



Starting or Re-Starting a Neighborhood Organization

A How-To Guide

Starting or re-starting a neighborhood organization can be a manageable task with a small committee of dedicated neighbors. Together, you can reach out to your neighbors, get a handle on key issues, and get organized.

Start-up Committee

Anyone interested in starting or restarting a neighborhood organization should seriously consider forming a Start-up Committee to lay the groundwork for making key organizational decisions at community-wide meetings. Among the questions to consider:

- Is the committee small enough to be effective and large enough to get things done?
- Is the committee representative of neighborhood demographics? Who's missing? Which areas of the neighborhood are under-represented?

If your Start-up Committee is representative of the neighborhood, your organization is more likely to be inclusive as well, and that is a fundamental foundation for successful neighborhood organizing.

- Are you on the same page? Have you shared with each other why you want to start a neighborhood organization? Where does each person's self-interest coincide with community interest?
- Who's in charge of calling meetings and keeping everyone on task?
- Is everyone on the committee volunteering to help?
If just one or two people shoulder the load, your organization will start off on the wrong foot.
- What is your plan for reaching out to neighbors?

It is very helpful if not crucial to know: a) who else in the neighborhood is willing to pitch in and b) what your neighbors want from an organization. These two items can be discovered from the first meeting and/or through door-to-door visitation.

See: "[Door-to-Door Neighborhood Outreach](#)"

- Are you prepared to discuss the key questions?
There are seven key start-up decisions that should be voted on by residents at neighborhood-wide meetings, but it can be very helpful for the Start-up Committee to have researched, be prepared to discuss, and even make recommendations about those key issues (see below).

Bring in Residents on the Ground Floor

When your Start-up Committee calls your first community-wide meeting, what will be on the agenda?

- Will the committee have made all the key decisions before that meeting starts?
- Or will the entire neighborhood have a hand in creating the organization?

The only way the neighborhood will feel “ownership” in the organization is to give everyone a chance to make suggestions, debate the pros and cons, and vote on each key decision. This will set the stage for a strong neighborhood organization well into the future.

Decisions can be made at a general meeting with a highly participatory process. For example, at a general meeting, you could ask everyone to break up into groups of three and write a mission statement. Then get back together to share the results. This can be a great way to see everyone’s vision and hopes for the organization.

The First All-Neighborhood Meeting

At some point, the Start-up Committee will be ready to call a meeting of all neighborhood residents within boundaries the committee has identified.

- Set date, time and place well in advance.
- Visit the venue in advance, checking on accessibility, ability to set chairs up in a circle, parking, etc.
- Logistics: name tags, sign-in sheet, babysitting, refreshments, signage, etc.
- Spend at least two hours planning the agenda & who does what.
- Plan for a one-hour meeting — or maximum 1.5 hours.
- Discuss presentation of and vote on the key decision points.
- Do not allow one person to be the only speaker. Plan for a variety of speakers, perhaps a different neighbor to introduce each of the major decision points.
- Plan for the Future: Secure place, date & time for the next meeting.
- Leaflet the entire neighborhood / Follow up with phone calls.

See: [“Tips on Leading Successful Neighborhood Meetings”](#)

Key Decisions

The Office of Neighborhoods is a strong advocate for inclusivity, transparency, and collaborative decision-making when it comes to starting, re-starting and operating neighborhood organizations. With leadership from the Start-up Committee, your neighbors can consider, discuss and make the following decisions in a way that will help ensure their “ownership” and commitment to your organization.

It may easily take more than one neighborhood-wide meeting to make the following seven basic decisions for new or newly revived groups.

1) Should We Form a Neighborhood Organization?

To present this question for a vote, the Start-up Committee should be enthusiastic about forming the organization. Get everyone involved by asking them to brainstorm the benefits of getting organized. Put their answers on a large sheet of paper in front of the room. The accumulated list of reasons will be impressive.

See: "[Why Start a Neighborhood Organization?](#)"

2) What Are Our Boundaries?

