

Community Engagement Chat: Building Community through Community Cleanups

Summertime steered the Engagement Chat to community cleanups. These events have powerful impact on the entire neighborhood and a positive impact on the volunteers themselves and while opportunities are broad, this conversation focused specifically on two subjects: cemetery cleanups and fostering longevity.

Cemetery Cleanups: Cemetery cleanups are a unique and meaningful activity that not only create a well-cared for space for beloved friends and family but also serves as a local history lesson and place of learning. When organizers from Mid City Redevelopment Alliance initiated the first cleanup at a local cemetery, they did not know the impact it would have. Organizers were hoping for about 30 volunteers but instead had over 100 people show up on that first day. The event was so well received it has become a quarterly event with different teams joining from local businesses and neighborhood groups to help. Sometimes individuals or small groups adopt a specific gravesite while others focus on overall routine maintenance. Families and neighbors have found working together in this space to be a meaningful bonding experience. Below are some takeaways from our conversation:

- Cemeteries are a place of reverence and respect and offer a special opportunity to unite volunteers who care about the community.
- Cemeteries are full of local history and lore, which serves as a nice reminder for residents who are new to the community as well as those who have lived there their whole lives. Local stories can help revive important histories and help build a community culture and persona.
- Neighborhood residents, city government, law enforcement, and religious communities all see the benefit of improving conditions at a local cemetery. Even larger companies and organizations want to join which can lead to longer term relationships for advocacy and support.
- Youth groups are valuable partners and may see this as a special opportunity to not only learn about local history and support their neighbors, but have a chance learn landscaping skills, which easily translates to a career development service.
- The unique bonding experience that comes from working together at a cemetery cleanup often creates enduring relationships, which can serve as a bridge to other projects and meaningful relationships. Volunteers often find themselves working together on other projects or pockets in the community.

Building Longevity: Some community cleanup events endure and those that have longevity, for example those that have been going for 20 or 30 years or longer, take time to establish but once they are in place, they take on a life of their own. Maintenance and management are always a necessity but when community ownership takes place, it becomes a force behind its success. These larger and longer-term events are much more than a 'community cleanup,' they build relationships, help with crime reduction, help local businesses be more successful, and increase property values. Here are some strategies to foster longevity with your community event:

- Partner with a large organization or company. NeighborWorks Great Falls began its community cleanup by collaborating with a local Air Force base, which created a captive audience and a large pool of volunteers. They were able to accomplish a great deal due to the sheer number of helpers, which inspired others to get involved. Generally speaking, people want to get involved in an event that has clear and significant outcomes.
- Partnerships are key. Reach out to school groups, scout troops, employment and career services, local military bases, universities, churches, parks and recreation departments, police forces, and so on.

- Create a clear map of locations and include tasks and timelines with who will help and what they need to do to get the job done.
- Teach participants how to recruit others. Use a +1 strategy or social media give away for those who recruit others.
- Connect with community leaders who can help identify community needs as well as helpers.

Tips for Success

- Give people an easy way to connect and plug in
- Make it simple
- Celebrate and give gratitude
- Reach out to community leaders
- Build partners – this is crucial
- Create a living history through storytelling, field trips and theater events
- Use events as a foundation for social media sharing and neighborhood news
- Have a consistent date or time of year – people will look forward to and expect it
- Don't duplicate programs, explore what already exists and build a collaborative
- Provide equipment and trash pickup so it is easy to participate.
- Know your goal and be open to other outcomes
- Let it grow but also have a plan for growth
- Establish a point of contact for each volunteer group and make a note of it
- Name it! A clever name will help with recruitment and recall