



# VOLUNTEER PARTNERSHIPS IN LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES

FROM THE FAITH INITIATIVE OF THE POINTS OF LIGHT FOUNDATION  
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*For faith-based organizations (FBOs), partnerships with “tough” communities—communities that are generally under-resourced or low-income—are essentially similar to other partnerships. The basic tenets of effective partnerships, such as managing the relationship, managing the work, developing a common understanding, still hold true.*

*However, FBO partnerships with tough communities that focus on community mobilization, empowering local people to take ownership of community issues, and finding sustainable solutions also have some distinct differences from standard partnerships. These partnerships call for strategies that address the particular conditions of the community and the needs of the people.*

## EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

**The following tips can be helpful in identifying essential strategies for effective partnerships with tough communities:**

### ■ Understand the Language

Learning the language and understanding the nature and history of volunteering in the community is an important aspect of developing a successful partnership with a tough community.

Volunteers are abundant in tough neighborhoods and often have a long history of helping, but residents may not refer to themselves as volunteers. Terms such as *helping out*, *giving back*, or *neighboring* are often used instead of “volunteering”.

The language and history of volunteering takes on an additional significance when considering the increasing diversity in America’s under-resourced neighborhoods. Outside organizations that seek to work in the community have to be intentional about their efforts to bridge the language and culture gaps that may exist.

FBOs that seek to partner with tough communities also need to be aware of the terms they use to describe the communities in question. Terms such as “distressed” and “blighted” can convey a negative perception and be disempowering. Without getting wrapped up in semantics, using terms like “tough” or “under-resourced” may be a way to appropriately deal with the issue of language.

### ■ Empower the Communities

For volunteer efforts to be sustained and the program implemented effectively, residents have to own the issues and solutions and must witness the benefit of their involvement in solving their communities’ social problems.

Too often, charitable volunteering entails individuals or organizations “parachuting” into a tough community to rescue the residents. This model may address some immediate problems, but unless residents are empowered, the efforts will likely be short lived and unsustainable. FBOs may be wise to look into partnerships with other faith-based organizations because they have often already gained credibility and developed strong networks within tough communities.

Community members should be involved in all the processes that are part of working for change. Residents should define the problems, set the priorities, develop the plans, make the decisions and implement the final plan. In this model of empowering the local community to help themselves, a FBO can become a catalyst and a partner, leveraging its monetary, human, and other resources to support community efforts.

## ■ Cultivate Skills and Talents

Residents of underserved communities may feel as though they have no talents or skills to bring to the table. FBOs should therefore be intentional in helping to identify and cultivate the gifts and talents of local residents. Translating these skills and talents into important assets often means showing the connection between a project's success and the residents' contributions.

## ■ Strengthen Existing Leadership

Cultivating existing leadership is fundamental to working with tough communities. Part of identifying and developing local leadership is recognizing different leadership styles and being cognizant of a community's unique cultural context.

Strengthening the internal capacity of community members to lead and engage in community activities translates to sustainable community efforts. Fostering and supporting new leadership is also vital for empowering the community. Local leaders help build community trust and ensure that the local perspectives and experiences are considered and understood by outside organizations that seek to help the community.

## ■ Acknowledge that Volunteering is an Exchange

It is important for FBOs to understand that it is okay to receive something in exchange for volunteering and that volunteering is fundamentally an exchange. Receiving something tangible in exchange for the time, talents, and efforts they contribute toward bettering their communities can make volunteering more attractive and feasible for residents.

Volunteers need to be rewarded for their contributions in ways that make sense to them. In tough communities, appropriate rewards could include meals, services such as tutoring, childcare subsidies, and job opportunities.

## ■ Ensure Community Readiness

Ensuring community readiness to partner with outside agencies and engaging community members takes time. Building relationships, developing a common understanding of problems, prioritizing issues, organizing citizens, and developing committed and able leadership all require patience and flexibility.

Communities sometimes need help resolving conflicts or problems that are preventing residents' involvement. FBOs can begin to develop a partnership based on mutual respect and trust by acknowledging the challenges faced by residents of tough communities and by adopting strategies to address those challenges.

## ■ Bear in Mind the Nature of Faith-Based Groups

FBOs can have advantages and disadvantages in tough communities. Religion often plays an important role in the lives of many tough community residents, and FBOs can find particular favor within these communities. On the other hand, other tough community residents may be wary of FBOs if they believe they must prescribe to certain faith beliefs in order to benefit from the FBO's services. FBOs should remember that their religious activities can sometimes be attractive and other times be culturally sensitive. It is helpful to be flexible enough to engage all types of tough community residents.

**Working together offers all involved a chance to decrease the stereotypes and prejudices that contribute to the isolation and disconnection of low-income communities. As our population continues to diversify, it will be particularly important for nonprofits, government, businesses, and traditional volunteer organizations to build partnerships across neighborhoods, cultures, and economic strata in order to engage and serve members of all communities.**