



The Groundwork USA Guide to Remote Community Engagement

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Social distancing means we need to rethink how we do public and community engagement. This presents both opportunities and challenges as we consider the potential of digital technologies to help us engage in new ways, while also recognizing that not everyone has access to those technologies. (See <https://tinyurl.com/GWUSA-VideoGuide> for our Guide to Video Community Meetings.)

These times call for creativity and patience as we develop new ways of interacting and learn how to adapt to them – it's ok to be frustrated! It's also important that we take the time to check in on each other as community members and to create distanced opportunities for social engagement. This short guide outlines some suggestions, both high tech and low tech (feel free to email additional ideas to Adi@groundworkusa.org), on ways for us to continue working and connecting with our communities even when we can no longer gather in person:

1. **Pick up the phone**
2. **Send snail mail**
3. **Post flyers in public**
4. **Write to local media**
5. **Take to the airwaves**
6. **Get active on social media**
7. **Celebrate the small things**

For some more considerations around equitable community engagement during these times: <https://www.smithgroup.com/perspectives/2020/equitable-community-engagement-during-a-global-pandemic-beyond>

1. Pick up the phone

With all the hype around Zoom and other digital platforms these days, it's easy to forget about dialing an old-fashioned 10-digit phone number! Making one-on-one calls or sending texts to community members to check in about their well-being, share information, or solicit feedback

(consider preparing a short oral survey or including an online link in a text) can have a powerful impact, while also addressing digital divide issues. Conference calls accomplish these objectives while also enabling group discussion and interaction. Digital platforms often include phone call-in options, which are important to share with people who may not have internet connections.

If you need to reach many people in a short period of time, consider organizing a virtual phone bank or a phone tree. A phone bank takes a list of contacts and divides them up amongst a group of volunteers to call or text. A phone tree is a more organized structure in which a designated coordinator is responsible for contacting a key group of 2-4 people, who in turn are each responsible for contacting 3-8 specific people (and so it continues as needed). Phone banks and phone trees can help create a sense of community, as you and your fellow callers are engaged in the work together and connecting with your constituents. For more details on creating a phone tree: <https://www3.aauw.org/resource/how-to-build-a-phone-tree/>

2. Send snail mail

Going postal is an effective way to share information or solicit feedback, especially for those who lack even phone connections. Consider including short physical surveys and self-addressed stamped envelopes with your mailing so community members can easily return the completed survey to you. For some of your more engaged community members, you can send a stack of flyers, signs, posters or pamphlets that they can use to help get the word out in public (more on this below). Be sure to account for costs and time with snail mail as part of your community engagement strategy.

3. Post flyers in public

Posting and distributing flyers, signs, posters or pamphlets in public places, bulletin boards, mailboxes, housing complexes, front yards, fences, walls and building windows is another way to take your message directly to your community. As mentioned above, you can snail mail these documents to community members to help with distribution, or e-mail them to people who have printers. Make sure to keep your flyer concise, use large text to make it easily legible, and include visuals if possible. Be sure to also include a contact address, phone number, e-mail address, and/or website URL where people can follow up for more information and to get involved. TinyURL.com is a great website that creates simple and concise links for Zoom meetings and other more complicated URLs.

4. Survey by Text

If you need to get feedback on an idea or project, put up a large, eye-catching poster on a major thoroughfare with a simple question and a number to text the answer to (there are a few free online text services that will hook you up with a digital message folder, so folks don't blow up your personal phone). Circle back in a week or so to post the feedback so that folks can see that they were heard.

5. Write to local media

Local newspapers and online publications are eager to hear from their readers. Writing a short letter to the editor (150-200 words) highlighting key community issues or responding to local news stories helps get your message out there. You can also contact local editorial boards to see if they'd be interested in publishing a longer op-ed piece (600-700 words) that enables you to explore issues more in-depth. Whether you're writing a letter to the editor or an op-ed, make sure to include some form of organizational affiliation/contact or website URL so that readers can continue to engage with you.

6. Take to the airwaves

Local access cable TV and radio present another means to share your message with your community. If local TV and radio studios are not open to the public due to social distancing, you can call in to existing programs to help get the word out. You can also explore the possibility of being a featured program guest from your home via phone or live audio/video stream. This gives you an opportunity to connect more at length with viewers and listeners who may call in.

If your local stations are open to original programming, you can record audio/video content in your home using your computer's microphone and webcam, or use a digital platform to record a virtual panel discussion with 3-4 community members. You can then send these recordings to the station for broadcast (or even edit them into a podcast that you post online) and once again consider making yourself available as a guest commentator remotely. All of these broadcasting options can be amplified through social media channels (more on this below).

7. Get active on social media

Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are another way to maintain and expand your reach. Post compelling content (images and videos help a great deal) that encourages your audience to engage via comment sections, direct messages or posted links.

The Facebook Live and Instagram Live features further enable you to broadcast video content from your computer directly to your online audience. Video meetings and virtual events hosted through digital platforms like Zoom can also be connected to Facebook Live to reduce the barrier to entry. In these times of social distancing, social media can help foster a sense of online community and even reinforce that we still have offline lives (more on this below).

8. Celebrate the small things

Consider using social media and other communications channels to encourage your audience to share pictures from their everyday lives that bring them happiness (if they feel comfortable doing so), or to share original art that responds to the moment we're in. You can also create campaigns inspiring households to document themselves taking a small local action, like planting something in their garden or picking up trash on their block. While community-scale gardening or clean-up events are not feasible at this time, there is still power in aggregating individual acts together using social media. (Make sure to have a unifying hashtag for your campaign!) They show us that we still have agency, remind us that we are not alone, and help us spread much-needed positivity and connection.

Thanks to Emily Torres-Cullinane (MAPC) and others for sharing your best practices with GWUSA!

About Groundwork USA

Groundwork USA is a national non-profit organization working at the intersection of the environment, equity, and civic engagement to transform the natural and built environment of low-resource communities. Together with our network of 21 Groundwork Trusts, we're working to bring about the sustained regeneration, improvement, and management of the physical environment by developing community-based partnerships that empower people, businesses, and organizations to promote environmental, economic, and social well-being.

For more information visit www.groundworkusa.org.

