
Encouraging Community Participation in Committees

A Guide for Minneapolis Neighborhood Organizations

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WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

The Community Participation Program funding guidelines require funded neighborhood organizations to encourage and promote participation in all activities of the organization. Here are the relevant sections from the Guidelines, under “Eligibility” on pages 2 and 3:

1. Provide for the participation of all segments of the neighborhood, including, but not limited to, homeowners, renters, property owners, business owners, immigrants, non-English speakers, low-income residents and communities of color.
2. Ensure that membership in the organization is open to all residents of the geographically defined neighborhood. Neighborhood organizations may not impose membership dues or require attendance at a certain number of meetings before voting rights are conferred.
3. Hold regular open meetings and take positive steps to encourage all interested parties to attend and participate. An organization may only hold closed meetings in cases of labor management and legal disputes.

In addition, the Standards and Expectations require good faith efforts by neighborhood organizations to:

- Build a sense of neighborhood identity within their communities;
- Conduct activities that promote the inclusion of all age, ethnic and economic groups in the neighborhood’s community participation efforts and in the decision-making processes of the organization, including renters. Explore new methods to stimulate participation;
- Identify the issues of significance that confront their residents;
- Bring neighborhood residents and stakeholders together to create and implement a vision for their neighborhood;
- Build bridges among neighbors and diverse communities within the neighborhood;
- Work cooperatively on common issues with other neighborhood organizations;

- Encourage leaders and develop new leadership;
- Engage current members and attract new members;
- Maintain an organizational structure and election process that maximizes opportunities for all residents to become involved. The board should make reasonable attempts to make sure the diversity of the neighborhood is represented;

But beyond the requirements of City funding, good community participation enhances the legitimacy and authority of neighborhood organizations to the City, to residents, to funders and to other stakeholders in the community. Most grievances against neighborhood organizations are filed because of perceived or real barriers to participation, or over lack of communication over meetings and decision making by the organization.

FOR OPEN COMMITTEE MEETINGS:

Following the eligibility requirements and standards and expectations established in the Community Participation Program Guidelines:

- Any resident may fully participate in committee meetings or other meetings of the organization with the same rights as any other member of the organization, including making motions and voting, regardless of past attendance or status as a committee member.
- All meetings should be open to the public, unless closed for legal disputes or labor management discussions. Non-residents should be able to provide comments during open meetings.
- Assume all information (minutes, etc.) is public information, unless for closed meetings.
- Conflicts of interest should be appropriately managed. Potential conflicts of interest should be disclosed and discussed, and where a potential for conflict of interest exists, participants should recuse themselves from debate or voting. Even where there is only the appearance of a conflict of interest, you may want to treat it as though an actual conflict of interest exists.
- Board discussion and votes may be limited to board members, consistent with the bylaws of your organization. This can include committees of the board dedicated solely to governance and management of the organization (e.g., Executive Committee, Personnel Committee, Finance Committee, etc.).
- The organization must provide opportunities for meaningful participation by other stakeholders who may be impacted by their decisions, and for residents who may not otherwise be able to fully participate (e.g., non-English speaking residents, business and property owners, etc.).

ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION:

The above guidelines should be considered a floor, not a ceiling. In addition to holding open meetings and allowing residents to fully participate from the first meeting they attend, neighborhood organizations should actively promote meeting agendas, times and locations, and encourage participation in activities of the organization broadly.

- Promote dates, times and locations of meetings well in advance of the meeting. Include in any notice the purpose of the meeting and any key decisions that might be made.
- Consider taking extra steps to inform stakeholders who may be directly impacted by your decision at the meeting, and encourage their participation.
- Reach out to under-represented groups in your neighborhood to create awareness of opportunities to participate.

CREATE SAFE, OPEN AND WELCOMING MEETING ENVIRONMENTS:

What keeps residents from participating in neighborhood organization meetings? What keeps them from coming back? Sometimes, neighborhood organizations unintentionally create barriers or unwelcoming environments that discourage participation. There are some simple techniques committee members can adopt to encourage participation, and help keep the group energized as well!

