

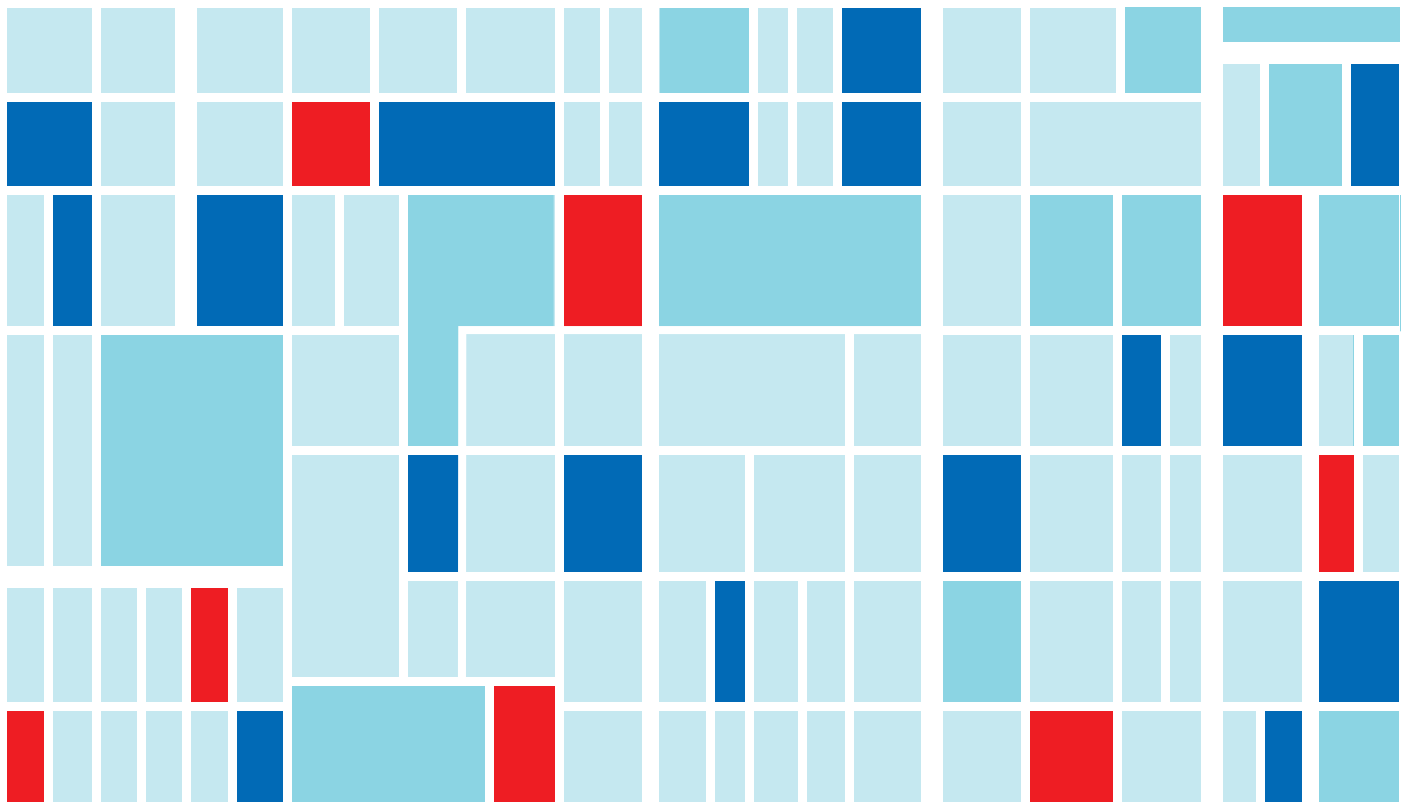
# LOVE YOUR BLOCK

A Cities of Service Blueprint



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**Love Your Block®** is a tested, high-impact service strategy in which city leaders engage community members in revitalizing their neighborhoods, one block at a time.



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## ABOUT THE PROGRAM

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Love your Block is a high-impact service strategy that connects city leaders with community residents to help revitalize their neighborhoods one block at a time. Typically, city officials provide small grants that support volunteer-fueled solutions developed by the community. Whether turning vacant lots into community gardens, removing graffiti, or helping elderly neighbors with simple home repairs that allow them to keep their homes, citizen volunteers are making their neighborhoods — and their cities — better places to live.

