

## LOVE YOUR BLOCK: GRANT PROGRAM

Every day, mayors and the cities they lead struggle with the negative impacts that vacant, abandoned, and deteriorating properties have on neighborhoods and the people living in them. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these problems, particularly for communities in economically distressed areas. Cities are not only at the forefront in responding to the pandemic, but they are likely to feel the impacts of COVID-19 for years to come. To help mayors and city chief executives address these daunting problems, Cities of Service is pleased to announce that applications are open for **Love Your Block**, an Impact Volunteering grant program supporting volunteer-fueled projects that address local public problems. This grant program will focus on helping cities partner with community groups and activate resident volunteers to repair, remediate, or otherwise address blight in their neighborhoods. Blighted properties include, but are not limited to, single family homes, apartment buildings, commercial buildings, vacant lots, parks, and other public spaces.

Love Your Block is based on the Cities of Service [Love Your Block Blueprint](#) and builds on the experience and lessons learned from ten years of program implementation in dozens of cities around the country. As an AmeriCorps VISTA program, Love Your Block exemplifies the core principles of AmeriCorps VISTA: an anti-poverty focus, community empowerment, sustainable solutions, and capacity building. [Click here](#) to learn more about AmeriCorps.

### About Cities of Service

Cities of Service helps mayors build stronger cities by changing the way local government and residents work together. We help our coalition cities tap into resident insights, skills, and service to identify and solve critical public problems. 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 84 million people across the Americas and Europe. Now situated at Johns Hopkins University, you can learn more about Cities of Service at [citiesofservice.jhu.edu](http://citiesofservice.jhu.edu) and by following us on Twitter [@citiesofservice](#).

Since its founding, Cities of Service has helped cities implement change through the use of its Impact Volunteering strategy. This signature strategy engages resident volunteers to identify and solve pressing public problems alongside municipal government. It is a participatory process in which residents and city officials develop a shared vision, set short- and long-term goals for their community, and then work together to achieve those goals. As partners, they communicate throughout the process and reflect on their work – discussing and evaluating what they have done and holding themselves accountable for results.

### Love Your Block

The Cities of Service Love Your Block program brings city leaders and residents together to build stronger neighborhoods, one block at a time. Typically, cities implementing Love Your Block invite community groups to identify priority projects and award mini-grants to support

neighborhood-driven solutions that the community can implement. From turning vacant lots into community gardens to helping elderly neighbors with home repairs to avoid fines and safely age in place, resident volunteers are “loving their blocks” and making them, and their cities, better places to live.

The benefits of Love Your Block go well beyond physical improvements. [A 2021 Urban Institute study](#) found that social networks sparked by deep resident-to-city-hall engagement can instigate neighborhood-level improvements in addition to larger, sustainable improvements to municipal practices and policies. Love Your Block activates and builds social networks between residents, their neighbors, and with city hall. This resident-to-city hall engagement can lead to collective efficacy that is often bidirectional: city officials can leverage neighborhood social capital in service of mayoral goals and residents can leverage greater responsiveness from officials to address their needs and priorities. In other words, Love Your Block is a starting point for cities to more meaningfully engage their residents to help improve their communities in holistic and sustainable ways.

## Love Your Block Eligibility

This opportunity is an open invitation to all U.S. cities with:

- A population of at least 30,000
- The capacity to recruit for and manage an AmeriCorps VISTA member each year **and** a Love Your Block Fellow for a two-year fellowship
- A demonstrated commitment to diversity and inclusion. Projects should:
  - Elevate the voices of historically-excluded groups
  - Reflect community-driven solutions
  - Meaningfully engage local partners
  - Recognize residents as assets and as leaders in this work
  - Meet people where they are

Applications must be submitted by 11:59 PM Pacific on August 9, 2021. Cities will receive notification regarding their application by September 1, 2021. Cities that participated in the 2015 - 2018 or 2018 - 2020 Love Your Block programs are not eligible to apply.

The application for this funding opportunity is available online through Qualtrics [here](#). The system automatically saves your progress. To continue the application you must use the same computer and browser. Simply click on the [Apply link](#) and the system will take you where you left off.

