POINTS OF LIGHT

From Idea to Impact

A VOLUNTEER PROJECT PLANNING GUIDE



POINTS OF LIGHT

Volunteering changes *everything*

Volunteering has the power to strengthen communities, bring people together, and create meaningful change in support of a cause. The most impactful volunteer projects aren't necessarily the biggest, they're the ones rooted in real community needs and shaped by the people who understand those needs best.

Whether you're organizing a project for a few friends, a workplace team, or a larger group, getting started doesn't have to be complicated. This guide will help you turn an idea into action, providing practical steps to design a volunteer experience that is both meaningful and community centered.

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LISTEN AND LEARN

The most successful volunteer projects are built with communities, not for them. By listening first and planning together, you can create a project that is both impactful and meaningful for everyone involved. Use the steps and exercises below to listen, observe, and check what community members and organizations are already identifying as priorities.

1. Listen to Community Members

Not sure where to begin? Start by identifying the people and organizations that know the community and issue best. Spend time gathering input from the people who live in the community. You can:

- Conduct short surveys
- Hold a listening session or focus group
- Talk with neighbors at community events
- Ask questions on local social media groups

When community members identify their priorities themselves, volunteer projects are more likely to be relevant and successful.



What Is a Community Map?

A community map is a way to discover the strengths, opportunities, and issues in a community by identifying its resources. From its people, nonprofit organizations, local businesses and more, every community is full of resources! The more you learn about your community, the better equipped you will be to take informed and impactful action on the issues and causes you are most passionate about.

First, we will provide you with some techniques to listen and learn about your community and then we will dive into your community map. Once you decide on an issue that you would like to take action on - the resources you've identified in your community map are here to help you!



Community Map Questions

Consider these questions as you complete your community map and fill in your answers on the next page. If you can't find all of the answers to these questions right away – don't sweat it! You can revisit these questions at any point.

CULTURE

What traditions are important to my community?

What stories and experiences are significant to the history of my community?

When have members of my community worked together to achieve a shared goal?

INSTITUTIONS

Places that are of service to the community, such as: libraries, nonprofit organizations, places of worship, local businesses, schools

List five institutions in your community. What is each institution's main purpose?

PEOPLE

Who is in my community?

What do residents see as a priority for the community?

What would residents like to see improved?

Who are the leaders in my community? What issues are important to them?

COMMUNITY GROUPS

Voluntary associations of members, such as: Girl Scouts, environmental clubs, sports teams

List three groups in your community. What is each group's main purpose?

