

BELONGING & CIVIC MUSCLE

People need fulfilling relationships and social supports to thrive. They need to feel part of a community, contributing to its vibrancy, and developing the power to co-create a common world. Social support from friends, family, and other networks helps us navigate challenges and reinforces healthy behaviors. People who feel connected tend to live healthier, happier lives.

At the community level, feeling like an important part of a larger community strengthens social ties, increasing trust and cooperation—making it easier to work together. This connection builds a virtuous cycle: When people feel valued and cared for within the community, they are more likely to contribute and participate in creating healthy, equitable places.





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POWER TO SHAPE A COMMON WORLD

< 1/3 of people in America believe that “most people can be trusted,” down from 50% in the 1970s

2X as many people report feeling lonely today as in the 1980s—and the number of people who say they have no one to turn to during difficult times has tripled

62.5M adults volunteer, however, membership in civic groups has decreased by more than 13% since 1974.

4.6M youth are not in school or working, and rates of disconnection are significantly higher for Native American (26%), Black (17%), and Latino (14%) youth.

47% of eligible voters cast a ballot in the 2018 midterm elections—a 50-year high.

AMERICA ITSELF IS A GRAND—AND STILL-EVOLVING—EXPERIMENT based on the idea that all people belong and have the power, or civic muscle, to govern our lives together. The great social movements of the past half-century profoundly changed America’s civic landscape in ways that carry deep implications for who feels they belong and how we work together to shape a common world.

The ideas of belonging and civic muscle bring together a long history of related concepts, such as such as, civic agency, civic capacity, deliberative democracy, public participation, public work, constructive nonviolence, and collaborative problem solving. All of these traditions strive to make democracy come alive, not only on election day but every day, as a way of life where we work across our differences in pursuit of the things we value.

The novel coronavirus and other crises in 2020 revealed, once again, many staggering contradictions of interdependence and injustice across our country. It will take an even more decisive movement to fulfill America’s promise of dignity and justice. Rather than focusing on any single issue, this movement must further expand the boundaries of who belongs and strengthen our civic muscle to build the resilience we all need to survive and thrive together through whatever crises may come our way.

KEY ISSUES

- **Communities with an inclusive sense of belonging and strong civic muscle may be better able to:**
 - Design their own pathways to resilience
 - Gather assets to respond effectively and equitably in a crisis
 - Persistently expand vital conditions, while alleviating urgent needs
 - Use their power to assure mutual accountability
- **Community-driven change**, which strengthens people’s resilience and responsiveness, is more likely to make lasting progress, while also being more fair and democratic.
- **Community-driven change is characterized by:**
 - Shared power between organizational decision makers and community residents
 - Multiple perspectives on issues
 - Meaningful participation from diverse people and organizations
 - A commitment to equitable processes and outcomes
 - Decisions that are transparent and widely supported

*Facts adapted from the **Belonging & Civic Muscle Deep Dive***

PIVOTAL MOVES

A SELECTION OF IDEAS FOR CHANGING COURSE

ORGANIZE RECOVERY & RESILIENCE ACCOUNTABILITY COUNCILS

Recovery and Resilience Accountability Councils would assure local control and coordination over the direction, actions, and accountabilities of residents, as well as federal, state, philanthropy, and business partners. These Councils would incorporate insights from similar, successful efforts, like Accountable Communities for Health and Ryan White Planning Councils.

ESTABLISH A COMMUNITY COMMONWEALTH CORPS

A nationwide Community Commonwealth Corps would build on America's long history of public work, repairing the lives, businesses, community organizations, places of worship, infrastructures, and other common goods decimated by the COVID-19 pandemic and by the decades of neglect, civic erosion, and racial injustice the pandemic has revealed so starkly.



The daily drumbeat of the disproportionate deaths of Black people from the novel coronavirus and police killings serves as a stark reminder of the pernicious persistence of systemic racism. As a counter to Mississippi's long history of racism, former Governor William Winter founded the **William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation** in 1999 on the belief that "honest, purposeful talk (about race) works." Over the years, it has helped bring perpetrators of racial violence to trial, taught police officers how to avoid racial profiling, exposed the symbolic racism of Confederate monuments, altered the public narrative about race by creating school curricula that tell the truth about the state's history, orchestrated rituals of atonement, and advocated for institutional reforms to replace systems of oppression with equitable ones.

EMBRACE TARGETED UNIVERSALISM FOR FAIRNESS & EFFECTIVENESS

Targeted universalism is a framework that allows communities to establish common goals and create strategies to support specific groups. When we understand how we are each situated in relation to the vital conditions we all need to thrive, we are better able to meet the unique needs of our friends and neighbors—and move toward shared outcomes.

UPHOLD CIVIL RIGHTS & HUMAN RIGHTS

We must uphold civil rights and human rights for all. US history shows substantial benefits when we enforce established civil rights with respect to health care, education, employment, housing, transportation, voting, environmental protection, and other vital conditions—all of which remain unrealized.

DEPOLARIZE PARTISAN POLITICS & WEAVE SOCIAL FABRIC

We must work together to discover what we have in common, building our social fabric around shared values and productive discourse. Organizations like Braver Angels, Weaving Community, Local Voices Network, and Living Room Conversations offer resources and strategies for facilitating conversations and dialogues across differences.

TRACK CHANGES IN BELONGING & CIVIC MUSCLE

Design a knowledge platform to track changes in belonging and civic muscle in communities across the country. This platform would spot trends and assess the influence of civic interventions intended to catalyze local, state, and national conversations about what transformed civic life could look like.

BELONGING AND CIVIC MUSCLE IS BOTH A VITAL CONDITION AND A PRAGMATIC NECESSITY FOR SUCCESS IN ALMOST ANY ENDEAVOR TO EXPAND WELL-BEING.

PATH TO RENEWAL

Belonging and civic muscle shape our civic life, who feels they are able to take action, and how we co-create our common future. A strong civic life requires active participation to produce communities that meet the needs of all residents.

ADAPTED FROM THE [BELONGING & CIVIC MUSCLE](#) DEEP DIVE

Citizenship does not end. It is not a task to be completed, and certainly not a drive to defeat other citizens. It is work: continuous, difficult, often frustrating, yet inherently dignified, personally rewarding, and publicly meaningful work—work that embodies inclusive democratic ideals for the frankly practical reason that no one group or generation can do it.

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In 2007, the Kansas Health Foundation invested an initial \$30 million over 10 years to establish the **Kansas Leadership Center**, dedicated to developing civic leadership across the state. Today, the Kansas Leadership Center reaches more than 2,000 people a year, redefining leadership and explicitly building civic capacity and resilience through its provocative programs and establishing a track record of helping others make progress on adaptive challenges. By shifting the focus of leadership from a few leaders in the heroic mold to pervasive leadership from all parts of society, the Kansas Leadership Center is transforming the civic culture of the state.