

## How to start a neighborhood organization

### **CITIZENS Committee For New York City**

305 Seventh Avenue  
New York, NY 10001  
(212) 989-0909  
(212) 989-0983 FAX  
[www.CITIZENSnyc.org](http://www.CITIZENSnyc.org)



### **STARTING A NEIGHBORHOOD ORGANIZATION**

A well-organized neighborhood can wield powerful influence when addressing the needs and problems of local residents. The deeper a community's problems are, the more neighbors need to be organized in order to bring about change. When you start a block or neighborhood association, you and your neighbors decide what needs to be done as a group. A group representing the community in all neighborhood issues will have the stability, credibility and political clout necessary to be an effective force in creating a better neighborhood.

If you think your building, block, or neighborhood needs to be organized, look over the six steps explained below. The steps are drawn from the experiences of thousands of New York City volunteers whose organizations provide leadership opportunities for young people, plant gardens in vacant lots, fight drugs and crime on the streets and in their building, combat unemployment and racism, and improve the overall quality of life in their neighborhood.

### **DEFINE THE ISSUES**

Some neighborhood groups are organized as multi-purpose organizations. They bring residents together around a variety of concerns. Others begin as a response to a crisis — a sudden increase in drug sales, an outbreak of racial tensions or a redevelopment scheme drawn up without consulting the community. In either 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. At the same time, collect information about the issues. If your goal is to plant a community garden, for instance, you'll want to know if there is available space in the community, how to get access to it, who in the neighborhood wants to participate, and what resources exist to help you.

Know the history of the issue or issues that you're dealing with. Your local community board, the public library, and the community newspaper are likely to have answers.

### **RESEARCH THE COMMUNITY**

What's the size of the area you want to organize — one building, a block, or the entire neighborhood? Is there a particular grouping — tenants, homeowners, single parents — who are most concerned and most likely to join the organization?

Find out what resources your community has and talk to the neighborhood business and government leaders.

Take a walk and look at your neighborhood with a critical eye. Where do people socialize? Which local

merchants might be supportive? Are there any buildings with rooms suitable for 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?

### **BUILD A CORE GROUP**

Recruit a handful of people — three or four are enough — to help you launch the organization. A group has more credibility than an individual and one individual cannot do all the work. Also, if your organization is tackling a drug problem in the neighborhood, working in a group is much safer than working alone.

Find candidates for your core group by talking to your neighbors. Look for people who are committed to the neighborhood.

Talk to leaders of churches, community centers, or similar organizations and ask them whether they know people who may be interested.

### **HOLD CORE GROUP MEETINGS**

The core group acts as the temporary steering committee until the general membership meeting is held.

When the core group meets, it should come up with ideas for projects to kick off the organizing drive. Start with fairly simple activities like a block cleanup, a letter-writing campaign or a potluck fundraising dinner. This will give the people who come to the first general meeting a beginning list of projects to get involved in; they may come up with other ideas. The first project should give the organization higher visibility in the neighborhood.

Decide which churches, community newspapers, government offices and other neighborhood institutions should know about your organization. You'll want to start contacting them after the first general meeting.

Divide up responsibility for contacting neighborhood institutions, reaching out to local residents (see step 6 below) and arranging for future core group meetings. Individuals from the core group may want to research specific issues in depth and head up a committee on that issue later on.

### **PLANNING A GENERAL MEETING**

Decide on a time, date and place that are convenient for people in the neighborhood — a weekday evening or a weekend day generally work best. Church buildings, community centers and public libraries are usually easy for neighborhood residents to get to and will often provide a room without charge.

When you prepare an agenda for your first general meeting, keep in mind that you're laying the foundation for the organization. Your goal is to come out of the meeting with an agreement on the issues and goals that the organization takes on. A good agenda should include the following:

#### **A. Introductions**

1. Who's on the steering committee and why they called the meeting.
2. The names of the residents and other people, who are in attendance.

#### **B. Discussion of the Problems / Issues**

1. All the people at the meeting should have a chance to voice their opinions and make suggestions.

#### C. Setting Priorities

1. If there are a number of issues that arouse strong interest, you will need to decide which are the most important.
2. Develop projects to address the one or two top-priority issues.
3. Assign volunteers to the tasks that need to be done. If the work is complicated or there are a lot of people involved, ask someone to head a committee on each issue.

#### D. Structure

1. Agree on a name for the organization.
2. You should ask the group to approve the current core group members as the steering committee or choose new leaders for a temporary period of time.
3. The structure should be kept simple during the early going. By-laws can be drawn up and elections held when the organization has more experience and members know each other better.
4. Choose a date for the next meeting.

### **REACH OUT TO THE COMMUNITY**

Getting the word out is crucial to create a well-balanced, fully representative organization.

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

Take the flyers door-to-door. Canvass the block or neighborhood you're organizing. Rehearse a few lines ahead of time to introduce yourself and the organization, and be sure to ask the 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.

Be ready for a big meeting with lots of discussion and more ideas than you had expected — but also be ready for a very small meeting. Sparse 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. Good next steps that could give your group a higher profile include: taking a survey of neighborhood opinion, holding a community forum, or meeting with the government agencies that are supposed to be dealing with your issues. Good luck.