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**Are we going to treat this question of DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP as a casual thing, which we do with our left hand when we are free for a moment from institutional concerns, or do we intend to move it squarely into the center of our program and recognize it as our main job?**

—R.E.G. Davis, “Democracy and the YMCA,”  
*Toward Christian Democracy*

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## *Executive Summary:* **YMCA Civic Engagement Guide**



**T**he future of democratic life depends on young Americans. However, the last three decades have seen a precipitous decline in the civic health of our nation. By most measures, Americans—particularly young Americans—appear increasingly disconnected from each other and from public life.

The habits of citizenship develop in early adulthood and, once developed, are not easily changed. People who participate while they are young are more likely to develop the skills, attitudes and behaviors that will lead to continued participation.

In short, increasing the civic engagement of young people is critical. And to this end, the YMCA has a very important role to play.

Recognizing this role, YMCA of the USA created the YMCA Civic Engagement Initiative, an ongoing effort to increase the capacity of YMCAs to promote the development of civic engagement attitudes, skills and behaviors, especially in young people. Initially launched as the Young Adult Civic Connector Initiative (YACCI) in 1999, the YMCA Civic Engagement Initiative is designed to reach young people directly and connect them to specific opportunities to act while simultaneously motivating and improving the ability of the YMCA and the civic engagement community to engage young people in civic life. Both

YACCI and the YMCA Civic Engagement Initiative were funded by generous grants from the Pew Charitable Trusts.

### DISENGAGED YOUTH

Survey measures of young people's interest in politics and public affairs show substantial declines over the past 35 years. Today among young people ages 15 through 24

- ◉ Nearly six-in-ten are completely disengaged from civic life,
- ◉ Fewer than four-in-ten believe citizenship entails certain responsibilities, and
- ◉ Only 32.3 percent voted in the 2000 elections, down from 32.4 percent in 1996, while the overall turnout rate was 54.7 percent, up from 54.2 percent in 1996. This election marked a new record low for youth turnout in a presidential year, even though the campaign was closely contested.

(Compiled from studies by the Center for Research and Information on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), 2002.)

### What Is Civic Engagement?

YMCA of the USA defines civic engagement as a person's capacity to work with others to affect common interests, to see oneself as a stakeholder in public life, to value the mechanisms for democratic decision making and to believe that individuals have a responsibility to contribute to their communities.

Purposely, this is a broad definition. It takes into account the many ways in which people, organizations and communities may define it. Nonetheless, it rests against the framework of other accepted definitions, many of which are touted in academic, political or social circles. Additionally, the definition is consistent with the YMCA's history, mission and values, and resonates with what YMCAs are currently providing in many existing programs, projects and practices.

### YMCA DEFINITION OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

A person's capacity to work with others to affect common interests, to see oneself as a stakeholder in public life, to value the mechanisms for democratic decision making and to believe that individuals have a responsibility to contribute to their communities.

### Why Is the YMCA Investing in This Effort?

More than any other national community-serving organization in this country, the YMCA is positioned to civically engage young people. The YMCA



- ◉ **Has reach.** Together, the nation's YMCAs are the largest not-for-profit community-service organization in America, working to meet the health and social service needs of 18 million men, women and children of all faiths, races, abilities and ages in 10,000 communities.
- ◉ **Believes in the value of collaboration.** The YMCA's strength is in the people and organizations it brings together. The YMCA actively seeks out and maintains collaborations with countless local and national community organizations across the country.
- ◉ **Attracts young people.** For years the YMCA has depended on young people to be the volunteers, staff and energy behind the YMCA movement. Today young people make up the majority of the YMCA's constituents and a significant number of YMCA staff are under age 30.
- ◉ **Makes a difference in the lives of young people.** The YMCA has a 150-year history of civically engaging young people. The YMCA specializes in increasing young people's motivation, opportunity and ability to participate by connecting their participation to public issues that matter to them and encouraging key civic actors and institutions to see young adults as valuable resources.

