

➔ Traditional municipal volunteering programs give people an opportunity to give their time and labor to worthy projects. By transforming those programs into “impact volunteering” efforts—into vehicles for deliberation, collaboration, and connection—leaders and citizens can lay a foundation for civic renewal.

A New Model for Citizen Engagement

BY MYUNG J. LEE & PETER LEVINE

In 2013, the city of Birmingham, Ala., implemented Love Your Block, a nationwide program that awards small grants to local volunteer groups that propose projects that will improve their neighborhoods. Before issuing a request for proposals, the city conducts extensive outreach to those groups to hear their concerns and to discuss potential solutions on which they and various city agencies can collaborate. The groups then develop and submit proposals, and the city makes a series of grants, which range in size from \$500 to \$2,000.

Staff members from city agencies also work with the neighborhood groups to help them implement their projects. Throughout this process, citizen volunteers engage directly with local officials in setting priorities for civic improvement. And they achieve concrete results: As of January 2015, Love Your Block volunteers in 16 Birmingham neighborhoods had removed more than 26,000 square feet of graffiti, disposed of more than 167,000 pounds of trash and debris, planted more than 500 trees, and revitalized 117 blocks.

As impressive as those outputs are, Love Your Block has also generated broad social outcomes. A statistician in the Birmingham Police Department reviewed crime data in the 16 target neighborhoods at the beginning of the first year of the program and again at the end of that year. In those neighborhoods, overall crime—a category that includes violent crime—fell by 11 percent during the first year of the initiative. What’s more, those neighborhoods collectively experienced a 13 percent reduction in property theft and a 16 percent reduction in auto theft. Although other factors certainly contributed to these results, there are reasons to believe that the social cohesion fostered by Love Your Block has played a notable part in reducing crime in the targeted neighborhoods. Testing is now under way in 13 other cities to gauge the impact that programs like Love Your Block have on public safety.

Love Your Block is an initiative of Cities of Service, a nonprofit organization that works to promote results-driven citizen engagement. Founded in 2009 by Michael Bloomberg, then-mayor of New York City, Cities of Service has built a coalition that includes more than 200 cities in the United States and the United Kingdom. One of us (Myung J. Lee) serves as executive director of the organization.



Photograph by Hayley Kallenberg, courtesy of Cities of Service

Strong evidence has accumulated to show that communities are more likely to succeed when citizens engage with each other—and with public sector leaders—in certain ways. At the crux of our model of citizen engagement are three elements. First, people in a community should *deliberate* on public issues. Second, they should *collaborate* on solving local problems. And third, they should *connect* with others to form long-term civic relationships.

That kind of citizen engagement is not particularly robust or widespread in the United States today. Between the 1970s and the 1990s, the proportion of Americans who said that they had attended a community

meeting declined from more than 60 percent to slightly more than 30 percent. Over the same period, the percentage of Americans who said that they had worked to address a community problem fell by almost 20 points. The proportion of people who follow local news has also been declining steadily since the 1970s.¹ The larger consequences of this trend are readily apparent: Institutions like the US Congress have become highly polarized and dysfunctional. And the 2016 presidential election is on its way to being the least civil national election in modern history.

