How Can We Make A Difference in Our Community?

The challenges facing our communities — not to mention our nation and world — are so daunting and complex that they tend to lead us to one of two responses. The first response is to turn away from these problems and focus on creating a good life for ourselves and our small personal circle. Perhaps we’ll vote in elections and then keep an eye on officials to see if they fulfill the promises they made. But mostly, when we’re in this frame of mind, we just try to carve out a good life for ourselves and our own. And as long as this approach causes no harm, most of us would agree that this is a perfectly valid way to live.

The second response is to decide that there are so many problems on so many levels of our society that the only chance we have of making progress is if we, as individuals and families and groups, all chip in. This response is based on the idea that ordinary people, not just the government, have an important day-to-day role to play in addressing problems and in making life better in our communities. In other words, there are lots of ways for all of us to make a difference and our communities would be better if we all did a little more.

There are, of course, very real obstacles to doing so. With greater pressure to make ends meet and get by, and with barely enough time to take care of ourselves and to be with our families and friends, the idea of taking time out of our already busy lives to serve in our communities seems unrealistic. To complicate matters even more, we live in a country where citizens are often treated as spectators on the sidelines of public life, and as clients or customers of government services, not as valuable partners in problem-solving. As a result, we may not always realize how much we have to offer, and how critical each of us is to building the solutions that are needed.

On the other hand, America is also a country that has a strong and vibrant tradition of community involvement, of neighbors helping neighbors, of citizens rolling up their sleeves and doing what needs to be done to make life better for our families, neighborhoods, communities and nation. For some, this is a reflection of faith, for others it is a reflection of political beliefs or family traditions. Whatever the source or motivation, America has a long history of community service, and at the start of the 21st Century, when there are more challenges than ever, we need the opportunity to think about ways we can all make a difference.

The fact is that government cannot handle all of our community’s problems or needs, and we all have unique talents, knowledge and energy to bring to the table to help make a difference. In other words, we all have something to offer, but it is critical that the work we do in and for our communities be effective, meaningful and satisfying. It should have the impacts we want it to have, and it should be a way of bringing us closer to our friends and families, rather than taking us away from them.

This guide is designed to help you think about different ways of making meaningful and effective contributions to your community. It is for people who are already working on community projects and issues and want to rethink the way in which they are doing so. And, it is also for people or groups who might not be involved now but want to make a contribution to the life of their community, and are looking for the best way to get involved.

Some might say that thinking and talking about how to be of service is a waste of time, that the needs are so many and so great that there should be no hesitation in getting down to work. But it is precisely because there are so many needs and so many ways of addressing them that we believe a few moments of thoughtful consideration and conversation up front and along the way can be worthwhile and lead to stronger results over time.

We invite you to proceed in your small group by spending about 20-30 minutes discussing each of these questions:

1. What are some of the important problems or needs facing our community?
2. What are some of the ways that we can make a difference on one or more of these community problems or needs?
3. What are the next steps we can take, individually or together, that will allow us to make a difference in addressing the issues we care about in our community?