

## ACTS OF KINDNESS MAINE – PROGRESS REPORT 2023 TO PRESENT

This has been an astonishing first year of full-scale activities for [Acts of Kindness Maine \(AOK Maine\)](#). We went from not much more than an idea in early 2023 to becoming a vibrant nonprofit touching the lives of many people throughout Maine and beyond. The hunger for connection and belonging in America combined with the power of kindness to bridge divides have been powerful catalysts for our work. At a time when Americans seem divided in so many ways, kindness is a welcome rare exception. Whether straight or gay; Black, white or brown; conservative or liberal, few people argue that we don't need more kindness in our lives.

AOK Maine's vision and our theory of change are unique in the national landscape. We go far beyond just putting "be kind" signs in yards. We are pursuing the creation of a statewide "civic architecture" that embeds an ethos of kindness within Maine's existing civic structures and creates new civic structures, where needed.

We're not just talking about "random" acts of kindness. We are helping individuals and institutions embrace kindness as an intentional practice, as a discipline, as a social and organizational framework. We are exploring kindness as the foundation for local and state policy policymaking and are seeking to bring kindness into the realm of politics to help heal the divisiveness and vitriol that is tearing apart the fabric of society.

We view kindness as an overarching ethos that encompasses the full range of human values, [from courage, honesty, and forgiveness, to beauty, presence, and grace, and much more](#). Our [Wheel of Kindness](#) is a powerful tool that underpins many of our activities.

Maine, we believe, can set an example of what can be achieved when a state devotes itself to an ethos of kindness, compassion, and caring for each other. Is this idealistic? Of course it is. Ideals are needed now more than ever. In an era of radical extremism and outright social and political cruelty, we should be aiming for nothing less than radical kindness as a force for social change.

As a state of mostly small communities, Maine provides a fertile seedbed for weaving multiple community-wide efforts into an integrated statewide foundation of kindness. Our goal is to "operationalize" kindness in everyday life.

We have learned in the past year that our vision is achievable. Everywhere we turn, people are asking us to give talks, workshops, and classes. Our on-the-ground efforts began in earnest in the fall of 2023, with the launch of our Radical Kindness adult education courses, which opened the door to myriad other activities. To date, we've achieved success with pilot projects in the following areas:

- Adult education classes
- Senior Citizen workshops
- Rotary Club talks
- College & University guest-teaching
- Monthly Kindness Meetups
- Faith Community activities
- Substance Use Rehabilitation activities

- Civic Leadership programs
- Community Kindness Committee development
- Regional and national conference keynote speeches and presentations

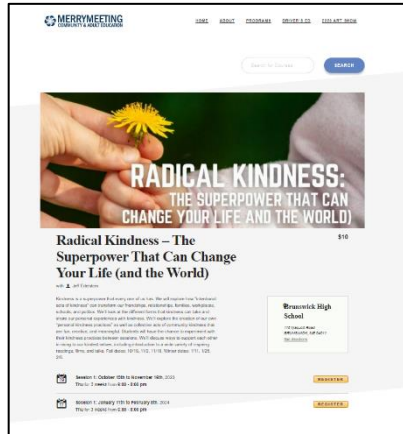
We aim to build on these initial pilot successes by bringing our efforts to entire systems throughout the state. For example, all twenty adult education programs that we contacted were enthusiastic about hosting a Radical Kindness course. From these, we chose eight programs to work with starting in the fall of 2023. With additional staff and volunteers, we can offer kindness courses in all 69 adult education programs in Maine. This type of statewide expansion is achievable in all areas of our work, including higher education, businesses, non-profits, public libraries, senior citizen agencies, Rotary Clubs, and more, through which we can directly connect with tens of thousands of Mainers, creating transformative change throughout Maine's communities.

We are incredibly grateful to our partners who have helped us cultivate a culture of kindness in Maine and beyond in various ways, including Avesta Housing, DisruptHR, Chaplaincy Institute of Maine, Maine Development Foundation, Southern Maine Agency on Aging, Rotary International, University of New England, Saint Joseph's College of Maine, Tuft's University, College & University Professional Association for Human Resources, Spirit Corps, Maine Credit Union League, National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, Northern Light Mercy Hospital, the Portland, Biddeford, Massabesic, York, Merrymeeting, Bonny Eagle, Windham/Raymond, and Sacopee Valley Adult Education programs, and a number of other talented and heart-centered colleagues and friends who have been invaluable thought-partners and allies in our efforts. Thank you. We're all in this together!