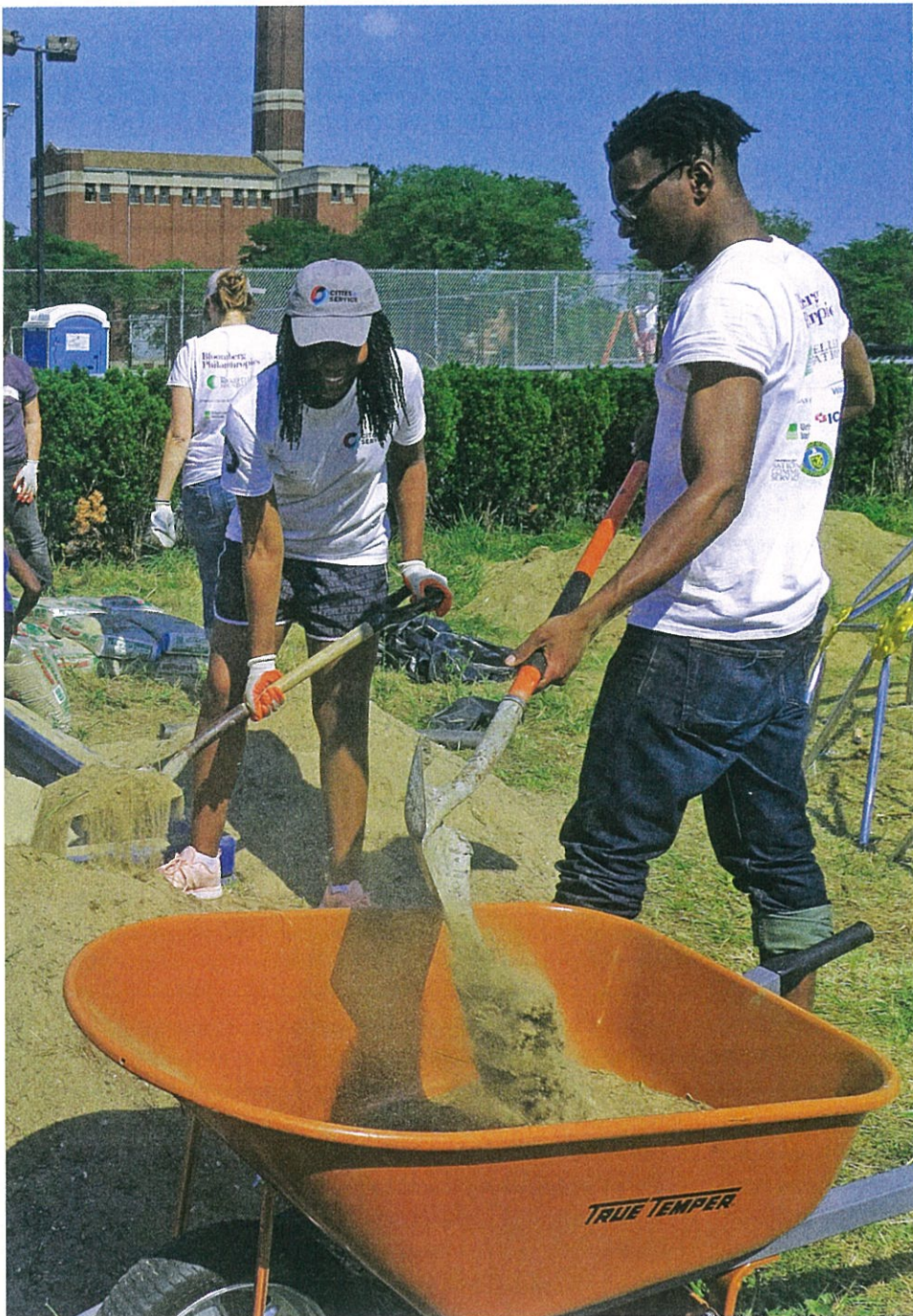
US communities, however, have an often-overlooked asset for promoting citizen engagement: city-sponsored volunteer service programs. Volunteering on its own does not necessarily produce better outcomes for a community. But municipal service programs, we believe, hold the promise of enabling Americans to achieve a deeper and more consequential form of engagement than most of them now have with their communities. By transforming traditional volunteering into what we call “impact volunteering,” civic leaders and citizens can lay the groundwork for improving community-level outcomes. In an impact volunteering effort such as Love Your Block, participants go beyond simply contributing hours of service to local projects. They also pursue the vital work of deliberation, collaboration, and connection.

Communities suffer when wide gaps exist between government and civil society—and between government officials and citizens. By engaging volunteers as partners in defining and solving local problems, community leaders can narrow those gaps and thereby advance the cause of civic renewal.