To be recognized by the city's Office of Neighborhoods, a neighborhood organization must define its boundaries. Boundaries need to be defined precisely: Do you include residences on both sides of Maple or just the south side?

First, make sure your neighborhood, as you define it, does not overlap an existing organized neighborhood. To erase all doubt, do all three of these:

- 1) Visit the Neighborhood Groups map on KGIS:
<http://www.kgis.org/maps/neighborhoods.html>
- 2) Contact the neighborhood groups around you.
- 3) Check with the Office of Neighborhoods.

Second, if your boundaries do overlap those of an existing neighborhood group, you must either redefine your boundary lines or reach agreement with the other group to "share" the territory. If no agreement can be reached, check with the OON.

How large or small should your neighborhood be? This is up to you and your neighbors. But keep these points in mind:

- You want to be large enough to attract a critical mass of residents willing to participate — but small enough to be able to distribute fliers and newsletters door to door.
- If you (or a committee of block captains) cannot handle door-to-door distribution, then you will have a difficult time staying in touch with the residents you claim to represent.
- Typical boundaries may be determined by roads or natural features along the border of the neighborhood. A review of the city map and a tour around the area may reveal logical boundaries for a manageable sized area.

- Don't forget to consider the purpose of your organization when determining the boundaries; the general goals of your organization may have an effect on how large or how small a group you would like to have.
- Once boundaries have been determined, a complete list of residents and property owners should be obtained. The list should be kept current in order to allow every neighbor to become involved. To get a complete list, you may need to go door-to-door or check with the city.

3) What Do We Call Ourselves?

Names are important. If you're the Maple Avenue Community Association, how will you attract residents from Elm Avenue?

Try to pick a name that all residents can identify with. You might start by asking folks how they respond when someone asks, "What neighborhood do you live in?"

Having trouble finding the right name? Consider a contest to generate names and then put the names up for a vote at a neighborhood-wide meeting. Look at original subdivision and historical names for your neighborhood on www.kgjis.org.

Check with the Office of Neighborhoods to make sure your name is not already taken.

See: "[What's in a Name: Tips for Naming Your Neighborhood Group](#)"

4) Why Are We Here?

By engaging folks in crafting and/or approving a **mission statement**, you can make sure everyone actually agrees on the purpose of the organization.

Keep your mission statement short enough to remember when you're recruiting members — and general enough to withstand the test of time.

See: "[Sample Mission Statements](#)"

5) Who Can Be a Member? Who Can Vote?

What is the basis for membership?

Are annual dues required... or are all residents members by virtue of living within your boundaries?

If you charge dues, are they set low enough so that economically stressed families can participate?

Will you include non-resident owners of businesses and properties in the neighborhood? Can they vote and influence elections and key decisions?

Will you include renters? It is your choice, but there are many good reasons to include renters.

See: "[Include Renters in Your Neighborhood Organization](#)"

6) Who Will Be Our Interim Leaders?

Transparency and access to decision making are very important elements in a successful neighborhood organization. At your first meeting, you may wish to ask the neighborhood residents to:

- Elect a leadership team to lead the organization until bylaws are adopted and/or formal elections are held. This could end up being the start-up committee, but perhaps not!
The leadership team may wish to identify officers or define roles.
- Announce how you will handle money and report receipts and expenditures to the residents.
- Elect a committee to work on bylaws and identify the chair.
- Elect other committees and chairs as you see fit, e.g. hospitality, clean-up, neighborhood watch, etc. But don't take on too much at once. Better to get one or two things accomplished early on rather than spread yourselves too thin!

Also, you may wish to announce when the leadership team will meet and invite any resident to attend if they like. This contributes to the atmosphere of openness and transparency you want to create.

7) When Is Our Next Meeting? How Often Will We Meet?

- Don't lose your momentum. Announce the date, time and place of your next neighborhood meeting.
- You may wish to suggest and get approval for a regular meeting date, time and place.

For Further Assistance

Contact the Office of Neighborhoods at 865-215-3232.