



# JOIN IN: REVITALIZING CIVIC LIFE

Reclaiming the Spirit of Association to Strengthen Ohio



# LEADERSHIP OHIO

[Leadership Ohio](#) (LO) is a nonpartisan 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to making Ohio the best state in which to live and work. LO champions leadership for a healthy democracy – through its signature civic fellowship, constructive dialogue across red and blue divides, and through the revitalization of Ohio’s civic life. The newly launched [Ohio Civic Health Initiative](#) reflects our commitment to strengthening the “civic heartbeat” of Ohio.

LO is guided by the principle that Ohio’s future depends on the engagement of its citizens. The organization prides itself on being a convener and catalyst – intentionally bringing together leaders from different sectors and political ideologies to find common ground and act on common goals. LO’s reach and impact sees its graduates occupy positions of influence in leading companies, government agencies, elected offices, and Ohio’s boardrooms.

Leadership Ohio is a proud member of the [Listen First Coalition](#).

## ABOUT JOIN IN

*Join In: Revitalizing Civic Life* was developed as a project of Leadership Ohio’s [Join In: Uniting Communities in Ohio](#) initiative, with support from the [America 250-Ohio](#) Commission and the Ellis Family Fund. We are grateful to the Library of Congress for their inspirational exhibition [Join In: Voluntary Associations in America](#), which helped spark this effort.

Leadership Ohio’s statewide [Join In](#) tour - featuring community discussions anchored by the film [Join or Die](#) - provided invaluable insights that helped shape this publication.



*Any views, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent those of the America 250-Ohio Commission or Ellis Family Fund.*

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## WHY THIS, WHY NOW: A **CIVIC CALL FOR OUR TIMES**

As America approaches its 250th anniversary, the question before us is not only how we commemorate the past - but how we commit to the future.

Across Ohio and the nation, we see signs of fraying: declining trust, rising isolation, and the quiet erosion of the civic habits that once bound us together. Yet we also see signs of promise - in small towns and big cities, on porches and in parks, where neighbors still gather, serve, and strive together.

This publication is a hopeful call to *join in* - to rediscover the power of voluntary association - of showing up for one another as members of a shared civic life.

Why now? Because we cannot wait for institutions alone to fix what only relationships can restore. Because social capital doesn't regenerate itself. And because the most enduring answers to division and disconnection come not from mandates or algorithms, but from people choosing to build together.

Whether you're a local leader, a civic-minded business owner, or a neighbor looking to reconnect, we invite you to use this guide as inspiration. *Joining In* is a way of life - an inheritance from those who came before us, and a responsibility to those who come next.

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**Lisa Duty, Ph.D.**  
Executive Director  
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# HOW OHIO FORGED A CIVIC WAY OF LIFE

Before America had formal institutions or sprawling cities, it had joiners.

Across the vast new republic, ordinary people came together - in barns, meeting houses, and borrowed church basements - to solve problems and shape their shared destiny. In these humble beginnings lay one of the boldest democratic experiments in world history: the idea that citizens, working side by side, could build a nation not by command from above, but by voluntary association from below.

**This tradition of joining was not just a feature of American life - it was a foundation of American democracy. And nowhere was this more true than in Ohio.**

The French writer Alexis de Tocqueville, astonished by what he observed in 1830s America, considered these grassroots efforts to be schools of democracy. The habits of association taught citizens how to work together for the common good. He observed that Americans practiced “self-interest properly understood,” meaning they recognized that by helping their neighbors and community, they were also ultimately helping themselves. In Europe, power resided in aristocrats and kings. But in the United States, Tocqueville wrote, “Americans of all

ages, all conditions, and all minds are constantly joining together in groups” (Tocqueville, 2004). Whether to build libraries, advance reform, or serve their neighbors, Americans were inventing a new kind of civic power - one rooted not in status or title, but in the willingness to join and act.

This tradition of joining was not just a feature of American life - it was a foundation of American democracy. And nowhere was this more true than in Ohio. Ohio’s story is, in many ways, America’s story. A frontier state carved from the wilderness, Ohio became a proving ground for the spirit of voluntary association.

It’s important to acknowledge that the founding of Ohio was part of a broader project of colonization. From its initial settlement - when land speculators with the Ohio Company promised Congress that in return for access to land at favorable rates they would encourage settlers to move onto territory *that had belonged for generations to Native Americans* - Ohioans uniquely built their society. According to one historian, the founders of Ohio believed that the new state’s “success depended above all else on the participation of its citizens, not just through suffrage or military service, but in the public realm as a whole (Cayton, 2002).”

Early settlers coming to Ohio entered a world that lacked all of their famil-

iar institutions - churches, schools, even governments - that they took for granted back home on the east coast. They would need to create these new institutions themselves. In doing so, they discovered something exciting: their society would depend not just on what elites said and did, but on what ordinary citizens did. This new society would be forged from the ground up, by the voluntary efforts of ordinary citizens. By joining, they created a new society.

That new society depended on citizens working together to achieve common goals. For example, in 1804, local leaders in Ames County, Ohio, raised \$70 from proceeds from pelts to buy books for what they called the Coonskin Library. Other citizens wanted to bring culture to the frontier. They donated time and money to establish lyceums to host lectures in towns across Ohio, including Cincinnati (1830), Cleveland (1832), and Columbus (1835). Young men joined literary societies where they could learn about culture, get access to books, and make connections. Men and women both enjoyed attending lectures from famous speakers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson or Frederick Douglass. Such events were educational, civic, and social all at once.

