Nonviolent Peaceforce



Window of Tolerance training ©NP

Case Study

Building Community-Based Safety in Rural Minnesota

United States

I. Executive Summary

Rural communities across Minnesota are facing escalating challenges to public safety and social cohesion. Residents report growing distrust in institutions, heightened threats toward marginalized groups, and deepening political polarization—all contributing to a diminished sense of safety and belonging. Once tight-knit communities are experiencing isolation, ideological division, and a breakdown in the relationships that traditionally supported mutual care and conflict resolution.

In response, Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) partnered with local organizations to pilot a community-led approach to safety rooted in nonviolence, trust-building, and local leadership in the Brainerd Lakes area and Northeast region (Cook County and Cloquet Valley) of Minnesota. This work focused on cultivating structures of safety and protection through trainings, workshops, and deep community engagement to support residents with the tools to prevent conflict and rebuild social trust.

This case study documents the lessons learned, strategies implemented, and community transformations that emerged over the course of this two-year initiative. It aims to serve as a resource for other rural communities navigating similar tensions and seeking people-centered approaches to safety that are inclusive, culturally grounded, and sustainable.

II. Context

In public meetings, community celebrations, protests, and vigils, rural Minnesota communities have experienced increased polarization and a decreased sense of safety. In 2020, in Murdock, MN, the Asatru Folk Assembly, which has been identified as a hate group, purchased an old church building and began to gather. Community members in Southwest Minnesota reached out to NP, fearing the Assembly would cause an escalation in threats of violence and outright harm. A few months later, in Pequot Lakes, Minnesota law enforcement was called in to bring order to a school board meeting that had devolved into a chaotic shouting match. The topic of the meeting was to discuss the district's diversity, equity and inclusion efforts. NP, not having seen this kind of behavior in their school board meetings before, expressed fears that culture wars were risking tipping into physical violence.

Residents of rural Minnesota communities have cited safety as one of the primary reasons they choose to live there, yet in recent years these communities have seen the growth of:

- Distrust of institutions by both marginalized groups and those opposing diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts;
- Anti-LGBTQ+ actions in schools, protests, and public spaces;
- A lack of relationships, communication, and cultural understanding between Tribal and non-Tribal communities, resulting in distrust and sometimes non-existent cooperation;
- Armed civilians appearing at protests and community gatherings, increasing fear and potential violence;
- Breakdown of social cohesion driven by increased political and ideological polarization;
- Loss of third spaces, where diverse community members can gather, converse, and be welcome; and
- The lack of established, community-driven structures for nonviolent conflict resolution and public safety.

These trends add up to a decrease in social connection and an increase in isolation—with lasting consequences for the health and safety of our communities. As former US Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy stated in the 2023 advisory, "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation":

> *Given the profound consequences of loneliness and isolation, we have an opportunity, and an obligation, to make the same investments in addressing social connection that we have made in addressing tobacco use, obesity, and the addiction crisis. ....*
>
> *If we fail to do so, we will pay an ever-increasing price in the form of our individual and collective health and well-being. And we will continue to splinter and divide until we can no longer stand as a community or a country. Instead of coming together to take on the great challenges before us, we will further retreat to our corners—angry, sick, and alone.*

We know there is another way. NP has developed locally-led unarmed protection strategies in small and larger communities facing conflicts and potential violence around the globe. This approach includes supporting community members in imagining what comprehensive safety can look and feel like and building and cultivating the networks and practices to achieve it.

Through the Rural MN Safety Project, NP partnered with local community organizations to build a structure for security that is guided and created by the communities themselves with the idea that this will serve as a model for other communities going through similar challenges. The long-term goal of this work has been to build social cohesion and inclusive communities in rural communities.

III. Program Intervention

Over the course of two years, the Rural MN Safety Project evolved from initial community sensing efforts into a dynamic partnership between local organizations and NP, rooted in deep listening, mutual learning, and a shared commitment to redefining what safety means in rural communities.

In the Brainerd Lakes area, led by The Sowing Room, and in the Northeast region, led by Northspan in Cook County and Cloquet Valley, the project began with a Phase 1 focus on relationship-building and community assessment. Each region tailored its approach: in Brainerd, the question “Who’s at your table?” anchored early dialogues with interested community members or individuals already involved in the work of our local partners, while in the Cloquet Valley, story circles served as a primary listening method. These community-driven conversations were complemented by surveys, in-depth interviews, and feedback sessions, laying the groundwork for understanding local safety challenges and opportunities. Altogether, 15 community-based events were held, reaching nearly 200 people.

