

What Makes an All-America City?

BY SARAH LIPSCOMB

The All-America City Award program of the National Civic League (NCL) began in 1949 after a journalist approached the National Municipal League about an idea to name the top ten best-governed cities in America. Recognizing the difficulty of making such a judgment and understanding the vital role of civic engagement in community success, NCL leaders decided to initiate an award program to recognize communities for civic achievement. Since the program's inception, NCL has continued to learn from the field about what makes a city successful, and the criteria to be named an All-America City have evolved accordingly. The four measures now include civic engagement and collaboration, innovation, inclusiveness and diversity, and impact. These criteria often can seem elusive and difficult to demonstrate. Projects of the 2014 All-America City finalists and winners give tangible examples of these criteria and how they can create lasting outcomes, especially when used together.

Civic Engagement and Collaboration

Authentic civic engagement builds a reciprocal relationship between local government and residents to identify and solve problems together. In a civically robust community, local government officials and citizens both initiate projects that meet the needs of residents. Hampton, Virginia, understood the need to solve problems “with” rather than “for” their residents. In 2010, the new Hampton city manager, Mary Bunting, went to the public for input in an incredibly difficult budget year. It was called “I Value” because it wasn't just about cuts or budgets. It sought to base a spending plan on the values of residents. The public process needed to be flipped, with input gathered on the front end, so that she and her staff could use it to craft the budget. This approach to participation required new methods. Citizens would not come to city hall; city hall would go to them. An aggressive outreach campaign ensued on social media, e-newsletters, partner organizations and neighborhood groups, local cable interviews, paid ads, flyers, and word of mouth. Innovation drew free publicity: media coverage from both print and TV. The broad participation in shaping the budget helped educate and inform citizens about their tax dollars and what they buy. It created

a model for building future budgets as the recession dragged on and housing values continued to decline. Ultimately, in year 4 of the process, residents overwhelming said they couldn't support more cuts and supported a 20-cent increase in the tax rate to maintain services—and to invest in their city's future.

The shared nature of civic engagement allows residents to initiate solutions and projects to meet the community's needs. Independence, Oregon, residents saw the need for increased park services and took responsibility for building new parks in partnership with the local government. In 2006, an Independence resident approached the city about purchasing a playground for a local park and said he would raise \$10,000 for the playground if the city would match it. Not wanting to pass up an opportunity to get the community involved in a project, the city agreed. The money was raised, but the most interesting thing the resident contributed was a new idea known as community build. Certain playground manufacturers allow citizens to install their playground equipment under the supervision of an experienced installer. Fifty people turned out for the first day of work, including neighbors, university students, grandparents, and—thanks to the bilingual flyers distributed—two men and their children who didn't speak English but wanted to help build the new playground for their kids. This was the first of several local parks projects completed with direct citizen participation.

In a time of shrinking resources, collaboration provides a partial answer to some of the challenges communities face. Breaking down the silos within local government and creating regional collaboration allows communities to better serve residents. After a successful collaboration of three city health departments in 2008 to administer H1N1 vaccines, these communities realized more could be accomplished by working together and created Montachusett Public Health Network (MPHN), which now includes eleven municipalities in Massachusetts. Challenges faced this collaboration, including fears of budget cuts from their home city and the fear that the lead agency would take over the jurisdictions. Intentional planning helped ease these challenges by creating

a “cafeteria” system that would grant services on a needed basis only, so that the services provided by MPHNS could not supplant the services provided by each city’s health department. Building trust between the cities was important to ease the fear that the city of Fitchburg dominates the group. The inclusive name of the group, a governing board with mutually agreed rules of operation, and intermunicipal agreements contributed to the basis of trust between the cities and allowed the group to achieve high impacts. Achievements include a shared part-time sanitary inspector and a part-time public health nurse to offer health and wellness promotional activities and communicable disease surveillance and tracking, which had not previously been offered in several cities; needle and lancet collection kiosks in each community; and a community health assessment to guide future interventions.

Innovation

Solving problems through innovation does not always require a brand-new idea but can result from an awareness of the strengths a community possesses, such as skills, relationships, physical environment, and financial capital, and the different ways they can be leveraged together to produce outcomes. In Fort Lauderdale, Florida, a vision began with one resident who saw the potential for transforming a rundown warehouse area into a four-block-long arts community. He began purchasing property and recruited a master puppeteer, a local photography and media company, an event planning and marketing business, an advertising agency, a local theater company, and an architecture firm to create Flagler Arts and Technology (FAT) Village. A grassroots group of artists and merchants worked to clean up the area, which had been a haven for drug dealers. These days the area attracts visitors through events such as the monthly art walk, which provides the opportunity for visitors to stroll through art galleries, artist studios, and a prop warehouse and see theater performances and puppet shows. The art district has helped make Fort Lauderdale a magnet for members of what author Richard Florida calls “the creative class” by providing an attractive, livable urban environment.