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## IMPACT

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A study by Urban Institute found that Love Your Block helps forge strong connections between city leaders and citizens and drives collective action by neighborhood residents. Read the full study at [citiesofservice.org](http://citiesofservice.org).

Since 2009, Cities of Service has helped dozens of cities implement Love Your Block. More than 9,000 community members have revitalized more than 2,200 blocks, including removing 5.6 million pounds of trash, creating 900 art displays, cleaning 60,000 square feet of graffiti, repairing over 70,000 square feet of community space, and maintaining over 730,000 square feet of public space.

The impact of Love Your Block extends beyond the removal of litter or newly painted buildings. It also improves the quality of life for city residents. Engaged communities are far less likely to let their neighborhoods fall into blighted conditions and can act as a powerful force in preventing crime and other negative behaviors. Love Your Block projects also empower participants and instill community ownership of public spaces. This further motivates citizens to pursue new neighborhood revitalization projects, even after the Love Your Block project has ended. Moreover, participation in Love Your Block forges relationships and builds trust between city officials and neighborhood leaders, leading to greater resilience and better long-term economic and social outcomes for city residents.



## HOW IT WORKS

For Love Your Block to be successful, the initiative must be led by the city. The program is most effective when it includes the following steps:

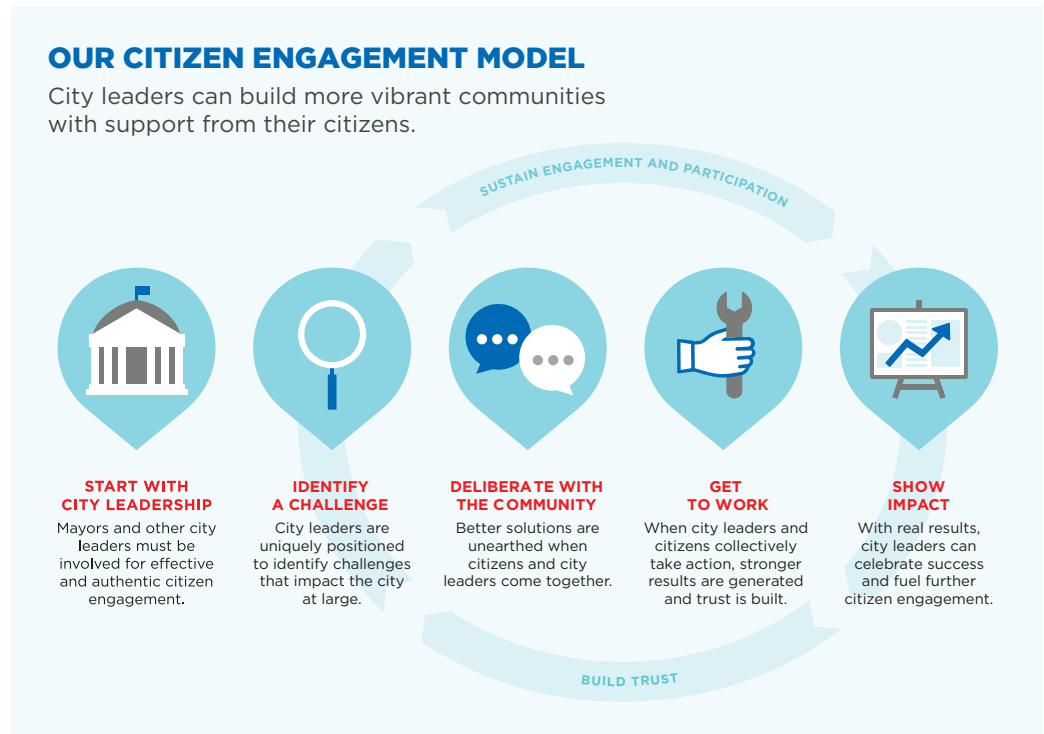
1. Identify a pressing public problem the city hopes to address with the energy and commitment of resident volunteers.
2. Engage local residents and other community stakeholders, including city agencies, to discuss the problem and identify possible solutions.
3. Design the initiative with input from the community.
4. Coordinate city services that can complement neighborhood projects.
5. Introduce a mini-grant competition to provide small grants to neighborhood groups to help cover the costs of volunteer projects.
6. Activate volunteers and community groups.
7. Work with neighborhood groups to track and report impact metrics for each project, learning from challenges and making mid-course program corrections when necessary.
8. Share and celebrate successes with local residents and other community stakeholders.
9. Take steps to make the initiative sustainable.

