

SOCIAL IMPACT CAPACITY BRIEF

INSIGHTS FOR SMALL DESTINATION ORGANIZATIONS

Social impact is the measurable result of welcoming and responsible tourism: a core capacity that determines destination organization resilience and relevance. Building social impact capacity gives destination organizations three critical advantages: strengthened organizational performance, deepened alignment across stakeholder priorities and reinforcement of the destination's role as an essential community partner.

When social impact is embedded into strategy and operations, both internally and externally, destinations are better equipped to navigate funding risk, build trusted relationships locally and drive broad visitation. But, for very small and small destinations with lean teams and limited resources, this capacity is often constrained, making it even more important to be intentional and strategic about where and how social impact efforts are developed.

This brief draws on insights from the 2025 Social Impact Assessment to examine capacity among very small destinations (annual operating budgets under \$1.5 million n=34) and small destinations (annual operating budgets between \$1.5 and 3 million, n=24). It compares holistically against practices from destinations with annual operating budgets above \$3 million, n=36, and offers tangible recommendations that smaller destinations can leverage.

Where Small Destinations Lead

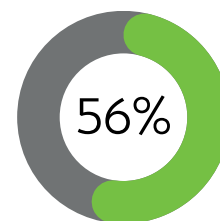
When it comes to social impact, very small and small destinations perform the strongest in two areas:

Community and **Board Governance**. Community assesses the organizational approach to engaging all members of the community, while Board Governance evaluates how the board reflects and supports the organization's commitment to social impact.

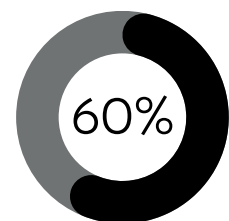
While the scores for these two dimensions are considered "emerging" or in early stages of maturity, they highlight an important structural truth: a destination organization's board shapes strategy while simultaneously reflecting the community's priorities. Strong performance signals alignment between organizational direction and local voice.

To guide effective strategy, this brief focuses on the largest performance gaps between small destinations and those above the \$3 million threshold: **Workplace**, **Community** and **Operations & Policy**. It also explores where two categories, **Accessibility** and **Stewardship**, the weakest performing across all destination organizations, can be enhanced.

Community Score



Board Governance Score



Emerging Maturity: 55-69%

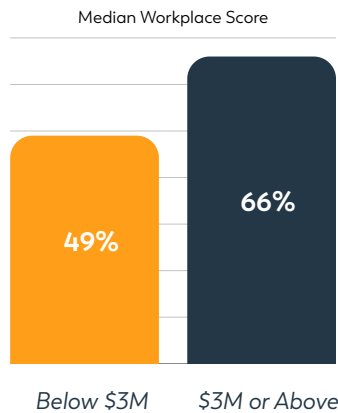
Comparatively, destinations with annual operating budgets of \$3 million or more have a median Community score of 70% and a median Board Governance score of 73%. This gap suggests that additional structure and intentionality can strengthen social impact capacity among smaller destinations.

WORKPLACE

Belonging Inside Shapes Welcome Outside

Workplace assesses how practices of welcoming and belonging are integrated in a destination's culture. Belonging in the workplace is a leading indicator of how "welcome" feels across an organization. When employees feel respected and included, they are better equipped to extend that same sense of welcome to visitors and residents.

In very small and small destination organizations, teams on average range from four to eight full-time employees. With a small team, workplace culture - through leadership behavior, trust and empowerment - becomes operational. Just as boards shape a destination organization's direction and reflect community voice, internal culture determines how that direction is carried forward. In small teams, belonging is a strategic capability.



Where very small and small destinations are doing well:

- 90% of leaders demonstrate their commitment to impact by fostering a welcoming work environment.
- 86% have initiatives in place to support employee engagement.
- 80% have a workplace impact strategy that aims to enhance community engagement.

Where to focus:

- Define what belonging or social impact means in your organization. Connect it directly to your mission, team performance, your visitor promise and your role in the community.
- Create accountability. Assign owners, timelines and metrics for culture and impact initiatives so progress can be tracked, not assumed.
- Invest in ongoing learning. Regular conversations and trainings around belonging, culture and community issues help build trust, psychological safety and a strong internal sense of community. Extend these educational opportunities to board directors or executive committees.



Looking for Inspiration?