*The YMCA has consistently recognized that the most direct pathway to future participation is providing young people with meaningful opportunities to participate today.*



The YMCA's investment in promoting civic engagement also supports many of the YMCA's existing priorities. This investment

- Reinforces character development and the YMCA's core values, especially responsibility;
- Amplifies the YMCA's approach to building the 40 developmental assets in young people;
- Leverages the YMCA Teen Action Agenda and its goal of engaging one in every five teens as YMCA constituents;
- Strengthens the Member Involvement Initiative by deepening member involvement in local YMCAs, enriching lives, promoting diversity, building relationships and creating caring communities in which all people—regardless of age, ability, income, gender, race or religion—find a place to belong;
- Amplifies the Diversity Initiative and YMCAs' efforts to expand their capacity, presence and position in low-income, underserved and disadvantaged communities by engaging people in meeting community needs through civic service; and
- Supports the YMCA Gulick Project by helping more people improve their spiritual, mental and physical health through meaningful community involvement.

Above all, this investment draws attention to and amplifies the ways in which YMCAs are already promoting civic engagement. In essence, it encourages YMCAs to continue doing what they do so well.

When YMCA of the USA launched the YMCA Civic Engagement Initiative, it recognized the importance of developing and sustaining a process of capturing, synthesizing and disseminating useful information about promoting civic engagement. Over the course of the past year, this process included convening the YMCA Civic Engagement Symposium, forming a team of YMCA Civic Engagement Fellows and developing two complementary and equally important products: the "Understanding and Promoting YMCA Civic Engagement" workshop and the *YMCA Civic Engagement Guide*.



## Using the YMCA Civic Engagement Guide

*YMCA Civic Engagement Guide: Strategies and Tools for Increasing Civic Engagement* was designed as a comprehensive how-to resource to assist your YMCA staff and volunteers and community partners in promoting the development of civic engagement attitudes, skills and behaviors. It provides a six-step process for promoting civic engagement at and through your YMCA.

THE YMCA CIVIC ENGAGEMENT GUIDE offers specific approaches, tools and resources to leverage your action. These are amplified by 19 case studies that illustrate successful best civic engagement programs, projects and practices and provide specific how-to suggestions for making those models work at your YMCA. Some of the approaches and case studies include:

- Staffing
- Community Collaborations
- Membership by Design
- Asset Building
- Youth and Government
- HI-Y/Leaders Clubs
- Earth Service Corps



## Six Steps to Promoting Civic Engagement

The six-step process is designed to produce long-term change so that all those your YMCA serves, but especially young people, become more civically engaged and your YMCA itself becomes a civic engagement catalyst in the community.

### STEP ONE: EXPLORE AND UNDERSTAND

Find out more about civic engagement. Learn as much as you can about the civic mission and history of the YMCA and the benefits of promoting civic engagement. Become a civic engagement champion and expert.

### STEP TWO: ASSESS

Identify what civic engagement looks like in your YMCA and community. Notice how you've been promoting civic engagement but haven't claimed these actions and activities as civic engagement. Affirm these aspects of your YMCA. Take stock of what you

have been doing and how promoting civic engagement fits with that.

#### STEP THREE: PLAN

Create a vision for promoting civic engagement. Develop goals and action plans. Plan how to transform your YMCA into a civic engagement catalyst. Engage young people in your planning process.

#### STEP FOUR: INTEGRATE

Infuse civic engagement into what you are already doing. Further develop existing civic engagement programs, projects and practices. Encourage individuals, especially young people, to become civically engaged. Provide opportunities for civic engagement.