Today, we take it for granted that when we want to accomplish something, we'll bring a group of people together, form an association, maybe write down rules and elect officers, start raising money, and get to work. But all of this came later. First, people had to learn to join - it was not some innate skill. While British colonists had formed towns, churches, and some corporations, the number of associations was limited. It was in the years after the Revolution that America became a nation of joiners, transforming the association into a tool for democracy (Neem, 2008).

**VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS** have historically reflected social exclusions based on race, class, gender, religion, and ethnicity - though many later became drivers of inclusion and equality as the nation progressed (Library of Congress, n.d.). Native Americans were removed from Ohio through a combination of warfare, treaties, and federal policies during the late 18th and early 19th centuries (see *Calloway, 2007* for further context); today organizations like Ohio History Connection and the Arc of Appalachia are working with tribal leaders to preserve and protect their sacred sites.

Ministers were among the first teachers, helping their congregants form committees and associations to make a difference in local, state, and national affairs. Once Americans learned how to join, they applied their new knowledge and skills to more and more uses. For example, Quaker Emma Alderson, who migrated from England with her family to a farm outside Cincinnati, Ohio, in the 1840s, wrote home that "There was a few weeks ago a very sociable assembling of women Friends at the meeting house to assist in making cushions for the seats; we were requested to come at an early hour & bring our dinners & very pleasant it was. I was only there the first day; it occupied four days to complete the work." Just by showing up, she learned how to join in and that she could work with others to accomplish more than any of them could do alone. Americans took what they learned in churches and applied them to all kinds of activities in their communities.

Joining could mean attending a lecture or participating in a literary society, but it could also mean working with others to affect political change. For example, in 1830 the "ladies of Steubenville, Ohio," wrote a petition against Cherokee removal which they





sent to the US Senate and House of Representatives. In their petition, the women acknowledged that they lacked the vote but hoped that “the small voice of female sympathy will be heard” by the nation’s elected leaders. They hoped that when “injury and oppression threaten to crush a hapless people within our borders,” those in power would act to do right and honor “American character.”

The temperance movement demonstrated how thousands of people acting together could change public opinion. A movement of men and women committed to preventing alcohol abuse, it took off in the 1840s. By 1847, the Orders of the Sons of Temperance - composed largely of artisans, merchants and professionals -

boasted 74 local chapters in 65 Ohio towns. The Daughters of Temperance had similar numbers.

Ohio was also a center for the anti-slavery movement - the Ohio Antislavery Society was formed in 1835; more than 300 antislavery societies formed by 1838. Famous antislavery activists such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and her husband Calvin Stowe helped generate energy and commitment from ordinary citizens. The first step was inspiring people to form their chapter. For example, after about 150 women attended abolitionist Theodore Weld’s 1835 lecture in Austinburg, Ohio, they formed the Ashtabula County Female Anti-Slavery Society and drafted a constitution. They enrolled 80 women at their first meeting, but within a year



their membership grew to include 450 local women! Women raised funds for antislavery by forming sewing societies to produce items for sale at fundraisers. At the meetings, women would prepare goods while reading from antislavery pamphlets or newspapers. Just like today, local businesses would sometimes donate products for local fundraisers. These women knew that what mattered was not just what happened at the state or national level, but locally too. Only by changing people's hearts and minds in community after community would public opinion change.



Despite Ohio being a bastion of anti-slavery, Black Ohioans faced racism in law and society. By 1860, Black people were only 1.6% of Ohio's population, in part because of laws preventing Black people from settling. Yet, Black Ohioans continued to argue for equality. They hosted lectures and held public meetings calling for civic equality. Perhaps the most radical, dangerous, and important ways in which Black Ohioans and their white allies joined in was by hiding, feeding, and transporting runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad. Many conductors and sta-

tion agents on the Underground Railroad were prominent, but others were ordinary people stepping up to participate in a common cause at great risk to themselves. They joined in to help those whose lives were at risk for seeking freedom.

Through their involvement in the temperance and antislavery movements, women became aware of their stake in politics, leading many women to seek the vote. In April 1850, around 500 women attended the first statewide women's rights convention in Ohio. In the following year's convention, anti-slavery activist Sojourner Truth spoke out on the importance of rights for all women, Black and white.

After the Civil War, Ohio's civic culture continued to thrive. The temperance movement saw real success. Women led the way because, as wives and mothers, they experienced directly the cost of alcohol abuse on their fathers, husbands, brothers, sons, and friends. Temperance advocates also worried that immigrants brought hard-drinking habits with them into the state. In the 1870s and 1880s, Ohio women, following the model of prior reformers, formed associations. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union was established in Hillsboro in 1874. Across Ohio, women were seeking to curb excessive drinking - in southwestern Ohio, women were so active that their efforts were dubbed the "Women's Whiskey War." Men followed women's example - Congregational minister Howard Russell established the Anti-Saloon League in 1895. As women took on larger public roles, they continued to push for suffrage. In response, Ohio permitted women to vote in school board elections in 1894, but voters rejected constitutional amendments to expand female suffrage until Ohio became the

fifth state to approve the Nineteenth Amendment.

