



# 2023 All-America City Award Application

Theme: Creating Thriving Communities  
through Youth Engagement

## Community Information

**Community name and state:** City of Mesa, Arizona

**Your community is applying as a:** ☐ Village ☐ Town ☐ Tribe ☒ City ☐ County ☐ Region

**If applying as a region, name participating communities:** N/A

**If applying as a neighborhood, name city:** N/A

**Has your community applied before?** ☒ Yes ☐ No If Yes, which years: 1979

**Has your community been a Finalist before?** ☒ Yes ☐ No If Yes, which years: 1979

**Has your community been an All-America City before?** ☒ Yes ☐ No If Yes, which years: 1979

## Contact Information

**All-America City Award contact (primary contact person available throughout competition & follow-up):**

**Name:** Andrea Alicoate **Title (if any):** Diversity & Special Projects Manager

**Organization/Government/Other:** City of Mesa

**Address:** PO Box 1466 City, State, Zip: Mesa, AZ 85211-1466

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**E-mail Address(es):** andrea.alicoate@mesaaz.gov

**If named a finalist, your community will receive a complimentary membership (or membership renewal if an AAC application was submitted last year) to the National Civic League for one year. To whom should this membership be directed?**

**Individual's Name:** Andrea Alicoate

**Organization:** City of Mesa

**Address:** PO BOX 1466

**City, State & Zip Code:** Mesa, AZ 85211-1466

**Phone Number:** 480-644-5034

**Email:** andrea.alicoate@mesaaz.gov

We agree to follow the National Civic League's rules regarding use of the All-America City Award logo, a registered trademark of the National Civic League. We allow the League and the All-America City Award to share this application and the information enclosed in it with League and AAC networks to promote the work of our community. If we are named an All-America City, we agree to conduct a post-AAC conference call or regional forum for the AAC network that features our projects. If named a finalist, we understand and commit to either raising the money or covering the cost of sending a community delegation to attend and compete in the three-day Awards Event and Conference. In a pay-it-forward spirit, if named a finalist or All-America City, we agree to consider supporting AAC through a National Civic League membership for a minimum of the next three years.

Signature:

X 

Date: 2/22/23

Name: Andrea Alicoate Title: Diversity & Special Projects Manager

#### City Location MAP



## Community Statistics and Map

POPULATION (most recent Census): 504,258

POPULATION PERCENTAGE CHANGE 2010-2020 (indicate + or -): +14.9%

Source/Date: U.S. Census Bureau, 2020 Census of Population and Housing

#### RACIAL/ETHNIC POPULATION BREAKDOWN:

White	75.1 %
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	27.5 %
Black or African American	4.4 %
Asian	2.3 %
American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN)	2.2 %
Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander	0.3%
Two or More Races	9.1 %

Source/Date: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017-2021 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

POPULATION BREAKDOWN BY AGE GROUP (percentages, if available):

19 years old and under	26.2%
20-24	6.5%
25-44	27.6%
45-64	23.2%
65 and over	16.5 %

Source/Date: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017-2021 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

PERCENTAGE OF FAMILIES BELOW POVERTY LEVEL: 12.1%

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE: Dec 2022 - 2.7%, *preliminary*

PERCENTAGE OF HOME OWNERSHIP: 62.5%

Source/Date: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017-2021 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates and US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Phoenix-Mesa-Scottsdale, AZ Metro Statistical Area.

WORKFORCE DISTRIBUTION—Name the three largest employment sectors in your community and provide the percentage of total employed in each:

Employment Sector 1: Health Care - 15.8%

Employment Sector 2: Retail - 14.9%

Employment Sector 2: Consumer Services - 14.1%

Source/Date: 2021 Arizona COG/MPO Employer Database, business locations with 5+ employees

EDUCATION ATTAINMENT BREAKDOWN

Bachelor's Degree or higher: 29.5%

Some college or Associates degree 36.9%

High School or GED: 24.1%

Less than High School: 3.9%

Source/Date: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017-2021 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

## **PART I: Tell Your Community's Story**

Mesa is a city on the move. For many years the City of Mesa (Mesa) has been one of the fastest growing cities in the country. As one of the premier cities in the Southwest, Mesa offers a diverse community and affordable quality of life. As the nation's 36th largest city and second largest in the Phoenix-Mesa metro area, Mesa has all the amenities of a big city while maintaining the charm and intimacy of a neighborhood community.

With a population over half million, many communities interweave to give Mesa its vibrancy. People from different races, places of origin, languages, faiths, and identities share the values of work, prosperity, and commitment to making Mesa the thriving, growing metropolis it has become. Groundbreakings and ribbon cuttings have been a welcome opportunity to celebrate decades of smart investment decisions that make Mesa a great place to live and do business. Our commitment to livability, education and infrastructure continues to attract new residents, businesses and job opportunities. It comes as no surprise that WalletHub ranked the City of Mesa as the best-run Arizona city for 2022, based on our quality of city services and total budget per capita.

However, in a time of divisive rhetoric and misinformation, it is important to keep focused on Mesa's strength: serving our community and working for the greater good. In recent years, as a large city with conservative

values, we passed a Non-Discrimination Ordinance. This was a big accomplishment, and we are proud to have memorialized our commitment to equality and diversity and ensure all have fair access to opportunities in our city. The process was unifying; we empowered marginalized groups, increased civic participation, worked across the aisle and brought more voices to the table. Just as much as the final ordinance was an accomplishment, so are the alliances and partnerships that were built after nearly a decade-long collaborative process.

