

MINI-GRANTS



This Citizen Engagement Technique is part of a series that Cities of Service has created to help city leaders work with citizens to solve problems. To learn more and access additional techniques, visit citiesofservice.org.

Mini-grants¹ are small monetary awards provided by the city, along with technical assistance and other support, to citizen groups so they can take local action on a public problem.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN:

Prior to implementing any citizen engagement technique, it is important to set goals and expectations, identify stakeholders, and more. For a checklist of steps you should take before you begin, please visit citiesofservice.org/techniques.

HOW TO LEAD A MINI-GRANTS INITIATIVE:

1. Identify specific challenges in target communities that resident volunteers can address with the help of mini-grants and technical assistance from the city.
2. Identify key metrics that will help determine whether the mini-grant projects are making the intended impact in the community. Ensure that the city has the internal capacity or community resources to collect the metrics data.
3. Meet with the city's finance and legal departments to discuss possible mechanisms for issuing mini-grants from city hall to citizen groups and necessary legal waivers for volunteer action.
4. Determine your overall budget, the number of mini-grants to be awarded, and the amount of each mini-grant.
5. Meet with external partners and other city departments that are active in the target community and have experience or expertise related to the identified challenge. Work with partners to identify opportunities to support potential mini-grant recipients. This could include community outreach, monetary and in-kind donations, skilled volunteers, or complementary services.
6. Draft a request for proposals (RFP) that includes a clear description of the mini-grant initiative, eligibility requirements, project parameters, submission deadline, data collection and reporting requirements, and a simple application form. Launch the RFP process, focusing outreach in target communities and providing support to potential applicants throughout the application period.
7. Carefully review submissions and select the winning projects. As part of your review, determine the available resources, potential stakeholders, and technical assistance that citizens might need to be successful in their volunteer actions.



¹Adapted from "Love Your Block Blueprint." Cities of Service. Accessed November 1, 2019. <https://citiesofservice.org/resource/love-your-block>.

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8. Notify the mini-grant recipients and confirm program requirements. Consider scheduling time with winners to create a detailed work plan, review expectations for reporting and data collection, and offer additional support, such as volunteer recruitment and city services.
9. Plan and execute a launch event to celebrate mini-grant winners, explain the desired impact of the work, recruit volunteers, and connect mini-grant recipients with one another.
10. Facilitate support for mini-grant projects by coordinating city services for project work days and liaising with external partners.
11. Attend work days to support the mini-grant projects, take photos, talk to volunteers, and gather stories.
12. Collect metrics as reported by mini-grant recipients. Celebrate their accomplishments and share results with partners, citizens, and other stakeholders.
13. Evaluate the grant-making process and the overall impact of the initiative on the identified challenge. If necessary, adjust the mini-grant initiative based on the findings.

EXAMPLE:

In 2018, Detroit's Department of Neighborhoods launched a mini-grant program to help engage its citizens in supporting Project Green Light, a crime-fighting partnership between local businesses, the City of Detroit, and community groups. Participating businesses have real-time camera connections with police headquarters and are visibly identified with a green light. The goal of the mini-grant program was to improve neighborhood safety and increase quality of life for residents through environmental improvements. Proposed projects had to benefit a commercial corridor with at least one Green Light business, a residential area adjacent to that business, or a nearby alley.

The Department of Neighborhoods selected 14 community groups from across all seven districts in the city to receive mini-grants. The awards included direct financial support, coordinated city services, and the opportunity to activate corporate volunteers from a program sponsor.

Financial support came in the form of prepaid \$500 gift cards. The gift cards were Detroit's solution to a common problem: smaller block clubs or community organizations don't always have bank accounts or fiscal agents, and cities are reluctant to (and often not permitted to) issue payment to an individual on behalf of a group.

Mini-grant projects also received support from city agencies. For example, the Department of Public Works provided garbage pickups after cleanup activities and coordinated the closing of alleys and streets during beautification events. Greater Detroit Resources Recovery Authority (waste management) provided dumpsters for alley projects where large amounts of yard waste, such as branches and trees, were removed. The Detroit Police Department permitted alley closures and assisted with outreach upon request.

Finally, Comcast employees provided additional volunteer capacity to projects. Comcast also served as a partner at multiple project sites that focused on clearing alleyways or commercial corridors. These efforts frequently exposed old telecom lines that were previously inaccessible due to overgrowth and debris. Once cleared of debris, Comcast technicians were able to remove old or downed wires.

The inaugural Project Green Light mini-grants activated more than 200 citizen volunteers to clean alleyways, commercial corridors, vacant lots, and park spaces. They removed more than 37,000 pounds of debris including yard waste, litter, and illegal dumping debris. Volunteers also provided 21 businesses with local crime stats and information, resulting in five new Project Green Light locations.

For guidance on using this and other citizen engagement techniques, or to learn more about customizing solutions for your city, contact Cities of Service at info@citiesofservice.org.