

HCIA addresses challenges of community building from a distance during COVID-19



Written By MARNI WALSH

The new Executive Director of Headwaters Communities in Action, Jennifer Payne says, "With the global pandemic and physical distancing now imposed on all of us, the challenge of creating and engaging community is more complicated than ever."

Headwaters Communities in Action (HCIA) is a citizens group that supports sustainable community well-being in the Headwaters Region. The organization sets and achieves goals by "hosting community conversations and encouraging people from different sectors and municipalities to work together."

"A big part of what people think of as community building is about getting together, being social, volunteering, attending celebrations, going to markets, shops and businesses, dinners, recreation and sporting events, fundraisers and festivals," says Ms. Payne. "I think our challenge will be to find new ways to take action from home for as long as we must, to keep connections happening through different means and new approaches to reassure, redirect and engage our community members so that we continue supporting each other as best we can in these challenging times."

She says, "Headwaters communities are still in action and making life better, together. All of our current project areas are engaged with front line efforts to connect volunteers, food producers, human services and funding opportunities with those who need them, during the pandemic and always."

Jennifer Payne wants her message to the community to be one of encouragement. "The COVID-19 crisis is affecting everyone differently. Our resilience is really being put to the test, and I think we're passing. I am continually amazed by the strength, ingenuity and heartfelt generosity on display in response to this crisis. Social and human services and other organizations are kicking into high gear to support those in hardship, businesses are adjusting to meet a new reality and changing needs, people are desperate to help each other and continue to find safe ways to do so."

"On a personal note," says Ms. Payne, "Now that the hamster wheel has been unplugged and life is pared back to the essentials, and after we address the important questions of how we get food and medicine, adjust to working at home, educate and occupy our children and take care of our elders," she advises everyone to "try to take a breath."

"Practice self care," she says. "Make a phone call. Go for a walk. Learn something new. Cook food. Limit your bad news intake and add a good news source to your feed. Make a donation. Have empathy for your short-tempered family members. Enjoy whatever little indulgences make this situation more liveable for you. Be ok with being idle. Reconnect with purposeful projects that got brushed aside when you didn't have time for them. We will get through this and we'll be stronger for it."

The newly appointed Executive Director says she "prefers the term physical distancing," rather than social distancing, "because we can still be social online or by phone—even old fashioned letter -writing is making a comeback." She says, "Just seeing some of the creative solutions people are coming up with to stay connected has been inspiring and so hopeful. Community is definitely top of mind for people right now, and I feel privileged to be taking on this role at such a crucial time."