Another alarming statistic shows that a large percentage of high school graduates in Mesa are not pursuing higher education, whether community college, 4-year institutions or technical school. Many initiatives are in place to help address these issues, including literacy programs, collaborations with local organizations and school systems and the Mesa College Promise initiative that helps graduates eliminate financial gaps or attendance barriers to completing higher level education programs. In addition, Downtown Mesa has added an amazing resource with the new Arizona State University MIX Center (Media and Immersive eXperience Center), which includes state of the art, film, production, and screening facility for ASU's Sidney Poitier New American Film School.

We find that with trust, innovation and strong collaborations, anyone can spring into action the support needed for their community and build a thriving city upon the common threads that exist within differing perspectives, and this is just what we have done. We are telling the world, "Mesa welcomes you. Here you can access innovative education and work opportunities, open your business, and find a quality of life for you and your family that is inclusive."

## **PART II: Describe the Strength of Your Community's Civic Capital**

Cities are uniquely positioned to be on the front lines of direct impact and to provide leadership to local efforts that will contribute towards meaningful and sustainable action. In Mesa, we believe it is our role to set the framework for citywide measures and advance these goals across programmatic and departmental lines targeted towards local impact, improving the quality of life, and ensuring the civic engagement of our community.

A city as large and complex as Mesa, we make it a practice to clearly articulate our strategic direction as well as utilize a systematic approach to translate long-range intent into actions. As such, Mesa's Council has developed a series of "Strategic Priorities," or broad statements that serve as a key tool in guiding the City towards a shared vision with a strong sense what the community wants moving forward. The City Council meets annually to discuss and refine their Strategic Priorities to align operations around key civic capital goals.

**Innovation, Inclusion and Outstanding Services are 'The Mesa Way.'** We deliver innovative services and inclusive solutions for all residents, businesses and visitors through the following six priorities:

### **1. Community Health and Safety**

Mesa is committed to safe and secure neighborhoods, parks, and businesses. We deliver community health and safety through compassionate, inclusive and mission-driven services for all.

### **2. Skilled and Talented Workforce**

In Mesa, every child has access to exceptional education and the promise of employment success. We are forging a future-ready workforce by developing strong business and P-20 partnerships, supporting robust workforce training and development, and building a sustainable pathway to quality jobs.

### **3. Strong Community Connections**

Mesa maintains strong community connections and achieves confidence in local government by emphasizing the importance of open government, providing services the Mesa Way, and pursuing communications and engagement with all Mesa residents, businesses and community partners.

#### **4. Neighborhoods and Placemaking**

Mesa's neighborhoods are well-connected, clean, safe and welcoming. They are economically and socially dynamic places, include culturally vibrant and blight-free spaces and are served by quality infrastructure.

#### **5. Sustainable Economy**

Mesa's economy is strong, diverse and sustainable. Mesa continues to focus on successful business retention and attracting high-quality jobs.

#### **6. Healthy Environment**

Mesa proactively and responsibly protects and conserves our environment and natural resources to reduce urban heat, carbon emissions, and waste for a healthy community for all.

These statements serve as a strong guidepost for future growth and development. At the local level, political polarization can make it seem impossible to get things done yet, cities worldwide have time and again brought people together from all walks of life to find new solutions to critical problems. Our Mesa leaders take on the challenge of tough conversations and policymaking by tackling issues head-on such as homelessness, mental/behavioral health, climate action, early childhood development, literacy, natural resources resiliency, workforce issues and more making us regional and national leaders.

In Mesa, we value and celebrate our rich diversity. We envision a city where all those living in, working in, or visiting Mesa are entitled to equal dignity, respect and have fair access to opportunities to thrive. We are committed to promoting inclusion in all our initiatives, programs, and services for the Mesa community and our employees. We work with cultural, community, and faith-based groups, colleges/universities, non-profit organizations, neighborhoods, employee groups, other city agencies and departments to build relationships that help to identify and address diversity, equity, and inclusion issues. These collaborative organizations and institutions help to bring people together across dividing lines to engage with the City and one another on key issues.

Mesa has a culture of engagement and utilizes best practices when engaging with our diverse community. From the inception of events, initiatives or partnership efforts, Mesa's staff often work with local community members to create and design authentic experiences to be shared with the greater public. These partnerships happen year after year to welcome new ideas and respond to public needs at the time. We pride ourselves in thinking out of the box to allow for genuine civic engagement that is accessible, comfortable or in familiar locations, and at convenient times for our community.

The strategies we use to assist with implementing inclusive community action are:

**Partnerships:** Community partnerships are an important pathway to various types of local solutions. The City and community stakeholders periodically assess roles and make pivots or shifts as needed to provide a foundation for maximizing the collective impact, optimizing actions and communications to support resilience and equitable outcomes. By continuing to reflect on how approaches are progressing, the Mesa community can take lessons learned and apply them to other planned strategies.

**Education and Engagement:** Education and engagement are vital as we are experiencing historic growth throughout all parts of the City. Continued education with schools (early education, primary, community colleges and universities), community organizations who have large networks of members, and other partners are essential to move efforts forward. Strategies include continuing to build partnerships with

thought leaders, technical experts, non-profits, youth, and community leaders to create positive community-led action, broad-based support, and a sense of ownership for City initiatives.

**Tracking and Ongoing Communications:** Ongoing communication, tracking performance, benchmarking, and sharing lessons learned are all part of our success in Mesa. We demonstrate ongoing action through regular website and social media updates, continued education programs and community news releases on large scale projects. Additionally, stakeholder feedback keeps the community informed on actions, strategies and progress toward goals. Moreover, monitoring provides concrete data to document the City's evolution for annual reports and increased transparency.

We have created trusted, civic-minded sources of information and news through storytelling and personal narratives, linking to and engaging customers with us from wherever they are and whenever they need us. Through digital storytelling, we build trust, increase transparency, increase awareness, position key messages and improve civic engagement throughout our city.

