



Strengthening Ward One Together

Nonprofit organizations, residents & businesses building a Ward that Works.

*Adams Morgan
Columbia Heights
Howard University
Kalorama Triangle
LeDroit Park
Mount Pleasant
Park View
Pleasant Plains
Shaw*

Invitation to the SWOT Community Canvass – May 14

The fifty organizations of the Strengthening Ward One Together (SWOT) coalition are planning a Community Canvass for Saturday morning, May 14. Volunteers will pair up and knock on doors.

The goals? In the short term, we expect to recruit dozens of new volunteers for our organizations, let residents know about our activities, and help connect them to services if they need them.

In the longer term, we are trying to build a civic culture where all residents feel responsible for the community and where all feel they can connect with other individuals and organizations committed to building a community that works.

Each team will be given a one-page survey and a handout to give everyone they talk to, but equally important is the simple act of talking about what we are doing and hearing from people about their thoughts on the community or their individual needs. You are not trying to make a hard sell; this is all about planting seeds that we expect will grow in time.

If someone doesn't want to complete the survey, that's ok. If they don't want to volunteer for anything, that's ok too. The important thing is to get the word out that there are people and organizations in Ward One who are working hard to make a better community; we need your help, but we can accept that some people are going to be skeptical, too busy, too tired, or whatever.

The first step is just to make the human connection, to show that there are real people who care about strengthening community, who are willing to take the time to listen and talk because we believe it really does take a whole community working together to build the world we want for ourselves and our children. Second, we are communicating that the organization that residents may have walked past for years that serves "other people" is not just for others. We are part of the community – we and our partners can use your help or if you have unmet needs, we may be able to help you or connect you with a partner who can. Third, we are communicating that we "walk the talk" about collaboration. Some people think highly of community-based organizations but others feel that there's too much focus on organizational self-preservation at the expense of broader community needs. This canvass is a concrete demonstration of what we can do when we work together.

At a practical level, canvassers can keep volunteers that they sign up for their own organizations if they want. Canvassers should mark each completed form to indicate the organization that made the contact. However, we expect canvassers to recruit people to help with activities that their own organizations don't support, too. We will collect completed forms at the end of the canvass, enter them into a master list, and then send out contact info for both new volunteers and people who need services to the appropriate organizations. (See attached for details.)

We recognize that individual or community change takes time. Getting people to believe that we can work together after maybe a lifetime of experiences to the contrary isn't going to happen quickly. If you look at the development of the civil rights movement, you see that it starts with a small number of people

willing to get out front, lead by example, and do the hard and patient work that it took to get lasting change. Martin Luther King emphasized the “fierce urgency of now” – but he also spoke about “true nonviolence ... as the persistent and determined application of peaceable power...” We need “persistent trying, perpetual experimentation, and persevering toughness.”

President Obama in his victory speech in November 2008 made much the same point: “I will ask you join in the work of remaking this nation the only way it's been done in America for two-hundred and twenty-one years -- block by block, brick by brick, calloused hand by calloused hand.”

Most people today feel that we need to be about doing things differently. Government – whether local, state or federal—is not going to come to anyone’s rescue these days. We all have our opinions about the Tea Party, but it’s important to see the positive dimension: people trying to work together to take responsibility for change. Let’s take that same sort of energy or anxiety but focus it constructively.

People in Utah volunteer TWICE as many hours as DC residents. There are lots of factors that can explain the difference, but we feel certain that there is a lot of untapped capacity in Ward One if residents make it a priority. If the Community Canvass and follow-up activities work as well as we hope, here are some of the concrete and social changes that we imagine are possible in a few years if we are successful in getting the community more engaged:

- Neighbors feel strongly connected with one another – whatever their background. Social scientists talk about a sense of collective efficacy, social capital and social cohesion: all would be strong. Long-time residents and newer residents would be working together actively to find common ground.
- Too often, we see interpersonal divisions emerge or conflicts escalate that could have been avoided if people had better communication or leadership skills. Just as many progressive organizations are adopting a positive youth development approach, we hope that we can make this or a similar approach part of the community’s everyday understanding.
- Enough long-term volunteers so every student in the Ward who needs one has a tutor or mentor.
- The community works actively to ensure that homes that need weatherizing get it... (more)
- People feel safe on the streets at all times of day and night.
- Community members can get the job training, apprenticeships, and work experience they need for self-sufficiency.
- People with substance abuse or mental health issues get the care they need.
- The Ward is considered a hotbed of performing and visual arts for all ages and skill levels.
- Home-bound seniors and disabled people feel cared for and safe in the community.
- Active living –walking, biking, exercising regularly – and healthy lifestyles are considered the norm for people young and old.
- Nonprofit organizations routinely work together for the betterment of the community helping to weave a thick network of social activity in the ward.

Is this vision attainable? It’s hard to say for sure, but we believe its time to try.