## Ohio has been a leader in voluntarism throughout its history.

The late 1800s and the early 1900s were a golden age for fraternal and sororal lodges. These clubs brought men and women together to socialize, but also to serve their communities. The orders also often provided work and life insurance. Ohio boasted Masons, Elks, Kiwanis and other fraternal organizations. Women joined ladies' auxiliaries, but also formed their own clubs, such as the Association for the Advancement of Women, which held a regional convention in Cleveland in 1877 that brought 1000 women together. Fraternal and sororal societies held initiation ceremonies, had their own uniforms and regalia, and followed complex rituals. Despite their secrecy, the rituals were really ways to encourage a sense of belonging. Even today, lodge members meet to deepen their bonds with each other and perform charitable work in their communities. There's a lot more going on behind the scenes when you see members of lodges marching proudly in community parades.

Despite being denied full equality, Black Ohioans recognized that citizenship included a wide variety of public activities in which they could participate. Black Ohioans built their own churches, clubs, and lodges. Black Ohioans formed chapters of the Masons, Knights of Pythias, Odd Fellows, United Brothers of Hope, Daughters of Hope, Good Samaritans, and True Reformers. The Improved Benevolent Protected Order of Elks of the World was founded in September 1898 in

Cincinnati and became one of the largest Black fraternal orders. Added to these after World War I were Black civic, social, and business clubs to promote improvement and service. These included chapters of the Ohio Federation of Women's Clubs (African American) and Columbus's Hi Y Club, which was affiliated with the YMCA.

Ohio has been a leader in voluntarism throughout its history. In Clark County in 1902, the "tomato club" for youth signaled the birth of the 4-H Club that, to this day, develops young people's character and knowledge about agriculture. Immigrants from across the world formed ethnic societies to support each other and to sustain their culture. Many are still active today. In 1914, Slovenians established the Slovenian Home as a community space in Cleveland. The Shamrock Club has been a home for Irish immigrants and culture in Columbus since 1936. In 1928, the Mexican Mutual Society was established in Lorain as a benefit society to provide financial, medical, and other forms of support to new immigrants, and it continues to thrive.

Today, some Ohioans continue to join in - serving on local committees for their school district or town. Some join fraternal or sororal organizations. Some coach or bring snacks for their children's sports teams or support their local PTA. Others go out to help clean the parks or give time at the local food pantry. Many help out at church or participate in ethnic associations. Others volunteer at their local theater. Ohioans provide literacy tutoring. They serve their unions and go to local chamber of commerce meetings. They support political parties and all kinds of causes. While organizations are mission driven, they also need people to care about them; all around the state Ohioans are giv-



ing time to take care of their associations, churches, and unions - everything from caring for the grounds and buildings to being part of governance and administrative committees.

What historically defined the Ohio experience is the idea that any citizen - when working with other citizens - can change things for the better. Stepping up to do the right thing when needed is deep in Ohio's DNA. Some clubs are purely local, others are affiliated with state or national organizations. It doesn't matter - in either case, the work is local. It is only by coming together to achieve a common goal that the goal can ever be realized. Ohioans meet to improve their communities by promoting education and the arts, to support a political or social cause, or

to provide charity. The secret to their success is that they do not just lobby legislators or elites, but that they involve ordinary people in communities throughout the state. By bringing local citizens together around common purposes, joining teaches Ohioans that there is nothing that they can't do if they only share their time and effort with each other.

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# THE EROSION OF CIVIC LIFE – AND WHY IT MATTERS

In recent decades, the American habit of joining has faded. Beginning in the 1960s and 70s, researchers observed a steady decline in membership across many civic organizations - a trend famously documented by Harvard professor Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2000). Putnam, an Ohio native, showed how people gradually stopped participating in the clubs, leagues, and associations that once thrived. The statistics are sobering. For example, from 1985 to 1994 alone, active involvement in community organizations fell by nearly half, affecting virtually every type of group and every demographic segment (Thompson, 2025).

**Americans are spending less time with other people than at any period for which we have data, going back to 1965 (Thompson, 2025).**

Why has this happened? In *The Anti-Social Century*, Derek Thompson (2025) points to several social transformations since the late 20th century that are reported to have eroded the foundations of civic life. Some say Americans today are far more spread out in suburbia. Others cite new entertainment, technologies, and modern conveniences - from TV to streaming to dinner delivery and remote



work - having made staying in more convenient or appealing than gathering socially. Government investment in public spaces like libraries, recreation centers, and civic halls slowed dramatically in the 1970s. Places that used to anchor community life simply became less accessible or disappeared. At the same time, many people began to prefer solitary or family activities at home over group activities in the community. Americans are spending less time with other people than at any period for which we have data, going back to 1965 (Thompson, 2025). But loneliness (feeling of being isolated) isn't always reported as rising. Many Americans no longer expect to feel socially connected (Effective School Solutions, 2024).

## When people stop joining, or connecting across differences, social trust is weakened.

At the personal level, a lack of social connection is now understood as a threat to individual health and happiness. In [Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation](#) (2023), former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy formally declared an “epidemic of loneliness and isolation,” warning that social disconnection carries real health risks. The advisory pointed to research showing that loneliness and social isolation increase the risk for premature death by 26% and 29% respectively - an effect equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day - and noted loneliness and social isolation are associated with higher risks of heart disease (29% increase) and stroke (32% increase), as well as increased risk for anxiety, depression, and dementia. In economic terms, isolation among older adults is estimated to add nearly \$6.7 billion in Medicare costs annually (due to increased health problems), and stress-related absenteeism attributed to loneliness costs employers an estimated \$154 billion annually. Simply put, social isolation makes us sicker, poorer, and less fulfilled.

Meanwhile, changes impacting social cohesion in the United States continue to show up in more unexpected ways.