PHYSICAL & NATURAL RESOURCES

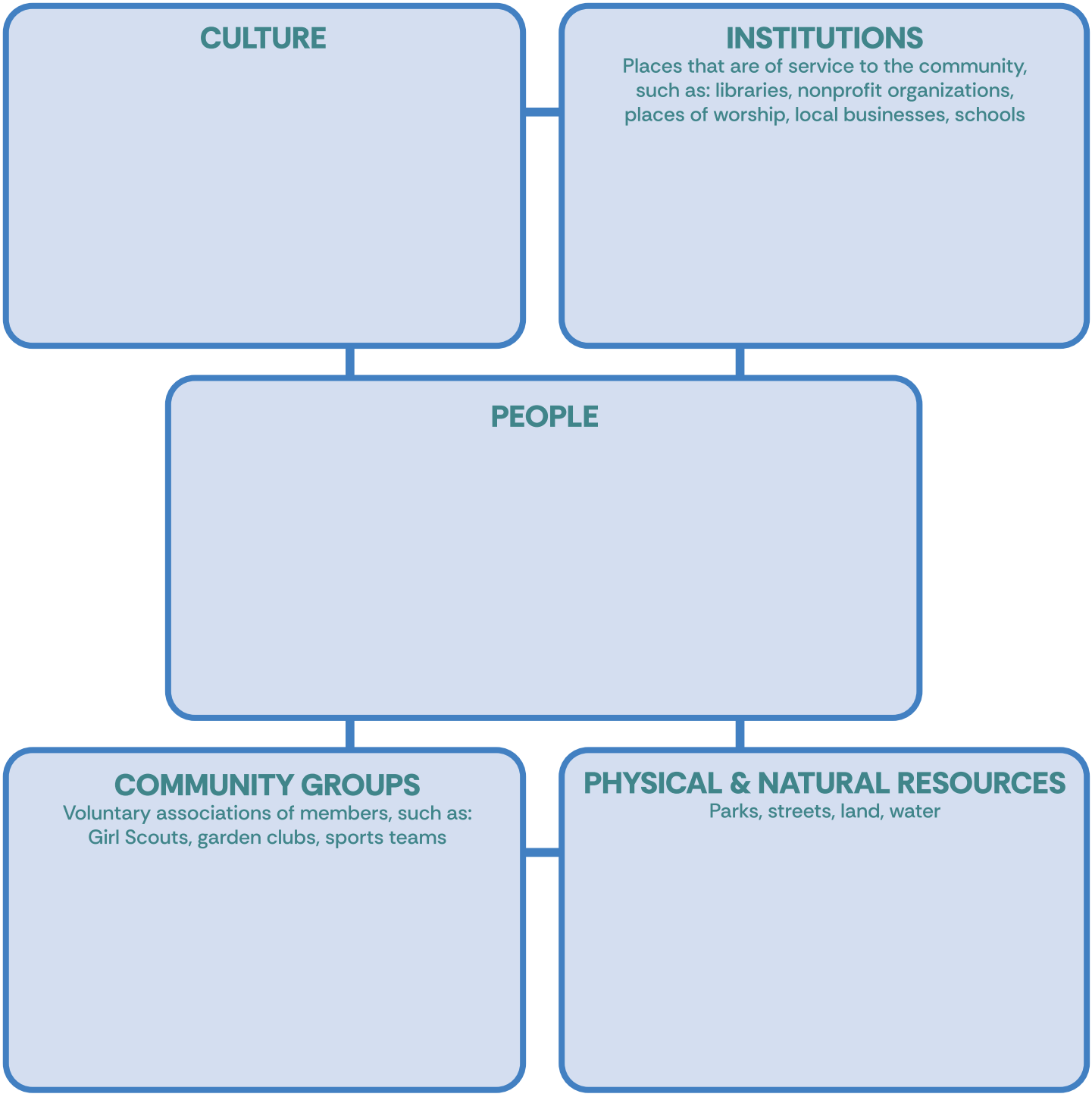
Parks, streets, land, water

List three natural or physical resources in your community. What do these physical and natural resources provide for residents?

Adapted from Building Communities from the Inside Out, Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993

My Community Map

Print or fill in this blank community map.



2. Reflect on Social Issues

Reach out to schools, nonprofits, food banks, libraries, faith communities, shelters, or community centers and ask:

- What needs are you seeing most often?
- Where do you need more volunteer support?
- What community priorities or challenges have become more pressing recently?

These organizations work directly with community members and can quickly point you toward unmet needs such as food insecurity, literacy gaps, social isolation, environmental concerns, or youth development.

