



ESTABLISHING A SISTER CITIES PROGRAM TOOLKIT

Introduction

This Toolkit for “Establishing a Sister Cities Program,” is designed to help Sister Cities International, Inc. (SCI) members plan and structure their program, whether they are searching for their first sister city, or are hoping to strengthen their sister city program. The information provided in this guide is relevant to a community-wide coordinating body responsible for multiple affiliations, a program with a single sister city affiliation, or a committee searching for its first partnership abroad.

Sister Cities International, Inc.

Founded in 1956 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, SCI is the national, nonprofit, volunteer membership organization representing the sister city programs of more than 450 U.S. cities and their 2,000 partners in more than 140 countries worldwide. As the premier organization for citizen diplomacy, SCI leads the movement for local community development and volunteer action in the global arena. SCI motivates and empowers municipal officials, volunteers, and youth to conduct long-term programs of mutual benefit and interest with their international sister city partners.

The goals of the SCI program are to:

- Develop long-term partnerships between U.S. towns, cities, counties, states, and similar jurisdictions in other nations
- Support cultural, educational, professional and civic opportunities, which may include physical and virtual exchanges
- Create an atmosphere in which trade and commerce may be developed, implemented, and strengthened
- Stimulate environments through which U.S. and foreign communities can creatively learn, work, and solve problems together
- Collaborate with organizations in the United States and other countries sharing similar goals

SCI is unique in that it officially links U.S. cities with international communities through sister city agreements signed by the respective mayor of each city and ratified by each city council, or its equivalent. To be official, a sister city relationship must have the endorsement of the local authorities, who support the efforts of community volunteers. This dynamic process empowers all sectors of a community to participate constructively in the global arena, thus unleashing citizen diplomacy at the grassroots level.

Getting Started

At the foundation of every successful sister city partnership lies a strong local program with volunteers, who are willing to commit time, talent, and resources to develop a long-term relationship with their counterparts abroad. It is vital for sister city programs to outline their goals and objectives clearly, both to their members and municipal representatives, and to their sister city partners.

Usually, a community has a potential city or cities in mind, but the process of formalizing the sister city relationship takes time, allowing the fledgling program an opportunity to build community support and to fine-tune its organization.

There are many questions community members should consider before establishing a sister city program. Among the most important:

- What is our mission?
- How do we accomplish it?
- What are our short-term and long-term goals?
- What do we have to offer our community?
- With whom should we partner abroad?
- What are our criteria for choosing a sister city?
- What do we have to offer our sister city?
- Do we want more than one sister city?
- If we have multiple affiliations, how will we structure an umbrella organization?
- Who would we like to join our organization?
- How can we build a diverse, multi-generational membership?
- What provisions have we made for people with disabilities to participate in our program?
- What provisions have we made for people of all socio-economic levels to participate?
- Who are the leaders, how are they chosen, and what are their responsibilities?
- How can we design our program so that people will want to join?
- Who does the work, and how can we share the work?
- How will we raise money?
- What initial budget do we project?
- What policies do we need to consider in our constitution and bylaws?
- From whom do we solicit funds?
- How can we design a structure that is flexible enough to change, when our members, goals, or community change?
- How do we design a structure that is flexible enough to change if our sister city counterparts change their priorities?

New sister city programs usually follow a six-step organizational process:

- 1. Selecting a Sister City**
- 2. Structuring a Strong Program**
- 3. Incorporating the Local Program**
- 4. Building Membership**
- 5. Designing the Budget**
- 6. Generating Publicity**

The following sections will help serve as a general guide to help you establish your sister city program:

Step 1. Selecting a Sister City

Sister cities find each other in different ways. Examples of how partnerships are begun include:

- A group (service club, ethnic association, health clinic) or individual (student, teacher, businessperson, elected leader, health professional) in the community with a particular interest in a region, culture, economic market or development issue form a committee and lobby their elected leaders.
- Two mayors or city officials meet, discover common interests, and then encourage their communities to initiate exchanges.
- SCI introduces cities to each other through requests that come directly to the national SCI headquarters through individuals or organizations with which SCI works (the staffs of SCI's counterpart organizations in foreign countries, Peace Corps Volunteers, and U.S. embassies)
- U.S. Department of State officers, U.S. government representatives, colleagues in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private voluntary organizations (PVOs) introduce cities to each other

SCI requests U.S. cities looking for a sister city abroad to fill out a Community Profile Form to provide as much information as possible to share with prospective partner cities. Cities are encouraged to send SCI copies of excellent brochures, books or videos that promote the U.S. city. SCI puts U.S. and international cities into a database and lists these cities in the [“City Connection Marketplace”](#) on its website.