NP’s introduction to communities came gradually through participation in community dinners, listening spaces, and an initial round of Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) trainings. These early sessions were designed not only to introduce UCP concepts—such as upstander intervention, de-escalation, and protective accompaniment—but also to allow NP to adapt facilitation in response to what communities were asking for. Throughout, NP partnered closely with Northspan and The Sowing Room, adjusting offerings in real-time as training needs became clearer and regional trust grew.

By 2024, Phase 2 of the project took hold. A new wave of holistic workshops emerged in October, marking a deeper shift. Trainings moved beyond introductions to focus on situational awareness, community-rooted safety frameworks, threat assessments, and the paradigm shift [from violence to nonviolence as a way to approach conflict].

Community partners began to explore how mutual security could be practiced more actively in everyday settings—like schools, public meetings, and police-civilian interactions.

This turning point was reinforced by the dissemination of research and findings from earlier community assessments (available upon request). As these reports circulated, they affirmed what many already felt: there was a hunger for more, particularly among young people and those historically excluded from safety conversations. This growing interest was met with expanded NP training sessions and evolving methods from partners, including youth-centered events and multilingual access.

> *"You cannot feel a sense of home and a sense of belonging in your community if you do not have safety first."*
>
> Amber Lewis, Northspan



Ethan Quezada and Nanyeni Glory conducting a training with residents in Rural Minnesota ©NP 2025

IV. Learnings

A. Grounded in Relationship: Community Organizing Must Move at the Speed of Trust

Unarmed Civilian Protection strategies hinge on moving "at the speed of trust," and this was clear in NP's engagement with community partners in rural Minnesota. As discussed above, NP began engaging rural Minnesota communities at the invitation of people worried about the increase of violence and isolation where they live. From there, the project inception began with building trust with local community partners: holding conversations and meetings to dig into their safety concerns, their visions and expectations of the work, and shared goals.

This approach allowed the NP team to orient itself around what the local community was experiencing in terms of violence, and the direction they wanted to take to build safety through nonviolence. This reflects a core through-line in NP's global approach: communities have the deep cultural rootedness and knowledge to know how best to build safety among themselves; NP is there to support that process with tools and resources. When issues arose in the planning and implementation of the project, the foundational trust built between NP and community partners allowed for those issues to be navigated jointly and in relationship. This relational approach leads to cross-pollination, in turn reshaping NP's own understanding of what safety work can look like.



"What I learned the most from this process, from our local partners, Dawn, Stef, and Amber, is how to organize community. I know how to come in and provide a training. But through this work I learned how to deeply listen to community. How to make spaces for them that aren't clinical, but that are human, that are effective in producing connections. I'm very grateful to be able to experience that in person. I bring this back to my community, my Latinx indigenous community – like the story circles. This was the way my community started building out our own security safety coalition. They've been able to have a plan and do their own trainings.

The secret ingredient was building community. I didn't know how to do that and our local partners taught me that through this work. That's what's so beautiful about being able to work with different communities, because that cross pollination does happen. And when we're able to share those lessons that's when we get to have enough knowledge and wisdom to create something that works to keep people safe."

Ethan Quezada, NP Trainer

B. Security takes many forms—listen to how communities define it for themselves

Partners began this project discussing interventions for physical safety, such as preparation for escalations at community events or school board meetings. However, as we began engaging with local community members, we found that one of the biggest needs raised was for psychological safety. Throughout the community, people did not know who they could trust anymore, leading many people to stop talking to one another and becoming increasingly isolated. There were multiple stories shared of neighbors, people upon whom community members used to rely on when they needed help at their home, who would no longer show up when a call for help went out, such as a home repair, due to political differences.

Safety and security takes many different forms; they are not limited to direct, physical violence. Whether or not overt violence is present, the feeling of insecurity can be deeply harmful, carrying individual and communal, psychosocial, and even physical repercussions. Across rural Minnesota communities, the inability to trust neighbors that families may have known for generations, led to the physical insecurity in the community. NP began providing trainings on tools such as de-escalation and situational awareness to help people have power over their physical safety. However, the trainings opened up broader conversations of how to engage with people across difference. Participants began brainstorming how to reclaim community spaces and bring people out of isolation and fear.

