

How to Start a Neighborhood Association

Of course, neighborhood associations are nothing new. But the current moment is a unique time to begin one.

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So you're thinking about creating a neighborhood association. Shared crises have frequently galvanized community action, in formal and informal ways, and perhaps you'd like to corral that energy into organizing within your own area. These days, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, mutual aid networks have been incubated on Slack and ad hoc associations cultivated on the neighborhood social network Nextdoor — which also has the benefit of helping abate isolation.

Of course, neighborhood associations are nothing new. As one of the countless examples: Between 1911 and 1912, the teacher and organizer Ora Brown Stokes established the Richmond Neighborhood Association, in Richmond, Va., partly in response to the dearth of social services available to black working mothers in her community. At its inception, it had 13 members and they met in her home; by 1921, membership had ballooned to more than 1,400. But it's important to note that, at the same time, neighborhood-level organizing has also been weaponized to reinforce existing power structures: In 1922, white residents of Brooklyn's Bed-Stuy and Clinton Hill neighborhoods created the Gates Avenue Association to oppose black people moving into their neighborhood.

“For a lot of communities, these issues that arise — whether it's the pandemic, whether it's fighting for racial justice — these are not sudden issues,” said Arif Ullah, the director of projects for the Citizens Committee for New York City, which helps facilitate neighborhood associations in underserved communities. He has noticed a prevalence of neighborhood associations in areas with less access to municipal resources: “people banding together to assert their rights, to work toward justice,” he said.

Here is some framework for cultivating an inclusive, deliberate association aimed at empowering residents and improving your neighborhood for everyone.

Determine the parameters of your neighborhood, and your neighborhood association.

The first step is to figure out if your area — be it your block, set of streets or larger region within a town or city — already has something going. Bed-Stuy, for example, is dotted with block associations. If one doesn't already exist, it's time to define the geographic parameters of your neighborhood — ensuring that area represents a socioeconomically and racially diverse cross-section of your community.

Reach out to neighbors.

When Keith Kahn-Harris, a writer and sociologist, observed the impending lockdown because of the coronavirus in his London neighborhood, he started to slip letters through the letter boxes of some 30 or 40 neighbors on his road. His text laid out a list of suggestions for how residents might be able to help each other out by exchanging valuable resources and checking in on older residents should workplaces, businesses and schools be forced to close.

The letter, which has since been widely shared via Google docs (under the polite name “A Neighborly Invitation Regarding Coronavirus”), presents a good template for community outreach, especially in this time of social distancing. “We weren't really rooted in this particular road, despite having lived here a long time,” Mr. Kahn-Harris said, but “in the lockdown, we would come to value hyperlocal sources of support.”

According to Mr. Ullah, getting in touch with neighbors — going door to door, setting up a table or meeting people on your or their stoop — is the most crucial initial step in making a neighborhood association. “Basically, what you're doing is expressing that you have a commitment to your block, to your neighborhood,” he said. But it's not just about manifesting your own concerns and rallying people around your ideas; it's about opening up a dialogue and assessing what members of the wider neighborhood are thinking about. Generating these relationships is fundamental to any successful community organization.

Create a central planning group and get planning.

Your initial outreach should also give you a good sense of who's most excited about getting involved in the community — and who has the time. (After all, neighborhood organizers are largely volunteers, making it happen in time carved out from day jobs and family duties.) Those people are your new planning committee, with whom you'll make priorities for your agenda — just one or two items, to start.

Some neighborhood associations muster around particular issues, like cleaning up Superfund sites, food security, housing, education or over-policing. Others handle more general community concerns, like development and beautification. Mutual aid and community emergency response are also frequently built into neighborhood associations. Whatever the issue, this work has been done *somewhere* before; devising a neighborhood association is, in part, a matter of shaping an existing blueprint (for example, the organizing guide published by the Citizens Committee) to your needs.

Establish modes of communication.