## STEP 1: IDENTIFY THE PUBLIC PROBLEM

Love Your Block addresses a public problem that aligns with the priorities identified by the mayor or city chief executive. This could include such things as preventing or eliminating blighted properties and increasing greenspace, public safety, and helping people who are at risk of losing their homes keep their homes. Experience indicates that the most successful Love Your Block programs are those in which the chief executive understands and appreciates the program and deploys city resources to ensure its success.



The Cities of Service citizen engagement model helps cities work with their citizens to solve problems and helps build trust within communities and between city leaders and their residents.



## STEP 2: DELIBERATE WITH COMMUNITY

Once city leaders have identified a problem that can be addressed with support from community volunteers, city officials convene stakeholders and community members to talk about the challenges and how citizens can contribute to solving the problem. Stakeholders may include city agencies and department heads, city council members, neighborhood groups, nonprofit organizations, schools and universities, local businesses, faith groups, and, importantly, residents affected by the problem who have experience and insights to share.

There are many ways to engage the community in these critical conversations — the most important thing is to make sure that the conversations happen. Community deliberation provides an opportunity to test assumptions and clarify thinking with the people who may be affected by this work or have been working in this area for years and have real experience, assets, and resources to contribute.

In Lansing, Michigan, city officials hosted monthly Leaders in Neighborhood and Community Services meetings, opening up communication and sharing resources and best practices between the city, community, and business leadership.

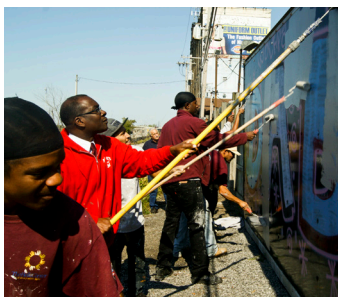




### STEP 3: DESIGN THE INITIATIVE

With community input guiding their planning, city leaders design the Love Your Block initiative. City officials should identify:

- How volunteers will be engaged to address the problem, including possible volunteer activities and required skills. For example, does the initiative need volunteers who can run a lawnmower? Do simple home repairs? Have experience with digital technology? Not all volunteers need to be skilled, but make sure that if certain skills are needed, the city recruits for those volunteers and provides training for volunteers where appropriate.
- The neighborhoods that are most in need of attention, for example low-income neighborhoods or those that are especially affected by blighted properties. It is important to clearly communicate this focus and get agreement from stakeholders, especially the residents.
- The role of the mayor or city chief executive in supporting the initiative.
- The role that city agencies or departments will play in implementing the initiative. Some cities assemble a Love Your Block team with representatives from the relevant agencies that will be involved in the neighborhood projects.
- City and external resources that are already being directed at the problem, and how volunteers might help those resources go further, either by addressing the problem more effectively or expanding the scope of the city's response. For example, maybe the city is trying to tackle the problem of vacant lots by mowing the lots once a season; that's all the city budget can afford. Volunteers might be engaged to "adopt" and care for the vacant lots all year round, or even transform them into community gardens or playgrounds.
- Output and outcome metrics that demonstrate that the work is being done and making a difference. For example, square feet of graffiti removed or pounds of litter collected. See Step 7 below for a further discussion of metrics.
- Partners — including city agencies, nonprofits, land banks, community foundations, and other organizations — that will be enlisted to help implement and sustain this initiative. Partners may supply funding or expertise or may be more directly involved in coordinating Love Your Block projects. An ideal partner will have experience in organizing and engaging citizens in revitalization projects or providing direct services for these types of efforts.



#### THE RANGE OF POSSIBLE VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES

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|---|---|--|
| • Graffiti removal                              | • Physical assessments of blighted properties   | • Basic code compliance repairs for homes                                  |
| • Neighborhood cleanups                         | • Educational outreach and skills-based support for homeowners facing the threat of foreclosure | • Minimal residential home retrofits to help reduce homeowner energy bills |
| • Transforming vacant lots                      |   |  |
| • Fixing up or boarding up abandoned properties |   |  |

### POTENTIAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS MAY INCLUDE

- Recruiting and managing volunteers
- Collecting and synthesizing impact reports
- Funding and in-kind support for the initiative
- Providing information and expertise on the conversion of vacant, abandoned, and tax delinquent properties into productive use
- Managing the disbursement of the mini-grants
- Connecting Love Your Block projects to other community programs, events, or activities
- Advertising grant application deadlines to neighborhood associations, civic organizations, places of worship, and nonprofit organizations
- Creating or managing a tool library where neighborhood groups can borrow tools for cleanup projects; tools are returned after projects are completed for future use by other groups
- Making flyers and brochures and staffing tables at community events
- Training or coaching grant recipients on effective project development and volunteer management



### STEP 4: COORDINATE CITY SERVICES

Once the initiative has been designed, city leaders connect with city agencies to identify services that can be offered to grantees to support their work. The city services are intended to complement the volunteer efforts, not replace them. Government-provided services could include, but are not limited to:

- Providing extra trash collection for neighborhood cleanups
- Providing equipment (trash bags, garden tools, gloves, etc.)
- Replacing broken or worn-out litter bins
- Facilitating city permitting processes to secure access to vacant and abandoned lots
- Testing soil on vacant lots
- Ensuring access to water for new community gardens
- Repairing broken street lights
- Repairing potholes and broken sidewalks
- Removing impervious surfaces and providing soil, trees, and mulch for green infrastructure to prevent flooding
- Training and offering technical assistance for specific activities, such as code compliance, energy-saving home repairs, and boarding up abandoned properties

## STEP 5: LAUNCH A MINI-GRANT COMPETITION

A key component of Love Your Block program is the mini-grant competition — small grants typically in the range of \$500 to \$2,000 made from the city to a community partner, such as a neighborhood association or a block club. The mini-grant competition is a great way for the city to generate awareness of and enthusiasm for the initiative, provide seed money and other resources for the most-promising proposals, help empower residents to take ownership over their neighborhoods or blocks, and build the capacity of neighborhood groups to design and implement these programs. The city will need to design a process to solicit mini-grant proposals from neighborhood groups, reach out to relevant communities to make sure that they are aware of the competition and encouraged to apply, and select the winners.

Develop a simple request for proposals (RFP) to solicit proposals from neighborhood groups. The RFP should include, at a minimum:

- Grantee eligibility
- The amount or range of the mini-grant awards
- Examples of fundable projects
- Examples of activities that are not eligible for funding
- Information on the required impact metrics
- The menu of city services that will be available

Proposals for funding should include, at a minimum:

- A description of the project
- A plan for engaging neighborhood residents
- An outline of volunteer activities
- The city services requested
- How the grantee intends to use the grant funding
- “Before” photos for reporting purposes



## OTHER MODELS

Some cities elect not to do a mini-grant competition. Instead, they may simply provide a set of city resources and services for selected neighborhood projects. For example, the city of Kettering, Ohio, chooses one neighborhood every year to be the focus of Love Your Block. City officials interview

residents about their concerns and then work with community partners to fix up those areas with volunteers. In Fall River, Massachusetts, the city created a mobile tool-lending library and an urban tree farm to support neighborhood led community revitalization efforts.

Applications can be considered in cycles (typically four to six months) to allow for planning and coordination of city services.

**Marketing and outreach:** The city should advertise the grant competition broadly to ensure that relevant communities have the opportunity to participate in the initiative. Spreading the word via other local elected officials, such as city council members, can be particularly useful. Community newspapers may be interested in reporting on the opportunity for their readers. Social media can also be a useful communication tool, as can advertisements in city utility bills or other city publications.

**Select a slate of grant winners:** Many cities have found it helpful to create a selection committee of judges comprised of the city agencies and community partners that may be involved in the projects. Cities may find it useful to seek a balance between projects that would require significant levels of agency resources, guidance and coaching and projects that can operate with greater self-sufficiency. Cities should select projects that clearly address the public problems identified during the planning process.

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## STEP 6: ACTIVATE VOLUNTEERS

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**Orientation:** Cities have found it very useful to conduct an initial orientation meeting for mini-grant recipients. The best times for these meetings are usually after work hours or on weekends. The orientation is an opportunity to:

- Get to know the community leaders that will be coordinating the mini-grant projects.
- Determine which in-kind city services could enhance the results of the project. Sometimes, representatives from the relevant city agencies are present at orientation meetings to meet grant recipients and discuss available services.
- Explain impact-reporting methods and requirements for expenditure and receipt tracking so that grant recipients understand city expectations and how they will be held accountable for use of funds and completion of projects. Completing grant agreements that include clear, quantifiable metrics is strongly recommended.
- Request that grant recipients begin thinking about a long-term maintenance plan.

