Find the right leader(s) for action groups. You need strong leaders who know how to run meetings and help the group do its work.
 - ✓ Look for local resources to support your work. A church or Grange Hall might provide office space or a place to meet.
 - ✓ Keep telling the story. Do your best to let people know what's happening.

"In many towns, people are uncertain, unconnected, and hopeless. They had lost schools or good paying jobs. ... At the end [of the study circles] there was some can-do attitude. You just can't go out and buy that for towns that are struggling."

- **Network with other Horizons communities.**
 - ✓ Get advice. Learn what has worked for them, and what hasn't.
 - ✓ Invite people from other communities to come and tell their Horizons stories, and share their ideas, inspiration, and encouragement.

"We invited them to come to our very first meeting ... and they came and told us all the things that they were doing through Horizons ... it was really inspiring for our people to hear what can be done and this probably ... promoted more people to get started here."

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the Northwest Area Foundation?

The Northwest Area Foundation is a private, charitable organization dedicated to reducing poverty and building lasting prosperity. It serves eight states where the Great Northern Railway was located: Idaho, Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, and Washington. The Foundation invests in proven or promising organizations that help achieve the poverty reduction mission.

What is Horizons?

Horizons is an 18-month community leadership program aimed at reducing poverty in rural and reservation communities with populations of 5,000 or fewer and with histories of economic decline and significant population change. More than 200 communities have already participated; another 100 will be added from 2008-2010.

Horizons was launched in 2003. The communities ranged in population from 100 to 4,800, with poverty rates from 10 percent to 96 percent. Horizons II started in 2006 and ran through most of 2008.

What has the Northwest Area Foundation invested in Horizons?

From 2002-2008, NWAFF invested \$20 million in 200 communities, and another \$10 million will be invested from 2008-2010.

What are some early results in Horizons communities?

Through this collaborative effort, a critical mass of residents deliberated about local poverty and became involved in making decisions and taking actions to improve their communities. Some never before involved in civic life ran for public office and won; others joined organization boards, while others signed up to complete community projects.

Small town residents have made a significant impact across the eight-state region stretching from Minnesota to Washington.

Horizons Statistics

- 10,000 study circle participants
- 5,000 LeadershipPlenty® participants
- 40,000 community visioning participants
- 15% of each of 200 communities involved in some way
- 20% of communities have new leadership

What are Horizons communities learning?

Participants in Horizons communities, as well as external evaluators, have identified significant community learning, including these points:

- Residents are willing to work on a difficult issue like poverty.
- Change becomes more possible when many new people get involved.
- Small investments in rural and reservation communities by foundations yielded large returns.
- Leadership is not limited to the few, but instead can be found within each of us.
- Change can be a slow process; initial successes in taking action energize communities for longer term work.
- Support and coaching help communities succeed.

- Ongoing evaluation is useful; communities are eager for information on their progress.
- For communities to thrive, everyone must have the opportunity to prosper.

Who is evaluating Horizons as a community change approach?

Quality Evaluation & Development (QED) evaluates the Horizons project using multiple methods, including pre- and post-study circle surveys, a multi-year panel study, content analysis of community planning documents, and interviews with project partner staff, organizers in communities, staff from delivery organizations and dialogue participants.

Many of the key points in this booklet are drawn from QED's findings from evaluations of the pilot round and the first full implementation round of Horizons, known as "Horizons II." The Northwest Area Foundation funds QED's evaluation of Horizons.

What is Everyday Democracy?

Everyday Democracy (formerly the Study Circles Resource Center) is a national organization that helps local communities find ways for all kinds of people to think, talk and work together to solve problems. 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.

Everyday Democracy was created as the Study Circles Resource Center in 1989 by The Paul J. Aicher Foundation, a national, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization. Since 1989, we have worked with more than 550 communities across the United States on many different public issues.

How did Everyday Democracy become part of Horizons?

Following the first phase of Horizons, in 2003, the Northwest Area Foundation decided that community change efforts would be more likely to succeed if they began with public dialogue. To that end, Everyday Democracy was invited to develop a discussion guide.

Working together, the two organizations conducted focus groups on poverty, and solicited input from communities, extension services, Native American leaders, and experts on poverty. The result was *Thriving Communities: Working Together to Move from Poverty to Prosperity for All*. Horizons communities now begin their four-step process with dialogue based on *Thriving Communities*.

What is distinctive about Everyday Democracy's approach to community change?

Everyday Democracy's effective processes are based on these principles:

- Involve *everyone*. Demonstrate that the whole community is welcome and needed.
- Embrace diversity. Reach out to all kinds of people.
- Share knowledge, resources, power, and decision making.
- Combine dialogue and deliberation. Create public talk that builds understanding and explores a range of solutions.
- Connect deliberative dialogue to social, political, and policy change.