### Emulating Human Connection

One striking development: the rise of AI companions designed to simulate friendship, intimacy, and even therapy. In late 2024, [Character.AI](#) ranked as the third most visited AI web product, trailing only ChatGPT and DeepSeek. With over half of its 28 million users under the age of 24, Character.AI’s rapid growth suggests that a gen-

eration facing historically high rates of anxiety, loneliness, and disconnection may increasingly turn to artificial agents for connection or to meet emotional needs (Yee, 2025).

### Swiping Right or Left

Politics is playing an increasingly central role in how Americans date. Many dating apps now offer features that help users match based on political views. Tinder, for example, introduced profile stickers for users to share voting intentions and issue priorities. Across platforms, political alignment has become one of the top filters - reflecting a growing reluctance to date across party lines. This trend mirrors a broader societal shift: as polarization intensifies, more people are choosing to avoid not just debate, but exposure to differing views altogether (Duffy, 2024).

### The Rise of Politically-Sorted Living

Even the most fundamental decisions - like where we live - are increasingly shaped by ideology. [Oyssey](#), a new real estate platform, offers users the ability to preview the political leanings of potential neighborhoods before purchasing a home. By combining campaign donation data, voting records, and other indicators, the app enables Americans to self-sort into likeminded enclaves with unprecedented precision. While this may offer peace of mind for those seeking “community fit,” it also accelerates the erosion of common ground by design (Morris, 2024).

Ideological sorting isn’t new, but something has changed. Humans have always sought out like minded groups - by geography, faith, class, or tribe. What’s different now is the scale, speed, and precision of the sorting -

and its consequences. The result isn't just polarization, it's a fraying of the civic commons. If shared spaces and experiences are shrinking, so is the foundation for democratic life.

Our system of government relies on citizen participation. When people stop joining, or connecting across differences, social trust is weakened. The decline of civic associations is not just a quaint nostalgia for bowling leagues; it represents a crisis of social cohesion that affects everything from local economies to public safety.

## The latest research highlights the economic toll of workplace incivility - estimated at \$2 billion per day.

Civic engagement is a powerful driver of both economic and community development. It is linked to higher levels of trust which strengthens the business environment - reducing friction, lowering risk, and enabling more reliable transactions. Conversely, polarization carries real costs for businesses. The latest research from SHRM (Mayer, 2024) highlights the economic toll of workplace incivility - estimated at [\\$2 billion per day](#). Political polarization was recently ranked the [#2 emerging risk](#) for American businesses, just behind mass generative AI (Gartner, 2024). These findings underscore the value of social cohesion, constructive disagreement, and bipartisan collaboration to America's economic competitiveness.

Engaged communities foster the social capital that keeps residents connected and committed to local well-being (Indiana Bar Foundation, 2024). Communities with higher social capital (strong networks of civic

groups and neighbors helping neighbors) have better outcomes in disaster response, economic prosperity, and youth development than those where isolation prevails. When civic ties fray, communities can spiral into decline - seeing rising crime, worsening public health, and an inability to solve collective problems (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023).

The proliferation of associations in Ohio's early history was not just socializing - it was nation-building at the community level. Each club or committee was a training ground in self-governance, bringing individuals together for purposes they defined collectively.



# RENEWAL IN OHIO

Across Ohio, civic life hasn't disappeared - and in *some* places it is stirring back to life - on porches and in coffee shops, libraries and banks, bike paths and block parties. While headlines may focus on division or decline, on the ground, something quieter and more hopeful is happening: people are reimagining what it means to belong.

The examples that follow are just a handful of ways Ohioans are taking responsibility for community and spreading good neighborliness. Some are rooted in decades-old traditions; others are new. But each is a reminder that civic renewal is not abstract or theoretical - it's tangible, local, and already underway.

These are not massive initiatives requiring legislation or multimillion-dollar grants. They are *joinable*, *joyful*, and *doable* examples of how Ohioans are rebuilding civic trust, one event, one habit, one block at a time.

## Behind the Bar, Beside the People: Lorain's Mexican Mutual Society

For more than 95 years, the [Mexican Mutual Society](#) (MMS) in Lorain has stood as a pillar of mutual support and cultural pride. Founded to assist Mexican mill workers and their families, the organization has evolved into a vibrant, member-based hub that serves the entire Mexican community

and welcomes the public through food, drinks, and fellowship.

But MMS does more than preserve heritage - it brings civic life alive. With scholarship programs, parades, and their signature *Meet the Politicians Nights*, MMS transforms civic engagement into community celebration. During these inventive evenings, candidates and elected officials take a turn behind the bar, pouring drinks and conversation in equal measure. Residents and leaders meet eye-to-eye - not behind podiums, but across tables - fostering familiarity, trust, and accountability in a joyful setting. Recent guests have included candidates for Lorain Municipal Court Judge, continuing the tradition of neighborly democracy that defines MMS.

## Rotary on the Go: Portsmouth's Mobile Meetings

Faced with declining membership, [Rotary of Portsmouth Ohio](#) reimagined what it means to gather - and serve - by launching *Rotary On the Go*, a mobile meeting model that brings Rotarians into the heart of their community. Rather than convene in a static location at a single set time, the group now rotates through diverse spaces across the city for lunch and dinner - from cozy bed-and-breakfasts and local restaurants to unexpected landmarks like Greenlawn Cemetery (there, they cross-pollinate with

Friends of Greenlawn Cemetery Foundation, whose grassroots efforts are restoring and preserving the historic site). The result: Members who used to pay their dues but stopped attending rotary a long time ago started showing up again. By breaking out of the traditional format, *Rotary On the Go* renews their core spirit of association.