SCI introduces cities to each other through requests that come directly to the national headquarters through individuals or organizations with which SCI works (the staffs of SCI's counterpart organizations in foreign countries). Deciding to accept an international partner, one which shares the U.S. program's goals and objectives, is often one of the most important first tasks upon which the sister city committee embarks. Normally, it takes one to two years to make the necessary contacts, to build solid sister city programs on each side and to develop good communication links.

SCI strongly advises cities to have at least one official delegation from each city visit their prospective sister city. Ideally, the delegation should consist of at least one senior city official (the mayor or a city councilperson) and key representatives from the community.

Step 2. Structuring a Strong Program

Over the years, SCI has carefully documented the successes and challenges of its members. Although a program can have unexpected difficulties during any of its sister city activities, strong sister city programs endure. Such programs have several common attributes:

- **Memorandum of Understanding:** One of the most important documents developed between potential or affiliated sister cities is the Memorandum of Understanding, a clear, concise statement of the program's goals, objectives and planned activities. Memoranda can be updated and revised throughout the life of the sister city relationship.
- **Diversity and Innovation:** Integral to the success of a sister city program is its ability to develop beneficial, needs-specific projects that lead to deeper ties between the two communities, such as using new technologies, promoting sustainable environmental and economic

development, creating cross-cultural learning and training opportunities for both sides or initiating multilateral programs that involve more than one sister city partnership.

- **Reliable Communications:** Strong sister city programs establish and sustain reliable communication links that utilize the best technology available with professionally trained staff (whether volunteers or city officials), who have a good understanding of the cross-cultural dynamics of the relationship.
- **Broad-based Community Involvement:** Linking as many organizations (newspapers, service clubs, scout troops) and institutions (schools, universities, hospitals) in the two communities as possible strengthens the sister city program. Several venerable sister city programs have more than 100 organizations and institutions linked between the U.S. and foreign cities.
- **Evaluation and Follow-up:** Periodically, successful sister city programs re-evaluate their partnerships to reaffirm commitment, to discuss minor problems each side might be experiencing and to plan for new, innovative projects, which are adapted each year to reflect the changing needs of the communities.

Choosing a program structure

What is best for a small town is not necessarily best for a large city. The three basic types of structures sister city programs use are:

- Association
- City Commission
- Corporation

Association

An association is a group of people joined with a common purpose, often without a formal structure. Ordinarily it is not incorporated, but an association uses the same methods and forms used by corporations. In fact, the association is often treated by regulatory and tax authorities as a quasi-corporation. This treatment is more likely if the organization and operation are governed by a written agreement of its members. This type of structure is usually found in small- to medium-size cities with a very informal sister city program, as well as and among programs with little community-wide fundraising or funding.

City Commission

A city commission is put together formally by municipal ordinance and carries out its functions as an arm of city government. The mayor usually appoints the members of the sister city commission. The commission is responsible for affiliation policy and direction. The commission reports to the mayor and/or city council. The chairman and members serve for specific periods of time. Even when membership changes within the organization, the commission has a continued existence.

Corporation

A corporation is a legal entity with its own name. It is made up of individuals that must follow the laws regarding corporations.