Check out Visit Greater Palm Springs' [Community Impact Story](#).

COMMUNITY

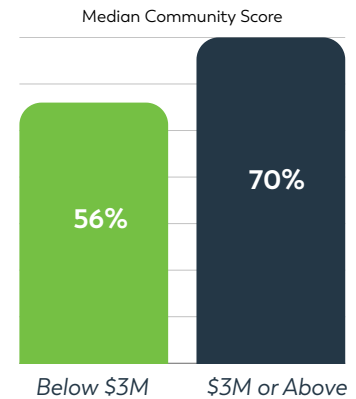
Turn Presence Into Strategy

Community measures a destination's approach to engaging all members of the community.

Community impact is strongest when destinations show up and codify intent into strategy. When engagement moves from presence to true partnership, tourism growth can align with community vitality, build trust with residents and ensure that economic benefits are visible and shared.

Where very small and small destinations are doing well:

- 87% of destinations' external messaging recognizes the diversity of communities in their destination.
- 81% of destinations take an intentional approach to being inclusive in the community.
- 79% of destinations' external messaging recognizes the diversity of visitors they want to attract.



Where to focus:

- Establish partnerships with community organizations. Co-design programs and support relevant causes, reflecting local needs and values.
- Work with various community groups to shape messaging that will resonate with visitors you want to attract.
- Extend community into unique supplier relationships. Treat local, diverse and values-aligned vendors as a community strategy.
- Train members on the importance of welcome, connecting to your vision and strategy.
- Create feedback loops to make your destination more welcoming. Put simple systems in place to gather, analyze and act on visitors' feedback.
- Recruit from your community. When roles or board positions open, look locally to deepen representation. Extend this approach to hiring models, internship pathways or vendor relationships, ensuring that tourism investment circulates within the community.
- Invest in inclusive sales and marketing strategies.



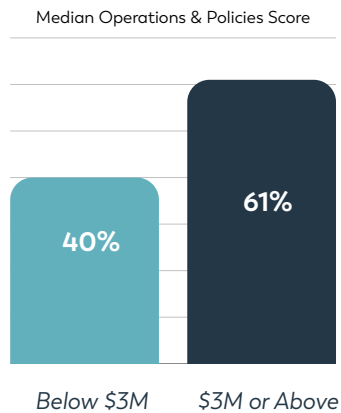
Looking for Inspiration?

Check out Visit Aurora's [Community Impact Story](#).

OPERATIONS & POLICIES

Build Infrastructure for Impact

Operations and policies assesses the creation of foundational structures for developing impact-led strategies as well as the recruitment and retention efforts within an organization. These practices are the backbone for a supportive and welcoming workplace culture. Capacity grows fastest when feedback and accountability are both in place.



Where very small and small destinations are doing well:

- 100% offer all employees access to professional development.
- 96% offer paid time off and sick leave.
- 86% offer flexible work schedules and arrangements.
- 83% consider employee behavior and its impact on the work environment when evaluating performance.
- 81% evaluate and write job descriptions to remove bias.
- 78% accommodate religious practices and cultural holidays into consideration when scheduling meetings or trainings.

Where to focus:

- Expand recruitment practices, such as using third-party platforms to reach broader talent pools. Create cross-functional interview panels, use AI for resume screening and collaborate with local organizations to attract credible candidates.
- Offer targeted benefits. Compared to larger destinations, small destinations are less likely to offer extended benefits such as phased return from parental leave, lactation rooms or childcare assistance.
- Evaluate leadership by their ability to lead diverse teams. Even though teams may be small or similar in terms of background and ability, this intentionality supports staff as they show up in the community.
- Conduct employee engagement surveys. While 71% of larger destinations field surveys annually, only 20% of small destinations do so.
- Develop succession planning strategies and programs to ensure talent of all backgrounds and abilities are represented.



Looking for Inspiration?

Check out Destination Greater Victoria's [Community Impact Story](#)

ACCESSIBILITY

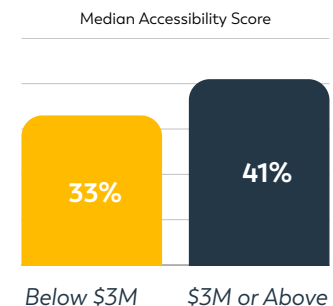
Responding to a Critical Visitor Market

Accessibility is not just a measure of how welcoming a destination is: it is a business imperative tied to a critical and growing segment of the visitor market. Travelers with disabilities, and those who travel with them, make decisions based on how confidently and comfortably they can experience a place. The same infrastructure, information and design choices that support visitors also enhance daily life for residents across the community.

