

# 68 Ways

## *We Can Make a Difference in Our Communities, and Why We Should*

These 68 recommendations offer practical suggestions for ways that individuals, leaders, organizations, and businesses can be involved on behalf of their communities. They are sorted into eight categories:

- 6 action steps that work for **everyone**
- 10 things **individuals** can do
- 10 things **leaders** can do
- 8 things **places of worship** should encourage
- 10 things people in the **business/private sector** can do
- 10 things people in the **government/public** sector can do
- 9 things people in the **nonprofit sector** can do
- 5 ways the **three sectors** can collaborate

Plus, we suggest:

**The Illinois Electronic Neighborhood:** We are creating the Illinois Electronic Neighborhood, on which we will provide examples of local initiatives to promote civic engagement around the state. You can find this electronic neighborhood at the Web site [civic.uis.edu](http://civic.uis.edu), the site of the Illinois Civic Engagement project. You will also find a form on which you can tell us about a project, and we'll update the list periodically.

**Additional resources:** This project is released in the midst of an important national discussion about civic engagement. On our Web site, therefore, we recommend many other resources to you. Especially noteworthy are efforts of the Pew Charitable Trusts ([www.pewtrusts.com](http://www.pewtrusts.com)), the reports of the Saguaro Project at Harvard University ([www.bettertogether.com](http://www.bettertogether.com)), the Kettering Foundation ([www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org)), the Independent Sector's push for collaboration ([www.indepsec.org](http://www.indepsec.org)), and the Harwood Institute ([www.theharwoodgroup.com](http://www.theharwoodgroup.com)).

We agree with the person who said at one of our focus groups that life is "a balance of responsibilities and rights. You have rights as a citizen, but you have responsibilities to your community, too."

With that in mind, here are our 68 recommendations:

# 6 Action steps that work for everyone

## *Simple yet powerful ways to truly change Illinois*

### ACTION:

### RATIONALE:

- 1. Ask people to be involved.*** A big difference between nonparticipants and participants in local communities is that nonparticipants often are not asked to help. 32% of those polled said they would be more involved if they were asked. The power of the personal invitation is enormous. Also use newsletters, Web sites, and community bulletin boards to make it easy to identify ways to be involved.
- 2. Ask for a limited amount of time.*** The biggest barrier to participation is pressure people feel due to job and family obligations and responsibilities. So make your request seem reasonable – a specific duration of time and number of hours.
- 3. Teach civic skills.*** People evidently feel intimidated; 23% do not know how to get involved. So they need not only to be asked, but to be told, perhaps step by step, exactly what to do, whom to write, where to go, whom to call.
- 4. Appeal to people with reasons for which most people get involved.*** Some of the main reasons people get involved are to improve their community, to be with people they like (fellowship) and with those who share their ideals, and to influence policy.
- 5. Remember the power of faith-based motivation.*** 35% of people become engaged in response to their faith. Some limit their activity to their place of worship. So extend collaboration to places of worship and faith-based organizations, and help them make connections to other community needs.
- 6. Also remember the power of corporate commitment.*** Many people are engaged through their job. So make such opportunities easier by encouraging employees to join professional organizations, volunteer their time, and make contributions to good causes. Our research shows that the more committed a business is to community involvement, the more involved their employees will become.

# 10 Things individuals can do

## ACTION:

## RATIONALE:

### **1. Vote.**

While 82% of those surveyed report voting in the last national election, only 57% reported always voting in local elections. What happened in Florida last fall should remind us of how important it is to go to the polls.

### **2. Stir the pot. Dare to ask questions.**

51% of those surveyed say they got involved to learn more about the community. Some things never get done because no one challenges the system. You can write, call, send e-mail, or attend meetings and dare to ask questions that you believe a lot of people want to ask. Dare to ask the tough questions of community leaders.

### **3. Attend community meetings on issues of importance to you.**

Meetings are a great way to get to know others who share your concerns. 23% of those surveyed said they didn't know how to get involved. Attending meetings is one way, but only 29% report going to meetings of neighborhood groups.