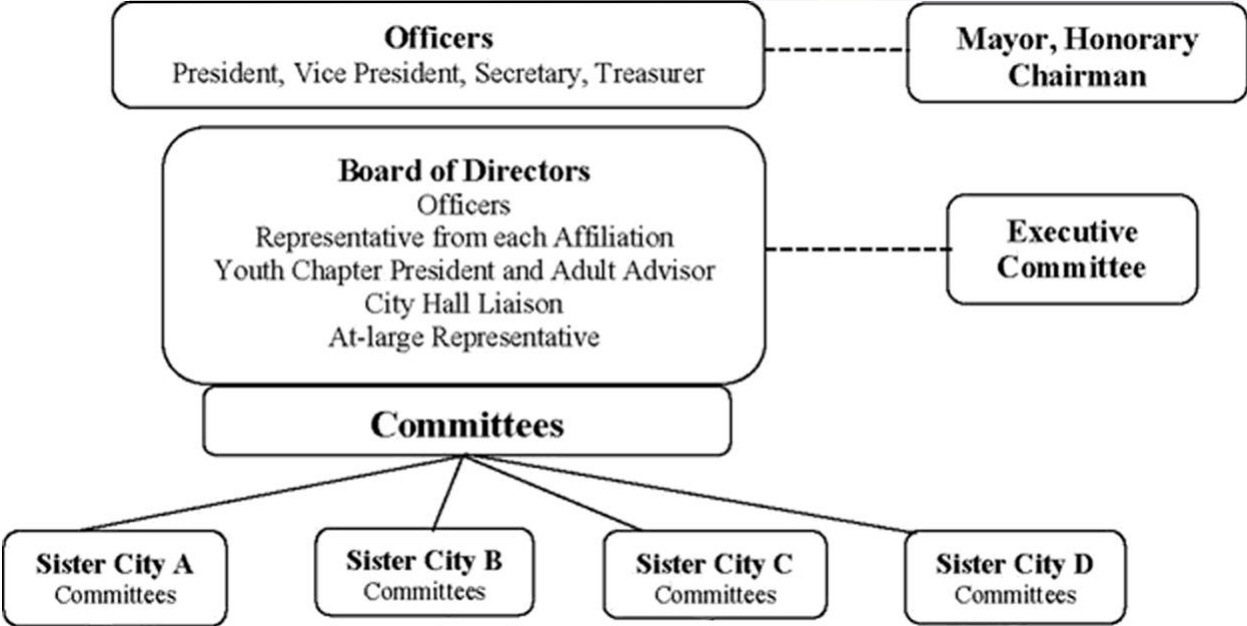
SCI strongly suggests incorporation of sister city programs. It is also wise to apply for tax-exempt status under the 501(c)(3) IRS tax code. This allows contributors to make tax-deductible donations to the program. Visit the IRS website for the step-by-step process for applying for 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status.

Structuring for Future Growth

When selecting the type of organization that best suits a community’s needs, the sister city program should consider the future growth of the program. Many cities enter the program with the intention of linking with only one sister city. Once communities realize the benefits of a sister city affiliation, however, interest is generated in the community for additional affiliations in other countries. SCI suggests forming an umbrella structure under which additional sister city partnerships may be organized and maintained. This organization functions as a coordinating body for the sister city committees in your community.

Structure for Multiple Sister Cities

SCI recommends this organizational flow for a multiple sister cities program:



Sister Cities Association of _____, Inc.

The organizational chart shown above provides structure to a city wanting to establish multiple sister cities, and:

- Serves as the overall sister cities corporation for the community with its tax-exempt status applied to all of the sister city committees.
- Represents and promotes each of the sister city committees, providing information to interested individuals and organizations, potential new volunteers and members, the media, and City Hall.
- Serves as a forum for communication among the various sister city committees. The program can publish a monthly newsletter with information on the activities and programs of the individual committees.
- Maintains the morale of a sister cities committee if relations with its sister city are in a down phase.
- Facilitates fundraising for the individual sister cities committees.
- Sets criteria for the selection of future sister cities for the community. This ensures that the proposal for a new sister city is backed by an enthusiastic and well-prepared group of citizens.

[CLICK HERE](#) to access suggested ideas regarding the organization of your board of directors and committees.

Step 3. Incorporating the Local Program

After the committee has decided on a structure, it may be time to make the program a legal entity. Drafting the articles of incorporation is the first step in forming the corporation. The articles will also serve as its constitution.

