



Civic Engagement: How to Get Involved in Your Community

Civic engagement is active participation in social, political, and/or religious activities, intended to improve the quality of life in our cities, towns and neighborhoods. Participating in these types of activities can keep you involved with matters affecting the world while also giving you a sense of empowerment. Activities may range from simple ones, such as being a “good neighbor,” to those that take more time and energy, such as organizing a community event.

What are some of the benefits to getting involved in the community?

- **Self-efficacy.** Civic engagement allows people to feel that they are being effective and making an impact on the world. A sense of self-efficacy can also improve emotional stability.
- **Social Integration.** Civic engagement helps people make new friends and broaden social networks. For example, civic engagement may include volunteering for a town project or joining an athletic team, where you can meet other individuals who are active in the community. Such relationships can ease feelings of isolation and loneliness, and provide support.
- **Personal interests.** Civic organizations can help people express their personal interests and beliefs. It can also give them the opportunity to seek new interests and hobbies while enabling them to take responsibility for their own leisure activities.

How Can I Get Involved in the Community?

•Attend town meetings

Town governments usually schedule open meetings once a year to discuss budgets, laws and other pertinent matters. Town meetings may give you a voice within local politics and the opportunity to help effect change. Look in the announcements section of your local paper or on your town’s Web site for times and locations. School districts may schedule similar meetings.

•VOTE!

Voting can have an impact on public policy and government, and can help make a difference in your own life as well as in the lives of others. There are many places to obtain a mail-in voter registration form, including county voter registration offices, state offices that provide public assistance and

services to persons with disabilities, Department of Transportation photo license centers, and online at <http://www.rockthevote.org/>. Contact your local election office for information on polls and election dates. Then get out and vote! A good place to learn more is Project Vote Smart at <http://www.vote-smart.org/>.

•Volunteer your skills

Many organizations have volunteer opportunities. These opportunities may be long- or short-term, even “virtual” – that is, online. Volunteering allows you to give back to the community and feel good while doing it. Through volunteer work you can also use and improve your skills and learn new skills while helping others and contributing to a cause you care about. Check out Volunteer Match for opportunities at <http://www.volunteermatch.org>.

•Participate in a community garden

A community garden is great way to meet your neighbors and produce nutritious food at the same time. It’s easy, and an opportunity for recreation, exercise, therapy and education while you are creating a beautiful place in your community. Find the community garden nearest you at <http://www.communitygarden.org/>.

•Get involved with your civic association

Find out if your community has a civic association by asking your neighbors and local business owners, searching on the Internet or calling your city or town’s administrative offices. Involvement in a civic association may give you a say in key decisions affecting your neighborhood, such as zoning plans. This involvement can give you the opportunity to become a member of a committee helping to effect change. For example, by becoming a member of the parks and recreation committee you could help improve local parks and recreation areas. A civic association can also help you turn your ideas for neighborhood projects (such as a fundraiser for a local school playground) into reality.

•Get involved in throwing a block party

Block parties are a great method for socializing and building relationships with new and old neighbors. You can plan the event or help other neighbors in planning it. Put fliers in mailboxes inviting neighbors to a meeting to discuss having a block party. You can also help by offering to host, bring snacks or plan games and activities. If the party is large enough, you can contact town officials about barricading the street to traffic.





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• *Be a mentor*

Mentoring can make a big difference in a young person's life, and it can teach you a few lessons as well. Many young people are looking for the support and friendship of a caring adult; however there are not enough adults to act as role models. By becoming a mentor, you can give these young people someone they can trust and look up to. Look for mentoring opportunities on volunteer search engines, such as <http://www.networkforgood.org>. An example of a mentoring organization is Big Brothers Big Sisters <http://www.bigbrothersbigsisters.org>.

• *Participate in or organize a sports activity*

Sports are great for exercise and for recreation as well. Contact your town's recreation association or the equivalent for a listing of available sports leagues/activities. There are many other places offering sporting activities, such as company leagues, gyms and other athletic facilities, schools or clubs. Pick a sport you think you may enjoy and play, coach, help out or even just go to games to support the team. Being a coach or an assistant coach is a great way to volunteer while enabling you to spend time with your children or other children in the community. You can also help support the team by bringing snacks or hosting team parties.

• *Participate in your child's school activities*

Many school functions are in need of parent volunteers. Not only is it important to know about your child's school activities, but it's also important for you to be an involved parent. Most school districts have Parent Teacher Associations (PTA), where parents support their children and other youths within the school and the community. By volunteering at your local school district, you can become closer with your child, while also developing a relationship with other parents, educators and members of the community. To learn more about your local or national PTA check out <http://www.pta.org/homepage.html> or get information from your local school district.

• *Participate in activities with your local faith-based organization.*

Faith-based organizations provide many ways to get involved: teaching, singing in choirs, fundraisers and community service, for example. Participating in such activities helps build relationships within your community.

• *Participate in political campaigns*

Volunteering for a political campaign allows you to make an impact on policies that are important to you. It is a great way to learn more about politics while also helping support your favorite candidate. Call the local offices of the candidates you support and volunteer. You can also check for volunteer opportunities on your political party's Web site or the Web sites of organizations such as Move On <http://www.moveon.org>.

• *Organize or participate in a town clean-up*

Team up with local civic groups and schools to beautify your neighborhood or town. Meet people as you pick up litter. Join the Great American Clean-Up: <http://www.kab.org/programs.asp?id=291&rid=68>.

• *Get involved in mental health advocacy*

There is a huge need for mental health advocacy, and people with mental illnesses are key advocates. Join the effort. It is another great way to meet people while helping yourself and others. Check out the National Mental Health Association at <http://www.nmha.org/> or NAMI at <http://www.nami.org/> for advocacy opportunities.

E- Resources:

American Community Gardening Association www.communitygarden.org/

BetterTogether: An Initiative of the Saguaro Seminar, Civic Engagement in America at Harvard University, www.bettertogether.org

Big Brothers Big Sisters www.bigbrothersbigsisters.org

Idealist.org: Action without Borders. www.idealists.org

Keep America Beautiful: Great American Clean-Up. <http://www.kab.org/programs.asp?id=291&rid=68>

Network for Good. <http://www.networkforgood.org>

Project Vote Smart. www.vote-smart.org/

The Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America. www.ksg.harvard.edu/saguaro/index.htm.

Volunteer Match. www.volunteermatch.org

