

HOW TO START A NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION

Whether your neighborhood is facing serious problems or just wants to build a stronger sense of community, the people within it must be organized in order to bring about real change. A neighborhood association is a group of neighbors who work together to make a stronger neighborhood.



Defining the Issues

Members of a neighborhood association should represent the community and all of its issues. These people get together to decide what needs to be done and how to do it. Through their work, they create the stability, credibility and political clout necessary to be an effective force in making a stronger neighborhood.

Some associations are structured as multi-purpose organizations. They bring residents together around a variety of concerns. Others

begin in response to a crisis — a sudden increase in drug sales, an outbreak of racial tension, or a redevelopment scheme drawn up without the community's input. In any case, you'll want to prepare yourself to represent all the people in your neighborhood.

Talk to other residents to find out what they think the important issues are and what should be done — collect information on the issues people care about. For example, if your goal is to clean up the neighborhood, you'll want to decide on a cleanup target, learn about your city's Waste Management team, find out who in the neighborhood wants to participate, and find out what resources exist to help you. Doing your homework and understanding the history of what's been done around this issue is very important. You don't want to repeat someone else's mistakes or miss some important advice and experience that could prove very helpful.

Learning About Community Resources

Get to know the area you want to organize. If you want to organize your block, find out which residents and groups are most concerned about the community and most likely to get involved in the organization. Make sure to also talk with neighborhood businesses and your local elected officials. They can be very helpful partners for your organizing efforts.

Take a walk through your neighborhood and look at it with a critical eye. Where do people socialize? Which local merchants might be supportive? Where are there good places to hold meetings?

What are the sore spots — vacant lots, abandoned buildings, drug dealing points, places where youth have run-ins with the police, dangerous street crossings? These are all potential issues around which residents may want to get together to make some changes.

Build a Core Group

Recruit a handful of people — three or four are enough — to help launch the organization. A group has more credibility than an individual. Also, working in a group can be much safer than working alone if, for example, your organization is tracking a drug problem in the neighborhood.

Find candidates for your core group by talking to your neighbors. Look for people who are committed to the neighborhood and have specific issues they care about tackling. They are the most likely to want to get involved. Talk to leaders of churches, community centers, or similar organizations and ask them whether they know people who may be interested. When you have a meeting with a fellow neighbor or someone who works for an organization, leave with a new name of someone you can contact. This is how you start to build the base of the organization.

Hold Core Group Meetings

Your core group acts as the temporary steering committee or leadership until you're ready to hold a general membership meeting. At the beginning of this process, the core group will be the one that picks the first issues to discuss (not necessarily to act on!), selects the location and time for the first general meeting, and gathers information that will help the whole group begin to work on issues that people care about.

Here is what your core group should work on during its first few meetings:

- Come up with some ideas for kick-off projects. Start with fairly simple activities like a block clean-up, a letter writing campaign, or a potluck fundraising dinner. This will give the people who come to the first general meeting a list of projects to get involved in and think about. Remember, when you have other people on board, they may come up with other suggestions. It's always a good idea to make the first project one that is visible and gets quick

results. This shows people that your group means business and can get things done. People are more likely to join a group that works on issues they care about and that can really make some changes.

- Decide who you want to tell about your new organization. Which churches, community newspapers, government offices, and other neighborhood institutions do you want to involve to help you spread the word? Make a list of organizations with contact names and phone numbers. You'll want to start contacting them after the first general meeting.
- Start to divide up tasks based on people's interests. Keeping people interested is the best way to keep them involved. Some of the tasks that the core group will take on are:

- Contacting neighborhood institutions and groups;
- Recruiting residents to be general members of the neighborhood association;
- Creating the agenda and arranging for future core group meetings;
- Researching specific issues in depth so you have all of the information you need when it's time for the general membership to meet.

Plan a General Meeting

As soon as you are ready, your core group should decide on a time, date, and place for a general membership meeting. Choose a time that is convenient for the largest number of people to increase your chances of a good turnout. An evening during the week or a day during the weekend generally works best. Church buildings, community centers, schools, and public libraries are usually easy for neighborhood residents to get to and will often provide a room without charge. Do you really want to get people to come? Have some local

teenagers provide babysitting and make sure you put that on your outreach flyer!

Simple rules to remember to have a good first neighborhood association meeting:

- All ideas should be given fair consideration.
- People need to be treated with respect or they won't come back.
- No one should leave the meeting without a task.
- Everyone should sign in. Collect contact information.