Articles of incorporation will be kept on file in a public office and are open for public inspection. The articles state the purpose of the organization and declare the organization's existence. [CLICK HERE](#) to See samples of Articles of Incorporation.

Bylaws are an internal document, which define management and operational practices of the organization. Only members have an inherent right to view the bylaws. The bylaws may be amended after they have been ratified without going through any legal process, whereas the articles of incorporation must be resubmitted. In some states bylaws may need to be submitted with the application for incorporation. [CLICK HERE](#) to see samples of Bylaws.

Some sister city committees seek legal help in preparing the necessary documents. This is recommended. Some attorneys will provide this as pro-bono work for non-profit organizations.

A corporation exists on its own, separate and distinct from its members. Incorporation means that members may have no personal liability. A corporation may:

- Deal in property
- Execute contracts
- Take legal action if needed
- Incur liability (note: any resulting judgments may only be claimed only against corporate assets, not against members assets)

Insurance considerations

The corporation should consider purchasing liability insurance. This will protect the corporation from damages that may occur or suits that result from a sister cities-sponsored event that involves the public. This liability insurance is not meant to replace an individual's accident or sickness insurance, while participating in a sister city sponsored exchange or event. Each participant should secure appropriate insurance coverage while on an exchange, or the group can purchase insurance for the duration of the exchange. Liability insurance is meant to protect the program and its events in the community. For the best type of insurance coverage for each program, SCI suggests consulting with a local insurance or travel agent familiar with nonprofit corporations.

The process of incorporation as a tax exempt 501(c)(3)

After a sister city organization has filed their articles of incorporation with the appropriate department(s) in their state, the sister cities program has 15 months to apply for tax-exempt status. Importantly, contributions made during this time may be retroactively tax-exempt.

Certain types of nonprofit corporations can be granted exemption from taxation. An incorporated sister cities program is one of these. By obtaining tax exempt status, the sister cities program may also receive other benefits as well, including possible exemption from state and local sales, use, property, and other forms of tax. The sister cities program is eligible to attract charitable contributions from individuals and corporate donors. This status would therefore assist your fundraising efforts if donors could deduct this amount from their federal taxes. By claiming tax-exempt status, your sister cities committee will qualify to receive funds from private foundations. Many federal agencies can often only make grants to or enter contracts with nonprofit organizations that are tax exempt.

SCI advises the sister cities program to follow the steps below efficiently in order to legalize and to protect itself:

- Obtain a federal employer identification number (EIN) from the IRS.
- Write the articles of incorporation and the bylaws.
- Call an organizational meeting to: approve articles of incorporation and ratify bylaws, select board of directors and officers and decide on a bank for the program's account.
- File the articles of incorporation with the Secretary of State in the program's state or a commissioner of corporations to become a nonprofit corporation. Although statutes vary from state to state, the corporation becomes a legal entity when chartered in one state. Some organizations may be required to file a certificate of incorporation with the city/county recorder of deeds.
- Obtain an income tax exemption from the federal government under section 501(c)(3) of the IRS tax code. Although this is not necessary, tax exemption is VERY beneficial. The sister cities program may be exempt from some forms of tax including state, local, sales, use, and property taxes. In addition, all of your donors will be able to deduct their contributions from their federal taxes. Also, by claiming tax-exempt status, the sister cities program will qualify to receive funds from private foundations.

- Tax exempt status requirements under Section 501(c)(3) of the IRS tax code, mandate that the program files an IRS Form 1023. More information may be found at: <https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/charitable-organizations/exemption-requirements-501c3-organizations> and <https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/application-process>.

Step 4. Building Membership

Recruiting volunteers

Recruiting volunteer members is essential to the existence of a sister city program and should be an ongoing process. New volunteers rejuvenate the program, bringing new ideas and community contacts, which complement those of long-time volunteers and program participants.