WHY CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

According to the philosopher Hannah Arendt, the founders of the American republic derived certain lessons from their experience of public service: They learned “that no one could be called happy without his share in public happiness, that no one could be called free without his experience in public freedom”—which, for Arendt, meant active participation in public affairs—“and that no one could be called either happy or free without participating, and having a share, in public power.”² They learned, in other words, that citizen engagement is an intrinsically valuable aspect of human life. By working with their fellow citizens on matters of public concern, people experience a special kind of satisfaction.

↓ A NEW START: Members of AmeriCorps VISTA join city staff members and local volunteers to revitalize a hospital complex in Detroit.



But the benefits of citizen engagement extend beyond the rewards that individuals gain from civic work. When people work closely with one another and with local institutions—with city agencies, nonprofit organizations, and the like—they build strong and healthy communities. And as a result, those communities achieve impressive outcomes in areas that range from education to environmental protection. In recent years, scholars have produced a wide range of studies that illustrate this effect, and in those studies they use terms such as “social capital” and “social cohesion” to describe the kind of value that citizen engagement creates.

Consider the issue of public safety. The sociologist Robert J. Sampson, in a landmark investigation of Chicago, explored the role that various factors play in a city. One such factor is “collective efficacy,” as Sampson calls it.³ He assembled a wide array of data to measure that quality—from the number of neighborhood watch groups in a community to the likelihood that residents who found a stamped, addressed envelope on the street would take time to put the envelope in a mailbox. For one study, Sampson and other researchers used a 10-item survey to measure the collective efficacy of various neighborhoods. They asked residents of those communities, for example, whether “people around here are willing to help their neighbors” and whether “people in this neighborhood can be trusted.” As it turned out, neighborhoods in which respondents scored high on that survey exhibited relatively low levels of violent crime. That result held even when the researchers took into account factors such as income and race.⁴

Or take the issue of education. Robert D. Putnam, a professor of public policy at Harvard University, has created an index of “social capital” that tracks participation in civic affairs and volunteering, among other measures. In one study, he examined test scores and graduation rates in all 50 US states and found that social capital was a stronger predictor of student success than spending on schools, the demographic composition of schools, class size, or teachers’ salaries.⁵

Social capital also appears to enable greater economic mobility. A team led by Raj Chetty, a professor of economics at Stanford University, has demonstrated that where people in the United States grow up has a significant effect on whether they are able to move up the economic ladder. The team has identified five attributes of communities that have high levels of economic mobility, and social capital is one of those attributes.⁶

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One of us (Peter Levine) joined with Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg and Chaeyoon Lim to investigate the connection between social cohesion and economic performance. Looking specifically at the aftermath of the 2008-09 recession, these researchers found a wide divergence in how well cities and states recovered from that event. Among states that have similar economic circumstances, for example, those with high levels of social cohesion regained jobs that had been lost during the recession at a 20 percent higher rate than those with low levels of social cohesion.⁷ (To measure social cohesion, the researchers developed a composite of variables that range from how often people socialize with friends and family members to the number of nonprofit organizations per capita.)

Other research suggests that civic engagement helps to improve environmental outcomes as well. Kent Portney, a professor at the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University, has shown that cities with well-regarded sustainability policies almost always rely on intensive engagement processes to develop those policies.⁸

Pathways to Citizen Engagement

Impact volunteering provides one route to improving both the quantity and the quality of civic engagement. But there are other fields of practice that promote deliberation, collaboration, and connection among citizens. Civic leaders should consider following these pathways to engagement as well.

Deliberative democracy procedures.

In some US cities, officials use participatory budgeting systems, town meetings, and other methods to promote public discussion. Some of these efforts take the form of time-limited public events. After Hurricane Katrina, for instance, officials in New Orleans relied on large, facilitated meetings organized by AmericaSpeaks to help shape a recovery plan for the city. In other cases, the pursuit of deliberative democracy is an ongoing process. Cities like Hampton, Va., and Portsmouth, N.H., have achieved international recognition for regularly holding small discussion forums that result in decisions that affect public policy.