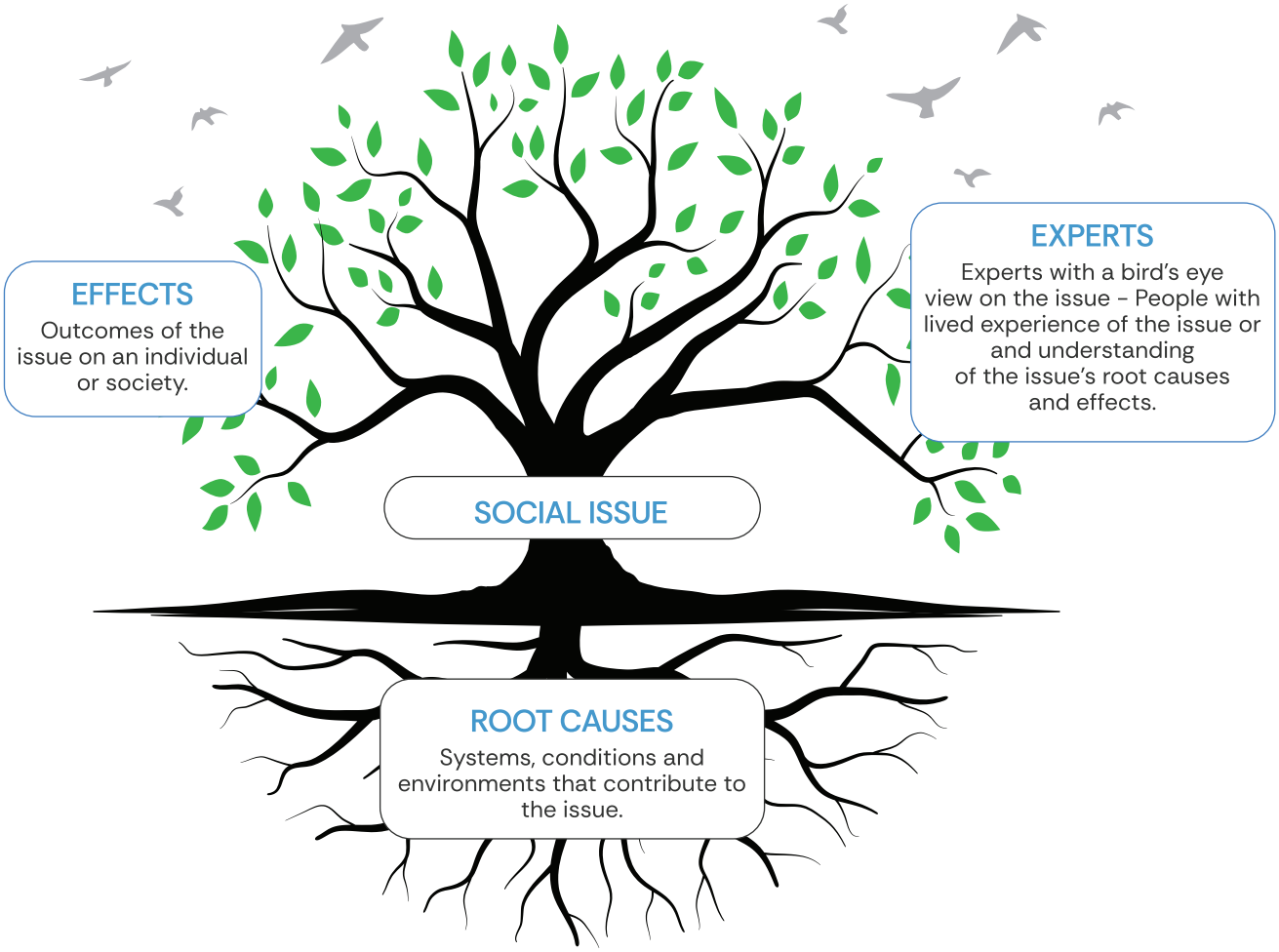


Social Issue Tree

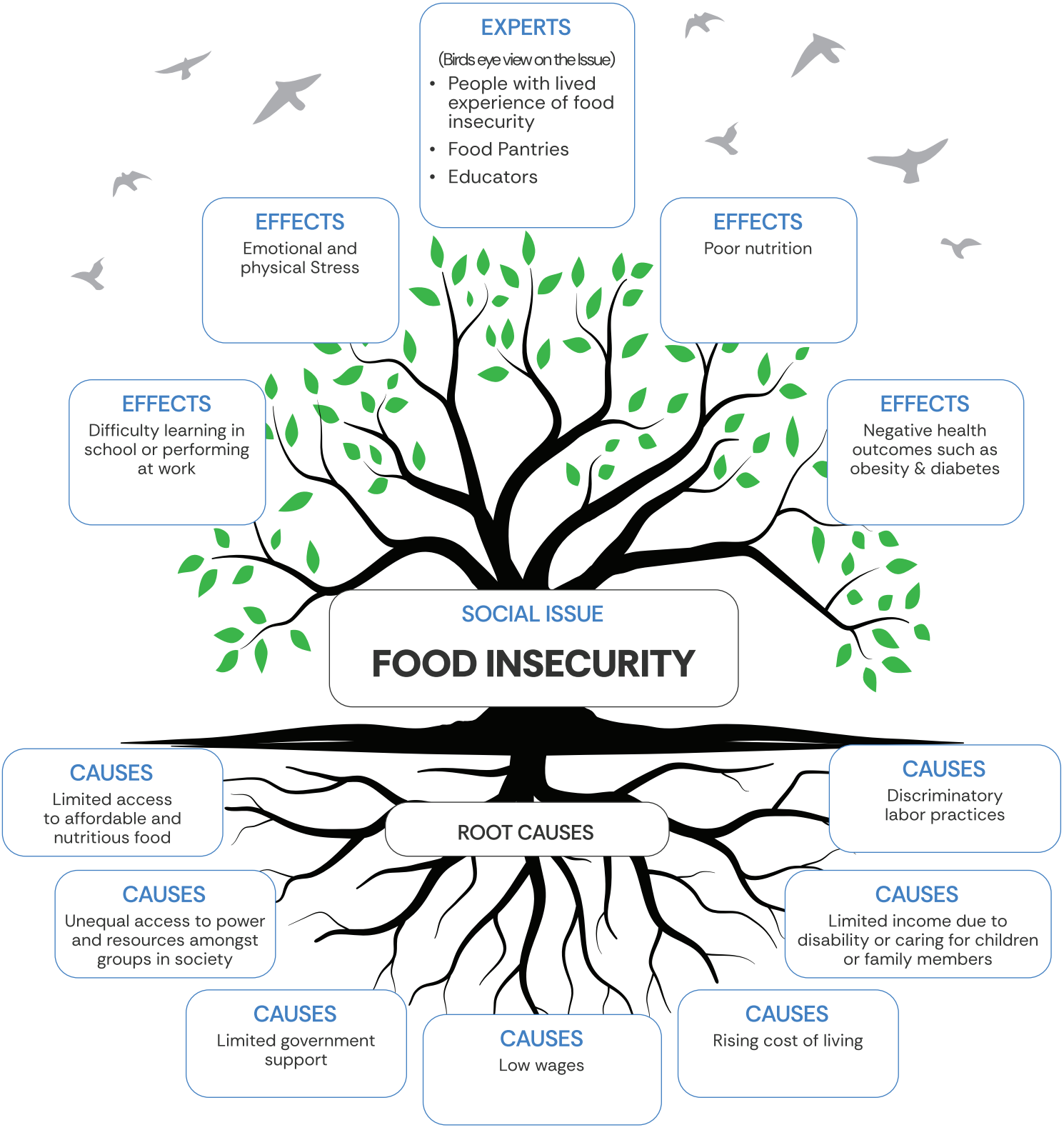
A **social issue** (also sometimes called a cause) is an issue that impacts many people in a community or a society. For example, food insecurity, racial & social justice and affordable housing are all social issues. But to understand how to support an issue that you care about, you need to understand the causes of that issue. A **social issue tree** is a way to identify and map the **root causes** and **effects** of a social issue. By identifying these root causes, you can begin to think about the best ways to take action to be a part of the solution.