- Greet participants as they are coming in before the meeting and thank them for coming.
 - Some groups regularly assign Board or committee members with the task of greeting new people at the next meeting, signing them in and making them feel welcome.
 - Formally recognize new participants and thank them for coming.
- Provide for introductions and social time, and consider family-friendly gatherings. Use this time to ask new participants about their interests.
- Think carefully about seat arrangements and how they affect group dynamics. Some types of seating arrangements (circles) can encourage informal conversation, while others can actually increase potential for conflict (sandbags).
- Take time to provide background for newcomers. Consider using “regular” participants as mentors to new participants.
- Avoid acronyms, or explain acronyms that may be regularly used in the meeting.
- Watch for negative or discouraging comments that may prevent people from providing input or sharing ideas (such as “we’ve tried that before,” “that won’t work,” “no one will listen to us,” etc.).
- Consider providing translation at meetings. When using headsets, a good practice is to have all participants use headsets, not just non-english speaking participants.

- Encourage participation from “quiet” participants at the meeting.
- Follow up with new participants with one-on-one meetings.

CHECKS AND BALANCES:

- Anyone has the right to participate, but no one has the right to be disruptive.
- The organization can establish and enforce simple ground-rules for meetings, such as:
 - Follow the agenda.
 - Start and end the meeting on time.
 - One person speaking at a time. No side conversations.
 - Allow others to speak to a resolution before speaking again.
 - Be brief and respectful when speaking. No raised voices.
 - Keep remarks on the issue, and avoid personal attacks.
- Boards always have the option to review, revise, and approve or deny committee actions.
 - Were stakeholders informed and have an opportunity to participate?
 - How was a committee’s action informed by stakeholder involvement?
 - Did residents have an opportunity to fully participate?
 - Were conflict of interest policies followed?
- When in doubt, the board can always take a recommendation to the larger community for discussion.

COMMUNICATION AND OUTREACH:

Funding for neighborhood organizations through the Community Participation Program is based not just on the size of the neighborhood, but also on neighborhood diversity, income, and neighborhood conditions. As a result, the levels of annual funding vary widely from neighborhood to neighborhood, and some neighborhood organizations may have greater capacity for outreach and participation.

For all organizations:

- At a minimum, all meetings should be promoted through the organization’s website and regular email communications. Keep online content current and relevant. Organizations should maintain other means of communicating with residents who do not have access to the internet or who are not included in the organization’s email lists.
- Meeting agendas and minutes should be regularly posted on the organization’s website and at various locations around the neighborhood (the library, a coffee shop, the park building, etc.).
- Provide direct notice (flyers) to residents who will be directly impacted by an issue that you are discussing at a meeting.

- Meet as necessary with other institutions in your community that may work closely with under-represented constituencies in your neighborhood.
- Board members should always serve as “Ambassadors” of the organization and its programs, to encourage and support participation by all community members.
- The Board should regularly review participation activities, and identify new leaders for development for committee and board participation.
- Committees should regularly review participation to identify new ways to increase involvement in the committees’ activities.
- Advertising community events and meetings regularly in community newspapers.
- Produce an annual report available to all residents on the organization’s website.
- Include ADA statement on all meeting and event notices.

As your neighborhood organization increases its capacity, through greater volunteer involvement or higher levels of funding, you should also consider:

- Hold regular community hearings or open houses to gather input from residents and other stakeholders. Use these hearings to inform committees and to recruit new participants for committees and other activities of the organization.
- Table at neighborhood events and activities to meet with residents and other stakeholders.
- Hire part time staff to support committees (meeting notices, minutes, etc.).
- Hold at least quarterly membership meetings to hear from the broader community. Develop partnerships with cultural, religious, professional or business associations to expand outreach into under-represented populations.
- Print and distribute a quarterly or semi-annual newsletter distributed to all households. Include notice of regular committee meetings.
- Provide notices of annual and special meetings in multiple languages (and provide interpretation services at those meetings).
- Hire outreach staff for regular door-knocking in the neighborhood, especially in under-represented segments of the neighborhood.
- Provide interpretation services at meetings of the members. Some neighborhood organizations have used special headsets for interpretation. These headsets are available at no cost for use by all neighborhood groups.
- Regularly conduct surveys or focus groups in your neighborhood to gather input from residents and other stakeholders. Surveys can be useful for gathering information in a large community, while focus groups can be useful in more diverse communities.
- Consider random sample surveys. Consider an annual self-evaluation of the organization.