Meeting Agenda

When you prepare an agenda for your first general meeting, keep in mind that the purpose of this meeting is to lay the groundwork for the organization. Your goal is to come out of this meeting with an agreement on the goals for the organization and the issues that it will take on. A good agenda should look something like the one below. Note — the information in parentheses is for your reference only and should not be printed on the agenda.

1. Introduction

-Meet the core group (The core group should introduce themselves and someone from this group should explain the purpose of the meeting.)

- Meet everyone in the room (Everyone should share who they are, where they live, and what they would like to see happen in our neighborhood.)

2. Discussion of issues and challenges

(At this point in the meeting, everyone should have a chance to voice their opinions and make suggestions. You may have to work hard to make sure everyone has this chance and keep the agenda moving.)

3. Setting priorities

-Brainstorm (Based on the issues and challenges discussion, help everyone brainstorm their interest in

helping the community as a neighborhood association.)

-Top priorities selected

(Prioritize one or two areas of interest that your group can work on first.)

-Project ideas developed

(Develop projects or ideas based on areas of interest that were top priorities.)

-Volunteers assigned

(Break project ideas down into a series of tasks. Assign volunteers to be responsible for the tasks that need to be done. If the work is complicated or if there are a lot of people involved, ask someone to head a committee on each issue.)

4. Creating the structure

-Organization name (Agree on a name for your neighborhood association.)

-Leadership team

(Ask the general members to approve the current core group as the steering committee or to choose new leaders for a temporary period of time.)

-By-laws and elections

(The structure should be kept simple at the beginning. Rules for operation and elections can be held when the organization has more experience and members know one another.)

-Time and date of next meeting

(Agree on these before adjourning.)

Reach Out to the Community

Outreach is the one job that never stops for a block or neighborhood association. Getting the word out and bringing in new participants will ensure that your group is well balanced and fully representative of its community. After every meeting and between meetings, you will want to have people talking to their neighbors and community organizations to let them know what you're planning and doing to try to get them involved. Don't give up too soon. Once neighbors start coming together and making changes, more people will get involved and then, the possibilities are endless!



Here are some tips to reach out to your neighbors and recruit them to come to the general meeting:

Flyers

Print flyers listing the time, date, place and purpose of the first general meeting. Post them in apartment building lobbies, on grocery store bulletin boards, in churches, in schools, and in other locations where people will see them.

Door-to-door visits

Take flyers door to door. Canvas the block or neighborhood you are organizing. Rehearse a few lines ahead of time to introduce yourself and the new organization, and be sure to ask people about their concerns and suggestions. Take down names and phone numbers of interested individuals so they can be re-contacted if they don't make it to the first meeting. Leave everyone you visit with a flyer or something to remind them you were there.

Attendance

Be ready for a big meeting with lots of discussion and more ideas than you expected — but also be ready for a very small meeting. Low attendance is common for organizations that are just starting out. If this happens to your group, stay positive and enlist the energies of the people who do show up to keep your community outreach going. Work with what you have. Develop your neighborhood organizing skills and move ahead.

Visibility

Next steps that could give your group a high profile include:

- Take a survey of neighborhood needs and issues;
- Hold a community forum on a topic that matters to your neighbors;
- Have public meetings with the government agencies that are supposed to be dealing with your issues.

The Experience of One Neighborhood Group



Janet was out in her front yard on Poplar Street talking to Mrs. Smith one day about the overgrown lot down at the end of the block. Mrs. Smith said, “Hank from down the street was talking about that same thing just the other day.” That was the beginning of the Poplar Street Irregulars — a neighborhood group that started with three caring neighbors. Janet gathered the three together and they talked about different issues and soon realized that

there were many more neighbors they should involve.

The team split the block up into thirds and committed to contacting all of the homeowners, renters, and landlords. They would talk to everyone and bring them together for a meeting to uncover common issues on the block and begin to work on some of them.

The first meeting was held in Janet’s front yard. About half of the people the founding three had contacted turned out, including one landlord. Janet and her friends were very encouraged — this was plenty of people to keep moving forward. The group decided that their first project was to try to convert the overgrown lot at the end of the block. They also began to schedule and plan for their street’s first annual block party.

In the eight years since that initial meeting, the Poplar Street Irregulars group has tackled many issues in their neighborhood from cleanups, to recreation, to getting the deteriorating street and sidewalks replaced, to placing lamp posts in their front yards for better pedestrian lighting.

Starting a neighborhood association can make life better for your family, your neighbors, and your community.

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