



All-America Cities: Using Civic Muscle to Strengthen Democracy and Get Results

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This paper is part of a [collection](#) of papers commissioned by [Braver Angels' Citizen Scholars Council](#) for discussion at the inaugural Council Symposium, held in Philadelphia on June 25, 2026, before the Braver Angels Convention.

The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what “courageous citizenship” is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: “We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: “I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America's civic culture.”

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Abstract

The All-America Cities program celebrates communities that are working collaboratively to solve problems and help everyone thrive, and during the past 77 years, over 500 communities have been recognized. This article describes the principles of civic muscle used by these communities, with success stories from around the country.

Part I: Courageous Citizens, Political Reform and Civic Muscle: 1949 and Beyond

In 1949, a reporter named Jean James was assigned to cover the National Municipal League's National Conference on Government in St. Paul, Minnesota. James approached League officers, including pollster George Gallup, and explained that she wanted to write a feature article about the best-governed cities in America. Gallup suggested that such a judgment was too complex, risky, and difficult to make.

"Well," she replied, "it is football season. How about naming an All-American team of the eleven best-governed cities—a team that could be selected every year."

The League (now called the National Civic League) ran with James' idea, creating the All-America City Award, now in its 77th year. Writing later about the initial award winners, James said "their stories are tales of real fighting, bitter battles against fat and placid political machines, against bosses with more power than men should have, against corruption and against genuine grassroots inefficiency."

Reflecting the League's long-time focus on municipal reform, the first group of All-America City winners were often communities that made inroads against political corruption and incompetence. **San Antonio**, for example, received the award adopting the city manager form of government. **Grand Rapids** had forced a mayor to resign after he had fired the city manager for not hiring a political crony. **Philadelphia** had broken the "hold of a corrupt political machine" that had ruled the city for half a century.

As the nation recognizes its 250th anniversary, the country is facing similar challenges to those that preceded the Progressive Era during which the League was founded, in 1894: a crisis of polarization and governmental paralysis which, if left alone, will continue to filter down to states and cities, disrupting the work of these "laboratories of democracy" and their innovations to address key issues. In the meantime, many of these issues have become more complex, becoming "wicked" problems for which solutions—or even measurable progress—are elusive.

Columnist Ezra Klein has written about America's declining trust in political parties and government, saying in [Abundance](#) that one of the reasons for this decline is the inability of government to manage public matters and the lack of focus on solutions. "The lesson, which the U.S. has seemed to have forgotten in the past two decades," he says, "is that implementation, not mere invention, determines the pace of progress."

Despite declining faith in democracy and an increasingly dysfunctional federal government, a quiet revolution has been growing at the community level. Under the radar of news media

coverage, these forces are leading to structural changes in how communities address increasingly complex public issues, bringing about improvements on nagging concerns from the collective work of citizens, local government and other stakeholders. Nowhere is this success more visible than in the 561 communities designated as All-America Cities since 1949.

Part II. Civic Muscle and Success Stories from the 500+ All-America Cities

“I have a very special reason for loving my community. My grandparents’ family was the first to move into Aberdeen Gardens. In addition to that I was born in Aberdeen. I’m celebrating my birthday for that community.”

Margaret Wilson, an 85-year-old Black resident of the Aberdeen neighborhood of Hampton, VA, spoke these words onstage in Denver, where she had traveled with 30 of her neighbors to make their case for the 2025 All-America City designation.

Following her “mic-drop” comments, tears and applause filled the conference hall.

Every year, cities and counties from throughout the U.S. compete for the honor of being designated as an All-America City. Communities submit applications to the National Civic League, which selects 20 finalists through an extensive review process. Each community sends a delegation of representatives to the Denver event to present their case for being designated to a jury of eleven national experts, which then names ten winners.

There is nothing more uplifting and patriotic than watching diverse groups of individuals present their case for why their community deserves to be recognized as an All-America City. Delegations sing, dance, and put on skits. Mayors dress up in costumes. Young people tell heartwarming stories about community programs that helped them. And long-time residents like Ms. Wilson tell about their love for their community.

What the 20 annual finalist communities have in common is civic muscle, the application of community capacity and relationships to address public matters. In reviewing the work of All-America Cities designated during the past 77 years, we have encountered five principles that build civic muscle, listed below and followed by descriptions that include examples from All-America Cities. These five principles are interrelated and overlapping, to some degree, and while the presence in a community of fewer than five may be sufficient for short-term success, all are necessary for long-term well-being.