**Site visits:** Based on the availability of city services, the city staff should work with Love Your Block grant recipients to conduct pre-project site visits with agency liaisons and project managers and schedule project implementation dates.

**Day-of coordination:** While much of the coordination will be done by the grantees and partner organizations, it is helpful for city staff to be available to visit sites on project days to ensure that projects go smoothly and city services are delivered as planned and to do additional troubleshooting as necessary. To increase visibility of the initiative, city staff should coordinate the mayor's or chief executive's participation in specific community projects and plan for press coverage of neighborhood projects.



The city of Phoenix, Arizona, provides extra support to Love Your Block grantees by coordinating activities on the day of the event. The city prepares the site to make sure it is safe for volunteers and parks a trailer full of tools at the site for volunteers to use. City staff also arrange for elected officials to attend certain events to meet the volunteers and recognize their efforts.



**Breaking down barriers to participation:** Make it as easy as possible for residents in target neighborhoods to participate. Some ways to increase participation might include:

- Holding outreach meetings at times and locations that are convenient to working parents, people on limited income and people with limited mobility.
- Translating materials into the languages most spoken in the neighborhood.
- Engaging key neighborhood partners (faith-based organizations, community centers, schools, block associations, etc.) to aid with volunteer recruitment.

## STEP 7: MEASURE IMPACT

Collecting data on the impact of each Love Your Block project is critical. It serves as a rallying point for project participants, and it demonstrates to volunteers that their efforts make a real difference in their neighborhoods. The city should ask mini-grant recipients to track at least one output and one outcome that are consistent for all the Love Your Block projects. An output shows that work is being done, while an outcome shows that the work is making a difference.

- Outputs could include: pounds of litter removed, square feet of graffiti removed, number of community gardens created.
- Outcomes could include: reduced risk of eviction, improved public safety, savings on household energy bills.

Community groups should also submit before and after photos and report any additional metrics that reflect their specific project as outlined in their work plan.

A short community survey can also be a useful way to measure the greater impact on community trust and relationships between city government and residents.

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**STEP 8:  
CELEBRATE SUCCESS**

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Once projects are completed and metrics have been collected, the city should share the outcome data with the volunteers, provide opportunities for everyone to discuss what worked and what they might do differently next time, and tell stories of impact. Being open and responsive to feedback is one way that city officials can build deeper, more authentic relationships with the community. By creating opportunities to come together and celebrate success, they show residents how much they appreciate their volunteer efforts and their partnership. To that end, some cities host annual awards celebrations in city hall where they recognize neighborhood leaders for their work on Love Your Block projects. Others host outdoor picnics and gatherings to enjoy new community gardens and clean vacant lots. However the city chooses to do it, make sure you do it — take the time to reflect, acknowledge great efforts and say thank you.

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**STEP 9: SUSTAIN  
THE INITIATIVE**

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Steps should be taken throughout the planning and implementation to ensure the sustainability of Love Your Block initiative and the resulting neighborhood projects. These include:

- Determining which city agency or department will oversee the project going forward or finding a partner organization to continue the program. For example, in Richmond, California, the Community Services Department oversees the Love Your Block program. In Atlanta, the Atlanta Community Foundation began to manage the program after the first year and continues to run it six years later.
- Identifying funding sources to sustain and grow the initiative, such as local foundations, corporate sponsors, and state and federal sources. Many cities have been able to get line-item funding in their city budgets to continue Love Your Block projects.
- Telling the story. City leaders, relevant city agencies and key community partners should communicate the results of this work to the community. This may take the form of a blog on the city website, use of social media, and pitching stories to local press.
- Recognizing volunteers, which is an effective recruitment and retention tool. Research by Points of Light Institute and HandsOn Network shows that recognition motivates volunteers and promotes public awareness in local communities. Consider sending thank-you letters or providing information on the impact of the Love Your Block effort (e.g., before and after photos, impact metrics) to those who volunteered.

# LOVE YOUR BLOCK IN ACTION

## LANSING, MICHIGAN

In collaboration with the city, nearly 500 citizen volunteers have collected over 200 bags of litter, created 100 art displays, and cleaned up 20 parks.