In Marquette, Michigan, a photograph collection, the local library, and nearly four dozen groups and individuals spurred an innovative program to promote the importance of mental health and wellness.

According to Marquette’s application, “When the Peter White Public Library staff learned of photographer Michael Nye’s work, *Fine Line*, they began a campaign to bring the traveling exhibit to the community library. Staff felt *Fine Line*, a collection of portraits of individuals in some way affected by mental illness, was a perfect jumping off point for a larger community discussion about mental health issues.” In 2009, the library hosted a broad series of programs called “Your Mind Matters” that focused on mental health issues and were designed to raise awareness, reduce associated stigmas, and highlight community resources. Programs included lunch-and-learn events, film screenings, and book discussions. Due to expansive community support, the program is now in its sixth year and continues to reach the 36,144 residents of the city of Marquette and nine surrounding townships.

San Pablo, California, leveraged a routine process—drafting a general plan—to begin addressing the health concerns facing its community: a childhood obesity crisis and the highest cancer rate in Contra Costa County. San Pablo became the first city in California to add a “health element” to its general plan. Representatives from all sectors of the community participated in the development of the Health Element, which was adopted in 2011 and focuses on a variety of factors affecting health, including access to health services, nutrition, and the quality of physical environments. Residents, nonprofit organizations, and government entities formed the Childhood Obesity Prevention Task Force, which collaborates with stakeholders to develop strategies that encourage the community to “Eat Smart, Get Moving.” To increase access to healthier foods and provide a safe gathering place on the weekends, the city established the San Pablo Farmer’s Market. In recognition of the need for healthy activity and mobility for residents of all ages, the city conducted the San Pablo Avenue Complete Streets Study, funded by a \$6.2 million Caltrans Environmental Justice Transportation Planning Grant, which seeks to improve multimodal access and safety along a busy regional corridor. Additional outcomes of the Health Element include the construction of the West County Health Clinic, which led to increased access to health care services and the creation of about two hundred new jobs, and the development of recreational spaces to reduce crime and provide opportunities for physical activity.

Inclusiveness and Diversity

Gathering diverse perspectives during community discussions is important to fully understand the scope of issues and the availability of solutions. Yet diversity is not enough. Too often token representation will occur in meetings, and a community conducts business as usual, allowing complex problems to persist. All-America Cities go beyond diversity to create an inclusive culture that recognizes the contributions of diverse populations as vital to creating sustainable solutions. Creating an inclusive culture means having spaces that allow for all underserved groups to participate. This can mean providing access to child care, food, and inexpensive transportation options; removing language barriers; and partnering with organizations that historically have relationships with underrepresented groups.

The most successful projects often include the residents affected by the particular problem in the planning and implementation stages. In Marshalltown, Iowa, diabetes was affecting a significant portion of the population. Marshalltown was poorly equipped to provide preventive interventions, especially for the Latino population. In 2010, the local YMCA-YWCA won a bid to pilot a new evidenced-based diabetes prevention program. This program, however, did not meet the needs of Spanish-speaking residents of Marshalltown. In 2012, a language-appropriate and culturally relevant Spanish version of the program was made available to demonstration sites. With funding from a Community Transformation Grant, the Healthier Communities Coalition offered the Spanish-language program free to persons with prediabetes of Latino heritage in the Marshalltown area. Although the first Latino group dwindled to two participants, their success was contagious, and they helped recruit thirty-six participants for the second class. Total weight loss for all participants in the program has been 4.91 percent thus far, and physical activity time has increased.

By removing barriers for underserved groups to be involved in city planning, solutions are more thorough and are able to address the needs of everyone. Ensuring civic engagement is at the center of all decisions is a priority in Somerville, Massachusetts, even with the unique challenge of fifty-two different primary languages among residents. SomerViva! was created for outreach efforts to non-English speakers

and shaped by extensive input from the immigrant community itself. Creating access to leadership also helps Somerville gain input from all residents. Three targeted free leadership trainings are offered by the city: SAIL (Somerville Academy for Innovative Leadership) engages residents with no prior civic engagement, Gente Ponderos (Emerging Leaders) reaches the Latino residents with a focus on education and health advocacy, and Leadership Development Workshops are conducted for existing leaders or emerging parent leaders in the public schools.

