

TIP SHEET: HOW TO START A BLOCK ASSOCIATION

When residents get organized into neighborhood groups like block associations, tenants groups or civic associations they become a force for dealing with local problems and building a better neighborhood. When neighbors get together around a common issue, they are able to get things done that individuals can not.

If you think your building, block or neighborhood should be organized, look over the six steps explained below. They are drawn from the experiences of thousands of New York City residents that are organizing their building, cleaning up their neighborhood, planting and maintaining community gardens, improving schools, combating racism or otherwise working to improve neighborhood livability.

STEP 1: DEFINE AND RESEARCH THE ISSUES

Some neighborhood groups exist as multipurpose groups that bring residents together around a variety of concerns. Others begin as a response to a specific issue such as an unresponsive landlord, a redevelopment scheme drawn up without consulting the community or a desire to increase community access to public green space.

In either case, you'll want to select an issue that connects to concerns and aspirations that are widely shared within your neighborhood. It's important to talk to other residents to find out what they think the important issues are and what should be done. Neighborhood surveys can be a good way to gauge community concerns and meet potential allies. It's also important to collect all the information you can about the hot-button issues. If your goal is to plant a community garden, for instance, you'll want to know who owns the available space, how you can get access to it, who in the neighborhood will help with the garden and what resources exist to help you. What's the history of the issue or issues that you're dealing with? You can find a lot of this information on-line but your local community board, the public library, community newspapers and other community groups can also be useful resources. It's also good to find out how different groups in the city and around the country have addressed similar problems.

STEP 2: RESEARCH THE COMMUNITY

What's the size of the area you want to organize? Is it one building or block, or a larger neighborhood? Is there a particular grouping, like tenants or homeowners or single parents, who are most concerned and most likely to join your group? In the beginning, it makes sense to start small – make sure your group's size and scope is manageable. Find out what resources your community has - potentially friendly organizations, faith communities, schools, local business groups, cultural associations, elected officials, or other neighborhood or community groups.

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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 ways in which the neighborhood could be improved?

STEP 3: BUILD A CORE GROUP

When you first start out, it's a good idea to have a small group of about three or four people to help things get started. A group has more credibility than an individual and can share the work. All volunteer groups should have some flexibility in the core group because as you do outreach, you'll find new people that are excited about your project and want to join up and some of your initial core group members may drop out after the first couple meetings.

Core members can be friends or people you find from your initial outreach. If you can, it's a good idea to include a couple of core member who are connected to other groups in the community – faith groups, community centers or other neighborhood groups.

STEP 4: HOLD A CORE GROUP MEETING

The core group will be the temporary steering committee until the general membership meeting is held. When you get the core group together for the first time, you should address the following questions:

- What does the group want to do?
- What people/groups are likely to be the most interested in working on your project?
- In addition to the above groups, who else will be supportive and helpful on the project?
- What is your plan for reaching out to these potential supporters?

Divide up responsibility for contacting this list of potential supporters as well as contacting other residents to invite them to your first general meeting.

STEP 5: REACH OUT TO THE COMMUNITY

Getting the word out is crucial for a successful first general meeting. Publicize the meeting widely on listserves. Print out flyers listing the time, date, place and purpose of the first meeting. These can be placed under doors, posted in apartment building lobbies, on bulletin boards in laundromats, barber shops, grocery stores, cafes, and in places of worship, schools and other public locations. Be sure to include contact information on all publicity materials.

Take the flyers on door-to-door canvasses of the block or neighborhood you're organizing. Rehearse a few lines ahead of time to introduce yourself and your group. Take down contact information of interested individuals so they can be contacted if they don't make it to the first meeting. If you are canvassing your neighborhood, it's a good idea to go out in teams of two. It's safer, makes the task more fun and is a good way to build relationships among core members.

STEP 6: PLAN A GENERAL MEETING

Decide on a time, date and place that is convenient for people in your neighborhood. A weekday, evening or a weekend day generally works best. Houses of worship, community centers, schools and public libraries are places that are easy for neighborhood residents to get to and will often provide a room without charge. Meeting in a public building may also help to get that institution involved with your group.

When preparing an agenda for your first general meeting, keep in mind that you're laying the foundation for your group. You'll want to come out of the meeting with agreement on issues and goals and the first steps you as a group will take.

It's important to agree on an agenda beforehand by sending it around to other members of your core group a few days before the meeting. A good agenda states meeting place; starting time, time for each item, ending time; objectives of the meeting; and items to be discussed.

When you begin the meeting, the facilitator should introduce himself or herself and ask to begin with a round of introductions. Then ask for someone to volunteer to take notes and someone to be the timekeeper. Next, review the agenda and ask if there are any additions or amendments. Then begin working through the agenda.

In your first general meeting, here are some things to think through:

- What is the issue or problem that the group wants to solve?
- What are three clear goals for the project?
- Who might be additional allies on this project who are not currently in the room?
- What are the barriers that you expect to encounter? How do you deal with them?
- What are the very concrete, specific activities that you need to do for the project to be successful?
- What is the minimum amount of money you need to do the best project that you can?
- What are the questions that you need to answer in order to complete the project successfully?
- What is your timeline for the project? Working backward from the end of the project, what do you want to accomplish by the end of each month?
- How will you evaluate the project? How will you know if it were successful? Besides reaching your major goals, what other outcomes are desirable?

It's helpful to display everyone's contribution on a flip chart, overhead projector or blackboard. People are more likely to continue to be involved if they feel like their contributions are valued.

TIP: WORK ON GROUP STRUCTURE

There is no single model of group structure that all groups must follow. The most important thing is that structure is open, inclusive, that everyone feels a sense of ownership over the work and knows who is responsible for doing what. As a general rule, groups should have as little structure as possible – just enough to get the work done. New groups often feel they have to put a lot of structure in place in order to gain legitimacy. This can result in the group spending a lot of time discussing the organization rather than the work they want to do.