Potential members may be found everywhere in the community:

- Friends and family
- Local businesses and corporations
- Civic groups: Rotary/Kiwanis/Lions/Scouts
- Travel/tourism groups
- Environmental organizations
- Neighborhood associations
- Police officers/fire fighters
- Ethnic associations and cultural organizations
- Artists, musicians, performing groups, theaters
- Elementary/secondary schools/vocational schools and colleges/universities
- Museums/historical preservation organizations/libraries
- Churches/synagogues/mosques/temples/shrines
- Sports clubs and teams

Step 5. Designing the Budget

An annual budget for a sister cities program should include both cash-on-hand and donated in-kind services. While some businesses may not be able to give cash, they may be able to donate their services. The value of their services is a legitimate income for the program.

Membership dues for the local sister cities program are a way to raise some of the basic operating expenses for the program. Initially, a sister city program may wish to start with a low figure for the first few years until it determines the actual cost of running the program.

In general, expenses for trips to the sister city are not included in the annual budget since participants pay their own way. Official representatives traveling to the sister city for a specific purpose other than vacation or touring, could deduct part of the cost of the trip from their taxes if the program is incorporated as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation. SCI suggests that the program consult with an accountant to determine which expenses qualify as tax deductions.

Travel, for the most part, is paid by individuals or supported wholly or in part by special fundraisers the program may decide to undertake. The program, however, may want to support some type of annual travel expense from the annual budget for special types of exchanges, such as youth exchange scholarship or technical assistance projects.

Expenses

The following is a list of typical expenses that the sister city programs can expect to incur. Several of these expenses are one-time costs only, and many may be donated as in-kind contributions from members.

- One-time incorporation fee
- Publicity and printing (newsletter, program brochures, advertisements)
- Hosting visiting delegations
- Copying/postage/overnight mail
- Telephone/fax/e-mail/Internet services
- Web site design and storage
- Annual membership dues to SCI
- Gifts for sister city
- Scholarship assistance for youth exchange programs
- Technical assistance projects
- Fundraising expenses (to cover the initial outlay before the event)
- Hospitality expenses during meetings and special events

Income

Annual membership dues are probably the easiest way for a sister cities committee to generate funds. The following list includes examples of membership dues for a city with a population of 50,000:

- Youth \$10
- Individual adult \$25
- Family \$30
- Business \$50
- Organization \$100
- Friend \$200
- Patron \$500
- Benefactor \$1,000 +

Other sources of funding and methods to generate income include:

- City government contributions
- Corporate donations/sponsorships
- U.S. government and foundation grants

- SCI grant programs
- Direct mail solicitation
- Sale of items (recipe books, T-shirts, bumper stickers)
- Fundraisers (auction, raffle, international dinner)
- In-kind contributions (printing, complimentary hotel rooms for visitors, legal services, meals, homestays)

Fundraising

Fundraising is a highly integrated management process. Each step in a successful fundraising program may not require the same emphasis for each organization, but no steps can be missed without diminishing the likelihood of favorable results. For detailed information on fundraising ideas and strategies, you can check out our Fundraising Toolkit [HERE](#).

Step 6. Generating Publicity

A comprehensive, well thought-out publicity (or public relations) plan will help the sister cities program create awareness, acceptance and understanding in the community. A successful publicity campaign will accumulate financial contributions, improve fundraising efforts, increase membership and advance community relations. By developing a publicity plan, there are no limitations set on innovation, other than ethical ones, to achieve the local program's objectives. For detailed tips on how to successfully plan, generate, and sustain effective publicity for your program, check out our Publicity, Marketing, and Media Toolkit [HERE](#).

Evaluating Program Progress

While the local program may be off to a good start, SCI recommends that programs follow best practices which include avoiding the following common pitfalls, which may slow the program's progress:

Although working with City Hall is crucial, it is unwise to have the program too closely identified with a single prominent personality. Such affiliations tend to confine themselves to formal exchanges of gifts and occasional visits. Because administrations change, there are no guarantees that the new city official will want to continue a sister city program. It is best to strike a balance and to keep the power split between the mayor's office and the sister city volunteers.

In order to have a dynamic program, one in which volunteers are able to participate fully and the community members deem beneficial and regard as officially representing the city internationally, the program needs to have the basic elements of organization.