We work to expand our reach through meaningful connections that works with cultural, community and employee groups to build relationship and showcasing various perspectives through our marketing, messaging and social media engagement. We strategically highlight the many voices that make Mesa special in efforts such as our 'TOGETHER MESA' initiative launched in May 2022 to foster greater awareness and understanding of our Mesa communities.

*"We live in a diverse city with rich history and a wide spectrum of cultural backgrounds and perspectives that make us who we are," said Mayor John Giles. "Together Mesa reaffirms our commitment to prioritize issues of equity, inclusion and accessibility for all. Sharing our similarities and embracing what makes us unique deepens our understanding of each other and strengthens our community, overall."*

*"Together Mesa encourages all of us to be active members of our city by sharing our experiences and knowledge," said Mesa Human Relations Advisory Board Chair Ron Williams. "When we listen to different experiences from our own, we gain a broader perspective of our community."*

One of the most effective ways to provide input is on City's citizen advisory boards and committees. Through this service, civic-minded residents become involved in their local government and make recommendations to the Mesa City Council. The City, in turn, benefits from the knowledge, experience and expertise of citizens. We strive for representation on our City boards and commissions, and regularly rely on trusted organizations such as these to serve as conveners and bring people together to resolve pressing conflicts and challenges. We seek to cultivate new leadership through targeted programs such our neighborhood course 'Resident's Guide to Community and Civic Engagement' and student-based Mayor's Youth Committee, both of which are tutorials on the ins-and-outs of city government and being involved in the community.

Equitable and inclusive engagement is not only about ensuring that diverse perspectives are at the table but that deliberate actions are taken for underrepresented communities to participate, contribute, and are part of the decision-making process. Understanding the demographics of Mesa residents is important for greater awareness of the diversity, history, and values of our community and to address historical barriers. Knowing that an estimated 30% of Mesa's population identifies as Hispanic is critical for our communication to be effective and resonate with our community. Language can be a barrier to accessing benefits or services, exercising important rights, complying with regulations, or understanding general information. To support these needs, the City has a list of vendors, as well as an internal Spanish Team and bilingual staff, to assist with appropriate language assistance. As a standard, marketing materials are developed in English and Spanish, bi-lingual staff are present at community workshops, and our website is multilingual.

In addition, it took a pandemic to make cities aware that digital world only works when everyone can participate. Bridging the digital divide is a problem that requires solutions for accessibility, affordability, and digital skills that touch social economics, infrastructure, and technology. We have made investments in innovative local solutions such as open-access fiber network across Mesa that will provide quality, reliable, and secure internet access to enable participation from those who need it most. The ambitious digital plan will connect 264,000 city premises and 2,470 street miles, providing citywide access to the fastest internet speeds. This serves as a regular reminder to keep equitable connectivity in the forefront of civic leadership and is essential to keep inviting voices to the table.

Inclusion is a journey, not a fixed destination, so organizations need to set up systems and processes to encourage, protect, and celebrate it. No other effort showcases this more than our two-day Dia de los Muertos celebration which brings an average of 30,000 people annually to downtown Mesa to honor the cultural Mexican holiday, Day of the Dead. This 2022 National League of Cities Cultural Diversity Award winning event stands as a model of community engagement for the public to not only enjoy the events, but to take part in actively creating it. From our community committee, to inviting the creation of personal altars (including those from partners such as Mesa Sister Cities and Mesa en Espanol), to painting side-by-side with artists from Mexico, to building out the large-scale community altar, attendees are invited to deepen their experience and understanding of this cultural tradition. In recent years, the event is live-streamed on the City's virtual platforms to allow the event into homes that may not have or could not attend in-person and enhance their connection to the City. The legacy of this annual event brings awareness to a significant cultural celebration and has become a tradition for families in Mesa for over two decades.

Placemaking also puts emphasis on engaging many different stakeholders, listening to their stories, and making recommendations reflective of their specific concerns and desires. When people see their values and preferences reflected in a place, they feel welcomed and a sense of belonging. We have experienced the joy of inviting the public into that creation process. As a result, West Mesa organically developed a cluster of more than 70 shops, restaurants, and service businesses with Asian ownership and/or cultural influences and illuminated them with murals/art, street signage, utility wraps and light pole banners to increase the area's visibility. Our Asian District offers unique spaces through this community-based planning, and created public spaces that are culturally vibrant, welcoming and safe. Efforts continue to engage with area stakeholders to help increase visibility for the area, so more of our community experiences and enjoys the culture, community, and commerce.

Now, in a time where talk is divisive, it may be difficult to walk the hard road, but we do it anyway in the best interest of our community. In Mesa, we do the work because the simple reason is it's the right thing to do. It's an important demonstration of our commitment to equality and taking on smart risks to do what's right for our community. We will continue to look to our Mesa community to help us develop a pathway of equitable and inclusive initiatives based on data, best practices, and local expertise that contribute to a vibrant, prosperous, and thriving city for generations to come.

## **PART III: Describe Three Community-Driven Projects or Programs**

### **ACTIVITY ONE: Hactivate Mesa (Data & Innovation)**

#### **Overview:**

Hactivate Mesa is a collaborative event where students come together to study and analyze data on pertinent topics or problems in their local community to help promote data science, STEM, critical thinking, problem

solving, presentation skills, community pride, and civic engagement. Events began in 2019 as a partnership between the City, Mesa Public Schools, and the business community. Initially designed as an annual 2-day event for high school students, Hacktivate Mesa now includes activities throughout the year for students in 8<sup>th</sup> grade to master's candidates in Public Administration, Public Policy and Business Analytics programs at each of Arizona's three public universities.