- Ongoing work to build trust, belonging and a sense of community;
- Collaborative efforts to address important issues;
- Structures that accommodate and encourage citizen engagement;
- Public measurement to track outcomes for key indicators; and
- The use of inclusive engagement to combat disparities.

Principle 1: Build trust, belonging and a sense of community

One of the foundational keys to success for communities in using civic engagement to get results is having trust and a sense of belonging. Few people will engage in civic affairs and problem-solving without having trust in their local government and its decision-making processes.

Ever since the work of the National Civic League and partner organizations in the beginning of the 20th Century to replace local governments often plagued by corruption with nonpartisan leadership and professional city management, most people have trusted local government. Recent [poll numbers](#) indicate that only 37% of Americans trust the federal government to solve domestic problems, compared to trust for local government, which polled at 67%, a number that has stayed fairly [constant](#) over the years.

For Robert Putnam, trust is both a cause and effect of social capital, which he [says](#) “is the key to making democracy work.” Taking Putnam’s ideas one step further, writer Peter Block, [says](#) that social capital “is measured by how much we trust each other and how much we cooperate to make a place better.” “A community’s well-being,” he says, depends on its social capital,” and this social capital “is about acting on and valuing our interdependence and sense of belonging.”

Government transparency can go a long way toward building trust, and this is most often done through regular newsletters, reports, social media posts, and regular updates like those provided by the [Mayor’s Blog](#) in **Madison, WI**. Some cities, like **Columbus, OH**, have opened their datasets to the public, including for use in [hackathons](#), in which community members search city data for ways to improve services.

Beyond transparency, building trust can be especially important to engage communities with a trust deficit. This was the case for a project in **Southeastern San Diego**, the [Cardiac Disparities Project](#), whose focus was improving the cardiovascular health of African Americans through a partnership between community health agencies and faith organizations. Several Black churches that engaged in the program had been approached many times for similar efforts, and it was only through a lengthy trust-building process in which ministers were allowed to set their own goals and processes that more than 2,000 people agreed to participate in exercise and measurement programs.

A sense of belonging is also critical for civic involvement, says a [report](#) by Over Zero, which created a “Belonging Barometer.” Belonging, the report says, relates to an individual’s “positive emotional bonds with others” and “lays the foundation for thriving individuals and strong communities.” Factors that make up the Belonging Barometer include “being welcomed and included, perceiving that one is able to influence decision-making, feeling like an insider who understands how the environment works, and feeling comfortable expressing one’s opinions.”

A sense of belonging and community is often the product of a city’s success, enhanced by efforts like this [initiative](#) in **Dallas, TX**, to improve racial equity in policing and in **Roanoke, VA**, to [distribute](#) federal stimulus dollars in accordance with public input. Public events like the international festival in **Aurora, CO**, [Juneteenth Celebration](#) in Montgomery, AL, and [Pride Festival](#) in **Phoenix, AZ**, help community members feel a better sense of belonging, making them more likely to be active contributors to civic life.

Principle 2: Broad Collaboration to Address Key Issues

Collaboration is the norm, rather than the exception, in successful communities, with institutions, community members, and intermediaries working together not just on planning, but also delivery. Groups like the [Public Safety Collaborative](#) in **Newark**, [Clear Vision](#) in **Eau Claire, WI**, and [Community Action Network](#) in **Carlisle, PA**, bring organizations and community members together to identify issues, analyze trends, and focus resources on strategies that involve a wide array of actors in implementation.

Collaborative governance recognizes that government agencies are no longer the only—or even the primary – problem-solvers in most communities. The most effective approaches coordinate the efforts of nonprofits, businesses, faith communities, schools, universities, and citizens around shared priorities. This might involve partnership agreements that pool resources toward common goals, new financing structures that combine public, private, and philanthropic funding, or volunteer-driven efforts that help citizens contribute directly to public priorities like environmental conservation or neighborhood improvement.

While direct democracy in the form of citizen input and collaboration is powerful, intermediary organizations can help enlist, empower, and amplify the work of citizens. Such intermediaries include neighborhood associations, business groups, nonprofit organizations, churches and other faith-based organizations, civic associations, and identity-specific organizations.