Following you will find a report on AOK Maine's activities since we launched in earnest in early 2023, followed by a description of our mission, our Theory of Change, and our workplan for moving forward.

## A YEAR OF LEARNING, PILOTING, PARTNERING

**Adult education courses:** We reached over one hundred students through courses in Portland, Brunswick, Biddeford, Windham, York, Standish, Cornish, and Waterboro in partnership with local adult and community education programs. The courses were quite well-received and in some cases participants enthusiastically continued meeting even after the course was completed.



Our courses go beyond simply “teaching kindness.” We have provided participants the chance to connect with each other about the struggles and joys of life. The caring and support that students have provided each other has been breathtaking as they have shared about births, deaths, divorces, reconciliations, betrayals, and other meaningful and challenging life events.

We developed a three-part format for our classes: 1) sharing, checking in and support; 2) discussing articles and videos on various aspects of kindness; and 3) skill-building on specific kindness methods. We developed unique tools such as a kindness self-assessment and a “wheel of kindness” to guide daily, weekly or monthly kindness practices.

Our skill-building activities focus on emotional validation vs. invalidation, empowerment vs. drama, non-violent communication, compassionate boundary-setting, and other kindness-related skills.

We look forward to expanding our offerings to all 69 adult and community education programs in Maine.



**Gratitude in Action:** Cultivating gratitude has become a popular way to cope in these troubling times through “gratitude practices” and meditations. At AOK Maine, we are helping people go further by putting their gratitude into action. In our classes and workshops, we encourage people to express their gratitude directly to people, and at most of our events, we provide blank thank-you cards for participants to send to people they have been touched by. Since we began this practice, participants at our events have taken well over a thousand cards, sending ripples of kindness throughout our communities.



**Senior Citizen workshops:** In partnership with Southern Maine Agency on Aging and Avesta Housing, we held workshops for senior citizens in Kittery, Yarmouth, South Portland, and Sanford, reaching around 120 people in total, with highly positive outcomes. Simply describing the ways that AOK Maine is bringing more kindness to Maine lifted the spirits of attendees who, at this late stage of their lives, feel discouraged by the increasing divisiveness and outright cruelty they see around them. It gave them a sense of hope for the next generations. Attendees had a chance to share stories about kindnesses they have experienced in their lives, providing a chance to share parts of themselves that even longtime friends in the group might not have been aware of and a chance to reflect on people and experiences to be grateful for. On more than one occasion, someone identified someone else in the room as the kindest person they'd ever known. We also heard stories about life-changing "tough love" acts of kindness, apologies and forgiveness given years after conflict, and about acts of generosity and caring. As one of the site coordinators said: "Thank you so much for presenting at the cafe! There was great feedback. The clients had a fantastic time. It was wonderful seeing and hearing the clients sharing their thoughts and interacting with one another!" You can hear participants sharing their stories of kindness [here](#).



**Rotary Clubs:** We gave well-received presentations at Rotary Clubs in Southern Maine. One of the presentations can be viewed [here](#). Rotary International is a natural partner for AOK Maine, given its status as the leading international network of service-oriented community civic clubs. We have begun discussions with [Rotary District #7780](#) about possibilities for collaboration with all of their 35 Rotary clubs in Maine.

**Specialty Keynotes and Workshops:** We designed and implemented activities for diverse audiences, including the Keynote Presentation for the annual meeting of a chapter of the Maine Credit Union League; a Kindness for the Holidays workshop for the Chaplaincy Institute of Maine, and a kindness workshop for a group home for women in substance-use recovery.

**College & University classes:** We were invited to guest-teach classes in education, communications, and business ethics at Saint Joseph's College and University of New England, each of which we approached through a lens of kindness. Our teaching was very well-received, with feedback including statements like "Jeff, you were amazing today!!! The students loved you, and so did I" and "Jeff Edelman was easily my favorite guest speaker of the semester."

**Community Kindness Committees:** We began developing the concept of "Community Kindness Committees" to address isolation, separation and division in Maine's communities. These committees will create mutual aid rosters; support former inmates, shut-ins, individuals struggling with mental health issues, returning veterans, and others facing special challenges; run kindness-focused book groups, social events, student activities; and more. Kindness can be a powerful organizing principle to bring people together across the cultural and political divides increasingly prevalent in our communities today. These committees will serve as a focal point for our activities with partners such as adult education programs, social service agencies, Rotary Clubs, colleges

and universities, libraries, K-12 education, faith institutions, non-profits, local government, and community residents. Read more [here](#).