Across Ohio, civic life hasn't disappeared – and in some places it is stirring back to life - on porches and in coffee shops, libraries and banks, bike paths and block parties.

## Gather on the Porch: Dayton Porchfest

Hosted by The Collaboratory, [Dayton Porchfest](#) is a music festival with a civic soul. This free, family-friendly event transforms front porches into stages and neighborhoods into venues featuring live performances from local bands across the city. More than a concert, Porchfest invites residents to step outside, meet their neighbors, and experience the power of shared space and sound. These small interactions help build bonds of trust and reciprocity, one concert at a time.





## Pedals, Purpose, and Joy: Sandusky Bay Cycles

[Sandusky Bay Cycles'](#) mission revolves around inspiring a robust bicycle network in Sandusky. The group's Happy Thursday! Ride encourages community members to go out biking together through various city neighborhoods. At its heart, it's a great way to connect locals, and it's simply fun, positive, and healthy. It has bikes, lights, music, friends, and beautiful Sandusky as a backdrop (Ouriel, 2019). With playful themes like Animal Instincts (yes, costumes encouraged!), the rides turn heads and celebrate the joy of community life.

## Checkmate & Connection: The Royal Oak Initiative

Born from a radical vision of using chess to galvanize community education, activism, and unity, [The Royal Oak Initiative](#) (ROI) has grown into a beloved pillar of civic engagement in Columbus. The flagship space and event that gathers chess enthusiasts and community builders alike is the

Upper Cup Community Chess sessions open to the public every 2nd and 4th Sundays from 4-8PM. What started as an occasional gathering of chess heads on Parsons Avenue, an ever-growing mix of chess pros, newbies, and entire families gather to play for hours - bridging generations and backgrounds across the board. The late founder, Ernest Levert Jr., called it "coffeehouse chess" - a lively, social alternative to the quiet intensity of traditional tournaments. As the gatherings outgrew their original home at Upper Cup Coffee, ROI expanded into a larger space across the street, named the Cooperative Chess Culture Center (4C). Ernest was fond of saying, "If y'all think this is about chess, it's not (Hendrix, 2023)," it's about using the wisdom and wellness of chess to protect, build, and heal community.

**DO YOU KNOW** of a neighborly tradition, creative gathering, or civic effort bringing people together in your community? Share your story and inspire others across Ohio.

[Share Your Story](#)





## REBUILDING CIVIC LIFE: WHERE TO BEGIN

Whether you're inspired to volunteer, organize your neighbors, or support civic causes in new ways, this section offers practical ideas to help you begin. While the ideas are categorized for convenience, don't feel confined to any one group. Think of this chapter as a springboard, rather than a complete guide.

### INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES

#### **Find** Your Passion and Start Small

Ask yourself: *What issue or activity matters most to me?* It could be anything – maybe you care about restoring public landmarks, youth sports, or supporting the arts. Or maybe you simply miss the sense of togetherness and want to meet new people. Use that spark as your guide. Once you have a cause or interest in mind, look for one small way to get involved. For example, if you care about education, you might volunteer for a few hours at a school event like a science fair or career day. If you enjoy gardening, you could help out for an afternoon at a neighborhood planting day. If you like board games, consider hosting a casual game night and inviting a new family on your block to join. The key is, start with one thing. You do not have to make a long-term commitment right off the bat. “Join in” just once, see how it feels, and go from there. Many people find that once they show up that first time, they make connections or discover enjoyment that pulls them back.

## Discover Opportunities

You might be surprised at how many opportunities to engage exist right in your community – some are just not widely advertised. Here are some ways to find them:

- ★ **Volunteer Networks:** Check if your city, county, or library has a local volunteer center or an online volunteer-matching platform - or check out opportunities at [ServeOhio](#). For those who can make a deeper commitment, [AmeriCorps](#) is the federal agency for national service and volunteerism.
- ★ **Community Organizations:** Look up established organizations in your area. The local United Way, Boys & Girls Club, or YMCA often coordinate volunteer activities. So do chapters of the Chamber of Commerce (which sometimes need volunteers for community events). Civic clubs like Rotary, Kiwanis, and Lions welcome guests to meetings and often have public service projects.



- ★ **Faith Communities:** If you belong to a church, synagogue, mosque, or other faith community, inquire there - almost all have committees or ministries devoted to service both internally and in the broader community. Even if you're not a member, many faith groups run public service programs (soup kitchens, clothing drives, etc.) that need volunteers.



- ★ **Schools and Youth Programs:** Schools frequently seek community volunteers – to read to kids, make costumes for the school play, or help with field trips. If you have children, you may already get requests to volunteer. If you don't, you can still reach out to a local school or youth organization (like 4-H or Big Brothers/Big Sisters) to ask how you can help. Youth sports leagues often need coaches and team parents. Public libraries also use volunteers. You might help set up for a family movie night, assist with a children's craft program, or pitch in during a seasonal activity like a Halloween party or summer reading kick-off.
- ★ **Local Government and Civic Boards:** Many local governments have citizen advisory boards or committees (on parks, planning, public safety, etc.) that residents can join. There are often seats for “at-large” community members. Check your city hall or city website for listings of current openings on committees or notices seeking volunteers for things like tree planting days, census outreach, or polling station workers.
- ★ **Meetups and Social Media:** Find community or hobby groups near you on [Meetup.com](https://www.meetup.com/), Facebook, Discord, or [Geneva](https://www.geneva.com/) - “an online place to find your offline people” currently being acquired by [Bumble](https://www.bumble.com/). You might find a hiking club, a photography group that documents local history, or a knitting circle that donates blankets to hospitals. Social sites can be useful to connect with local people who share interests and want to do more together.
- ★ **Ask and You Shall Receive:** Don't underestimate the power of simply asking around. Talk to a friendly neighbor or the librarian or a local shop owner: “Do you know of any community groups or events around here? I'm looking to get involved.” You might be invited to join something on the spot. Community bulletin boards (at cafes, houses of worship, grocery stores) are also old-fashioned but effective sources of info about clubs or meetings.

