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Dear Colleague,

I am providing this letter of reference in support of Jeff Blair of Facilitated Solutions, LLC. I have worked with Mr. Blair since 2016 on a prestigious research program funded by the National Science Foundation called OysterFutures. Our goal was to test a systematic approach for conducting collaborative policy development that is grounded in sound science, and for this we chose the Consensus Solutions process as applied to the public oyster fishery in the Choptank and Little Choptank Rivers in Maryland. The debate on how to bring back oysters, the industry, and ecosystem is highly contentious in Maryland.

Our research program was a huge success – after 150 years of conflict about what to do about the oyster, we were able to achieve consensus in just two years. A large part of the resounding success of our research program is due to the Consensus Solutions process which Jeff Blair had a leadership role in developing as well as to Mr. Blair's outstanding facilitation skills.

Mr. Blair's outstanding facilitation skills were a key element to the success of the program. The respectful dialogue, constructive focus, and positive space that Mr. Blair created through his facilitation allowed people who had testified against each other in Maryland's legislature to share their concerns, their hurt, and their hopes in a way that moved people toward mutual understanding and respect. We are very grateful for this gift which he has given our community. In addition, he was able to move the process along efficiently while helping people bring up, and deal with, difficult topics. He knows when to let people talk out problems, maintain respectful and productive discussion, and keeps the agenda and goals of the meeting front-and-center so we always achieved our objectives. He is a truly a master facilitator. As a testament to my admiration and respect for what he brings to the table, I have contracted him to facilitate team meetings of a new high-profile research project with the goal of helping our diverse and interdisciplinary research team effectively and efficiently work together to innovate.

In addition, I would like to comment on the genius of the Consensus Solutions process. First, the process brought the right people to the table. We have stakeholders from all walks of life and education levels, all with the respect and support of their communities behind them. Then, the process helped them acknowledge the past and focus on the future. The structure of the consensus-driven process, the high 75% agreement threshold, and the respectful and focused discussions helped people work collaboratively to develop solutions which had broad support across stakeholder groups. Finally, the consensus package of recommendations that the stakeholder group produced is a uniquely powerful document that is changing the way the State of Maryland manages the oyster fishery. It is my understanding that Mr. Blair had a large role in developing this process which is highly effective, representative, transparent, fair, and powerful. I believe it is what we have all be striving for – a better way to work together for a brighter future. I appreciate his outstanding contribution to our democracy.

In closing, OysterFutures stakeholders have told me repeatedly how much they appreciate the Consensus Solutions process, the facilitation team, and Mr. Blair's support in particular. He has gained their trust and mine. I have been to so many meetings in my almost 30-year career that I don't want to try to count them – all I can say is that the meetings that Mr. Blair ran were the very best that I have had the privilege of participating.

I am deeply grateful for his work, and could not give a higher recommendation.

Kind regards,

Elizabeth Watkins North, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Lead Principal Investigator of OysterFutures (<https://oysterfutures.wordpress.com/>)