When considering how members of your neighborhood association will stay in touch, it's helpful to look to networks that already exist. Communication lines that have been built up in response to the pandemic — Slack hubs or WhatsApp threads offering mutual aid, for example — likely have robust presences. Bed-Stuy Strong, a mutual aid group founded in March with upward of 3,500 members, recently published tips for creating a neighborhood-wide Slack (search for “How To Make A Slack Neighborhood Hub During COVID-19”). “When I pictured a WhatsApp group with a few thousand people on it, it just seemed so unbearably noisy. People's needs might get lost,” said Sarah Thankam Mathews, the group's organizer. Slack is easy to use and allows members to organize separate channels around specific issues or locations. “Bed-Stuy is a really big neighborhood; it's allowed for a little bit of segmentation,” Ms. Mathews said.

But some members of your network might not have access to or be fluent in email or text; for that reason, having multiple methods of keeping in touch, and enacting a plan for who will keep everyone in the loop and how, can be helpful. “How do you reach the elderly and the homebound?” said Healy Chait, one of the organizers of the mutual aid group Invisible Hands. “It's important not to forget you're dealing with real people on the other end.”

You might consider clearly outlining purposes, boundaries and etiquette for your group chats — since ListServes sometimes go awry and the Best of Nextdoor Twitter account has become notorious.

Solicit additional feedback from your community.

Now that you've whittled down your agenda to a few shared priorities, it's time to take it back out to the community to solicit additional feedback, which ensures people's concerns are addressed and keeps the process transparent. While social distancing is in place, this can take the form of flyers and emails, or even safely going door-to-door. And, as recommended by the Idaho-based nonprofit PocatelloWorks, you might also consider how your neighborhood association fits into its wider region or into a network of other neighborhood associations. In Bed-Stuy, for example, the Bed-Stuy Works Alliance is a coalition of block associations throughout the neighborhood; in Red Hook, Brooklyn, the nonprofit Resilient Red Hook works with other organizations in the community to advocate for emergency and climate change preparedness.

After amassing contact information for the lower half of his road, Mr. Kahn-Harris consolidated his WhatsApp group with that of the upper half of the road, making a street-wide chat. Then, someone else set up a WhatsApp group with representatives from each of a cluster of such street groups. “It built up pretty organically,” he said.

Make a plan for how you'll accomplish goals, and dole out roles accordingly.

The Citizens Committee has recommended “as little structure as possible — just enough to get the work done”; too much deliberating about structure can detract from actually accomplishing anything. Whatever it looks like, be deliberate about your leadership structure instead of allowing people to simply fall into roles. Otherwise, Mr. Ullah explained, the neighborhood association risks unintentionally replicating external power structures it intends to avoid.

Inevitably, there will be turnover — which can ultimately strengthen your neighborhood association. “In all sorts of communities, volunteer communities in particular, they're often dependent on a small number of people with enormous energy, and people burn out,” Mr. Kahn-Harris said, adding it's crucial to maintain a balance of new and veteran organizers.

Plan regular meetings — and make time for social things, too.

Since meeting spaces should be accessible to the majority of your members, it's best to seek out public locations — especially community-oriented spots like parks, libraries or, if they permit it, local businesses. Regular calls and email communications

help keep members connected remotely, too — especially while, as is the case right now, in-person meetings aren't possible.

These meetings should also be matched with action, and even a bit of fun. "Successful and effective neighborhood associations share appreciation for the folks who are doing the work, and allow time for social gatherings," Mr. Ullah said. "It's not just meeting, it's not just the work — there is an opportunity for people to socialize, to celebrate."

Finally: Make it official.

Neighborhood associations themselves can be formal, registered nonprofits, or informal organizations. You may also request that members pay dues. Though not essential, there are certain advantages to formalizing a neighborhood association, like through 501(c)(3) status or incorporation, which impose some structure and establish legitimacy.

"It's easier, in some ways, to establish yourself as a group that is there for the long haul, a group that has a vested interest in a neighborhood or certain policies that impact that neighborhood," said Lara Birnback, the executive director of the Brooklyn Heights Association, New York City's oldest neighborhood association. Whether or not you seek official status, she added, it's important to "gain relationships with elected officials and city agencies and others with whom you need to interact in order to get the work done and make your case." The Brooklyn Heights Association, for example, has held candidate forums and invited elected officials to town halls and the organization's annual meeting.

Whatever it looks like, "don't talk yourself out of doing the thing before you've even done it," said Simone Policano, another organizer for Invisible Hands. "Don't feel like you have to hold yourself to the way it's been done before. We're in an unprecedented time."

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