## More Ideas You Can Try

- ★ **Organize a potluck night** where families share favorite dishes – food is a universal bridge-builder.
- ★ **Create a Neighbor Support Network** – basically a contact list, WhatsApp or Facebook group for your block to share needs (a ladder to borrow, a pet to watch, etc.) and alerts. It builds trust and mutual aid.
- ★ **Celebrate civic holidays** in a community way: July 4th is great, but how about Constitution Day (September 17) with a public reading of the Preamble?
- ★ **Start or join a time bank or barter system** in the community: people exchange services (an hour of home repairs for an hour of tutoring, etc.) – it's an old idea that fosters trust and reciprocity.
- ★ **Use the upcoming America 250 (2026) celebrations as a springboard.** Become an official [America 250-Ohio Community](https://www.america250.org/) and plan how your town will commemorate the nation's 250th anniversary. Renewing civic engagement is a fitting tribute to our American ideals.



## Bring Others Along

Taking the leap into civic participation can be easier and more fun if you do it with someone you know. The importance of individual conveners of community cannot be overstated. Invite a friend, family member, or coworker to join you in whatever you choose to do. Want to attend a city council meeting but feel a bit intimidated? Ask a neighbor to go with you and grab coffee afterward to chat about it. Thinking of joining a volunteer day? Bring your kids or spouse; not only do you get quality time together, but you're also modeling civic engagement for the next generation. Starting a new neighborhood tradition like a potluck or block party is much easier if you team up with one or two other neighbors to plan it. In short, don't go it alone – civic engagement can be contagious, and inviting others multiplies the impact.

## Leverage Your Strengths

Everyone has something to offer their community. Think about the skills you already have and how they could benefit others when shared. Are you good at cooking? Consider helping with a community kitchen or baking for a fundraiser. Are you handy with tools? Maybe assist an elderly neighbor with home repairs or join a Habitat for Humanity build.



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Be patient, positive, and embrace the joy! Try a few different activities to see what clicks best with you. And remember why you're doing it: to contribute, to connect, to live out the values you believe in.

# COMMUNITY GROUPS

If you are already part of a community group or you're a go-getter ready to rally others, this section is for you. How can we strengthen existing civic associations and launch new community initiatives effectively?

## **Welcome** and Include New People

The lifeblood of any community group, whether a club, a committee, a congregation, or a volunteer team, is the continual infusion of new participants. Actively invite new people and prioritize their welcome. This might be accomplished through the support of welcoming liaisons, welcome kits, and orientations (Pressler & Davis, 2025). Introduce newcomers around and follow up later to thank them for coming.

## **Collaborate** and Network with Other Groups

You don't have to operate in a silo. If you're in a civic club or running a volunteer project, reach out and connect with other organizations in your area. Collaboration can amplify impact and avoid duplication of efforts. For instance, if your town has separate groups for environmental conservation, youth outreach, and a church ministry, consider a joint project like a community garden. On a larger scale, communities can form coalitions of organizations that meet periodically to coordinate. For example, a "Community Council" where leaders of various groups gather quarterly to share plans and needs. Through such councils, a business association might learn a veterans' group is planning a Memorial Day event and offer sponsorship, or the library might coordinate a history night with the local historical society. This kind of meta-network strengthens the associational ecosystem of a place.

## **Embrace** Events and Traditions

Shared events and rituals are powerful for building community culture. If your town or group doesn't have many, consider starting an annual tradition (Pressler & Davis, 2025). Start with people - ask what your neighbors value or what they miss. Design around real life. It could be a heritage festival, a neighborhood block party, a charity 5K run, a holiday parade, or a day of service. Events give people something to look forward to and plan for, and they often draw out folks who aren't otherwise active year-round. You might also consider creating a Club Fair where groups set up booths and recruit members (Pressler & Davis, 2025).

## **Communicate** and Celebrate Successes

People won't join what they don't know about, so use multiple channels - social media, local papers, newsletters, flyers, and word of mouth - to spread the word. Monitor inboxes, direct messages, and chats, and respond promptly to calls and texts from interested joiners. No single method reaches everyone, so variety ensures access. Highlight both the impact and the benefit to participants. After each event, share what happened, who showed up, and what was achieved. In-



clude photos and publicly thank volunteers to recognize their efforts and show others that something meaningful is happening. Consider simple recognitions like “Volunteer of the Month” or “Good Neighbor Award.” A little recognition goes a long way in creating a culture of civic engagement. For younger audiences, use casual, real-time platforms like Discord or Slack, and share updates visually through Instagram, TikTok, or Snapchat. Direct messages and interactive posts often feel more authentic than email. Celebrate wins in ways people can easily share - short videos, stories, or live updates.

## Persist and Adapt

Running community initiatives isn’t always easy - low turnout, limited funds, and organizer burnout can all get in the way - but persistence and adaptability are key. ServeOhio even offers a [Volunteer Engagement Fundamentals Course](#) to support your aims.