The purpose of [Hacktivate Mesa](#) is to engage youth in tackling some of the most difficult issues facing our community by:

- Drawing on the great young minds we have in our community to be innovative and help the City to think of unique ways to address some of the challenges we have in our community.
- Introduce students to data as a way to understand what is happening, and how to use data to think about questions and solutions.
- Develop interest in data science and public administration and be inspired to pursue their education in ways that prepare them to be civic-minded and to be involved in improving their community.

Hacktivate Mesa is operated by the City's Office for Data & Performance which guides the City, and its departments, to realize their public purpose and strategic objectives, using data informed analysis to achieve results that improve the quality of life in Mesa. The Office supports the objective to be a data-informed government where leaders and staff at all levels are committed to using data to make decisions.

**Challenge Being Addressed:**

We recognize that generational differences can inevitably impact our community. By understanding the youth viewpoint, cities can positively adjust their programs and services to create a better sense of belonging and produce better outcomes for future engagement. Active and engaged youth are a source of government innovation and improved service. They can provide governments with fresh approaches, create positive impact on a personal level and ensure that policy outcomes are responsive to the concerns of young people. By breaking down barriers for communicating with our youth audiences, we can identify who they are and how they perceive their relationship with government.

*"This allows us to see that we are more than what we're told we are; because a lot of times you're told 'well, you're a teenager, you're not going to do anything right now, you're not old enough, you can't do this yet' and we can, we can make a big difference in our community."*

*"I really enjoy getting to learn about these issues not only as a student trying to solve them but also as a Mesa resident trying to have a greater understanding. I feel like if more people could talk to these experts and have more intimate knowledge of our challenges as a city we could problem solve better."*

In addition to sparking youth interest in government, there are local challenges that need to be addressed. Over the past several years of Hacktivate Mesa, students were presented the status of vital community topics such as reducing poverty, behavioral/mental health, crime rates, attracting talented workforce, transportation access just to name a few.

Below is a sample of the most pressing challenges provided to students at the 2023 Hacktivate Mesa event. Not only are these issues that policymakers are actively trying to combat, but these are also issues that directly impact our youth:



- **Homelessness and Affordable Housing:** Many factors contribute to homelessness including income inequality, increasing housing costs, mental health issues, addiction and family struggles.
  - a. 4,935 Mesa residents received homeless services during calendar year 2022, an increase of 27.3% since 2019.
  - b. 20.1% of Mesa residents receiving homeless services in 2022 were under the age of 18.
  - c. Regional accessibility to affordable housing continues to decline. The median monthly rent in Mesa for Q3 2022 was \$1,500, a 5% increase over the same quarter in 2021
- **Climate Change:** Urban heat is a growing problem in the region as annual land surface temperatures continue rising. Mesa's Climate Action Plan is the city's commitment to proactively and responsibly protect and conserve Mesa's environment and natural resources.
- **Education:** Since 2015, Mesa ranks last or next to last in percent of population with a bachelor's degree or higher when compared with Phoenix, Tucson and other major east valley cities (see Regional Educational Attainment datasets below).
- **Opioid Epidemic:** Opioid addiction and abuse are serious national crisis and Mesa public safety are on the front lines, responding to related incidents every day.
  - a. 1,590 fentanyl related offenses appeared in municipal court during 2022, an increase of 95% compared with 2021.

#### **Action Being Taken:**

Hactivate Mesa was created to celebrate youth ideas and encourage collaborations with professionals to increase civic engagement and elicit the exploration of careers in civil service. We want to give them tools to use their words, ideas and voices to inspire the larger community about the value of youth ideas. Multiple generations are impacted as younger kids are mentored by experts and university students, including those from the local major universities- Arizona State University, University of Arizona and Northern Arizona University. We also demystify these post-secondary institutions by using them as sites for the physical events.

This effort is a shared vision with Mesa Public Schools addressing community challenges faced by Mayor, Council and District Governing Board. Sponsorships are provided from major corporations such as Waymo, Versaterra, and CGI, and includes support from other non-profit organizations, career community subject matter experts, and City staff alike who are there to aid in the success of the students. The most recent event included:

- 75 college students, 360 high school students, and 72 8<sup>th</sup> grade students
- 30 volunteers and subject matter experts from ASU, business community, non-profit, and other government agencies (county, state, federal)

Youth from diverse schools across Mesa join teams consisting of 5-6 students. Participants are introduced to the issues and their complexities. Mesa staff and volunteers with different professional backgrounds mentor the teams as they work, and they are greeted by local officials.

During Hacktivate Mesa, students are exposed to and have access to real City data. We task them with identifying patterns and trends about a community issue to make recommendations for addressing it. In effort to promote inclusiveness and understanding of equity, the projects always include data on community demographics (race, ethnicity, socioeconomic) and areas of disparate impact. The youth benefit from leadership

development, problem solving, better understanding of the community around them, increased job readiness and potential employment opportunities.

Data analysis is the process of using current and historical data to discover, interpret and communicate meaningful patterns that inform decision making and creates new insights. Our City data assets need to be timely, appropriate and easily accessible, and of high quality. Tools like Microsoft Excel, Google Charts, and data visualization on Mesa's Data Portal are useful to identify these trends as well as visually display information. Participants get to put these skills to practice in real-life scenarios using the City's data assets.

Recent Hactivate Mesa participants have enjoyed looking at real data:

*"It's cool that we're an open data community! The fact that the City is so open and allowing us to use their own data so that we can learn from it and the community can learn from it, is completely amazing."*

*"We get the chance to dive into some of the real problems that exist in the community around us and we get to understand what really happens and see the big that issues that exist and not just what happens in our home or at school."*

*"Enlightening to see how much data and problems there really is and how many people are trying to solve them and how many people are needed to solve them."*

We want young adults to ask questions such as what, when, and where is it happening? They should be prepared to answer these questions using data such as:

- What data is missing?
- Not available or not being collected?
- What improvements should be made in collecting data?

