

How to Start a Neighborhood Association

Neighborhood association: A neighborhood association is a group of neighbors who work together to make a stronger neighborhood.

Why should my neighborhood organize?

Before you ask your neighbors to organize, you have to be able to explain to them the benefits and value of forming a neighborhood group.

Organizing is mostly about developing relationships with each other, the city government and other neighborhoods.



When deciding whether or not to organize as a neighborhood, ask yourself and others the following questions:

- Do you know how to get in touch with neighbors in case of an emergency?
- Would you like to address some problems in your neighborhood that need to be corrected?
- If your children needed to reach someone nearby for help when you're not home, would they know who to call?
- In the case of a neighborhood emergency, would your neighbors know how to get in touch with you?
- Could your neighborhood be friendlier?
- Would you enjoy more planned activities in your neighborhood for children and adults?

If you answered "yes" to a majority of these questions, let's work together to organize your neighborhood!

Getting started

Build a core group

The first thing to do is to meet with the neighbors who want to form a neighborhood group. Create a core group that will serve as the temporary steering committee until you decide the formal structure of your neighborhood association and officers are elected. The core group, three or four individuals is enough, handles arranging and advertising the first few meetings. Often, the core group is made up of all the people who have decided to form a neighborhood group.



Hold core group meetings

As the temporary steering committee, the core group will be the one that picks the first issues to discuss (not necessarily to act on), selects the location and time for the first general meeting, and gathers information that will help the whole group begin to work on issues that people care about.

Below is what your core group should work on during the first few meetings:

- **Come up with some ideas for kick-off projects.** Start with fairly simple activities like a block cleanup or potluck. This will give the people who come to the first general meeting a list of projects to get involved in and think about. Remember, when you have other people on board, they may come up with other suggestions. It's always a good idea to make the first project one that is visible and gets quick results. This shows people that your group means business and can get things done. People are more likely to join a group that works on issues they care about and that can really make changes.
- **Decide who you want to tell about your new organization.** Which neighborhood organizations, businesses, etc. can you involve to help spread the word? Make a list of organizations with contact names and phone numbers. You'll want to start contacting them after the first general meeting.
- **Divide up tasks based on people's interests.** Keeping people interested is the best way to keep them involved.

Some of the tasks that the core group will take on are:

- Contacting other groups within the neighborhood.
- Recruiting residents to be general members of the neighborhood association.
- Creating the agenda and arranging for future core group meetings.
- Researching specific issues in depth so you have all of the information you need when it's time for the general membership to meet.

Plan a general meeting

As soon as you are ready, your core group should decide on a time, date and place for a general membership meeting. Choose a time that is convenient for the largest number of people to increase your chances of a good turnout. An evening during the week or a day during the weekend generally works best. Church buildings, community centers, schools and public libraries are usually easy for neighborhood residents to get to and will often provide a room at no charge. Do you really want to get people to come? Have some local teenagers provide babysitting, and make sure you put that on your outreach flyer!



Simple rules to remember to have a good first neighborhood association meeting:

1. All ideas should be given fair consideration
2. People need to be treated with respect
3. No one should leave the meeting without a task
4. Everyone should sign in
5. Collect contact information

When you prepare an agenda for your first general meeting, keep in mind that the purpose of this meeting is to lay the groundwork for the organization. Your goal is to come out of this meeting with an agreement on the goals for the organization and the issues that it will take on.

A good agenda should look something like the one below. *Note—the information that is not bold is for your reference only and should not be on the agenda.*

1. Introduction

- a. **Meet the core group** — The core group should introduce themselves, and someone from this group should explain the purpose of the meeting.
 - b. **Meet everyone in the room** — Everyone should share who they are, where they live and what they would like to see happen in your neighborhood.
2. **Discussion of issues and challenges** — At this point in the meeting, everyone should have the chance to voice their opinions and make suggestions. You may have to work hard to make sure everyone has this chance and keep the agenda moving.

3. Setting priorities

- a. **Brainstorm** — Based on the challenges discussion, help everyone brainstorm their interest in helping the community as a neighborhood association.
- b. **Top priorities selected** — Prioritize one or two areas of interest that your group can work on first.
- c. **Project ideas developed** — Develop projects or ideas based on areas of interest that were top priorities.
- d. **Volunteers assigned** — Break project ideas down into a series of tasks. Assign volunteers to be responsible for the tasks that need to be done. If the work is complicated or if there are a lot of people involved, ask someone to head a committee on each issue.

4. Creating the structure

- a. **Leadership team** — Ask the general members to approve the current core group as the steering committee or to choose new leaders for a temporary period of time.
- b. **Bylaws and elections** — The structure should be kept simple. Sample bylaws are available.
- c. **Time and date of next meeting**

Reach out to the Community

Outreach is the one job that never stops for a block or neighborhood association. Getting the word out and bringing in new participants will ensure that your group is well balanced and fully representative of its community. After every meeting and event, and between meetings, you will want to have people talking to their neighbors and community organizations to let them know what you're planning and doing to try to get them involved. Don't give up too soon. Once neighbors start coming together and making changes, more people will get involved and then, the possibilities are endless.



Here are some tips to reach out to your neighbors and recruit them to come to the general meeting:

- **Flyers:** Print flyers listing time, date, place and purpose of the first general meeting. Post them in apartment buildings, lobbies, coffee shops, grocery store bulletin boards, etc.
- **Door-to-door visits:** Take the flyers you create and distribute them door to door in your neighborhood.
- **Survey:** Conduct a survey of neighborhood needs and issues
- **Attendance:** Your first meeting may be large or small; low attendance is common for organizations just starting out. Stay positive and work with the people in attendance to reach more neighbors.

Bylaws

Bylaws explain the purpose of your organization and spell out the rules and procedures for how your group will function. Each neighborhood group should have its own bylaws to make its operation more predictable and less confusing. The core group or other subcommittee should develop bylaws, and then present them to the general membership for modification and approval. Final approval of bylaws should come after your neighborhood group has met several times and you have a good idea about where the group is heading.

Bylaws do not have to be complicated. Bylaws should include the following items:

- Name and purpose of your group
- Requirements for membership — Living in the neighborhood is the only requirement for most St. Louis Park neighborhood associations.
- Structure of your group, including terms of officers
- Membership dues, if any. — Most St. Louis Park neighborhoods do not have dues.
- How often the group plans to meet
- How decisions are made
- Process by which bylaws are approved and changed.

Use the sample bylaws as a guide and adapt them to your neighborhood.

City services and resources

The City of St. Louis Park values strong neighborhoods and has set aside limited funds to assist neighborhoods. Each year, the city offers neighborhood grants for organized neighborhoods. These grants can be used for community building activities, communications such as newsletters, and service projects in the neighborhoods.

In addition to neighborhood grant there are several other ways the city supports neighborhood associations. Included in this organizing kit are the following resources to help you get started and to learn what the city has to offer:

- Neighborhood support
- Sample bylaws
- Sample start-up letter
- Sample survey
- Park volunteer opportunities

The St. Louis Park community liaison is here to help you organize your neighborhood or re-organize it if your neighborhood association has not been active for a while.

Congratulations on taking the first step to organizing your neighborhood!

Contact

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