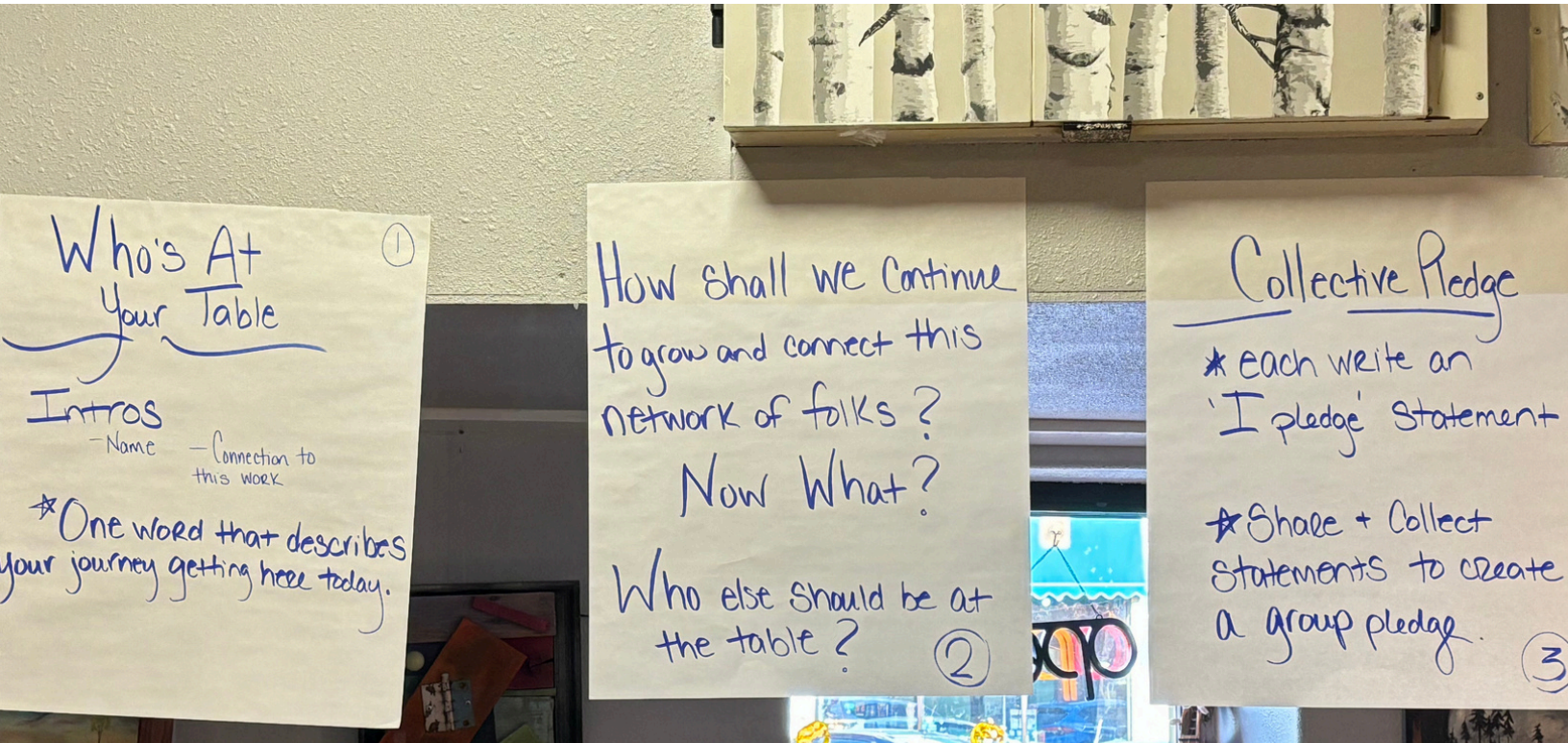
"What was originally imagined to be community training on de-escalation and peacekeeping tactics ebbed into something more. The realization that threats against psychological safety was having a greater impact than physical safety on the social fabric and mental health of our rural place was huge. We came together to keep each other physically safe but ended up discovering that our sense of personal connection to where we choose to call home also was incredibly dependent on authentic relationships built on trust and a sense of understanding each other's lived experiences."

Dawn Espe, Director, The Sowing Room

C. Adapt trainings to fit community needs, not the other way around

Not everyone was sure safety was a need in their community, but when we engaged deeper in relationship, we helped people to uncover what behaviors the community was engaging in that led to isolation and further insecurity.

Students became interested in this project too and had different, yet still unsafe, experiences to talk about. Their input helped shape trainings specific to their safety needs, as well as reflect back to the adults engaged in this work how they could support adult community members in understanding ways to be safe in their community.



“In Cook County, we actually had a little bit of a difficult time at the outset of this work. In Nothspan’s welcoming community program, many initial responses were ‘I don’t think we need that [safety work] here.’ But when we ran surveys on people’s experience of safety, their response to how to handle unsafe situations is to leave them, “to isolate myself.” And as adults it seems like that’s what we do—we go into hiding in our houses. But we know isolation only increases distrust and division in the community. We see a cycle of unsafety.