How to Create a Social Issue Tree

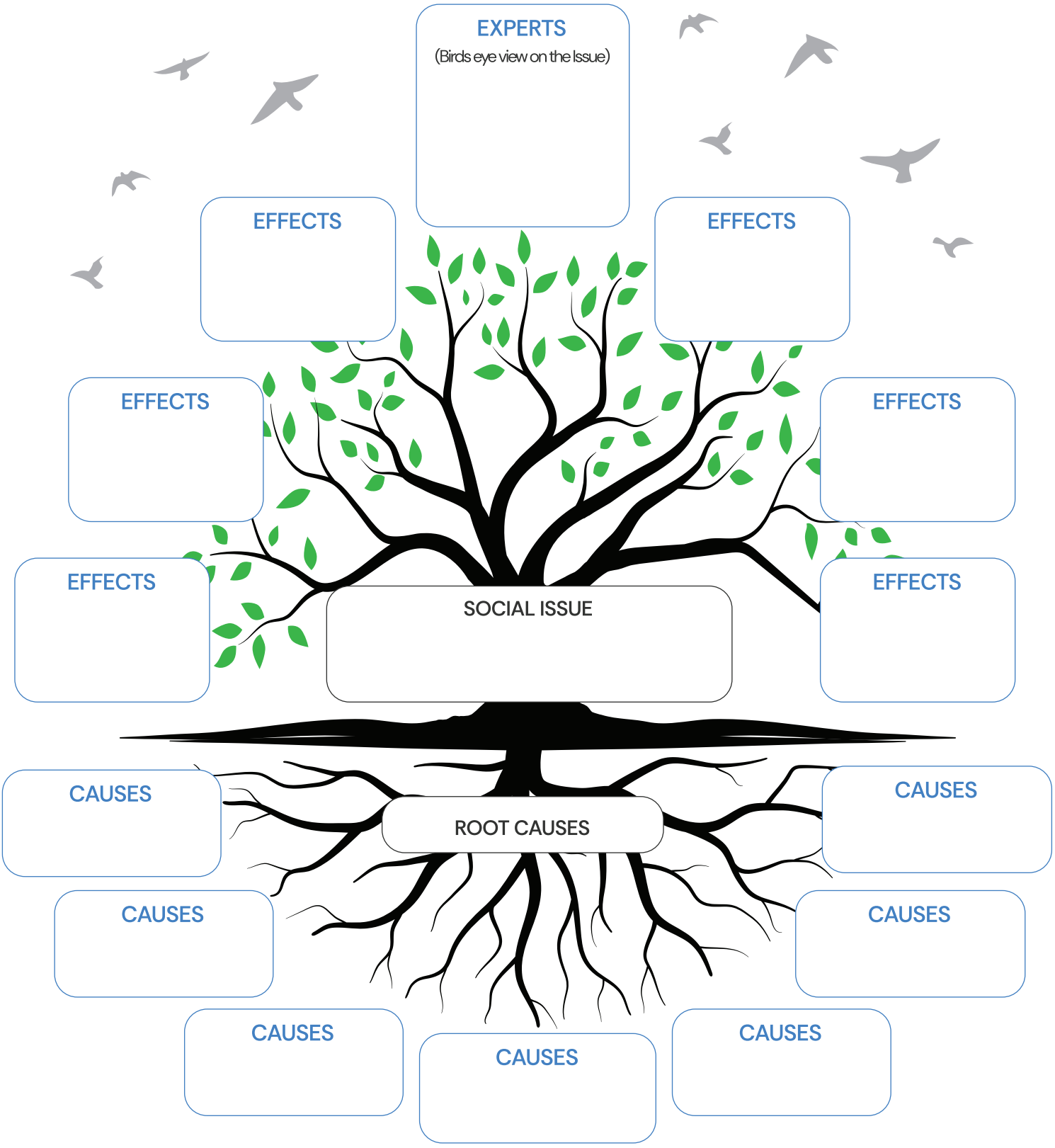
1. **Choose your issue** – Think about an issue that you feel passionate about.
2. **Identify the experts** – The experts will help you determine the root causes and effects of the issue. They can include people and communities with lived experiences of the issue, organizations that support people affected by the issue, researchers who study the issue and more.
3. **Draw your tree** – Use the blank tree provided or draw your own tree. We have also provided an example of a completed tree.



Social Issue Tree - Example



My Social Issue Tree



3. Develop Community Partnerships

Think about what community stakeholders can provide to help carry your project out. This may include people with lived experience, organizations, local agencies, businesses, civic groups, youth, or resident groups that can advise, approve, donate, lend, host, promote, or provide volunteer support.