Many collaborations focus on a specific goal, like **Tallahassee's** [TEMPO](#) program, a cross-sector initiative bringing businesses, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies together to provide better job connections for young people. Started in 2019 by a former high school principal, TEMPO provided over 2,100 kids, ages 16-24, with GED completion help, apprenticeships, and job placement services in its first five years.

Another example of an initiative with a single goal, but with a wider [variety](#) of strategies, is the work by **Edinburg, TX**, to reduce obesity. When a website ranked Edinburg's metro area as the overall third "Fattest City in America" and a subsequent study showed major problems with diabetes, obesity and behavioral health, the city worked with the county and community to create a variety of health and wellness programs, including free meals for kids and seniors, a 10K race and fun run, expansion of its parks and trails systems, eight low-cost specialty clinics, and a school-based health center.

A collaboration that was spurred by a local disaster, is the expansion of mental health services in **Longmont, CO**, which began after a flood in 2013 brought public attention to health disparities, including mental health. Following this disaster, a group of 50 community members formed a coalition called [Supporting Action for Mental Health](#), a collaborative effort of local community groups and organizations, faith communities, residents, and local government to raise awareness and address mental health issues in Longmont. Since that time, the collaboration has held mental health first aid trainings and expanded community mental health services, with a particular emphasis on the Spanish-speaking population.

Principle 3: Structures for Inclusive Engagement

Civic engagement is most effective when communities institutionalize the role of citizens by creating mechanisms, traditions, and expectations for collective work. Annual community input on city budgets, like the robust outreach [process](#) in **Philadelphia**, youth commissions with meaningful input like the [Youth Policy Task Force](#) in **Rochester, NY**, and programs like [Inclusive Dubuque](#) in Dubuque, IA, that welcome immigrants and other newcomers, fit this mold. City and county charters can be a good place to start, with principles on equity and engagement as seen in the [charter](#) for **Decatur, GA**, and advisory commissions with clout, like the [Public Safety Coordinating Council](#) in **Multnomah County, OR**.

Such structures create a strong civic infrastructure, sometimes called civic capacity or civic capital. The [Aspen Institute lists](#) three “keystones for civic infrastructure, (1) engaging all sectors; (2) enlisting all voices; and (3) building vertical and horizontal thoroughfares for information and practice exchange.” The National Civic League’s [Civic Index](#) contains similar elements, including authentic communication and shared vision and values.

Most importantly, each sector of a community needs the capacity to be effective and relationships with other sectors necessary for collaborative problem-solving. Such is the case in **New Haven, CT**, in which a researcher at Yale University stepped forward in 1968 to help address failing performance in local schools by creating a [collaborative governance model](#) for the district that harnessed parents, professionals and the community featuring multi-sector committees to oversee a [child development](#) model at each school. Similarly, the city government has created [Community Management Teams](#) for 12 city regions in which city staff work with community members for the benefit of each neighborhood.

Neighborhood-based services also provide the foundation for civic engagement in **Ft. Wayne, IN**, where community-oriented policing that started in 1988 led to “community-oriented government” five years later. This approach continues today, with 227 organized neighborhood associations in which city planners are [embedded](#) via coffee shops, walks, and markets. The [FORT-ify](#) program provides neighborhood workshops, funding and branding support, and [Engage Fort Wayne](#) serves as a digital hub for resident input on city projects, policies, and updates, with a goal of accessible participation for all residents.

A third example of a city with a strong civic infrastructure is **Decatur, GA**, which regularly seeks resident input on budgets, the city’s charter, and other programs. A strategic planning exercise involving hundreds of people in 2015 resulted in the creation of a program called Better Together that resulted in a [Better Together Community Action Plan](#), to improve equity and unity, and nonprofit groups like [Legacy Decatur](#), help the city oversee its strategic plan and manage community celebrations and other resources.

Principle 4: Measurement

In communities with long-term success, measurable progress is the stated goal of civic engagement, with indicators that are tracked in a public manner. In the 1992 book, [Reinventing Government](#), authors David Osborne and Ted Gaebler promote “entrepreneurial,” results-oriented government to better serve the public. In a collective governance environment that

harnesses the power of community, results can build trust, civic pride, and motivation for further engagement and funding.