### **4. Invite a friend; bring a friend.**

Studies show that people are more likely to get and stay involved when they are asked personally. 32% of those who are not involved attribute it to the fact that they have never been asked.

### **5. Pick up your phone or your pen and make your voice heard.**

Send letters to your legislators and the media expressing your point of view. 34% of those surveyed report having contacted a state or local official, while only 9% have written a letter to a magazine or newspaper. Most elected officials will say they receive only a handful of letters on any given issue. Your letter matters. Officials' addresses and e-mail addresses are available in libraries and many Web sites.

### **6. Identify your own talents and interests. You don't have to do everything.**

Whether you are good at analyzing policy, interacting with people, making posters, or baking cookies, everyone has something valuable to contribute. Yet 13% feel they lack the necessary skills to get involved. And remember most people are selective in how, when, and where they get involved. So choose carefully. But choose something!

**ACTION:**

**RATIONALE:**

**7. Civic participation is a learned behavior.**

Make opportunities to involve young adults, students and youth groups in civic activities. The responsibility of child care is cited as an impediment to 26% of the respondents. So find ways to make your kids partners in the community. Some companies have “family days” for the involvement of everyone. If you have children, involve them in discussions of community affairs, and when appropriate, take them to meetings. Children whose parents were involved are more likely to become involved themselves as adults.

**8. Learn how to become involved.**

From your local library to the United Way to your cable access television screen, your communities are full of resources about activities. Many groups probably have tried and failed to reach you. So look for them. 23% of those surveyed said they didn’t know how to get involved. Information is as close as your community calendar. The next time you visit the library or supermarket, look for information on upcoming events.

**9. Do something for yourself.**

Although 65% of citizens believe that everyone should be involved, people have different reasons for doing so. One of the top three reasons is to meet people or improve your own situation in some way. So be “selfish” by getting involved and doing things for others.

**10. Realize that your “informal socializing” is healthy for your community.**

For some people, getting together informally with friends and family is their primary way of connecting with other people. Those gatherings provide opportunities for discussion of community needs and politics, and that strengthens our democracy. Studies prove it. So get together!

# 10 Things leaders can do

## ACTION:

## RATIONALE:

**1. Teach people how to become involved; teach them how to use “civic skills”.**

Many people don't know how to become involved or say they don't have the necessary skills. So don't assume people have civic skills or know how to reach their elected officials or sign up to volunteer. Be creative. Reach out. Some people are waiting to be taught.

**2. Conduct forums for dialogue and conversation as a routine step in solution development.**

13% of those polled don't feel they are part of the community, and 9% say they don't participate more because they don't feel welcome. Forums can be casual informational meetings in neighborhoods and homes.

**3. Emphasize public listening more than a formal public hearing when possible.**

All too often, a public hearing is merely an event that satisfies a legal condition for making a decision. Such occasions should be opportunities for people to express themselves. Leaders should listen, then determine specifically about how they will respond to citizens' concerns. Then they must do what they promised to do.

**4. Exploit technology to impart information and encourage such audience participation as cable television programming, telephone call-in, or cyber-town hall meetings.**

26% report they know too little about the issues, 17% are often not involved because of poor health, and 9% are without transportation. For lots of people, new technology is a primary means of interacting. And 53% watch or listen to a call-in show at least weekly.

**ACTION:**

**RATIONALE:**

**5. Be an active listener.**

Some people do not feel heard even when they do show up. They say their efforts do not make a difference, and 30% of those surveyed believe a small number of people control their community.

**6. Publicize efforts to solve community and neighborhood problems that affect people where they live and work.**

19% say the reason they don't participate more is that local politics and community affairs have nothing to do with the important things in life. You have to make the connection for them.

**7. Establish policies that make it easier for employees or constituents to volunteer.**

Research shows that the more an employer shows a commitment, the more an employee contributes money and volunteers time.

