



THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING A SISTER CITIES PROGRAM IN YOUR COMMUNITY TOOLKIT

What is a sister city?

When a community of any size or character joins with a community in another nation to learn more about each other and to develop friendly and meaningful exchanges, the two may propose a formal affiliation leading to official designation as “sister cities.” The ideal affiliation involves many citizens and organizations in both communities who are engaged in continuing projects of mutual interest.

This interchange helps to further international understanding at all levels of the community on a continuing long-term basis. Within the program, cities and their citizens exchange people, ideas, and culture in a variety of educational, municipal, professional, technical, and youth projects.

The sister city program was launched at a White House conference in 1956 when President Dwight D. Eisenhower called for massive exchanges between Americans and the peoples of other lands.

Hundreds of American cities responded to that call and are continuing to carry out meaningful exchanges with their partners in 136 nations around the world.

Why have a sister city?

A sister city program enables the citizens of both communities become directly involved in international relations in unique and rewarding exchanges that benefit everyone. It enables all who participate to: exchange ideas and develop friendships with their counterparts in another culture on a direct personal basis; establish an identity as members of the global family involved in the constructive process of building world peace; develop a way for the many and diverse elements of each community to come together to enjoy and profit from a cooperative program; open new dialogues with the people of another culture to find unique solutions to improving the quality of life of all citizens; participate in a program with a real partner in another country so all members of the community can feel they are contributing to international understanding in a direct, personal way; and better understand their own community by interpreting their way of life to the people of another culture.

What to do first?

Hundreds of communities of all sizes around the world have discovered the rewards of participating in an international program in which each member can realize deep personal satisfaction and benefits. Your community can join this growing movement, but you should first develop support for the idea in your own community.

This can be easy and fun. You will have a lot of help from Sister Cities International, the national membership association for sister city programs in the United States, as well as from hundreds of volunteer leaders across the country who are available to share their experiences in the program.

The sister city concept, like all good programs, must have broad support if it is to succeed. If your community understands the program, it can succeed and the rewards will be well worth the effort.

Once you've secured community-wide support for a sister cities program, begin your search for a partner. Nearly every member of your community, young or old, belongs to some kind of organization or another. Nearly everyone works in a business or industry, has a hobby, goes to school, belongs to a service or professional society, or volunteers his or her time in any number of local organizations that can be linked to counterparts in another country. Thus, the linking of skills, crafts, and interests of people and organizations in both cities can enrich your newly formed sister city committee, open new avenues for program adventure, and secure the initial contacts you'll need to find an appropriate partner community.

No catalog could possibly list all the ways in which sister cities operate because the varieties of exchanges are only limited by the imagination and resources of the two communities.

There are two principal objectives to keep in mind when planning your activities. You don't establish and maintain friendships by a single effort. It requires continuing activity. You do establish such continuity by a broad base of activity in which many people and organizations participate.

Everyone Can Participate

The concept is simple once two communities have taken the initial step of actually affiliating as sister cities. A catalog of organizations should be developed that will give you an idea of the potential areas of exchange possible. Don't forget to include your schools, hobby groups, business and professional organizations, scouting groups, service clubs, and so on. This list can then be sent to your partner to determine which organizations they have in their community to match yours. In some cases, a similar organization won't exist. Perhaps you can start one.

Sister city programs must always strive to ensure that each project undertaken by its members reflects the diversity of its network. Specifically, you should promote the inclusion of ethnic and racial minorities, people with disabilities, youth, women, and people of diverse socio-economic status in all sister city activities.

Each project should be planned with the knowledge that each person will be able to individually become a part of a person-to-person, organization-to-organization, city-to-city approach to citizen diplomacy.

Above all, remember that the uniqueness of the sister city program is that it is two-way. The give and take is shared by both communities through planned and continuous contact.

Projects That Work

Sister City programs and projects are developed out of mutual desires and interest. There is no cut-and-dry pattern. Through visits and exchange of correspondence, cities discuss the types of projects they would like to carry out. When one or more projects are agreed upon, the program is developed and can take place.

As you start out, send promotional materials (e.g., photographs, brochures, videos) to offer a comprehensive introduction to your community. Remember, language barriers can be overcome very easily through simple visual presentations. Your new partner city may want to publish these in their local newspaper. You should ask for photos and news of the city as well so your local newspaper can acquaint your own citizens with your sister city.

Here are some of the types of projects that have been carried out successfully by other communities. The projects you choose may be more comprehensive, depending upon your resources and ingenuity.

- Exchanges of visitors, officials, prominent citizens, musicians, students, teachers, professionals, media, radio and TV, labor, etc.
- Organized tours, including hospitality and ceremonies for visiting groups.
- Club affiliations, such as the development of relationships between such groups as Rotary, Lions, Boy and Girl Scouts, women's clubs, hobby clubs, etc. with their counterparts in the sister city.
- School affiliations can be a stimulating activity if organized within your educational system. They can be a strong adjunct to your school's language, history, cultural, and other programs.
- Technical and professional exchanges can have benefits both communities far in excess of the limited costs involved. Many communities have exchanged experts in transportation, housing, health care, the environment, public safety, and more.
- Art exhibits. Both school children and members of local art clubs exchange artwork with their international counterparts. The material is often exhibited publicly in both communities.
- Photo exhibits. Camera clubs exchange stills, slides, and documentary motion pictures.
- Sending of mementos, not on a charitable basis, but of mutual interest and respect. Gifts are generally modest.
- Exchange of music, recordings, and plays.
- Publications and preparation of food recipes with your international partner.

A successful sister city program builds on the history of cooperation between the two cities, incorporates the present needs of the communities and prepares for the needs of the program as it matures, adapts and expands.