Impact

Demonstrating impact of the programs and initiatives happening in communities isn't always a simple task. Lives impacted, number of people in attendance, dollars raised, number of collaborators, among others, are all important measures of success. Yet many impacts are more abstract and difficult to operationalize, such as *how* lives are impacted. Pairing comments from residents on their experiences to complement the numerical measures provides better insight into the achievements of a program or initiative.

Brush!, a small town on the eastern plains of Colorado, exemplifies the can-do spirit of an All-America City. When Colorado Mission of Mercy approached city leaders to make Brush! a site for a two-day free dental clinic, this thriving rural community quickly rose to the occasion. Brush! was the smallest town ever considered for this type of event, and there were no venues large enough to host the clinic. Led by the mayor of Brush!, who has a local dental practice, and his wife, a dental hygienist, the community's enthusiasm was demonstrated during the planning and execution of the event, with the school district lending support by rescheduling activities to accommodate the dental clinic and volunteer appreciation dinner. Over 892 donors and volunteers, including several hundred dental professionals throughout the state who were joined by local retired dentists, converged in October 2011 to provide much-needed dental services to 1,375 patients (548 from Brush!). The patients who were treated expressed satisfaction, with 98 percent indicating they were happy with their clinic experience. "Thank you. I love your heart. You didn't just fix my tooth, you helped with my self-esteem. I want to repay somehow," wrote one.

The collaborative and inclusive North Bellingham Hill Action Plan of Chelsea, Massachusetts, set the groundwork for strong outcomes in the neighborhood and surrounding areas. The Neighborhood Developers, a community development organization overseen by local residents, partnered with the city to initiate the North Bellingham Hill Action Plan in 2009 to rebuild the entire Shurtleff-Bellingham neighborhood and create social and financial capital for its residents. Ideas and initiatives were generated by residents and community leaders at a series of four participatory charrettes, conducted in multiple languages, which provided an engaging process for residents to share their opinions and to hear the concerns of others. The action plan secured resources that led to improvements of the streets and in sewer and water systems, lighting and trees, a neighborhood park, cleaner streets, recycling, housing quality, and civic engagement in North Bellingham Hill. The plan also had a spill-over impact in the adjacent subneighborhood; fostered two programs (CET and CONNECT) for expansion; and secured a competitive grant to extend the work. CET has organized and implemented the community cleanliness campaign that included community organizing, community education and outreach, and local advocacy to change trash and recycling procedures and outcomes in Chelsea. Six community organizations colocated to form CONNECT, a financial opportunity center to provide services for neighborhood residents to increase their financial stability and economic security. Results are high for participants when financial coaching plus two other services are accessed; 76 percent see increases in at least one key financial milestone.

The city of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, was able to turn a tax-delinquent Phoenix Steel site, contaminated with lead at levels well above acceptable state standards, into a large recreation area for all residents to enjoy. The city joined forces with Wisconsin's Remediation and Redevelopment Program to clean up the site and revive the land, both aesthetically and environmentally, to serve as a community and recreational hub. The city used citizen participation concepts developed by the Institute for Participatory Management and Planning and suggestions from the Project for Public Spaces as guiding principles. This working group of city, business, and community members crafted a vision and mission statement

for the Phoenix Park project. Today Phoenix Park features nine acres of green space, strolling paths, a fishing wall, two plazas, and a clock tower. A paved labyrinth serves as a focal point for play, live performance, and dancing, with more than sixty performances and celebrations energizing the space in 2013. The Wisconsin Bike Trail System, which was built on top of abandoned Milwaukee Road rail lines, now connects to more than seventy miles of trails in the city, along the banks of the Eau Claire and Chippewa Rivers, providing park users with interesting, safe, and scenic routes. The trailhead is a focal point of Phoenix Park and has proved to promote tourism and economic development downtown and served as a vital resource for commuting and recreation.

Conclusion

The All-America City Award program aims to help build healthier and more prosperous communities. Over six hundred communities have shown that using the four criteria—civic engagement and collaboration, innovation, diversity and inclusiveness, and impact—as the basis for solving complex problems leads to strong community-based solutions. Engaging all stakeholders, especially those experiencing an issue, creates community buy-in and support to help make solutions more sustainable, as shown by Hampton, Virginia's "I-Value" budgeting system. The creation of FAT Village in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, demonstrates the revitalization challenges that can be overcome when residents identify their unique assets and innovatively combine them. Once members of the Latino community were included in program outreach in Marshalltown, Iowa, the diabetes prevention program participation increased from two persons to thirty-six, showing the success inclusiveness can spur. Pairing numerical measures with quotes reflecting residents' experiences allows outsiders to see the intrinsic value of programs and helps those providing services to leverage impacts they were not previously aware of, as seen in the Brush! example, which demonstrated increased self-esteem as a self-reported impact from their Dental Day.

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