**8. Make it clear in many ways how citizens can contact officials in order to get involved or express an opinion.**

This reinforces community interaction, rather than passivity, dependence, and isolation. Advertising studies indicate that when you're tired of putting out a message, the public may just be starting to hear your message.

**9. Conduct asset inventories (such as youth, seniors, etc.) rather than problem inventories to focus your vision on success.**

Every community already has human assets. Focus on people's abilities to solve problems, not to be problems.

**10. Involve diverse constituents.**

View diversity as an opportunity, publicizing and celebrating the many attributes of constituent groups and sectors. Our state is getting more diverse, and leaders have to work at inclusivity.

# 8 Things places of worship should encourage

Places of worship – churches, congregations, synagogues, mosques – are institutions with members who are among other things (employers, mothers, husbands, doctors, etc.), citizens. Places of worship can be places where people are provided opportunities to enhance and strengthen their responsibility to be good citizens.

Two rationales dominate this list of suggestions: Many people don't know how to get involved, and many are not asked.

Also, keep in mind that one's religious faith often motivates people to become involved:

## ACTION:

**1. Appoint, hire or find a volunteer coordinator for your church.**

**2. Establish relationships with groups and organizations such as women's shelters, tutoring programs, and Bread for the World, which need volunteers. Make a list of organizations and encourage members to volunteer. Encourage friends to volunteer together.**

**3. Create a child care cooperative, making church facilities available, providing parents with an opportunity to volunteer for something or to gather with other parents to talk about education in their community.**

**4. Sponsor a gathering, get a speaker, explore themes such as diversity (cultural, social and religious diversity as well as diversity of opinions), provide people with the opportunity to discuss how diversity affects their lives and communities.**

## RATIONALE:

A primary reason people volunteer is to be with people they like.

Lack of child care is a major barrier to participation for 26% of parents.

A new national benchmark study on civic engagement identifies diversity as one of the major opportunities for new forms of civic engagement.

**ACTION:**

**5. Provide facilities where members can volunteer, e.g., establish a “cooking for the homeless” program in your place of worship or provide transportation so that members can visit prison inmates (some prison systems provide opportunities for tutoring as well).**

**6. Provide legislative advocacy or information opportunities. Highlight important pieces of legislation in which members might be interested. List the addresses and phone numbers of those who should be contacted to express an opinion about an issue.**

**7. Sponsor a visit by community, civic, social service professionals, or elected officials.**

**8. Establish a social concerns committee to encourage all of the above and think of others.**

**RATIONALE:**

People volunteer to help their communities and for humanitarian purposes. Sometimes they just need a place to do it or a way to get there.

This suggestion may depend upon the doctrines and principles of your place of worship. But many people are motivated by their faith and say they don't know enough about issues.

As a place of worship, you already have one of the places where people are most likely to get involved. But many don't know enough about issues or don't know how to get involved beyond the church. Bring people together.

The number one motivation for people to get involved is to make their community a better place.

# 10 Things people in the business/private sector can do

## ACTION:

## RATIONALE:

- 1. Adopt company policies that make it easier for parents to attend their children's functions, and identify opportunities for "family volunteering" events – in which the whole family can get involved.***

Youth-related activities are a main form of civic engagement for adults.
- 2. Encourage your employees to make donations to workplace campaigns.***

Corporate support makes it more likely that employees will donate time and money.
- 3. For parents with children, allow flexible working hours so that their work schedules are more in line with school schedules.***

Despite great changes in the workplace and in families, our society still operates as if two models can coexist independently: the 8-to-5 business hours and the 8:30-to-3 school hours. Surely, schools and businesses could work in better harmony.
- 4. Encourage and pay for participation in business-related and professional associations, locally and nationally.***

For many people, their work IS their life. 28% of our sample belong to a professional organization already, and 9% are active members of a local business or professional group. Encourage more of what people already are doing.