The table below highlights potential partners, the value they bring, and questions you can ask to better understand community needs, build strong relationships, and shape a project that creates meaningful impact.

PARTNER TYPE	WHY THEY MATTER	WHAT TO ASK
People with lived experience	They understand what help is useful, respectful, and practical.	What would make this project helpful? What should we avoid?
Organizations serving the issue	They know current needs, rules, logistics, and clients.	Do you have a project volunteers can support? What guidelines should we follow?
Local government or institutions	They may control permits, sites, equipment, or safety rules.	What approval, cleanup, insurance, or access steps are required?
Businesses and civic groups	They may donate space, supplies, promotion, or volunteers.	Would you donate, lend, host, or share the opportunity?
Youth or resident groups	They bring energy and community connection.	What role is appropriate, safe, and meaningful?

As you meet with potential partners, here are some topics to consider including in your conversations:

- Introduce who you are, where you live or gather, and why this issue matters to you.
- Share what you have learned so far, then pause and ask what you are missing.
- Ask whether your project idea is useful, timely, safe, and welcome.
- Confirm the exact activity, length of time, date, location, volunteer count, age requirements, accessibility needs, and safety expectations.
- Ask what supplies, forms, photo rules, donation guidelines, parking details, and cleanup expectations are required.
- Agree on a primary point of contact and any deadlines.

Sometimes a prospective partner will decline participating, and that's ok. Treat it as useful information. Ask whether the timing isn't right, if the project is not needed, or if a different activity is better. Sometimes the best way to support a community is by joining an existing effort instead of creating a new one.

PLAN FOR IMPACT

Most volunteer projects take more planning than people expect—
but that planning is what sets them up for success.

1. Assess Project Fit

Before moving forward, take a step back and make sure your project aligns with the community need you've identified and is realistic given the time, budget, skills, and support available to you.



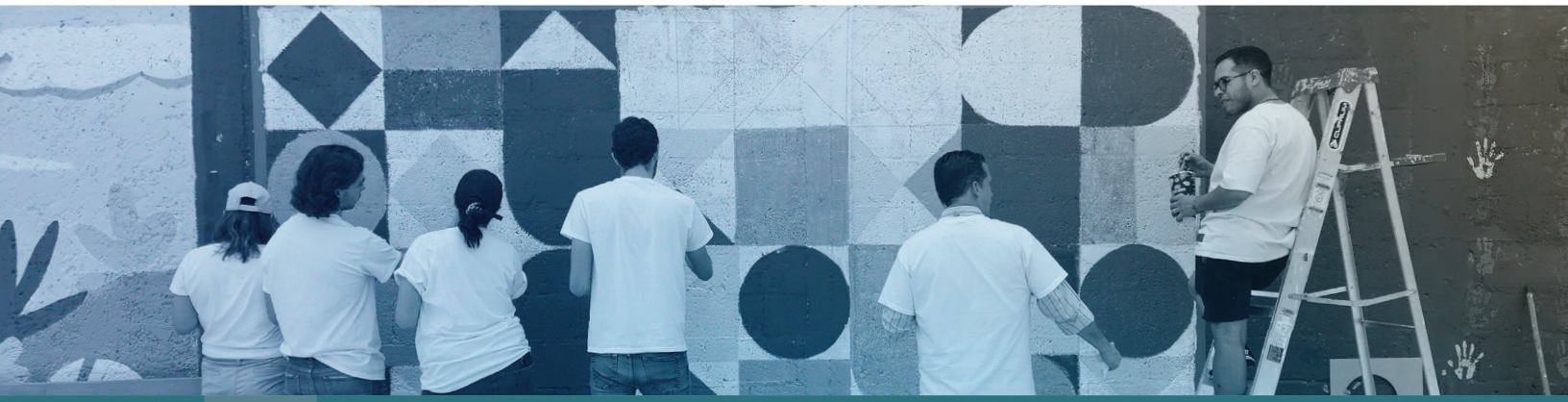
A focus area is the broad cause you care about; a project is the specific action you will organize.

PROJECT SWEET SPOT: The most impactful projects are those that address pressing needs while also matching community partner interests and volunteer skills and abilities.

Other considerations:

- Will the volunteers be able to see the visible difference they made
- Is the work tangible and sustainble? (i.e. will it last and not feel like just "busywork"?)
- Can the tasks be completed in the allotted time?
- is the project appropriate for volunteers? (i.e. is it safe to complete and does not require specialized skills?)

The most successful volunteer projects balance ambition with practicality. Taking time now to assess your resources, constraints, and partnerships can help you avoid common challenges and set your project up for success. Use the table below to capture your ideas, test your assumptions, and determine whether your project is ready to move from planning to action.