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Even the most successful efforts have ups and downs, so if something isn’t working, don’t give up. Instead, gather feedback and try a new approach: meetings that feel too long or formal might benefit from a social twist or shorter format; Saturday clean-ups that compete with kids’ sports might do better on a weekday evening or Sunday afternoon. Refresh leadership regularly to prevent burnout and encourage new leaders to step up and use mentorship to support them by pairing experienced members with newer volunteers. Gradually handing off responsibility builds both confidence and continuity. Bridging generations is part of civic renewal too, so actively involve youth - and then listen to their ideas.



## EDUCATORS AND SCHOOLS

Our schools are training grounds for our young citizens - and they can also be centers of community engagement.

### **Integrate** Service Learning into Education

Schools can implement civics education that not only includes how a bill becomes a law, but a focus on practical participation. This can include service-learning programs where students engage in community service as part of coursework. For example, a class might adopt a local issue like river pollution and study it in science, write about it in English, present solutions in social studies, and complete a weekend river clean-up as a service project. Research shows that young people who have early positive experiences with volunteering or community problem-solving are much more likely to continue being engaged citizens as adults. ServeOhio provides [National Days of Service Funding](#), a [Youth ServeOhio Toolkit](#), and [InnerView](#) - a free mobile tool for students to track their service and build a digital Service Resume to support job, scholarship, and college applications.

### **Employ** Extracurriculars that Build Civic Skills

Schools and youth clubs can offer activities that double as civic engagement. Debate clubs, Model UN, student council, and Junior State of America all teach public speaking, critical thinking, and collaboration - excellent civic skills. Community service clubs (Key Club, National Honor Society, 4-H, etc.) directly involve youth in volunteering. Mentorship from adult civic organizations to school clubs can also be powerful - for example, the local League of Women Voters could advise a high school voter registration drive.

In Ohio, districts and schools are required to adopt guidelines for at least one locally defined diploma seal. Among the options are a [Community Service Seal and Student Engagement Seal](#); the latter is earned by participating in extracurricular activities such as clubs or student government to a meaningful extent.

### **Build** School-Community Partnerships

Educators can partner with parents, local businesses, and civic groups to support youth civic engagement. This might mean students working with a neighborhood association to design and implement a community beautification project, such as creating a mural, or a local veterans' group might work with students to plan and stage a Memorial Day ceremony.

### **Open** School Facilities to the Community

A school building can be more than just a place for classes; it can host town halls, cultural events, or serve as a polling place on Election Day. By being a venue for community gatherings, schools reinforce the idea that they are at the heart of the community, and that civic participation is important.

## CITIES

Cities play a vital role in shaping the everyday experience of civic life. Beyond managing services, local governments can foster not only belonging, but *membership*.

*Whereas belonging can be read as an individual feeling that passively arises in us, membership is a type of communal relationship into which we are invited and to which we are asked to actively contribute. Membership can be seen as a form of deep belonging: it's being such a part of a community that we feel responsible for honoring its past, stewarding its present, and co-creating its future.*

– Pressler & Davis, 2025

Pressler & Davis's (2025) [City Membership](#) framework is an excellent source of recommendations and ideas for building civic membership. For instance, cities can recognize civic engagement as a public good and appoint leaders - such as a municipal community membership director or a membership committee - to steward efforts. These leaders might coordinate local associations, host civic fairs where clubs recruit new members, and maintain civic directories that connect people to opportunities. Cities can also provide welcome kits to help new neighbors connect with local civic life, make meeting spaces easily accessible, and offer microgrants for neighborhood gatherings. Cities might start by asking, *How can we bring people together here?* In many cases, establishing a Membership Committee could be an effective first step (Pressler & Davis, 2025).

### FEATURED RESOURCE

[City Membership](#) published by Democracy Policy Network explores how cities can cultivate a sense of local community membership among their residents.

### Reimagining Akron's Civic Commons

Akron was recently honored as a 2025 All-America City by the [National Civic League](#) for its efforts to strengthen civic life and create deeper neighborhood connections. A key example is the Civic Commons initiative, which used a three-mile stretch of the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail to reconnect neighborhoods with vastly different economic and demographic profiles. Through a community-first approach led by the Ohio & Erie Canalway Coalition and more than a dozen partners, Akron transformed public spaces with direct input from residents. Today, over \$30 million has been invested across three neighbor-

hoods, including new parks, trails, and community spaces shaped by the people who use them (National Civic League, n.d.).

Akron is also currently marking its 200th anniversary with a yearlong [bicentennial celebration](#) (1825 – 2025) that began in December 2024. More than a commemoration of its history, the bicentennial invites residents to help shape the city's future. Through events and initiatives that honor Akron's past and celebrate its potential, the effort strengthens civic pride, promotes community engagement, fosters cross-cultural connections, and reinforces a shared sense of responsibility for Akron's next chapter.

## LOCAL BUSINESS / PRIVATE SECTOR

Local businesses and the private sector have a crucial role to play in revitalizing civic culture. Business owners and employers are often community leaders, whether they intend to be or not. What they support or discourage can influence a whole town's civic climate.

### Encourage Employee Civic Engagement

Employers can give their employees flexibility and/or incentives to participate in community service. This could mean offering a certain number of paid hours for volunteering each month, or organizing company volunteer days (for example, a team from the company goes together to refurbish a playground for children). Companies can realize great success and team-building benefits from participation. Even small businesses can adapt – if you have a staff of 5, maybe close for an afternoon just twice a year to let the team volunteer together. Additionally, try to allow employees time to attend important civic events (like making it easy to leave early to go vote or to attend their child's school ceremony). These policies send a clear signal that civic life is valued.