ACTION:

**5. Make it easy for your employees to contribute to the United Way and other local charities, through payroll deduction if possible. Encourage them to participate and set company goals for participation.**

**6. Encourage employees to take walks or do physical exercise and offer them the time to do it, such as at lunchtime.**

**7. Understand different approaches to civic engagement taken by people of different generations.**

**8. Encourage employees to get involved in a community activity or organization, and give them flexibility in their work schedules to allow it.**

RATIONALE:

Many people say they don't know how to get involved or that they were never asked. Some said their employers' encouragement led them to give. The company goal lets your employees know that you are concerned about their community.

This lets employees know you are concerned about their overall health and well-being. The number of health clubs is growing rapidly and has the third highest membership in our study, so encouraging workouts on "company time" is good for everybody.

Some younger people are more technology oriented, and some older people limit themselves to making contributions and watching the news. Build on what people are already doing and respond to how younger people like to get involved.

Many say the pressures of work and time prevent them from getting involved. So use company newsletters, bulletin boards, verbal encouragement, and leaders' examples to make it known that community service is important. A sustained effort is preferable to a one-time announcement.

**ACTION:**

**RATIONALE:**

**9. Endorse employee requests to coordinate activities such as Toys for Tots, blood drives and local festivals.**

88% donated food, toys, or clothing within the past year. Hop aboard this bandwagon.

**10. Provide informal socializing opportunities for employees and provide friendly spaces for such interaction.**

For one of every 10 people, informal socializing is their primary form of social connection. So employers should encourage it at the workplace as a healthy form of civic engagement. That time spent chatting may be valuable to the person's health, your community's development, and your employees' overall job satisfaction. It would also provide settings where one person can ask another person to become involved or talk about community issues and problems.

# 10 Things people in the public/ government sector can do

## ACTION:

## RATIONALE:

- 1. *Build on the civic pride in your community – be positive and assertive.***

Every public official hears criticism. But 83% of Illinoisans rate their community as an excellent or good place to live, and 79% think most people in their communities have civic pride. Tell people this, and say it's time to put that pride to work instead of dwelling on the criticism.
- 2. *Be a teacher and promoter of civic skills.***

A number of people say they do not know how to get involved – write a letter, attend a meeting, participate in a public forum. Do not assume that people know – and don't assume they know how to get in touch with you or other leaders.
- 3. *Provide leadership training as part of the civic-skill building process.***

Our form of government depends upon future generations of leaders coming along. Teaching civic skills to children, teenagers, young adults and adults will help develop the leaders of the future. Work with schools and civic groups to identify and promote civic skills.
- 4. *Make it easier for citizens to register to vote.***

Perhaps move the registration deadline closer to election day, or allow people to vote on Saturdays. What is so sacred about Tuesday?
- 5. *Get up to speed technologically.***

Part of your younger audience is most engaged in technology-based activities. If you want to reach them, you can probably do so with Web sites.
- 6. *Support an Illinois television channel like C-SPAN to track the actions of Illinois state government.***

Not enough Illinoisans know what's really happening in state government. Many Illinoisans already are watching C-SPAN regularly, and television is the number one source of news in Illinois.

**ACTION:**

**RATIONALE:**

**7. Foster more relationships with businesses, nonprofit organizations, schools, civic organizations, and places of worship.**

50% believe there is shared power in their community, but 30% believe a small group is in control. Attack this negative attitude with outreach.

**8. Commit to hosting at least one town hall meeting per quarter.**

A significant number of people do attend such sessions, and attendance would probably increase if people are personally asked to attend. But only about half the respondents said their community has a local forum of some kind.

**9. When you are with groups, tell citizens the importance of asking others to contact you and other community leaders.**

Of all the people who contacted a public official, four in 10 said someone had asked them to do so. With civic engagement, there is rarely a substitute for personal contact or a personal suggestion to do something.

**10. Participate in your statewide associations.**

Many people in Illinois already do. A primary general motivation for participating in society is to influence government policy and to make your community better. Another major reason is to be with people who share your ideals. Associations exist for every kind of public official. So join.