**Strong Program Design.** To kick off their Love Your Block program, the city of Lansing organized a bus trip to Flint, Michigan (50 miles away) to learn lessons from that city's Love Your Block program. The mayor of Lansing at that time, Virgil Bernero, joined 20 neighborhood and community partners on the trip to Flint, where they met with then-mayor Dayne Walling and members of his staff who worked on neighborhood revitalization and Love Your Block. During the visit, Lansing learned important program design elements such as:

- The need for a city liaison to neighborhood block clubs and a connection to critical city services
- The importance of facilitated and coordinated resident training
- The value of public-private sector partnerships and city-county collaboration that can result in innovative solutions.

The city also began to understand how Love Your Block can spur new solutions with input from new voices.

The Lansing team returned from the trip with new ideas for conducting neighborhood services in Lansing. Andi Crawford, the Lansing Neighborhood Resource Coordinator at the time, and her team immediately began developing the infrastructure and systems to support unified, collaborative action on neighborhood priorities. She began hosting monthly Leaders in Neighborhood and Community Services meetings, opening up communication and sharing resources and best practices between the city and community and business leaders.

**Activating Volunteers.** Neighborhood groups in Lansing are now fighting blight in their communities through the Love Your Block program. Members of three neighborhood organizations partnered with the city and interested citizens to connect several vibrant neighborhoods with biking-walking trails, activities, and art displays by local artists. The Point West Art Trail serves as a gateway to the city and a community gathering place. The city used a \$5,000 Love Your Block mini-grant competition to lay the physical groundwork, and, with the help of the city and AmeriCorps VISTAs, volunteers installed signage, crosswalks, and other street features in preparation for the larger project. The VISTAs also helped the team connect with a wide range of partners to encourage buy-in from additional organizations, including the Lansing Department of Parks and Recreation, the Michigan Department of Transportation, and the Department of Planning and Neighborhood Development. Partners raised \$26,000 to fund the development of the trail, which today serves as a point of pride for residents.

**Sustaining the Initiative.** Today, Love Your Block is fully institutionalized within Lansing. The city has allocated \$40,000 to go toward future Love Your Block grants. Shortly after taking office, Mayor Andy Schor appointed Andi Crawford as the first director of the Department of Neighborhoods and Citizen Engagement — a cabinet-level position akin to the chief service officer role. This appointment was a major signal to citizens that its government wished to work together in bigger and better ways.

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**RICHMOND,  
CALIFORNIA**

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**Identifying the Problem.** Like all cities that implement Love Your Block, a key component of the program design process for the city of Richmond, California, was to identify a critical public problem the initiative could address. To that end, the city launched a Community Research Process, the goal of which was to “analyze the landscape of local, community-based organizations utilizing volunteers, prioritize the specific challenges the city would address through our initiative, and identify the resources and opportunities available to support the effort.” As part of the process, the Love Your Block team collected surveys to gauge residents’ needs. This process highlighted Richmond’s target neighborhoods, Parchester and North Richmond, which were selected based on their poverty levels, blighted properties, vacant lots, and a high number of reports of illegal dumping.

**Deliberating with the Community.** To promote the initiative and increase community engagement, the city installed an interactive art installation at the Richmond Metro Transportation Center that read, “With \$2,000, how would you Love Your Block?” This allowed 225 residents to share their aspirations and concerns for their neighborhoods. Because of its success, there will be another installation in March, 2018, in both English and Spanish.

To further engage residents, the city completed a Community Asset Mapping exercise with the Shields-Reid Neighborhood Council to identify resident concerns in North Richmond, followed by a workshop to report the results back to the community and receive additional feedback. In Parchester, the team connected with residents at a local National Night Out event to start the conversation around the issues they were concerned about in their neighborhood.



For additional resources and information on Love Your Block, please visit [citiesofservice.org](https://citiesofservice.org) or contact us at [info@citiesofservice.org](mailto:info@citiesofservice.org).





**Cities of Service** is an independent nonprofit organization that helps mayors and city leaders tap the knowledge, creativity, and service of citizens to solve public problems and create vibrant cities. We work with cities to build city-led, citizen-powered initiatives that target specific needs, achieve long-term and measurable outcomes, improve the quality of life for residents, and build stronger cities. Founded in 2009 by New York City Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, Cities of Service supports a coalition of more than 280 cities, representing more than 80 million people across the Americas and Europe.

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