

VAN - Beginnings

VAN - How It All Started

photos by Andie Petkus Photography

Check out the video below to learn how VAN was created and its importance in Washington County.

Washington County has experienced two decades of explosive population and employment growth. With the region's economy and population still growing faster than the national average in 2000, the Washington County Board of Commissioners asked that a different approach be taken in updating the County's strategic blueprint. Before considering how it should change as an organization, the Board reasoned that the County needed to better understand how its community had transformed. Initial focus groups involving more than 100 leaders from all segments of the community resulted in two findings: 1) despite unparalleled economic growth, many basic needs in Washington County were not being met, and 2) the county lacked any real sense of community. The second point was underscored by a "we don't know one another" sentiment repeated throughout each of the focus group sessions. This lack of awareness or "community" immediately presented itself as an opportunity to build or improve the connections between organizations and individuals. Out of these early focus groups grew the VisionWest project, a countywide effort that sought to identify, better understand and develop strategies around community issues, while also building the capacity for collaborative community action. Community members representing business, non-profits, faith groups, public organizations and citizen advocate groups participated in the VisionWest issue development process. Beginning with more than 200 small group presentations that involved 1400 individuals ranging from corporate CEOs to newly arrived farm workers, the identification phase highlighted eight issues of broad community concern (basic needs, environment, housing, children and families, education, aging and disabilities, behavioral health care and primary health care). Next, an additional 400 volunteers stepped forward and formed Issue Teams that completed four months of rigorous analysis and strategy development. Their recommendations all included strategies that called for greater collaboration among the county's many well-developed sectors. The Issue Teams asserted that the capacity of these "islands of excellence" could be enhanced dramatically through greater partnership, not just within sectors, but across them as well. Encouraging and sustaining a heightened sense of community and the desire for tangible collaborative action was a fundamental VisionWest objective. As noted in the Issue Teams' reports, fundamental social concerns such as high school dropout rates and the lack of affordable housing defy solutions from a single institution. However, the demands felt by Washington County's many mission-driven organizations, as well as the realities of existing relationships and political dynamics, made it impractical for any one of them to assume the leadership role in the push for more productive partnerships. Enhanced collaboration was critical to Washington County's future, but it lacked a champion. In 2002 the Vision Action Network (VAN) was created in response to this need. VAN was formed as a private non-profit agency to be a catalyst, incubator and facilitator for resulting collaborative efforts to improve life for people throughout Washington County. A critical step in the formation of VAN was the creation of a 16-member Board of Directors made up of a diverse group of community leaders from education, social services, healthcare, business, government, and the faith community. With its unique perspective on community issues and needs, the VAN Board provides vision to help set priorities for the community and leadership to mobilize different sectors to respond to community needs.