Collective impact initiatives. In recent years, ambitious cross-sector initiatives that extend across an entire community have become an increasingly common way to pursue social change. Collective impact efforts aim to achieve a broad outcome—such as a reduction in hunger or an increase in literacy—and they focus on tracking progress against a set of shared metrics. Initiatives of this kind may not involve a high

degree of engagement by ordinary citizens. But they do involve creating forums for deliberation, collaboration, and connection among participants from a wide array of organizations. They also provide insights on using outcome data that are relevant to citizen-oriented initiatives.

Technology-based models. Nonprofit organizations and city agencies are launching digital platforms that support civic participation. The city of Boston has gone so far as to create a special agency—the Mayor’s Office of New Urban Mechanics—that has developed a mobile application called Citizens Connect, which lets users report local problems directly to city officials.

Neighborhood governance systems.

City governments can empower local groups to make and implement decisions that affect their neighborhoods. The city of Seattle, for example, has a Department of Neighborhoods that makes small grants to support plans and programs that groups of citizens develop for their community.

How exactly does citizen engagement lead to positive social outcomes? Research exists to support several explanations.

- Engaged citizens gain skills and contacts that help them succeed in other aspects of their lives. Studies of labor markets in Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States demonstrate that “people skills”—as measured by, for example, a preference for working in collaboration with others—have substantial and growing market value.⁹
- Engaged citizens develop norms of trust and collaboration that enable them to contribute to their local economy. Francis Fukuyama, a scholar based at Stanford University, notes that numerous studies from around the world show a correlation between higher levels of social trust and higher rates of entrepreneurial activity.¹⁰
- Engaged citizens push to achieve effective legislation and effective performance from government. Putnam, in a classic study, found that devolving power from a national to a regional level in Italy worked well in regions that had high levels of civic participation, in part because people in those regions demanded clean and responsive government, but it failed in regions where participation was low.¹¹

WHAT CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT REQUIRES

To reap the full benefits of involving people in civic life, people and their leaders must pursue all three aspects of citizen engagement: communicating about issues of shared concern (deliberation), working together to address those issues (collaboration), and forging effective and enduring relationships (connection). In an optimal case, these aspects reinforce one another: People gather in groups to decide what to do. Then they work in concert to implement that decision. And then, as a result of these efforts, they form tight networks that support continued engagement.

Deliberation | The American system of government was built on the assumption that citizens would deliberate with each other. In his draft of the First Amendment to the US Constitution, James Madison included this explanation of its purpose: “The people shall not be restrained from peaceably assembling and consulting for their common good.”¹² The final version of the amendment omitted that line, but clearly Madison believed that “consulting for [the] common good” was an essential element of the US constitutional system. Woodrow Wilson made a similar point in a speech that he gave while running for president in 1912: “The whole purpose of democracy is that we may hold counsel with one another.”¹³

When citizens talk and listen to people who are different from them, they enlarge their understanding of public issues. They learn to check their own values and assumptions against those of other people, and they make themselves accountable to their fellow citizens. Along the way, they build the kind of consensus that makes political action possible.



Collaboration | Deliberation is not enough, however. Citizens must be able to follow their talk with collective action. They must be able to work together—across different sectors, across the boundaries that separate citizens from civic leaders—on efforts to create better outcomes for their communities. Citizens, in other words, need to cooperate to achieve the goals that emerge through deliberation. To be effective, collaboration must also include an element of reflection: Citizens should discuss and evaluate what they have done and then hold themselves accountable for the results.

A study by the sociologist Sean Safford highlights the necessity of collaboration. Safford compared the trajectories of Allentown, Pa., and Youngstown, Ohio. The collapse of the US steel industry devastated both cities, but Allentown rebounded and Youngstown did not. Allentown, Safford discovered, had a diverse network of overlapping associations—including both municipal and private sector entities—that could develop a coordinated response to the city’s social and economic challenges. Youngstown also had a large number of local associations, but the membership of those groups tended not to overlap, and their members did not work together effectively.¹⁴

Connection | Democracy depends on civic relationships—on voluntary ties among peers who share an interest in improving their community. Civic relationships require certain essential attributes, including loyalty, trust, and hope. In the United States, these attributes have become less and less prevalent. According to survey research, for instance, the proportion of Americans who say that they trust other people has dropped over the past four decades. And that shift is generational: Each new cohort exhibits a lower degree of social trust than the preceding cohort.¹⁵ But it is not too late to reverse that trend. By connecting with their fellow citizens, Americans can rebuild the sense of trust that helps create strong communities.