Groups create a presentation not to exceed 8 minutes. During the presentation they identify the question or problem and present the data (evidence) that informs what they learned. They are to include effective data visualizations and citation for all data and evidence included. A panel of judges, including members of the City Council, listen as they present. The students hope their ideas make a good impression to be implemented into the community.

Groups are graded based on a 3 category/ 9 criteria scoring rubric:

- Analysis: Evidence, Knowledge & Content
- Presentation: Delivery, Visual Design, Organization
- Innovation: Use of Information, Novelty, Creativity

#### **Outcomes Achieved:**

The City has leveraged these youth insights into actual programs. The 2022 Hacktivate presentations informed initiatives that helped shape ongoing efforts such as centralized homeless resources/services, crisis intervention training for School Resource Offices to improve mental health and trauma systems for youth, a food waste into gas program, and more.

For example, Mayor Giles recently announced the "Trees are Cool" initiative to increase shade across Mesa, lower the urban heat island effect and cool our neighborhoods during the hot summer months based off student participants' recommendation for increased climate action. "Trees are Cool" challenges residents and businesses to help increase the City's tree canopy coverage to 15% with a target of planting one million trees in Mesa by 2050. As part of the initiative, we launched an online tool to record newly planted trees. The page features a map showing Mesa neighborhoods at greater risk of heat impacts - which often correlates with lesser amounts of tree canopy. This new dashboard will be available for future Hactivate Mesa youth to analyze for progress and efficiencies.

The most recent Hactivate Mesa Event took place January 25-26, 2023 at the new Arizona State University campus in the Mesa City Center. The topics and resources provided to students inspired the 2023 winning teams:

- Team MVT MVPs, from Mountain View High, on the topic of Opioids: Empowering Mesa Citizens to Reduce Opioid Overdose Deaths
- Team RM Going Green, from Red Mountain High, on the topic of Climate: Going Green
- Team Speakers for the Trees, from Red Mountain High, on the topic of Climate: Bringing Change Through Treesh

We continue to evolve Hactivate Mesa with the first ever Mesa College Hactivate event planned later this year. Student participants will be coming from each of the major Arizona universities. They will be challenged in a similar format allowing them to provide their own unique ideas and creative solutions on how to address these current pressing topics impacting the community today.

It's important to note that Hactivate Mesa is part of the City's [Smart City](#) initiative. A Smart City is one in which the latest technologies and data-driven insights are leveraged to improve the quality of life, civic engagement, economic development, service delivery, and community vibrancy for its residents, businesses, and visitors. In short, a Smart City is about people versus tech itself. Several pillars of a Smarter Mesa that Hactivate Mesa contributes to are:

- **Smart Government:** Create a responsive, engaged city that makes decisions based on data and understands the needs of its community.
- **Smart Public Safety:** Create a safe and secure environment for all citizens.
- **Smart Community:** Create an engaged, inclusive and equitable community that can provide a high-quality life to all Mesa citizens.

Ensuring that the youth are actively engaged in open government strategies is fundamental in building active civic engagement and creating City initiatives that fully reflect the needs and concerns of the younger generation. Fostering this climate of engagement and participation is dependent upon the creation and implementation of an effective and tailored communications. Hactivate Mesa is an innovate solution that showcases how local government works, the issues we are working on, and gets the youth involved in shaping lives of its residents.

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## **ACTIVITY TWO: Project Lit (Art & Culture)**

### **Overview:**

Founded in 2015, City's Project Lit is an arts learning program that uses poetry, Hip Hop, and drama to promote literacy and activate social and emotional development with young and emerging adults. Project Lit primarily serves students who attend Title 1 schools in grades 7-12, through 16-to-24-week school residencies with professional teaching artist mentors. In each residency, youth engage with the tools of creativity to find, develop, and publicly present their unique voice, while also learning to foster empathy and compassion as a means of critical thinking. In addition, upon completion of their residencies, students are offered an opportunity to publicly share their work in a community performance space and submit their poems to be published in an annual student anthology.

Owned and operated by the City, the [Mesa Arts Center](#) (MAC) serves more than 420,000 people annually. The Mesa Arts Center Foundation serves as the nonprofit arm of the city-operated MAC, and through outreach and education seeks to encourage participation and increase exposure of the arts to the larger community. In 2017, the MAC received funding from the Pulliam Foundation to support and expand Project Lit.

Mesa's Arts and Culture Department, in partnership with businesses, educational institutions, community members, volunteers, City staff, and other cultural and government entities, ensure our community has unique, safe spaces for youth and all to enjoy inspiring, relevant, fun and transformational experiences. The department advocates that arts and culture is rooted in the value that creativity and discovery are the engine of human progress and well-being and are essential to placemaking and transforming neighborhoods.

### **Challenge Being Addressed:**

Arizona has consistently ranked among the bottom five states for the quality of its public-school education. According to Education Week's annual Quality Counts report, Arizona currently ranks 46 out of 50 states overall in K-12 education quality. There remains a need to improve the quality of education for Arizona's children. There are many well documented studies connecting arts education to a more complete and well-rounded educational experience. The arts integrate with other disciplines in creating engaging and rigorous learning opportunities. These foster linguistic, numeric, and aesthetic literacy, alongside discipline, creativity, and enhanced self-esteem. When implemented, the arts bring a sense of community into the classroom that transcend the walls of the school, creating a more robust and civically engaged student. However, 50% of schools in Arizona have no budget for curricular support in arts education.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) define Social and Emotional Learning as "the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions." We believe that social and emotional skills play a vital role in the academic success and personal resiliency of young people.