Design, implement, and sustain regular activities so that the program can represent the community well. Volunteers and community members should be able to participate fully, so that the program is regarded as an important and beneficial city organization.

Keep communications open and inclusive. Group email and other virtual messaging platforms have proven to be a secure and cost-effective means of communication.

Learning Citizen Diplomacy

Building your local sister city program, like citizen diplomacy, is not an exact science; no two programs are perfectly alike, just as no two communities are the same. During the past five decades, however, sister city programs nationwide have learned to use citizens' diplomacy to achieve similar results: cross-cultural understanding through long-term partnerships.

In this guide, SCI has offered recommendations, not regulations, for creating and sustaining a successful, grassroots level sister city program. In many cases, fine-tuning a sister city program takes a myriad of meetings, visits abroad and effective cross-cultural communication, accomplished through the extraordinary efforts, time and flexibility of volunteer members.

SCI strongly encourages each sister city program to tailor this guide to its specific needs, to share this guide with its counterparts abroad and to contact the national office any time for assistance.

Annually, Sister Cities International awards local organizations honors for successful programs. These programs are designed to be duplicated by local sister city organizations.

Encouraging youth participation

A strong sister city program has active youth participation. Sister city relationships offer young people unique opportunities to develop beyond their local boundaries within a global family of communities. Welcomed in cities and towns worldwide, sister city youth learn first-hand about other cultures and diverse perspectives and about their own potential for making a positive international contribution on the local level. Sister city youth are active in grassroots diplomacy efforts, cross-cultural leadership training and educational exchanges, activities which teach them the skills and knowledge necessary to lead their communities into the future. Sister city youth activities have long-term impact in the participating communities. These youth activities strengthen and diversify the sister city partnerships by involving new groups, institutions, and individuals in the relationships. To date, these activities include the SCI *Young Artists and Authors Showcase (YAAS)*, the SCI *Youth Leadership Summit (YLS)*, and many programs and activities organized on the local level.

Exploring the Internet

Sister city programs in many countries use telecommunications technology to offer individuals of diverse backgrounds the opportunity to participate in global dialogue, almost instantly, regardless of gender, religion, race, ethnicity, disability, or socio-economic status. Youth active in participating in online discussion groups, designing Websites, and engaging in community service activities, extend their reach beyond their desks, classrooms, and schools. Such projects allow individuals to choose themes such as local and global environmental issues, health and human services, cross-cultural understanding, peace and conflict studies, political issues, international trade, and the arts to explore with their sister counterparts via e-mail and the Internet. Through such projects, students may begin to sense their role in the global community.

Working with City Hall

An official sister city relationship does not exist in a community without a document, a sister city agreement, signed by the respective mayor of each city and ratified by each city council, or its equivalent. Although the mayor and City Hall may not always be active in the sister city program, SCI

recommends that the city and program establish a good rapport and a close working relationship with the mayor and City Hall.

Proven techniques for strengthening the sister city relationships with municipal government:

- Involve local elected officials to participate in the sister city program. Invite officials on exchange programs to the sister city.
- Appoint city government officials to the sister city board.
- Provide sister city officials the opportunity to speak at a sister city events.
- Provide the opportunity for an elected-official to serve as a host family of a visiting delegate.
- Establish a liaison in the mayor's office or in City Hall. Recruit an employee at City Hall to participate on the program's board of directors.
- Address financial and other issues up front with the local government. Obtain financial commitments from the city council, city manager or mayor's office. Funding should be inclusive for all sister city committees. If funding is secured through local government, make certain to keep these branches of local government informed of all administrative decisions made by the board of directors.
- Develop projects with the city's chamber of commerce, economic development and parks and recreation department.
- Create a partnership between the sister city program and local government. Ask the city council or mayor to help choose sister city programs that are of interest to them. In doing this, be cautious that city hall does not completely control the sister city agenda, nor allow the sister city program to become too political.
- Encourage local Mayor to join the Sister Cities International Mayor's Council for networking with other mayors or similar size cities.
- Encourage the local Mayor to tell the Sister Cities story in his/her speeches to the community.