➤ **A CLEAN SWEEP:** Citizen volunteers pick up litter during a Find It, Fix It walk in the Lake City neighborhood of Seattle.

WHEN VOLUNTEERING HAS IMPACT

In cities and towns across the United States, municipal volunteer programs attract large numbers of citizens who commit time, passion, skill, and energy to community activities. In 2015, according to the Corporation for National and Community Service, 62.8 million Americans volunteered 7.9 billion hours of service.¹⁶ And according to data gathered by the US Census Bureau, 35 percent of Americans participate in at least one voluntary association.¹⁷ In our view, the vast scale of volunteering offers an important opportunity to increase the scope and impact of citizen engagement.

Volunteering per se is not a predictor of better social outcomes. Although volunteers benefit the people whom they directly serve, their efforts do not automatically produce positive results at a community level. Kawashima-Ginsberg, Lim, and Levine tested the relationship between the rates of volunteering in counties, cities, and states and the economic outcomes of the same communities, and they found no link between these variables.¹⁸ But such findings mainly reflect the limitations of traditional volunteer programs. In that kind of program, people give hours of service to community projects, but neither they nor local leaders work to connect that service to a larger strategy of citizen engagement.

Impact volunteering, by contrast, adjusts such shortcomings by involving community members in deliberation, collaboration, and connection. By treating citizens as partners, leaders can transform their volunteer programs into participatory processes in which citizens and public officials develop a shared vision, set long-term and short-term goals for their community, and then work together to pursue those goals. Ultimately, impact volunteering is not only about pursuing discrete projects but also about creating social capital and increasing social cohesion.

By way of example, consider Path Finders, an impact volunteering initiative operated by the city of Orlando, Fla. (Orlando is a member of the Cities of Service coalition.) Path Finders is a six-week-long after-school program that aims to help middle-school students increase their career potential. Volunteers from various industries and professions work to help students develop an individualized path toward a successful future. Students in the program investigate career alternatives, explore their own career goals, and then create an academic plan that supports those goals. Results from the Path Finders program illustrate the value of engaging volunteers in this way: During the yearlong evaluation period that followed one iteration of the program, every participating student achieved a grade point average of 2.5 or higher, and no student underwent suspension or expulsion proceedings. In a survey of Path Finders students, 74 percent of them reported that they saw a connection between their education and their career path, and 88 percent of them reported that their desire to graduate from high school had increased. Path Finders, in sum, demonstrates how a city government can raise social capital by building relationships among citizens.

HOW IMPACT VOLUNTEERING CAN THRIVE

Two ingredients that help turn a conventional volunteering program into an impact volunteering program are the use of metrics and the active involvement of municipal

government. (Cities of Service, for example, urges participating cities to establish and collect outcomes metrics, and it calls on city agencies to act as full-fledged partners of their citizen volunteers.)

Using metrics | Officials who administer volunteer programs and citizens who serve in those programs should select measurable outcomes and track their progress toward meeting such outcomes. This focus on metrics shifts the framework of volunteering from one in which volunteers garner praise simply because they do unpaid work (“it’s nice”) to one in which they work to achieve measurable results (“it’s necessary”). A commitment to tracking outcomes also promotes transparency and a sense of shared purpose, and those benefits in turn help deepen relationships among volunteers and between volunteers and city officials.

In Austin, Texas, for instance, city staff members trained volunteers to identify and report the occurrence of invasive plant species in the city’s parkland. The work of these volunteers helped the city assess the extent of this problem, and it provided staff members with specific data that they could use to make a funding request—which was ultimately successful—to the Austin City Council. Later, the city was able to dedicate a staff member to working with volunteers to remove the invasive species from parks throughout Austin.