To compound this, youth have experienced unprecedented circumstances over the last two years where their educational support system was turned upside down, they were isolated from friends and social settings, school safety remains a concern, and possibly experienced the loss of a loved one due to COVID-19. During these challenging times we have seen art empower and unify us, relieve stress, and promote overall health and wellness. The purpose of Project Lit is now more important than ever. We work to overcome these challenges,

by partnering with schools and local organizations with the support of the community sponsorships and local foundations.

**Action Being Taken:**

Through Project Lit, students are given the space for exploration, freedom and discovery through a unified framework that centers on collaboration between the Teaching Artist Mentors, classroom teachers, peer mentors and students. This framework provides a common set of learning objectives, integrating literacy and social and emotional development with the respective artforms and classroom needs. This also allows a customized experience for each child while also maintaining a unified goal throughout the program.

The Project Lit annual program goals include providing approximately 4,000 in-depth program exposures through RUSH weeks and serving up to 80 students weekly through 16–24-week residencies that are offered at 8 schools and community partners. Pre-and-post program assessments/surveys are provided to understand the impacts on students. Since the program inception, Project Lit has expanded to engage:

- 23 host schools or community-based sites
- 21,700 students participating in RUSH Day
- Up to 400 students participating in Project Lit program activities annually

Project Lit workshops occur in out-of-school time hours, usually right after school concludes for the day, throughout the school year. The program model launches at each site between September and December and winds down in April. Program related productions and year-end festivals take place during the Spring. The universal program design allows each student to step into the programming at their appropriately tailored level. Thus, incoming students and returning students can broaden and deepen their learning simultaneously in the same space.

**Outcomes Achieved:**

Project Lit provides opportunities for youth to engage in dialogue and writing prompts around traditional and cultural literacies. This exposure to dialogue around cultural issues gives them opportunities to expand their capacity for empathy as they hear the stories of their peers and explore the stories of their lives. By allowing them spaces to critically evaluate their world, Project Lit builds their civic aptitude and gives them tools on how they can actively engage their voice to impact decision makers.

In support of improving or commencement of poetry, spoken word and performance skills, Project Lit helps expand technical skills among students.

- Students reported increased self-identification as an artist by the program's end (65% pre to 80.9% post) and feeling more confident in their dramatic skills (80.9%).

Project Lit classrooms provide spaces for youth peers to come together in weekly settings. Students who have a year of programming experience are invited to co-lead the space with teaching artists and educators. These Peer Mentors are seen and respected as experts in their experiences and sharing their voice with their peers.

In support of building meaningful youth participation and expanding their involvement in impacting the community, Project Lit provides ongoing leadership development opportunities.

- One Peer Mentor is involved in each session with up to 10 mentors per week.

- 1 in 4 participating students become a Peer Mentor

Statistics show that above all other skills in the career field, the most impactful skill is social and emotional intelligence. Project Lit is rooted in developing social and emotion engagement, that gives students the baseline to explore and prepare for other job readiness skills. Furthermore, we host additional programming like Unity Festival, where we go beyond the art of poetry and introduce opportunities for students to build transferable job skills.

In support of developing speaking, listening, and writing skills, Project Lit helps grow students' critical literacy and communication skills. Youth demonstrate the understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings through interpretation and analysis, and exemplified by their own employment of said techniques. They develop and strengthen writing through routinely planning, revising, editing, and re-writing.

Project Lit encourages youth to explore the arts and literacy as a healing mechanism to help navigate the pressures of what they are going through. Whether coping with issues facing the world or typical teenage angst, most young people are eager to find an outlet for expression. In the long term, Project Lit aims to engage students in a compounded learning experience that helps them move past fears while challenging them to look at adversity not as a roadblock but as a piece of the puzzle to be solved. The goal is to create lifelong learners who approach the world through a critical but compassionate lens.

*"There is always light. If only we're brave enough to see it. If only we're brave enough to be it."*

— Amanda Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*

In support of promoting emotional awareness, Project Lit supports offering students coping skills to healthily express their emotions.

- 80.9% (4 out of 5) of students reported the program made it easier to talk about uncomfortable things.

*"I have developed from a shy, harsh self-critic to a confident, not-so-harsh self-critic."*

Project Lit does not create safe spaces, we create brave spaces. Specifically in the focus of LGBTQIA+ community, creating a safe space is not possible for youth that are going through this development stage and may not feel safe to express themselves for fear of what others will say of them. That is why we create a brave space, that promotes empathy, compassion, for ALL students to tell their story and listen to others to create connections to one another and understandings. Expression is about an openness to reveal oneself completely. If used effectively, expression can be a vehicle to expand worldviews. In addition, expression is a great tool for developing critical life skills and social engagement. The goal is not necessarily that students become professional poets, but rather that they find their unique voice and learn what it takes to manage the responsibility of having that voice amplified for the world to witness.

Social engagement has been found to be important for adolescents and teens for multiple reasons. Research has demonstrated the following positive outcomes related to social engagement:

- Youth social engagement has been found to have protective effects against mental health disorders.

- The lack of these opportunities increases the likelihood that adolescents will engage in drug abuse, extremism, or violence.
- Social engagement and positive peer relationships have been shown to improve one's own body image and have a protective effect against developing a negative body image.

In support of fostering social engagement, Project Lit has been successful in developing observable connection and interaction among student peers.

- Students reported feeling more comfortable collaborating in small group settings (pre 65.6% to post 89.4%). Over 89% of students also reported feeling like part of a community created by the program.

*"It feels like a small loving family."*

A City-wide Slam Championship commemorative event celebrates the hard work and dedication of students involved in Project Lit during the school year. Hosted in traditional slam fashion, our Youth Poetry Festival highlights poetry performed by both individuals and teams for a community audience. In addition, poetry in any form or style is collected to be part of the annual Project Lit Youth Anthology. Work is chosen by a group of peer editors that participate in Project Lit, and based on the quality of content, consistency of voice and style and mastery of language.