**Human Resources Talks:** AOK Maine’s Jeff Edelstein gave the Keynote Address at the [College & University Professional Association for Human Resources’](#) New England Conference in November 2023 to over 80 HR directors and staff from a diverse mix of institutions, ranging from elite private universities to community colleges. Given how fraught the field of HR in higher education is in these polarized times, the concept of kindness as an organizing principle in HR was very well-received. Read the address [here](#) along with other materials relating to kindness in the workplace and in higher education.

Jeff also presented at [DisruptHR-Portland](#) in June of 2024, an event featuring eight “lightning presentations” on cutting-edge topics in Human Resources. Jeff’s presentation of “Radical Kindness: The 21st Century Superpower” was selected by the organizers as the closing presentation in order to send the attendees out into the world carrying the message of kindness. Watch the presentation [here](#).

**Maine Development Foundation (MDF):** AOK Maine partnered with MDF’s [Leadership Maine](#) program which provided AOK Maine with a 5-person practicum team for an eight-month period. In addition to valuable research on kindness initiatives around the U.S., the practicum team conducted an experiential kindness project with the full 35-person Leadership Maine cohort, measuring the impact of personalized acts of kindness. Practicum team members included senior leaders with the Foundation for Portland Public Schools, Bangor Savings Bank, New Ventures Maine, MaineHealth, and Maine DEP. The final report and slide show are [here](#).



AOK Maine was invited to attend a peer consultation session with Maine Development Foundation’s 24-person [Institute for Civic Leadership](#) (ICL) 2023 cohort. The process provided us with valuable insights about how to move forward as a startup nonprofit and helped us build relationships with a number of ICL participants interested in supporting our mission.



**Frontiers of Democracy Conference:** AOK Maine played an active role at [Frontiers of Democracy](#), an annual conference at Tufts University’s Tisch College of Civic Life that convenes practitioners and scholars from across the United States and overseas. The 2023 theme of “Religious Pluralism and Robust Democracy in Multiracial Societies” aligned perfectly with AOK Maine’s use of kindness to bridge the gap between diverse faith communities and provide ways for people who have left organized religion to engage around values of kindness as a tool for creating healing in America’s increasingly fractured communities. AOK Maine’s Jeff Edelstein conducted a well-attended breakout session titled [Democracy: What’s Kindness Got to Do With It?](#) that explored the intersections between kindness, religious pluralism and democratic functions. Jeff also organized and facilitated a dinner discussion with a diverse set of conference presenters at the forefront of America’s religious pluralism and interfaith activities. The conference served a valuable role in introducing the concept

of kindness as an organizing principle to the field of democracy reform as well as to a number of national leaders in the religious pluralism and interfaith communities.

### **National Conference on Dialogue & Deliberation:**

AOK Maine’s Jeff Edelstein served as the “Chief Kindness Officer” for this [conference](#) in Atlanta of over 300 mediators, facilitators and academics from throughout the U.S. and Canada. We created a [Kindness Scavenger Hunt](#) and provided blank thank-you cards to all attendees to write personal notes of gratitude to session presenters, venue staff, or whomever they wished. We also conducted three well-attended sessions:

- “How Kindness-Informed Dialogue Can Reshape Society”
- “Kindness - Superpower for the 21st Century & Beyond”
- “The Power Of Kindness - A Courageous Pathway In An Age Of Uncertainty”

The conference provided us with new ideas for our work and helped us expand our network of partners throughout the U.S. and Canada. The interest expressed by individuals and organizations from around the U.S. in implementing similar statewide programs has inspired us to develop our programs in ways they can easily be adopted in other states.



## WHAT IS OUR MISSION AND OUR THEORY OF CHANGE FOR ACCOMPLISHING IT?

Humanity is experiencing social, technological, and environmental change at a pace and scale never before seen, while at the same time we are losing the social and civic structures that used to provide community coherence. Thus, we believe that kindness is needed now more than ever, both to support our communities and each other in these challenging times, and as a critical component to meeting those challenges, resolving their inherent societal conflicts, and achieving solutions to the underlying problems. AOK Maine's mission is to create a robust culture of kindness throughout Maine using a set of strategies that can be replicated in every state in America, resting on the twofold premise that:

- Kindness is a public good desperately needed in all aspects of our lives in and of itself as one of the most important attributes of healthy communities; and
- By cultivating a more kind society, *we will achieve measurable progress on important societal issues*: homelessness, suicide, loneliness and isolation, child abuse and neglect, poverty, racism, deterioration of social cohesion, and a lack of a sense of meaning and purpose in many people's lives.