# 9 Things people in the nonprofit/ independent sector can do

## ACTION:

**1. Ask citizens to support specific events or programs, get their help as board members, or simply ask their advice.**

## RATIONALE:

41% of those citizens who are “unengaged” have not been asked. Conversely, many of those who give time, money, and expertise were asked by someone to contribute. Citizens need to be invited to participate. Who does the asking is also important: tapping into existing social networks is best. Ask existing volunteers to help recruit their friends and co-workers. See if an existing network like a youth or church group might take on a project.

**2. Structure volunteering opportunities to help participants succeed.**

Offering prospective volunteers small projects, with limited time commitments, and mentoring to make them feel comfortable and capable may help to ease apprehension and, over time, might lead to more involvement. The data also show that potential volunteers want to *believe* that their effort – no matter how big or small – is making a difference.

**3. Utilize untapped potential.**

The work of many community-based organizations has shown that community improvement efforts succeed when impacted populations – youth, older adults, low-income persons, single parents – are part of the process.

**4. Use talk radio as a way to spread the word about the work of your nonprofit.**

Some groups, and particularly nonwhites, rely on talk/news radio as an important source of information.

**5. Invite a religious leader to serve on your board or to help advise on a project.**

Other research indicates that citizens have strong social networks through their church and religious affiliations and are very likely to be involved through these networks.

**ACTION:**

**RATIONALE:**

**6. Encourage and recognize employee volunteer involvement and leadership.**

Volunteer activities add value, build camaraderie and relationships among staff, and help employees feel they are making a difference. Short-term projects not related to work can help employees connect with community needs in a different way. The research suggests that employer encouragement does indeed motivate people to participate and volunteer.

**7. Use your office space as a place for meetings of community groups.**

Getting people in the door – even if it’s for a different group or issue – helps citizens of all types become more familiar, comfortable, and connected with the work that your nonprofit is doing.

**8. Educate your employees, members, and constituents about public policies related to your issue(s).**

Citizens are involved in issues they care about. By learning how to become active in the policy arena process through your organization (writing a letter about public school funding or a zoning change, for example), they can learn a new skill and add a valuable voice to the policy process. They will also take these skills with them elsewhere in their personal, community, and professional lives.

**9. Find ways to involve youth.**

Not only do they need to be involved, you are giving them valuable skills for the future. Young people are not as involved as other groups in community activities – including those organized and run by nonprofits. Real youth involvement takes work – training, mentoring, skills building and listening.

# 5 Ways the three major sectors can collaborate civically

## ACTION:

**1. Move beyond partnerships and into true collaboration.**

## RATIONALE:

The buzzword used to be “partnerships.” Now the trend is to make collaborative efforts more inclusive. The Independent Sector, for example, has an initiative to encourage government, nonprofit, and business leaders to collaborate. See [www.independentsector.org](http://www.independentsector.org) for more information.

**2. Provide a “safe space” for joint discussions.**

Any of the three sectors can call people together . A significant number of people feel alienated from their community. Some people in our study feel nothing would happen as a result of what they think or do. Some officials think they are rarely heard, we have been told. Design a forum in which everyone can share freely their own concerns and interests.

**3. Don’t invite only the “usual suspects.” Look for new suspects. Build relationships.**

This is an idea from the Pew Partnership – that new people, organizations, and approaches must be brought into the discussion. A Pew study showed that many leaders do not really believe ordinary citizens have the ability to make a big difference. So Pew emphasizes building relationships over time, not just holding a listening session or having people work together.

**4. Promote the concept of interdependence.**

There seems to be an organization, publication, or Web site for every cause and interest. While those can be informative and helpful, they can also be a source of factionalization in society.

**5. Explore what’s already happening in Illinois: a lot! And enter the new Illinois Electronic Neighborhood.**

From the “Neighborhood College” in Springfield to the “Common Ground” project in northeastern Illinois to the work of the DuPage Mayors and Managers Conference to the joint efforts of city and suburban mayors, including Mayor Daley, many projects are under way. Go to [civic.uis.edu](http://civic.uis.edu) (Illinois Civic Engagement Project) periodically and click on “Illinois Electronic Neighborhood” to get more ideas.