The most successful strategies for achieving concrete outcomes engage citizens directly in measuring progress, analyzing data, and advocating for evidence-based solutions. Examples include tools for measuring perceptions of engagement opportunities, like the League's [civic engagement scorecard](#), citizen-led measurement programs that generate data about community conditions, and public dashboards that make progress transparent to everyone.

An example of citizen involvement in measurement is [SA2020](#), in which **San Antonio** brought together over 133 nonprofit organizations, seven major corporations and others to gather input from thousands of citizens, creating over 61 indicators on topics like teen pregnancy and third-grade reading, with progress then tracked by a nonprofit group that was formed for that purpose. Ten years after the project's indicators were set, 70% of the goals were trending in a positive direction, including a drop in teen pregnancies six years before its 2020 goal.

Somerville, MA, has also used data to measure performance and gather community input, beginning with a program called SomerStat in 2007 and with regularly "ResiStat ward meetings.

SomerStat was based loosely on New York City's Compstat program as a way of collecting and reporting detailed crime data. Later, other questions were added to SomerStat, including a biannual [Happiness Survey](#). Regular "[City Hall Community Meetings](#)" continue as a means of gathering resident input on crime data and city matters.

A city with a measurement program specific to one topic is **Lakewood, CO**, which in 2011 started a [Sustainable Neighborhoods Program \(SNP\)](#), in which the residents of eight participating neighborhoods generate ideas for improving sustainability, health and wellness, and city staff assign metrics to quantify the actual improvements to be expected from the program in terms of greenhouse gas reductions or health benefits. Neighborhoods that reach numeric goals are then granted certification as an Outstanding Sustainable Neighborhood.

Principle 5. Inclusive Engagement to Address Disparities

Efforts to correct disparities are a strong contributor to well-being for the whole community. Engagement and measurement systems that include a focus not only on addressing disparities, but also on involving populations that are often underrepresented in designing and implementing this work are more likely to generate community-wide success.

In [The Sum of Us](#), author Heather McGhee discusses the benefits to the full community of work to combat racism and attain equity. Using the example of public swimming pools, McGhee traces the harm that came to all community residents when cities closed pools in the late 1950s and early 1960s in response to a court requirement for integration. More generally, communities that discriminated against Black people by limiting public services disadvantaged their entire populations, she says.

This dual focus on improving overall outcomes and addressing equity was apparent in **Oakland and Alameda County, CA**, which [became](#) one of the nation's biggest success stories in

minimizing overall mortality from COVID 19 by working with dozens of community-based organizations to focus services on low-income people of color and the homeless. “We used a coalition model,” said one of the community leaders, “using community-based organizations so that people felt more comfortable, felt good coming, and felt like ‘I’m welcome here.’”

A community that has focused often on improving equity is **Roanoke, VA**, where an [Equity and Empowerment Advisory Board](#) (EEAB) was created under City Plan 2040, to promote equity, inclusion, and opportunity while addressing historic issues like poverty and segregation. Through community engagement and advocacy—such as renaming public spaces and supporting zoning reforms—the EEAB fosters dialogue between residents and officials, empowering citizens to shape a diverse and equitable future.

The [Sustainable Workforce Initiatives](#) in **Memphis, TN**, address racial wealth gaps between Black and White households, while at the same time promoting sustainability. The city and other partners opened a Moore Tech facility to train 30 technicians annually for well-paying green jobs and launched the BDC Business Hub in Binghampton, which recycles LED streetlights, provides career and financial training, and has hired over 90 people since 2021.

Part III: Civic Muscle Builders: Communities with a Culture of Civic Engagement

Here are three communities that exhibit the five principles of civic muscle described above, each of which has won the All-America City award multiple times.

Hampton, VA

Hampton, Virginia, has long been a recognized leader in civic engagement, particularly in the areas of budgeting, education, and resilience. Civic engagement is so embedded in city problem-solving that it has been called the “Hampton Way” and is now widely-known in public administration circles.

Following neighborhood opposition to a proposed road development in the 1980’s, city manager Robert O’Neill created a Neighborhood Office with skilled facilitators to help neighborhoods create plans and resolve problems. One of those problems was residents’ desire for a community center in Northampton, which O’Neill satisfied by providing the building and relying on neighborhood volunteers to staff it.