Youth don’t have that option. They are in schools every single day facing unsafe situations and violent challenges. They can’t hide. When we did this same work with youth, they were eager to identify threats and be coached in tools and techniques to de-escalate and lean into nonviolence. Youth in our community identified a number of threats and they identified that they couldn’t hide. They shared with us that they found so much value these simple tools and techniques. The youth put those tools into practice each day at school.

Once we built relationships with the adults, we could go deeper in our work. When we led sessions on threat assessments community members identified a number of threats they felt in their community. They said “this training is so needed, we need to have a plan in place.” We’ve seen real changes in the community. When community gatherings or potentially charged civic actions take place, adults and youth know how to plan ahead for safety for all. Our communities are practicing that there are better options than just hiding. That we can connect, we can be in public with people different than each other, or in disagreement, and do this safely, with nonviolence and connection. I believe, long term, this will make a difference in our community – decreasing polarization, and increasing trust and peace for all. After one workshop I said, “These are things I need to know, even as someone who has gone through so many workshops and trainings and has a masters degree in peacebuilding. The basics – like you have to be centered and de-escalated yourself before you step into a situation. That was revolutionary to me. I have that knowledge and now I’m able to share that with my kids. It is a personal impact and I see that in my communities as well.”

Amber Lewis, Consultant at Northspan, Duluth MN

"This work of building community safety creates ripple effects. It starts to take shape and something is created that is contagious in a way. People find the work in themselves. They realize I can walk into the room and I can create that space and I can fit people with a mindset of acceptance by leading the way."

Anna Claussen, Voice for Rural Resilience

D. Initial convenors and trainers pass the torch to community leaders

As one training participant noted during this project, "How do we ensure long-term steps for humanizing each other?" And as the authors of Safe Together write, "The answer came not in any single gathering – but in the way roles were handed over, ideas were shared, and community members took ownership."

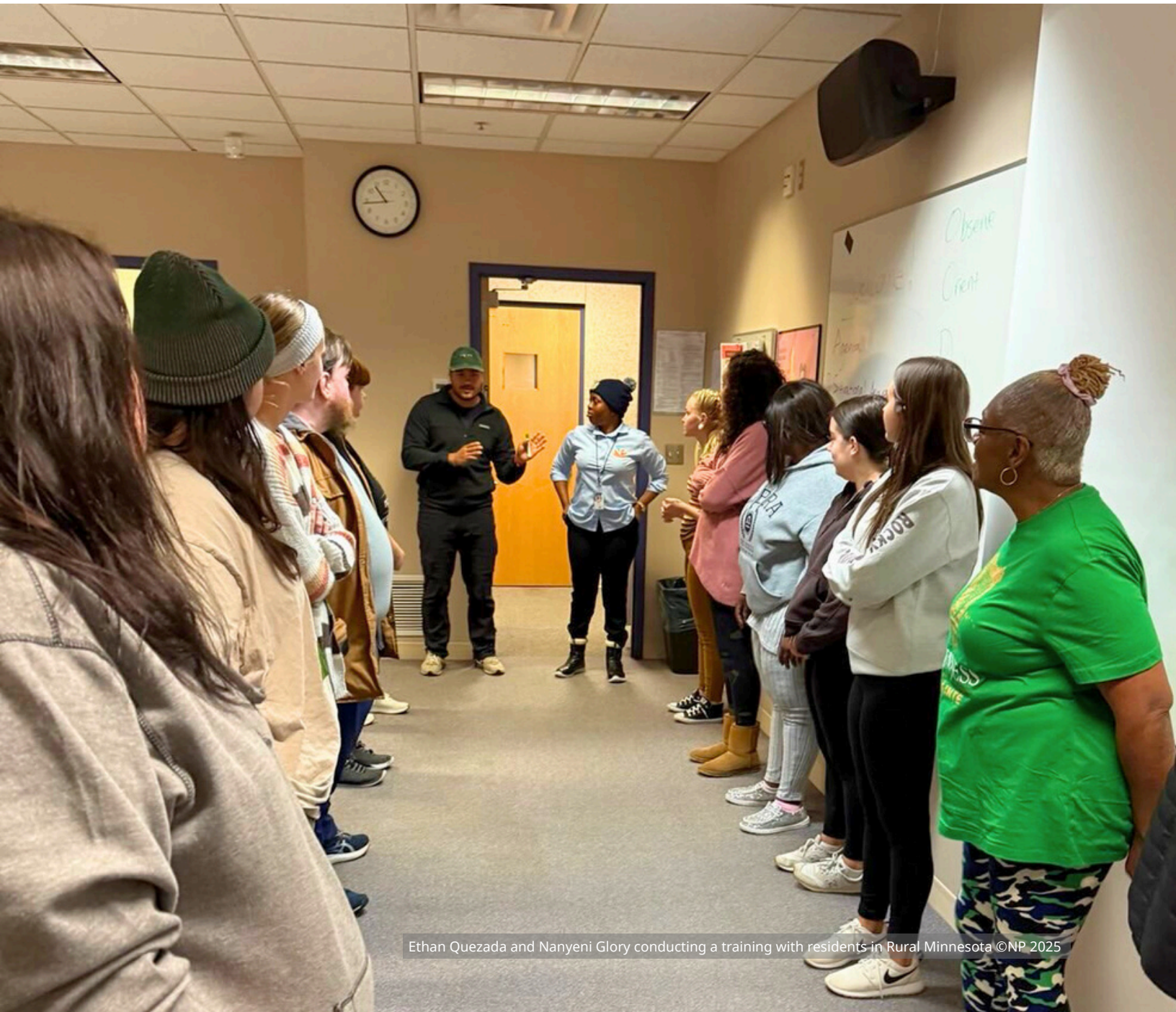
Recently, Northspan gathered with a local Native American community to support the development of their next strategic plan. Eddy (name changed), a deeply respected and knowledgeable Tribal Elder, opened the gathering with a ceremony. Eddy had previously joined trainings co-led by Northspan and NP – engaging in concepts such as threat assessments, de-escalation, and the ways to use nonviolence to address community tensions. Where Eddy lives, there are tensions among Tribal and non-Tribal communities, including prejudice, hate, and violence.