***Imagine a world where young people speak for themselves with passion and authority.  
A world where they tell their own stories. This anthology is just that.***

Project Lit continues to evolve to ensure support exists for youth to express themselves, and to learn and grow during challenging times through healthy social and emotional development. Since the program's inception, several program modifications were made for the purposes of ongoing quality improvement and to facilitate real-life implementation. The MAC started offering free virtual program content over the last two years for youth and learned that students were receptive and eager to participate in this type of online setting. Project Lit has implemented what we have learned and enhanced the program by incorporating online curriculum and professional development for teachers.

In addition, the MAC and Arizona State University are partnering to expand access to latest digital tools and engagement in workshops for all youth in the community. Co-lab, a youth recording studio, is now being offered to all youth at no charge. Mesa's IDEA Museum and Natural History Museum are supporting the expansion of youth arts learning program focused on exposure and literacy in pre-kindergarten populations.

Finally, Mesa supports the active participation of the larger region by ensuring the same access to arts learning programs to youth in neighboring cities and areas in nearby cities. These efforts will support youth continuing to be invigorated to explore the arts and literacy to help develop resiliency, expand their emotional awareness, celebrate cultural diversity, increase civic engagement and develop confidence in using their talents publicly.

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### ACTIVITY THREE: SPARC Youth Programs (Public Safety)

#### Overview:

Mesa's Police Department (MPD) contributes to our city's thriving community through programs that activate youth engagement and positive community-police relations. SPARC (Sports, Programs & Activities Reuniting Community) Youth Programs is the umbrella over initiatives that provide opportunities to play fun sports, experience simulation activities, and learn life skills all with the support and mentorship of public safety officers. Initiatives like SPARC help to strengthen police-youth relations and proactive police engagement within our diverse community.

SPARC is administered through the Community Relations & Recruitment Division that provides outreach, engagement, educational and career pathway opportunities to the community and within the department. An average of 300 individual youth and their families are impacted by SPARC initiatives each school year.

#### Challenge Being Addressed:

It's no secret that police departments across the nation are grappling with an increase in crime and violence, mental health, homelessness, and other high-profile topics, and forced to look at how they are policing in a comprehensive manner. Now, more than ever, we see the consequences of bad interactions and discourse with police officers across daily news, and in those events, the entire community pays a steep and sometimes irrecoverable cost.

In Mesa, we are doubling down on our investment to our community and are shifting the paradigm. We are taking a holistic approach by doing what we can to help connect with and support our youth and families. We know that cultivating long term trust increases civic engagement, decreases vulnerability to external forces, strengthens relationships in our community and promotes positive experiences with law enforcement. Mesa is now recognized as one of the safest big cities in the country.

As a department whose vision statement is 'Excellence in Public Safety', it is imperative to ensure use of developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed, racially equitable best practices with youth. MPD's strategic plan is currently governed by six goals, two of which are *Community Partnership* and *Customer Service*. A Strategic Council comprised of the Chief and various leaders in the department, meet regularly to ensure accountability, evaluate the relevance, and be apprised of the status of each initiative. A notable accomplishment includes *Community Engagement through Youth Mentorship Program* (the development of SPARC) and current strategic initiative for a *Creation of a Police Athletics League*. These initiatives have been researched as far back as 2016 when the department developed the division dedicated to youth and community relations programs.

#### Action Being Taken:

SPARC is a shared vision with Mesa Public Schools and community youth non-profits such as Boys & Girls Club, Girl Scouts, Arizona Soccer Association, Maricopa County Juvenile Probation Office, Rotary Clubs, and more. Events are often hosted at Mesa facilities or directly within the schools and neighborhoods that they serve.

SPARC Includes:



## Sports

**Running Club:** Running program that promotes self-esteem, good health and provides opportunities to socialize through fitness. The program is a partnership with RRCA Certified Running Coaches, Mesa Public Schools and City of Mesa Parks & Recreation.

**Soccer Clinics:** Our soccer program teams up with local non-profits, like the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Valley, to hold soccer clinics and games that are coached by Mesa Police Officers.

**Basketball Clinics:** Our basketball program is a collaboration with Mesa Public Schools and provides youth within our community the ability to play a fun sport while learning important life skills from our officers.

## Programs

**Teen Community Engagement Academy (CEA):** A one-day experience that allows participants to learn about police operations and obtain a personal view of what a day in the life of a police officer in their neighborhood is like. Teens participate in trainings on common scenarios and challenges, discussions on important topics such as Use of Force, presentations from specialized policing units (e.g., K-9, Motor Unit, Forensics, Therapy Canine), patrol ride-along and station tours and other hands-on activities. Open to youth 13-18 years old.

**Youth Leadership Academy:** A two-week summer program that builds character, leadership development, and appreciation for community services and good citizenship. Youth tackle challenges while rappelling down a 7-story tower, giving a public presentation, and completing a multi-task obstacle course requiring complex communication skills. Open to high school aged youth in 10th, 11th, and 12th grade.

**ASPIRE Academy:** A four-day leadership camp for high school aged girls. They get hands-on experience in firefighting and law enforcement operations and work side-by-side with women in these fields. ASPIRE helps to de-mystify what are non-traditional careers and teach girls that they can do anything they set their mind to. Open to youth girls 14-18 years old.

## Activities

**Teen Court:** Gives youth a practical experience of the judicial system by allowing them to hear actual cases and determine an appropriate, constructive consequence. It promotes restorative justice by allowing the offender, victim, and community to work together to find solutions. Open to youth 14-18 years old.

