

Neighboring: Essential Strategies

Since 1996 the Points of Light Foundation, in partnership with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, has explored volunteering in low-income communities and the role it plays in building family-supporting places where children and families can thrive. We have learned that volunteer programs and initiatives that view residents as assets and seek to engage the community as an equal partner by empowering, mobilizing, and building upon its assets, are best positioned to facilitate sustainable positive change.

Neighboring: The connections among residents that support positive individual and community behavior based on mutual respect, responsibility and ownership.

We have identified seven strategies that individuals, organizations, and businesses can use when working with under-resourced communities to engage and empower local volunteers and to build effective partnerships with the community. By integrating these strategies into planning and implementation of programs, whether a short term group volunteer project or a long term community initiative, we can affect real change!

1. **Understand the language and nature of volunteering** - Learning the language and understanding the history of the community is critical to working effectively in tough communities. Volunteers are abundant in tough neighborhoods and have a long history of helping, but residents generally do not refer to themselves as “volunteers” not volunteer under the auspices of formal nonprofits.
2. **Overcome barriers to volunteering** - Barriers to volunteering include lack of time, financial resources, child care, transportation, as well as low self-esteem and confidence, negative perceptions of volunteering or of volunteer organizations, and cultural and language barriers. These must be addressed in order to engage local residents.
3. **Empower the communities to help themselves** - Residents must own the issues and solutions and must witness the benefit of their involvement in solving their communities’ social problems. Outsiders cannot be “parachuted” in the community to rescue the residents, but the residents must be part of the planning and decision-making process.
4. **Cultivate community members’ skills and talents** - The gifts and talents of the local residents need to be identified and translated into important assets needed to accomplish a project’s goals. Many residents believe they have no talents or skills to bring to the table.
5. **Strengthen existing community leadership** - Organizations should identify existing, and help develop new community leaders. Local leaders help build community trust and ensure that the local perspectives and experiences are considered and understood.
6. **Acknowledge that volunteering is an exchange** - All volunteers need to be rewarded for their contributions in ways that make sense and have meaning to them. In tough communities an appropriate exchange could include meals, services such as tutoring, childcare subsidies, and job opportunities.
7. **Ensure community readiness** - Building relationships and involvement takes time. It is a process that needs patience and flexibility. Communities may need help resolving conflicts or problems that are preventing residents’ involvement.

RESOURCES

- Matter of Survival: Volunteering In, By, and With Low-Income Communities
<http://www.pointsoflight.org/downloads/pdf/MatterOfSurvival.pdf>
- Connecting Rural Communities: Volunteering and Service
<http://www.pointsoflight.org/programs/neighboring/resources/pdfs/ConnectingRuralCommunities.pdf>

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