At the strategic planning sessions, Eddy shared with Northspan that the NP trainings had really stuck with him. He was bringing to his community his wisdom, as well as ideas he had learned to enhance psychological safety in his Tribal community. He believed the Nonviolent Peaceforce tools are useful for creating space for Tribal members to feel more comfortable living out their culture on and off the reservation. He plans to take the learnings and practices to build ties across differences with non-Tribal communities in order to reduce violence. In the Tribal strategic planning sessions, Eddy brought these ideas forward, ensuring the principles of nonviolence and protection would become embedded in the future goals and activities of his Tribal community.

Eddy is just one example of many project participants who, already deeply rooted in their community working for safety, has a whole host of resources and community members who he can engage with to continue the work of safety.

V. Looking Ahead

As NP, the Sowing Room, and Northspan bring this stage of work to a close, our evaluation partners have compiled learnings into a toolkit for communities. Framed as an interactive role playing game, Safe Together: Learnings from the Rural Minnesota Community Safety Project takes the reader through a step by step process to build trust in community, equip local leaders to spearhead this work, and cultivate safety from within. The tools and relationships developed through the project can continue to support communities as they carry the work forward in ways that fit their needs.



Ethan Quezada and Nanyeni Glory conducting a training with residents in Rural Minnesota ©NP 2025

Programme Partners

The Sowing Room (TSR) began as a newsletter and website. Through outreach, connections and conversations, it has emerged as a grassroots organization that supports projects, programs and initiatives designed to create social cohesion and a sense of belonging for all who live in and those yet to discover North Central Minnesota. Their mission is to provide spaces and places that create opportunities and pathways for underrepresented individuals and cultural communities in rural places.

Northspan provides economic development consulting to form connections, build capacity and access capital. As contracted and full-service consultants, they offer a deep and diverse portfolio of services. Through process management, conversation facilitation, and expert navigation of complex challenges, they work to turn ideas into actions and accomplishments. Northspan also powers Driving Access to Wealth and Networks (DAWN) which focus on supporting access to capacity, capital, and connections.

Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) is a global, non-governmental organization (NGO) that uses unarmed strategies to protect civilians in violent conflicts. NP's work is guided by principles of nonviolence, non-partisanship, the primacy of local actors, and civilian-tocivilian action. NP's work is based in a suite of methods known as "Unarmed Civilian Protection" (UCP) and the conviction that conflict is inevitable, but violence is not.

Voices for Rural Resilience (project co-evaluator) facilitates the social change necessary to protect and heal our natural world by embracing deep stories, locally relevant knowledge, resources, and experiences to shift the way people think and feel about climate change and each other.

Department of Public Transformation (project co-evaluator) is an artist-led organization that works locally and relationally to develop creative strategies for increased community connection, civic engagement, and equitable participation in rural places.

During 2024, the previous partnership between Region 5 and Nonviolent Peaceforce was transferred to The Sowing Room, however, the geographic community remains the same. Additionally, the previous partnership with Southwest Initiative Foundation ended in 2023, and work with Northspan began.