Project Assessment Exercise

DECISION POINT	KEEP IT REALISTIC BY ASKING...	WRITE YOUR ANSWER
Focus area	Is this a community priority, not just our idea?	
Community need	How did listening and learning inform this?	
Project idea	What will volunteers do? Can this be finished at one time?	
Special skills	What tasks require a trained partner, permit, tool, adult supervision, or special safety step?	
Organizer capacity	How much time can be committed to organizing?	
Budget	What can be spent, and what must be donated or borrowed?	
Partner support	How will community partners be involved?	
Quantity	How many volunteers can I safely brief, supervise, and support?	
Location	Where? How much can be completed in the given space?	
Date and time	When?	
Other project leaders	Who will help lead volunteers at the project? Who will be responsible for taking pictures, tracking what has been accomplished, etc.?	

2. Identify Your Resources

Before asking for contributions, draft a supply list and budget so you know what to request and can make specific, realistic asks. Could an item be donated by a local business, borrowed from a partner organization, purchased within your budget, or provided by volunteers? Identifying sources early can help you manage costs, avoid shortages, and ensure everything is in place before project day.

SUPPLY LIST + BUDGET TEMPLATE

MATERIAL	SOURCE	QTY	COST EACH	TOTAL	STATUS
Collection boxes	Borrow from neighbor group	6	$0	$0	Confirmed
Shelf-stable snacks	Donation drive	100	$0	$0	In progress
Reusable gloves	Local hardware store	20	$3	$60	Request sent
Water for volunteers	Organizer purchase	2 cases	$8	$16	Needed
Printed signs	Library printer	10	$0.25	$2.50	Needed
Garbage Bags	Volunteers will bring	30	$0	$0	Confirmed

3. Set a Realistic Timeline

A collection drive may come together in three to four weeks, while a hands-on service project involving partners, supplies, site logistics, or safety considerations may require six to eight weeks or more. The sample timeline below provides a roadmap for the entire planning process, from the first spark of an idea to project day and beyond. Each stage connects to a section later in this guide, where you'll find practical tips, planning tools, and examples to help bring your project to life.

Sample Planning Timeline

WHEN	ACTIVITIES
8 WEEKS OUT	Identify a community need to support.
7 WEEKS OUT	Listen and learn – Connect with local partners such as residents or local organizations to identify how a volunteer project can support the community need.
6 WEEKS OUT	Develop the project goals, ideal volunteer count, types of activities, and a rough budget.
5 WEEKS OUT	Confirm project date, location, access needs, rules for engaging youth or taking pictures, supply needs, and backup plan.
4 WEEKS OUT	Begin volunteer recruitment, request donations, and reserve space/ tools.
2 WEEKS OUT	Reconfirm details with partner(s), close or cap volunteer sign-ups, and plan volunteer emails.
3 DAYS OUT	Check weather, supplies, signage, forms, first-aid, and send final details to volunteers.
DAY OF PROJECT	Arrive early to set up, brief volunteers, complete tasks, clean up, and thank everyone.
3-5 DAYS AFTER	Send thanks, share results, return supplies, debrief with partner(s), and begin to think about what comes next.

DESIGN THE EXPERIENCE

This is where your idea starts to take shape as a real volunteer experience. Before inviting others to participate, take time to map out the work that needs to happen and how it will come together.

1. Think through the Volunteer Experience

A complete volunteer experience includes the steps that happen before, during, and after project day:

- **Identifying volunteer roles**: What roles are needed, and what does each role contribute?
- **Recruitment**: Who is the right fit for the opportunity, and how many people can the project use well?
- **Onboarding and training**: What do volunteers need to know before they begin?
- **Supervision**: Who will answer questions, support volunteers, and adjust tasks if plans change?
- **Recognition**: How will volunteers be thanked and understand what they helped accomplish?

2. Design Activities

A strong project plan answers three simple questions: **What will happen? Who is responsible? What is needed?** Documenting these details helps turn good intentions into coordinated action and ensures everyone understands their role.

Keep your plan clear and practical. If a fellow volunteer, troop leader, neighbor, or volunteer coordinator needed to step in at the last minute, they should be able to follow the plan and keep the project moving forward with confidence.

ACTIVITY PLANNING TEMPLATE

ACTIVITY/TASK	TASK LEADER	VOLUNTEERS NEEDED	MATERIALS	DONE MEANS...
Set up check-in table	Alex	1	Sign-in sheet, pens, name tags	Every volunteer signs-in
Sort donations	Priya	6	Tables, bins, labels	Items sorted by partner categories
Pack kits	Marcus	10	Bags, supply list, quality checklist	All kits match checklist
Cleanup and handoff	Jordan	4	Trash bags, boxes, partner receipt	Space is clean; items delivered

DESIGN THE EXPERIENCE

Plan for *Access and Safety*

- Confirm age requirements and adult-to-youth supervision.
- Ask about disability access, restrooms, parking, transit, shade, and seating.
- Prepare first-aid supplies and know who will be responsible for handling any emergencies.
- Match tasks to volunteer ability; offer seated, lighter, or non-physical roles.
- Use closed-toe shoes, gloves, sun/rain gear, or masks when appropriate.

Plan for *Quality and Dignity*

- Use the partner's preferred language for the issue and community being supported.
- Protect privacy; do not photograph clients, homes, or sensitive sites without permission.
- Do not leave unfinished work for the partner(s).
- Donate or return extra supplies to the community partner(s).
- Leave the space cleaner and more organized than you found it.