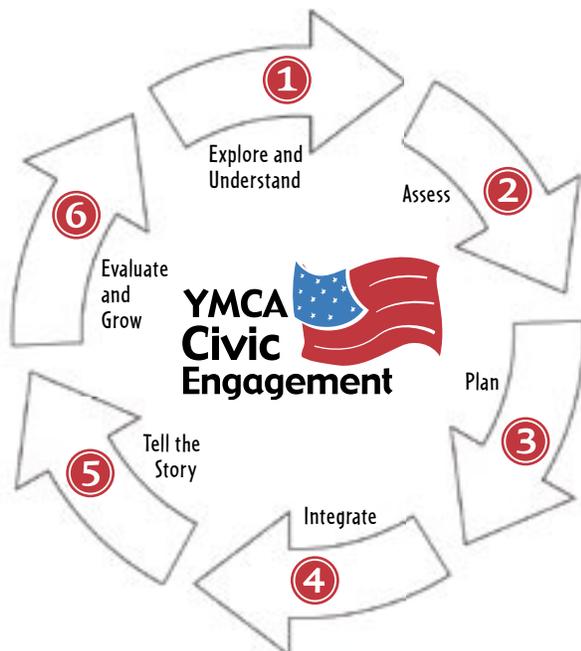
#### STEP FIVE: TELL THE STORY

Tell others about the civic engagement work of your YMCA. Share your civic engagement vision and invite others to help you reach your goals. Cultivate more relationships to strengthen your YMCA.

#### STEP SIX: EVALUATE AND GROW

Assess and evaluate what you're doing and how you're doing it. Identify ways to improve your efforts and strategies. Evaluate your programming for young people.

### SIX STEPS TO PROMOTING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT THROUGH YOUR YMCA



### Adapt the Six Steps to Fit Your YMCA

Although this guide outlines a step-by-step approach to promoting civic engagement, the approach is not a one-size-fits-all design, it's merely a process to facilitate your efforts. The way you choose to create a culture rich in civic engagement will depend on your YMCA's individual strengths.

The approach to promoting civic engagement presented in this guide celebrates the current strengths of your YMCA, the current strengths of your community and the current strengths of the efforts you have already made. This approach is about recognizing what's already working and building from there.

You don't need major funding (or even a line item in your budget) to begin the process of promoting civic engagement. You don't need to start a major campaign. What's more, promoting civic engagement can work no matter what type of YMCA you have. All you need is a commitment to do so.

### Getting Started

The transformation begins with the first person who promotes civic engagement for the first time at your YMCA—your civic engagement champion. This champion can be anyone associated with your YMCA, including you. The civic engagement champion you choose should model civic engagement, advocate for it and enlist others to promote it (the more champions you enlist at multiple levels within your YMCA, the sooner you'll embrace civic engagement throughout your full operation). With *YMCA Civic Engagement Guide* as a road map, your champions will coordinate your initial civic engagement promotion efforts and lead the way for integrating civic engagement into all aspects of your YMCA.



### Expanding Your Efforts

Although the process of changing your YMCA into a civic engagement catalyst may ultimately take a long time and seem complex, at the beginning you can and should give the clear message that small, everyday actions of promoting civic engagement can happen right now and will make a difference.

Your staff and volunteers can begin promoting civic engagement in young people immediately. You can start educating your members about civic engagement and provide them with opportunities to act right away. You don't need to have a civic engagement strategic plan in place to get people started.

With these initial efforts under way, you and your team of leaders can begin the larger process of integrating civic engagement into all facets of your YMCA's operation.

### Outcomes

Among other things, your YMCA's investment in promoting civic engagement will

- Attract more young people to your YMCA and increase the number of young people who become members, participants, staff and/or volunteers at your YMCA;
- Increase your overall membership;
- Strengthen your YMCA's mission, vision and goals and the community's perception of your YMCA;
- Amplify the ways in which your YMCA is meeting the needs of young people and others in your community;
- Position the YMCA as a community and national leader in promoting civic engagement; and
- Increase the number of young people who are civically engaged.

### It's the YMCA's Civic Mission

Changing the course of youth civic engagement in our country requires big ideas, renewed commitment, shared vision, catalytic leadership and local community-based capacity. By drawing on the YMCA's history and by linking its efforts to promote civic engagement to what YMCAs are already doing in and for communities around the country, this guide leverages a combination of strengths that has a chance—and perhaps a significant probability—of catalyzing developmental change on a national scale.

YMCAs are uniquely positioned to model and lead the kind of transformation needed in all of our country's social institutions and communities and the young people they serve. *It's the YMCA's civic mission.* What excites us most—and what we hope will excite you the most—is the possibility that YMCAs, including your YMCA, will lead the way in both capturing and mobilizing our collective capacity in this important transformative work.



*If you're not promoting civic engagement, you're missing out on the real mission of the YMCA.*



YMCA of the USA

101 North Wacker Drive, Chicago, IL 60606

[www.ymcacivicengagement.org](http://www.ymcacivicengagement.org)