### Support Community Initiatives Financially or In-Kind

Not every business can donate lots of money, but even sponsorship of little league jerseys or donating refreshments for an event helps. In-kind contributions (printing flyers or donating gift cards as prizes for community contests) are often as valuable as cash. Businesses can also partner with nonprofits for specific drives – like hosting a donation box for a food or coat drive on their premises.

### Adopt “Open Door” Practices

An idea from the *City Membership framework* is expanding accessible meeting space to communities (Pressler & Davis, 2025). Businesses with physical space (like an office conference room or an empty lot or cafe) can make it available for civic uses. Perhaps allow the neighborhood watch to meet in your office's conference room after hours or host the local book club at your neighborhood bakery. Businesses can even create community rooms for public lending purposes.

### Brewing Community: How Richwood Bank Turned Coffee into Civic Capital

Ohio's [Richwood Bank](#) in central Ohio offers a powerful example of how a business can become part of a community's civic infrastructure. With a vision to *Inspire, Protect, and Celebrate anything that helps communities thrive*, the bank transformed its lobbies into welcoming third spaces – complete with Richwood Coffee shops, free Wi-Fi, seating, and even pinball machines. Open to all, not just account holders, these spaces invite people to gather, study, or connect over a drink. Instead of buying a coffee, patrons make a donation to their favorite local nonprofit, and the coffee is free. More than \$750,000 has been raised for 38 nonprofit partners, who in turn help spread the word. CEO Chad Hoff-



man notes, “If you don’t have a community, you don’t have a community bank.” By blending everyday generosity with a strong sense of place, Richwood Bank has turned foot traffic into community impact.

### Civic Time Off: Investing in Democracy

In an era of declining civic participation, Appalachian-based talent firm :hire (Jackson, Ohio) is proving that businesses can be powerful engines of democratic renewal. Under CEO Larry Kidd’s leadership, the company launched a Civic Time Off policy, paid leave that empowers employees to serve their communities as [Poll Workers](#). The idea was sparked by a call from the [U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation](#) to reinvigorate civic life, and :hire responded by embedding civic engagement into the workplace culture. Serving at the polls isn’t just an act of civic duty; it’s a rare chance to work side-by-side with someone who may hold very different political views, united by the shared goal of upholding a fair and honest election. For a small business, the sacrifice isn’t insignificant – but Kidd believes the return is greater: a workforce that sees itself as part of something larger, and a company doing its part to strengthen democracy from the ground up (Pino, 2024).

## PHILANTHROPY

Philanthropic organizations are uniquely positioned to strengthen civic life by funding not only services and infrastructure but also the connective tissue that binds communities together. This includes supporting efforts that foster belonging, trust, and shared purpose – especially in ways that bring people together across divides. Most Americans see value in connecting across difference and are eager for opportunities to work alongside those with different backgrounds or beliefs – yet many cite a “lack of opportunity” as the primary barrier (Small et al., 2025). Philanthropy can help close this gap.

In addition to traditional grantmaking, foundations can invest in relationship-building efforts – projects like block parties, concerts, or festivals that create space for neighbors to meet and build understanding (Carney, 2025). Another promising opportunity is to map civic infrastructure and fund initiatives that address gaps in connection or participation. Community foundations, in particular, are well positioned to strengthen these social ecosystems by supporting “gatherings of gatherers” – networks of those actively building community. As connection is cumulative, the more people have an opportunity to connect, the more interested they are in connecting (Small et al., 2025).

**Most Americans see value in connecting across difference and are eager for opportunities to work alongside those with different backgrounds or beliefs – yet many cite a “lack of opportunity” as the primary barrier.**

The [Community Foundation of Lorain County](#) is an example of how philanthropy can power local connection and grassroots leadership. In partnership with [Neighborhood Connections](#), the foundation supports *Neighbor Up* - a resident-led initiative in Lorain, Elyria, and Oberlin that brings people together to discuss community priorities, from small business development and youth opportunities to policing and public trust. At the heart of this effort are *Neighbor Nights*: informal, inclusive gatherings that foster relationship-building and collaborative problem-solving. Open to all, Neighbor Nights invite everyone to put their titles aside, bring their ideas to the table, and imagine and collaborate as neighbors.

The foundation also supports [The People's Project](#), a civic crowdfunding platform developed in collaboration with Patronicity. This effort empowers residents to raise funds for local improvement projects, from green spaces to revitalized playgrounds, with the potential for matching dollars - *all without needing to form a nonprofit*.

Together, initiatives like *Neighbor Up* and *The People's Project* demonstrate how community foundations can go beyond grantmaking to catalyze connection, trust, and shared investment in the places people call home.

## FEATURED RESOURCE

[The Connection Opportunity](#) by More in Common US informs efforts to create more opportunities for connection across difference, strengthening society's resilience against polarization and the erosion of social trust, and enriching individual, family, and community life.



## CHOOSING THE PATH OF RENEWAL

America stands at a crossroads as we approach our 250th anniversary as a nation. On one path, we see continued fragmentation - neighbors estranged, civic halls empty, distrust on the rise. On the other path, we see renewal; a great rejoining of Americans - of Ohioans - to one another, a restoration of our civic faith and friendships.

The choice of path is ours to make, collectively, through millions of small actions in towns and cities across the country. *Join In* is a call to choose the path of renewal: to reclaim and rekindle the spirit of association that has long been a bedrock of American greatness.



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