3. Plan for the Unexpected

Even the best-planned projects can encounter unexpected challenges. A few volunteers may cancel at the last minute. Supplies might arrive late. Weather, traffic, or site conditions could require a change of plans.

The key isn't to anticipate every possible problem—it's to be prepared to adapt when something doesn't go as planned. Taking time to think through potential challenges and backup options before project day can help you respond quickly, reduce stress, and keep the project moving forward. A little contingency planning can make the difference between a disruption and a minor adjustment.

SCENARIO	RESPONSE
Fewer volunteers arrive than expected	Focus on the highest-priority tasks first. Reduce the number of stations, complete a smaller area, or lower the number of items being assembled.
Supplies are missing or delayed	Use the supplies that are available and adjust the activity. Shift volunteers to sorting, prepping, cleaning, writing notes, or another task that does not depend on the missing items.
Weather affects the project	Move to an indoor backup activity, shorten the outdoor portion, delay the start time, or focus only on tasks that can be done safely.
A task takes longer than planned	Complete fewer items, reduce the project area, or move volunteers from lower-priority tasks to the task that needs more support.
Volunteers finish early	Have a short list of extra tasks ready, such as cleanup, organizing leftover supplies, writing thank-you notes, counting completed items, or preparing materials for a future project.
A safety concern comes up	Stop the task, check in with the partner or project lead, and adjust the activity before continuing. Do not ask volunteers to keep working if the task cannot be done safely.
The partner requests a change	Listen to the partner's guidance and adjust the plan as needed. Prioritize what is most useful to the partner, even if it changes the original activity.
Cleanup takes longer than expected	End project work early and move volunteers into cleanup roles. Make sure the space, supplies, and trash are handled before volunteers leave.

ACTIVATE AND ENGAGE

As your project date approaches, shift your focus from planning the idea to preparing the details that will bring it to life. Think through the entire volunteer experience—from setup and check-in to project activities, cleanup, and the moment the last volunteer heads home.



1. Bring People Together

Volunteers are more likely to sign up—and have a positive experience—when they understand the purpose of the project, what they'll be doing, and what to expect before they arrive.

That's why recruitment works best after the project has been clearly defined. A well-scoped opportunity allows you to answer the questions volunteers are already asking: Who will this project support? What will volunteers do? Where and when will it take place? How long will it last? What should participants wear or bring? How many volunteer spots are available?

When it's time to spread the word, start with the places your community already trusts and pays attention to. Consider sharing through group chats, school newsletters, troop meetings, neighborhood associations, community calendars, faith communities, local businesses, partner organizations, and social media networks.

The goal isn't just to recruit volunteers - it's to connect the right people to a meaningful opportunity to make a difference. And remember, while it's always good to plan for some level of attrition, keep sign-up capacity aligned with the scope of the project. A large number of volunteers is not always better.

VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT TEMPLATE

Hi **[Name or Group]**,

My name is **[name]** and I'm excited to invite you to make a difference in our community by joining us on **[date]** from **[time]** at **[location]**.

Together with **[partner organization]**, we'll be **[activity]** to help address **[community need]**. Volunteers will play an important role by **[specific tasks]**, helping create a meaningful impact for **[who the project supports and why it matters]**.

As a volunteer, you'll have a chance to learn more about **[issue/cause]**, connect with others who care about the community, and be part of a project designed to make a meaningful difference.

No special experience is required – just a willingness to help. To ensure every volunteer has a meaningful role, participation is limited to **[number]** volunteers.

Project Details

- Date: **[date]**
- Time: **[time]**
- Location: **[location including parking and public transit details]**
- What to Wear/Bring: **[items]**
- Sign-Up Deadline: **[date]**

Ready to get involved? Sign up today and be part of something meaningful.

Questions? Contact **[name]** at **[contact information]**. I hope you can join us for what is sure to be a great day!

COMMUNICATION CHECKLIST

When communicating with volunteers, consider what they need to know to be prepared and show up on time.

- Within three days of the project, reconfirm the project date, time, location, parking and transit options, weather plan (if project is outdoors), attire (e.g. closed-toed shoes), what not to wear (e.g. high heels), what to bring (e.g. water bottle, hat), and what not to bring (e.g. lighters, vaping devices).
- If volunteers are pre-assigned to a task, consider sending them details on their assignment.
- Share any photography or other waivers well in advance. If volunteers under the age of 18 are participating, you may need a permission form signed by the parent.

2. Set Your Project Up for Success

When project day arrives, your plan should help volunteers feel welcomed, informed, and ready to contribute. It should also provide a clear roadmap for anyone helping lead the project, ensuring everyone understands their roles, responsibilities, and the flow of the day. The more prepared you are behind the scenes, the more meaningful and seamless the experience will be for everyone involved.