## Important Application Dates

- July 14 - Informational Webinar I ([register here](#))
- July 22 - Office Hour ([register here](#)) - A one-hour session dedicated to applicants who have an idea they would like to discuss or those who need specific points of clarification prior to submitting the grant application
- July 28 - Informational Webinar II ([register here](#))
- August 9 - 11:59 PM Pacific Application deadline

- September 1 - Applicants notified

### Important Program Dates for Selected Cities

- September 6 - Welcome webinar for participating cities
- September 7 - Love Your Block Fellow and AmeriCorps VISTA recruitment commences
- October 1-29 - Grant agreements fully executed
- November 1 - Love Your Block Fellow start date
- November (date TBD) - AmeriCorps VISTA start date

### Award Benefits

Over the two years of the grant term, selected cities will be provided with:

- \$40,000 in funding for program implementation and volunteer-led mini-grant projects
- \$60,000 in funding to support a local full-time Love Your Block Fellow from the community. The Love Your Block Fellow must be an individual from the community being served, have a track record of building local relationships, and cannot be related to city hall staff or elected officials.
- Up to two AmeriCorps VISTA members each year to support city leaders in engaging low-income community members in this work
  - AmeriCorps VISTA members' time must be used in accordance with the core principles of the VISTA program: an anti-poverty focus, community empowerment, sustainable solutions, and capacity building. [Click here](#) to learn more about AmeriCorps.
- High-touch consulting services and programmatic support from Cities of Service
- Peer-to-peer networking with current and former Love Your Block grantees
- Invitations to annual gatherings.
- Recognition as a Love Your Block grantee cities in Cities of Service collateral, including on our website and other media.

### Selection Criteria

Eight cities will be selected to participate in Love Your Block. Applications will be judged on several criteria, including:

- The nature of the public problem the city is trying to solve around blight.
- How the proposed Impact Volunteering initiative will tackle the problem. We are looking for initiatives that tie to larger city strategies meant to address the public problem, or are tackling the problem in innovative ways that are supported by impacted residents and other stakeholders.
- The role of resident volunteers. We are looking for cities to engage volunteers within the neighborhoods of focus. In addition, we are looking for initiatives that engage volunteers early in the project design stage as well as during implementation and evaluation. Lastly, we are looking for cities to engage volunteers for their time as well as lived experiences and skills.
- The role and level of engagement of the city chief executive and relevant city agencies and departments.

- The specific neighborhoods that will be the focus of the initiative. We are looking for demonstrated involvement of neighborhood-specific stakeholders in the proposed initiative or commitment to doing so during the grant period.
- The proposed roles for the AmeriCorps VISTA member(s) and Love Your Block Fellow and how the city will support them in their work.
- Demonstrated commitment to tracking critical measures to demonstrate impact.

## Use of Funds

Cities of Service grant funds are to be used for direct support of the Impact Volunteering initiatives.

- Fellowship grant funds are restricted to the direct compensation of the identified Love Your Block Fellow.
- Acceptable use of project implementation grant funds include, among others, costs associated with engaging volunteers in:
  - Activating vacant lots or empty storefronts/building
  - Neighborhood clean ups
  - Transforming vacant lots into vibrant community spaces
  - Educational outreach and skills-based support for individuals and community groups
  - Basic code compliance repairs for homes
  - Compensating local partners
- Cities of Service grant funds may not support:
  - Services covered by existing city infrastructure, such as standard trash collection and staff salaries
  - Rent or utilities
  - 501(c)(3) incorporation fees
  - Speaker honorariums
  - Improvement projects that primarily serve churches and/or other religious organizations
  - Scholarships or other direct support to individuals or families
  - Fraternal, political, labor, athletic or social organizations, civic clubs, candidates or projects
  - Events such as block parties, conferences, festivals, dinners, sports competitions, art exhibits, fundraisers (e.g. dinners, walks/runs/relays, golf tournaments and auctions) unless directly in service to the larger strategic initiative
  - Capital campaigns, endowments or endowed chairs

## Contact

For questions, please feel free to contact [info@citiesofservice.org](mailto:info@citiesofservice.org).