AOK Maine's efforts to achieve a kinder society are based on the following multi-faceted theory of change:

**To create a robust movement for change, people need a clear simple concept, word, or slogan to rally around.** For example, the slogan "Black Lives Matter" has provided a compelling touchstone for those on the political left, while for those on the right, "America First" has served that role. We believe the word "kindness" has a particular type of power in that it bridges nearly all social and political divides; lies at the heart of all faith traditions; and has personal meaning for every one of us. AOK Maine also uses phrases like "Radical Kindness" and "The Power of Kindness" to further inspire people.

**Strategy matters.** The deficit of kindness in modern society is not due to a lack of desire among people for more kindness in their lives and in their communities. Almost everyone *wants* to be (more) kind, but we face obstacles, are too busy, or sometimes don't even know how. Thus, by acting strategically to remove the barriers to kindness, create opportunities that make kindness easier, teach kindness skills, and provide incentives, people *will* act with greater kindness. Well-crafted strategies are needed because the barriers to kindness in our modern society can be quite high, and because our culture reinforces deep-seated patterns that work against kindness. Simply placing "Be Kind" signs in yards is a totally inadequate strategy. But with a multi-faceted multi-level integrated statewide approach, that takes place over the long-term, and that continually evolves and adapts to changing conditions and new learnings, a kinder and more compassionate society can be achieved.

**Leadership is critically important.** Individuals, institutions and communities need inspiration from those leading the way who can demonstrate that change is achievable. AOK Maine is cultivating leaders throughout the state committed to operationalizing and infusing kindness in themselves, their institutions, and their communities, and we are developing methods to publicize and promote success stories and measurable outcomes.

**People need support from each other.** Kindness is *not* purely an individual trait; it flourishes in groups. AOK Maine is creating spaces where people feel a sense of belonging to something bigger

than themselves, part of a movement dedicated to cultivating kindness, both inwardly and outwardly, in order to create a better world. By providing supportive environments with a sense of solidarity, people can be empowered to take steps towards greater kindness, in ways both large and small.

**Many small steps add up to a big difference.** Incremental actions on a wide enough scale can reach a tipping point where wholesale change takes off like wildfire, sometimes in ways entirely unforeseen. History shows that when enough people take small steps the ripple effects grow exponentially. This is why AOK Maine is taking a multi-faceted large-scale integrated approach to the cultivation of kindness in all aspects of life in Maine.

**Public policy matters:** Wholesale societal change must include a focus on public policy. Policy debates often revolve around whether proposed policies are just or fair - important attributes to be sure - but to create the kind of communities we all want to live in, equal emphasis must also be placed on whether policy proposals are kind. Assessing the kindness of public policy is a new frontier, and it would open up a whole different type of debate. It would force decisionmakers to explore what kindness actually means, how it might differ for different stakeholders, and how kindness intersects with justice, as plays out with Restorative Justice practices.

**We have all the assets we need here in Maine for wholesale social transformation; what we need is to leverage them and align them towards the cultivation of kindness:**

*Individuals:* AOK Maine envisions and is working towards the deployment of an “army” of individuals to help lead and facilitate kindness activities in organizations, businesses and institutions throughout the state, who can be recruited from Maine’s vast array of social, civic and religious organizations. Maine has over a thousand churches, synagogues, mosques and other spiritual institutions; over 60 Rotary Clubs; 29 colleges and universities with a collective enrollment of over 70,000 students; 204 high schools with a collective enrollment of over 60,000 students; thousands of alumni of leadership programs such as [Leadership Maine](#), [Institute for Civic Leadership](#), [Education Leaders Experience](#); and thousands of individuals who have either served as state or local officials or run for such offices. With sufficient staff and resources for outreach, training, management and support, thousands of volunteer kindness leaders, ambassadors, and facilitators can be recruited and deployed in communities throughout the state.