Other Hampton programs include the city’s annual budget engagement process, [I Value](#), begun in 2010 when budget cuts were needed in the face of community opposition. To enhance school performance, the city works closely with its school district, whose [motto](#) is “One Community, One Transformation,” and a set of academies that link young people to the workforce, resulting in enhanced graduation rates and fewer dropouts. The police department [works closely](#) with schools on school safety and to help address the mental health needs of students.

Climate resilience is a high priority for the city. In 2015, the city launched the "Dutch Dialogues," adopting [green infrastructure](#) techniques from Holland centered on a "Living with Water" strategy that engages residents in preserving wetlands and waterways. As part of its

work to improve equity, the city has devoted considerable efforts in this project to aiding low-income communities that have suffered economically because of frequent flooding.

Seattle, WA

A five-time winner of the All-America City award, Seattle has a strong culture of civic engagement that includes active neighborhood organizations, civic associations, and business groups. The city has prioritized equity and accommodation of diverse populations, creating programs to address disparities, affordability, and gentrification.

Seattle's civic associations include the [Seattle City Club](#), a group that sponsors regular forums, including one in the days immediately after the 2024 election to help participants process the election results and get inspired to get involved in their community. One of the biggest players is the [Seattle Foundation](#), which hosts a variety of programs to improve equity and civic infrastructure, including [Civic Commons](#), which produces a shared prosperity scorecard for measuring well-being, We Belong Here, which asks residents to sign a Belonging Compact, and a Civic Participation Impact Strategy to facilitate civic engagement through capacity-building grants and programs.

The City of Seattle has created a variety of programs to engage community members and to improve equity. The [Department of Neighborhoods](#) works with an extensive set of neighborhood associations, regularly updating neighborhood plans and including provisions to improve housing equity. To ensure that the city's engagement strategies are inclusive, the city contracts with 31 residents from diverse cultural backgrounds and who speak 23 languages to serve as Community Liaisons, working side-by-side with city equity and engagement staff.

Dubuque, IA

Another five-time All-America City, Dubuque has grown in diversity and opportunity over the past several decades, along with its commitment to self-improvement. When the city's economy fell in the 1980's, as large manufacturing companies like John Deere and the Dubuque packing plant cut operations, community leaders from both the public and private sectors rallied to cultivate [community development efforts](#) focused on rebuilding neighborhoods, civic engagement, and redeveloping the city's historic downtown area. These practices are still in place today and make Dubuque the hallmark of citizen-motivated growth it is today.

A leader in this effort was the [Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque](#), founded in 2001 by the current President and CEO, Nancy Van Milligen. Community-centered programs funded by the Foundation include Every Child Reads, Community Heart and Soul, a community development model used to empower rural residents to use their community assets, and [Inclusive Dubuque](#), a network of diverse partners working to foster a culture of inclusion, social justice, and equity. Inclusive Dubuque conducts a variety of community initiatives, one of which was holding racial healing workshops following the murder of George Floyd in 2020.

The City of Dubuque, whose city manager, Mike Van Milligen, Nancy's husband, has served in that position for 33 years, has made significant investments in both physical and civic infrastructure, including community development and leadership programs, youth engagement programs, and resilience initiatives like [Sustainable Dubuque](#), a program that engages

community members to develop and help implement efforts to address critical environmental, ecological, and economic prosperity issues.

All-America Cities 2026 & Beyond: Ensuring a Strong Future for Democracy

The theme for the 2026 All-America City Award is *America at 250: Strengthening Civic Health and Building Trust*, a reflection on America's 250 years as a representative democracy and the importance of healthy communities built through civic muscle and trust. As the awards program enters its eighth decade, it becomes ever more important to show that democracy can get results and that communities that engage their residents in a meaningful way can create long-term well-being.

To continue their record of success in the face of problems that are increasingly complex and a political world that is increasingly polarized, All-America Cities are constantly adjusting their strategies, using methods such as 1) innovations in democracy, like civic assemblies and participatory budgeting, and initiatives to reform elections, like ranked-choice voting; 2) new technologies, like the use of artificial intelligence to track and respond to public sentiment, online surveys, blogs, digital town meetings, and targeted outreach to underrepresented populations; and 3) effective regional governance models and informal partnerships among communities and levels of government to address problems that cross political boundaries and lines of authority.

Most importantly, though, is the continued faith in the power of civic muscle in tackling problems that government alone cannot solve. This is the power of an All-America City.

Mike McGrath, Editor, National Civic Review, also contributed to this article.

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