All the same, the use of metrics is no substitute for citizen engagement. Melody Barnes and Paul Schmitz, in a recent article in *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, acknowledge that there is “an economic and a moral imperative for adopting data-driven approaches” to social policy. “Given persistently limited budgets, public and nonprofit leaders must direct funds to programs and initiatives that use data to show that they are achieving impact,” they write. Yet they also emphasize the need for continued public engagement in that process: “Data-driven solutions will be feasible and sustainable only if leaders create and implement those solutions with the active participation of people in the communities that they target.”¹⁹

↓ **A FRESH COAT:** Byron Brown, mayor of Buffalo, N.Y. (center), helps Love Your Block volunteers in his city to paint over graffiti.



Enlisting municipal government | Citizens do not need to work with local government in order to pursue deliberation, collaboration, and connection. Still, municipalities can and should play a leading role in citizen engagement. They have resources—expertise, access to data, legal authority, funding—that they can share with local groups. In addition, they have power to convene cross-sector gatherings where citizens can address matters of common concern. Communities need both robust horizontal relationships among their own organizations and tight connections to city hall. Sampson, in his study of Chicago, found that neighborhoods flourish when local leaders can form networks that connect them not only with each other but also with public sector institutions. And indeed, one advantage of the impact volunteering model is that it changes how citizens and city governments relate to each other.

That model, for example, can strengthen relationships between city agencies and historically underserved groups. In Austin, an AmeriCorps VISTA participant who was serving at city hall used the Love Your Block program to engage low-income communities that typically find it hard to access municipal resources. To help people in those communities apply for Love Your Block mini-grants, she hired a contractor to translate application documents into Spanish, and she facilitated two grant-writing workshops. Of the 38 applications that Austin received for these grants, 35 came from neighborhoods where the average income was below that of the city as a whole.

Impact volunteering practices also enhance the ability of citizens to deal with local problems. Instead of merely lodging a complaint at city hall, they can engage in two-way communication with government officials. In Seattle, as part of a program called Find It, Fix It, the city's mayor walks through neighborhoods alongside residents to identify and discuss local challenges. The heads of city departments and other city employees join the mayor on these walks, and these officials then work with citizens to address the problems that they spot along the way. Most important, the officials report back to neighborhood residents about whether and how they are able to solve each problem.

Another important feature of the impact volunteering model is that it breaks down the artificial distinction between citizens and city employees. That distinction is harmful because it obscures the fact that civil servants are also citizens. People who work for city government often have a particularly keen sense of civic welfare. Consider Tanya Meeks, who has served for many years as community affairs officer in the police department of Flint, Mich. A few years ago, after budget cuts resulted in a layoff of more than one-third of the city's police force, Meeks lost her position. But she continued to work on community safety issues as a civilian. "I came back to the city to work on neighborhoods ... not in uniform, no cruiser," she says. "It was not about me; it was about services. ... The work never stopped. We kept rolling." Later, she was able to return to the force, and she served as coordinator for a volunteer program that Flint launched with support from Cities of Service.

THE QUESTION OF CIVIC RENEWAL

To meet the challenges that Americans currently face, communities in the United States need to increase the scale and the quality of citizen engagement. They need, in short, to begin an effort of civic renewal. So how can leaders and citizens begin

that effort? People in various sectors have developed approaches to answering this question. (See "Pathways to Citizen Engagement" on page 42.) But impact volunteering, we argue, offers an especially compelling answer. By enabling volunteers to deliberate, collaborate, and connect—by enabling them not only to contribute hours of service but also to take part in planning and initiating civic improvements—communities can transform those volunteers into engaged citizens.

Americans respond well to direct calls to participate in civic activities. But relatively few of them have the ability on their own to transform traditional volunteering into impact volunteering. Civic leaders who oversee municipal service programs do have the resources—the skills, the experience, the convening power—that are necessary to achieve civic renewal in their jurisdictions. What's more, they have an incentive to do so: Their communities prosper when levels of social cohesion are high. They, along with their volunteer partners, can be a nucleus of an effort to renew citizen engagement. ■

NOTES

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