CREATE A DETAILED SCHEDULE

TIME	ACTIVITY	WHO/WHERE/NOTES
7:15–7:30 a.m.	Project leaders arrive at community center	Devonte will arrive at 7:10 to unlock building. Meet in front lobby
7:30–8:30 a.m.	Set up project supplies	All project leaders
8:30 a.m.	Breakfast arrives	Sandra will drop off and set up
9:00–9:15 a.m.	Volunteers arrive	Susie and Juan will greet volunteers in the front lobby
9:15–9:30 a.m.	Opening remarks and project overview	Erika Smith Derick Johnson
9:30–9:35 a.m.	Group photo	In the lobby in front of the organization's banner (taken by Devonte)
11:30–11:45 a.m.	Clean up	Devonte will direct volunteers to trash cans and dumpsters
11:45–12:00 p.m.	Debrief and reflection (meet back in the front lobby)	Erika and Devonte will co-lead
12:05–12:10 p.m.	Volunteers depart	

A detailed plan for those supporting the leadership of the project helps ensure a well-run event. It doesn't need to be complicated, but it should clearly outline what will happen, when it will happen, and who is responsible for each part of the day. The clearer the plan, the easier it is for everyone to stay organized and focused on making an impact.

VOLUNTEER SCHEDULE TEMPLATE

While volunteers don't need the level of detail that project leaders do, a simple timeline of the key activities helps them know what to expect and mitigate questions about what comes next.

TIME	ACTIVITY
[Time volunteers arrive]	Volunteers arrive [note where volunteers should meet and any other activities associated with their arrival such as registration]
[Time]	Opening remarks and project overview
[Time]	[create a time and activity for all key moments and milestones such as a group photo, cleaning up, group reflection, etc.]
[Time volunteers depart]	Volunteers depart



OPENING REMARKS

The project kickoff sets the tone for the entire volunteer experience. It's an opportunity to do more than share logistics—it helps volunteers understand the purpose behind the work, how their efforts will contribute to the community, and what to expect throughout the day.

A strong kickoff strikes a balance between inspiration and information. Volunteers should leave feeling welcomed, informed, and ready to contribute. The table below outlines key topics to consider. Keep in mind that shorter is often better—aim to keep the kickoff to 15 minutes or less so volunteers can quickly transition from listening and learning to taking action.

TOPIC	DETAILS
Why does this matter?	While what you're doing matters, why you're doing it is at the heart of the project. • Greater context for the issue or cause being supported • How the community partners are working to combat these issues • How the tasks being completed during the project align with the issue or cause
Encourage conversation and questions	This may be a volunteer's first time supporting a particular issue or cause. By encouraging conversation with each other, you're fostering a sense of belonging while acknowledging there's more we can all learn.
Logistics	Equipping volunteers for success begins with answering their questions before they have even asked them. You should plan to address: • How volunteers will be broken into tasks, if applicable • A quick recap of the schedule • Note where restrooms, dumpsters, refreshments and other key areas are • Safety concerns and requirements, if applicable • Any other policies of the organization, if applicable • Rules around taking pictures • Introduce who volunteers can go to with questions • Remind volunteers that flexibility is key to ensuring success at the end – if they are needed to transition to support something else, etc.

CLOSING REMARKS AND REFLECTION

It's important to bring everyone together at the end of a project to show appreciation for the collaborative work and celebrate the group's accomplishments. This is also the space to reflect on what's been learned and how volunteers can continue to stay involved. The table below includes some reflection questions to get you started.

WHAT?	• What were your initial expectations of this experience? • What did you know about this issue, community, people impacted or organization before the project? What have you learned as a result of this experience?
SO WHAT?	• How have your views or understanding about this issue changed as a result of this project? • How was this experience different from your expectations? • How have you connected with someone else on a personal level during this experience? What insights did you gain or share with them? • Is there anything about this experience that surprised you about the issue, the people or community impacted, or even yourself?
NOW WHAT?	• How can this experience help you approach future interactions with a deeper understanding of the challenges that others may be facing? • What more would you like to learn related to this issue? • How can you share what you've learned or experienced today with others? • What more can be done to support this cause (i.e. volunteering, donating, using your voice, listening and learning, etc.)? • What commitments has this inspired you to make or what action are you taking next?

SUSTAIN AND GROW

The project may be over, but the impact doesn't end when the last volunteer leaves. Taking time to follow up with volunteers and community partners is an important step. It's an opportunity to express gratitude, gather feedback, celebrate accomplishments, and reflect on what was learned.

After the project, document what happened and the impact that was made. How many people participated? What was accomplished? What worked well? What would you do differently next time? Capturing these insights can help you tell the story of your project, recognize contributions, and plan future volunteer projects more effectively.

A successful project is something worth celebrating. Whether this is a one-time effort or the beginning of something larger, taking time to reflect on the experience can help you identify new ways to stay connected and continue making a difference.

As you think about what comes next, the Points of Light Civic Circle® can be a helpful framework for exploring additional ways to stay involved, such as listening and learning, using your voice, donating, volunteering again, or taking other civic actions connected to the cause.





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