

Civic Engagement - Reducing Poverty Through Community Linkages: City of Lynchburg, VA

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John H. Hughes, IV, MBA

Assistant City Manager, City of Lynchburg, VA

Civic Engagement continues to be a priority for VLGMA localities and requires people power. Engaging communities in social uplift to promote a better quality of life for all provides a sense of responsibility between citizens.

In the City of Lynchburg, a concerted effort to reduce poverty and raise the median household income has brought together many civic-minded individuals of diverse backgrounds. The movement, "From Poverty to Progress," is supported by City Council and was championed in 2017 by former Mayor Joan Foster and current Mayor, then Vice Mayor, Treney Tweedy. This initiative was born out of a realization that our civic engagement practices should involve all citizens despite varied socioeconomic status, census tracts and zip codes.

Background:

Lynchburg was designated a Bridges Out Of Poverty[®] Community in late 2013 and the Bridges of Central Virginia (BOCV) group was formed. As the initiative moved on, the BOCV worked to develop plans that tackled Lynchburg's over 24% poverty rate. Lynchburg's City Council soon saw a need for more direct support from government to spur community involvement. In 2015, City Council commissioned a study to analyze this pressing issue; and in 2016 Council approved funding for and staff to better manage the City's priority of poverty reduction.

Beginning with a call to action from former Mayor, Joan Foster at the State of the City address in March of 2017, citizens were asked to be an integral part of the poverty reduction strategy in Lynchburg. A kick-off event for the newly minted "From Poverty to Progress" initiative was held in May of 2017 to engage the public, enhance support for ongoing programs, and flesh out definitive community concerns. Citizens of all ages, creeds, ethnicities, and incomes (many of whom may have not been at the same table otherwise) were now a part of a long-term collective effort to reduce poverty in the City of Lynchburg. This event began the process of developing action items focused on eliminating barriers for our low-income citizens. It was also a catalyst for the civic engagement of faith-based organizations, non-profits, individuals, businesses, schools, and others to rally around the cause of community uplift.

Current Events:

In 2018, Lynchburg continues to strive toward the mark of poverty reduction and increased median household income through civic engagement. The most recent Community Gathering held in June of 2018 marked a year of progress toward accomplishment of goals set by the workgroups. These projects include, but are not limited to: Early education tutoring assistance, building a grocery store in an identified food desert, creating an alliance to increase affordable childcare options, improving kindergarten readiness, developing easier access to health resources, implementing a community-subsidized transportation application, and revamping local public transportation. It is obvious that each of these items require an immense level of engagement, collaboration and cooperation!

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Citizens have voiced a desire to be more civically engaged and involved with local issues. Through the Community Wealth Building Grant, Lynchburg's TechHire initiative and Getting Ahead program are forging the path toward self-sufficiency for many citizens. The Empower Lynchburg website was launched which offers a direct link between those who want to help and specific community needs. Also, our From Poverty to Progress groups and Bridges of Central VA groups are creating a symbiotic relationship based on active collaboration.

In summary, the success of this intensive movement could not be achieved without the engagement of Lynchburg's citizens. While official leadership comes from the City Manager's Office, the community linkages are pertinent and powerful. Community members have presented information to City Council, have addressed specific neighborhood concerns to administrative staff and have been thoroughly immersed in the workings of City government as a result of the From Poverty to Progress movement.

City management, local business owners, neighborhood groups, and many others have embraced the ideology of unselfish benevolence while directing the initiative toward a Thriving Lynchburg through civic engagement.