*Nonprofits:* Nonprofits touch the lives of a sizeable portion of Maine’s population in one way or another and are, by their very nature, kind organizations, but they do not necessarily include the cultivation of kindness as part of their missions or activities. If they were to do so, the impact on the overall temperament of the state would be significant. For most nonprofits, regardless of whether they are focused on social issues, the arts, conservation, or other areas, a kindness perspective could be integrated into their activities without diluting their core focus, and in fact, in many cases, it can help support their core focus.

*Businesses and Corporations:* The private sector represents both a hugely untapped asset for cultivating kindness in society, and a place of great need for kindness in these times where the workplace has become fraught with divisions and discontent. [Nearly nine out of ten young workers](#) view mental health and kindness as high priorities in the workplace, but believe most employers don’t provide adequate support systems. AOK Maine believes that leveraging the power of the private sector as a force for the cultivation of kindness in our



communities is the next wave of corporate social responsibility, both in creating more kindness in the workplace and also taking that kindness out into the community. The high degree of interest we have experienced from Human Resource professionals supports that belief.

**Money matters:** Programs require resources, whether for personnel, materials, promotion, etc. Fortunately, there are multiple sources of funding that can sustain a statewide kindness infrastructure:

*Individuals:* We believe that individuals will support programs, not only for those they participate in (adult education classes, workshops, etc.), but also to support overall kindness-based civic infrastructure. We aim to generate the same type of support for kindness programs as exists for issues like environmental advocacy and conservation.

*Businesses and corporations:* There is a great need and demand for kindness in the workplace in these times, in order for Maine's companies to succeed, as demonstrated by the interest in our programs from Human Resource professionals. We are developing programs that will be provided to the private sector on a fee basis, which will both support those programs and generate revenue for other kindness programs.

*Philanthropy:* The philanthropic center is increasingly recognizing the importance of supporting values-based programs and as we continue to grow and demonstrate success, we believe that there is enormous potential to obtain philanthropic support for the creation of a sustainable kindness organizational infrastructure in Maine and beyond.

*Government:* We believe kindness is a public good and that certain aspects of a statewide kindness infrastructure are amenable to government funding, such as kindness in the public school system and community kindness committees at the local level.

## **NEXT STEPS THROUGH 2025**

### **EDUCATION**

- Continue [Radical Kindness](#) Adult Education courses (2024)
- Launch [Moral Courage](#) Adult Education courses (scheduled to begin in September 2024).
- Recruit and train volunteers to lead Adult Education courses statewide (2024).
- Continue guest-teaching and providing workshops at colleges and universities (2024).
- Recruit Kindness candidates for School Boards (2025)
- Advocate for state commission on SEL and Kindness in the schools (2025).
- Establish Higher Education Kindness Consortium (2025).

### **COMMUNITY**

- Continue development of local/regional [Community Kindness Committees](#) (2024).
- Launch Monthly “Kindness Cafes” in Portland region (2024).
- Develop kindness activities in partnership with Portland neighborhood associations (2024).
- Recruit and train volunteers to host [Kindness Potlucks](#) in their homes (2024).
- Launch Public Library kindness book groups/clubs. Click [here](#) for Kindness reading materials (2025).
- Launch monthly “statewide act of kindness” promoted through partner organizations, social media, and traditional media (2025).

## **OUTREACH**

- Exhibit and speak at [Common Ground Country Fair](#) (confirmed for September 2024, attendance ~64,000) (2024).
- Continue conducting keynotes and workshops, as opportunities arise (2024).
- Launch monthly newsletter (2025).

## **WORKPLACE**

- Launch “[Kindness in the Workplace](#)” initiatives for private, public and non-profit entities (2025).

## **PUBLIC POLICY, POLITICS & GOVERNMENT**

- Conduct Kindness Debates for 2024 elections (2024).
- Pilot Kindness-based citizen dialogues (2024).
- Conduct research and development for a “[Kindness in Public Policy Consortium](#)” involving Maine colleges and universities (2024).
- Recruit Kindness candidates for local and state offices (2025).
- Create state’s first local-level [Kindness Commissioner](#) (2025).

## **FAITH**

- Explore methods to connect with the 1,000+ faith institutions in the state.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

- Recruit intern(s) and volunteers (2024).
- Fundraising for hiring of staff:

Phase 1:

Project Manager  
Project Assistant

Phase 2:

Executive Director  
Administrative Assistant  
Workplace Program Director  
Adult Education Program Director  
Community Programs Director  
Communications/Social Media Director  
Development Director

- Continued development of AOK Maine Advisory Council/Board of Directors.
- Nonprofit incorporation.