**RadKids National Safety Education Program:** Allows youth to replace fear with knowledge, skill, and power by enhancing their critical thinking abilities to stay safer in our world today. Open to youth 6-12 years old.

**Youth Community Forum:** Intended to create relationships between MPD and the community, to provide effective avenues of communication for community members, and to address cultural that transcend ethnic, cultural, religious and geographic barriers to increase the quality of life for all citizens, particularly topics that are important to youth.

It's important to note that SPARC programs often includes registration from students at Title I schools which service a high percentage from low-income families and students who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. These schools often seek partnerships to provide students more opportunities to receive fair, equitable and high-quality leadership programming. SPARC also offer various sports activities to primary education students in the schools. Police Officers serve as coaches and mentors for youth while participating in non-enforcement engaging activities.

**Outcomes Achieved:**

Three programs within SPARC offer high school aged student participants job readiness and civic engagement to include volunteerism and community engagement. These opportunities offer hands on-experiences, character building exercises, and various developmental skills to prepare for life and careers after secondary education. In addition to SPARC programs, MPD also offers a year-round Police Cadet Pathway Program for high school students who embrace continual community service and engage in weekly law enforcement training. These students assist with traffic control and support community members at several community events resulting in over 3,665 community service hours last year.

In April 2022, School Resource Officers at Desert Ridge and Dobson High Schools assisted with the organization of the annual Law Enforcement Torch Run awareness and fundraiser event for Special Olympics Arizona. The mission of Special Olympics Arizona (SOAZ) is to provide year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for those with intellectual disabilities, giving them continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy of participating equitably. Both schools, with 5,000 combined student enrollment, organized designated paths through their schools for SOAZ students to run through to the finish line filled with officers, teachers and Special Olympic staff. All students on campus stepped out of class in session to cheer and support the participants of the event.

In another inspirational effort, SPARC launched the first afterschool basketball skills session and tournament with Edison Elementary and Lowell Elementary, both Title I schools, in Fall 2022. Each week, the officers coached 5<sup>th</sup> grade students that lead up to an exciting and fun competition between both schools at the Eagles Community Center. This collaborative tournament created positive connections between officers, students and their families and the gym was packed cheering on the kids with joy and excitement.

**Event Testimonials:**

*"The SPARC program, it was so great for the kids to interact with the police officers. They love playing basketball and then you took these great role models in the community and brought them together and it just made a great experience for the kids. Something that they'll never forget and they're already asking, 'When do we get to do it again?'"* Edison Elementary PE Teacher.

*"It's good to interact with the kids of the community. Especially the area we work, and we know the kids very well. They see us driving by in a patrol car, but now they can interact with us. They get to speak with an officer and see that we are human just as they are. We also love sports. It's good to be a good mentor and a leader and show these kids that we are interacting with the community and just doing our part to make this world a better place".* Police Officer Paramo

*"My name is Edgar and I'm in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade Lowell Elementary. What I really liked about SPARC is I like playing with the coaches, I really loved meeting the police officers and I really like the tournament!"* Lowell Elementary 5<sup>th</sup> grade student.

In a more targeted approach, the four-day ASPIRE Academy is held in the spring and open to young girls interested in pursuing a career in public safety. Girls gear up and work alongside elite women from Mesa's fire and police services, learning the value of fitness, rappelling, climbing a 100-foot ladder truck, investigating crime scenes, and riding with driving instructors in a high-speed obstacle course. Cultivating young female interest and talent in public safety is of high priority for the department.

In 2021, MPD signed on to the 30x30 Pledge to improve the representation and experiences of women in law enforcement. We were among the first agencies in the nation to make this commitment. The ultimate goal is to reach 30% of women in police recruit classes by 2030, and to ensure our agency is truly representative of the community we serve. While 30x30 is focused on advancing women in policing, these principles are applicable to all demographic diversity.

Currently, women make up only 12% of sworn officers and 3% of police leadership in the U.S. As of 2022, MPD has 13% female sworn staff. This underrepresentation of women in policing has significant public safety implications. Research suggests that women officers:

- Use less force and less excessive force
- Are named in fewer complaints and lawsuits
- Are perceived by communities as being more honest and compassionate
- See better outcomes for crime victims, especially in sexual assault cases

By taking a series of low actions, such as investing in ASPIRE Academy, we plan to improve the representation and experiences of women in law enforcement. We are actively assessing the current state of our department regarding gender equity, identifying factors that may be driving any disparities and developing and implementing strategies and solutions to eliminate barriers and advance women in policing.

Quotes from attendees of the ASPIRE Academy:

*"I myself didn't think I could do it. Everyone was with me and cheering me on. It was so supportive environment, and I really liked that".* Haadhija Mohammed

*"It's been really amazing talking to all these professionals, and we get to see so many people who do so many different things. It's really opened my eyes to the variety in these jobs".* Brenna Rogers

*"It's been hard physically but also really mentally rewarding. It's really a lot of fun and helpful to what I want to do in life".* Dax Harless

Finally, another collaborative SPARC program for teens promotes restorative justice and reform overview of the criminal justice system in partnership with the Juvenile Probation Office. Community Teen Court empowers youth to help change negative and delinquent behavior in their peers in their own community. We encourage civic engagement of youth to increase social and emotional well-being by allowing the offender, victim, and community to work together to repair the harm done to the victim and assigning consequences that involve education and deterrence.

Through SPARC, we provide Mesa youth unforgettable experiences that build respect and authentic communication with law enforcement, provides leadership opportunities, and enhances our Citywide culture of engagement. We take pride in increasing the civic engagement with our next generation of leaders. We look forward to expanding SPARC into new schools and sports programming in 2023.

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*End of Application. Thank you for the opportunity to submit the City of Mesa for the All-America City Award!*