Accessibility assess the organizational approach to understanding and creating accommodations for people who need additional assistance in the destination. Scores remain among the lowest across all social impact measures, signaling a significant opportunity for capacity growth. This is particularly important for destinations seeking to strengthen relevance and long-term economic impact.

Where very small and small destinations are doing well:

- 67% have defined accessibility, either by working with an expert or on their own.
- 65% adhere to accessibility standards.
- 59% meet or are working to adhere to WCAG 2.1 Guidelines.



Where to focus:

- Begin internal conversations to shape what can become an accessible travel vision.
- Carve out a small budget. Often this starts in marketing, but its impact extends across the entire destination.
- Conduct an audit. Assess digital and physical touchpoints to understand current state and identify quick wins. Ensure that this information is readily available on your website.
- Define accessibility with experts. Partner with disability experts to develop realistic priorities or initiatives, and adhere to standards in built and digital environments.
- Develop an accessibility-specific marketing strategy.
- Offer accessibility training to staff and partners.



Looking for Inspiration?

Check out Alabama Mountain and Lakes Tourism's [Community Impact Story](#).

STEWARDSHIP

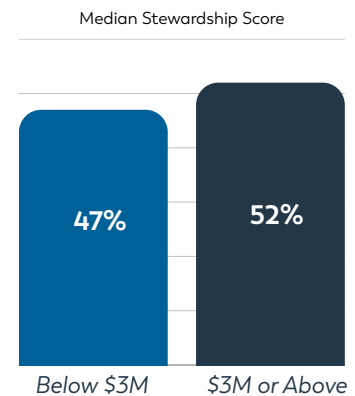
Where Community, Environment and Visitor Experience Meet

Stewardship focuses on how your organization upholds its responsibility to the broader community. It assesses practices related to leadership, initiatives and the alignment of social impact goals with destination development.

Treating stewardship as part of a social impact strategy aligns tourism growth with resident priorities, visitor expectations and long-term destination resilience. While most destinations report having stewardship initiatives in place, deeper integration, measurement and visible accountability are what transform stewardship from programmatic activity into sustained impact.

Where very small and small destinations are doing well:

- 73% have appointed ownership for destination stewardship.
- 72% of destination teams understand the meaning and value of stewardship.
- 60% of destination boards understand the value of stewardship initiatives.



Where to focus:

- Define stewardship within your destination.
- Measure the environmental or social impact of visitation. This can include protecting and upholding cultural and natural assets.
- Increase community and visitor awareness of stewardship storytelling.
- Highlight programs, like nature or heritage trails, that connect environmental sustainability and community well-being.



Looking for Inspiration?

Check out Elkhart County CVB's [Community Impact Story](#).

FROM INTENT TO IMPACT

As very small and small destinations move into strategic planning cycles, start with reflection and dialogue to move from intention to impact. Ask yourself:

1

SOCIAL IMPACT IS THE MEASURABLE RESULT OF WELCOMING AND RESPONSIBLE TOURISM.

What are we doing to make our destination more welcoming? What are we doing to make our destination more responsible?

2

WHY DOES MEASURING WELCOMING AND RESPONSIBLE TOURISM MATTER?

Why does social impact matter to us as an organization? To our stakeholders? To our residents? To our visitors?

3

WHERE IS OUR CAPACITY STRETCHED TOO THIN?

Where are we unable to move the needle on our social impact work because we lack time, tools, people or funding?

4

CAN WE SEE AND NAME THE IMPACT?

Can we point to specific people, places or communities who are benefiting from our social impact efforts?

5

ARE WE TELLING IMPACT STORIES?

Are we currently sharing stories of the impact we're creating on our board, among local members or partners and within the community?

Use Destinations International's [Community Impact Stories](#) and the [Social Impact Framework](#) as practical resources to turn these conversations into action. Guide focused conversations with boards, staff and stakeholders about where to act next and ensure that social impact is a core lens for how your destination plans, invests and measures success.

