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Promoting peace through
mutual respect,
understanding
& cooperation - one
individual, one community
at a time.

Communications Toolkit

Sister Cities International – History Fact Sheet

Early Years

Despite isolated community partnerships and informal citizen relations, the people-to-people initiative did not gain momentum until President Eisenhower's 1956 White House conference on citizen diplomacy. The post-World War II climate proved an ideal environment to launch this kind of effort. With enthusiastic response to the concept, tens-of thousands of Americans pledged their support to create a free and peaceful world.

Growing out of the two-day White House Conference, participants formed forty-two "People-to-People" committees. The autonomous nature of the federally backed movement meant that some committees flourished while others never left the ground. By 1960, thirty-three committees continued the original mission. Organizations such as "People-to-People" grew out of this umbrella group of committees.

The sister city idea developed from the Civic Committee. Envisioned by President Eisenhower as the 'main cog' for citizen diplomacy, the sister city program grew throughout the 1950's and 1960's. The Civic Committee and the National League of Cities provided joint administrative support for the fledgling sister city movement until 1973.

A 1974 study found that many early sister city relationships formed out of the post WWII aid programs to Western Europe. The relationships that endured, however, were based on cultural or educational reasons that developed lasting friendships.

In an attempt to repair relations with Japan, Seattle, Washington and Tokyo re-started a longstanding trading relationship between the two countries. Due to their initiative, other city officials revived trading agreements. These interactions developed into friendships and the foundation for sister city partnerships. Seattle eventually partnered with Kobe, Japan in 1957. Local government officials brought to life an initiative instigated at the national level. Key to all sister city partnerships, however, was community involvement alongside local government officials.

During the mid-1960's, city affiliations recognized that their diverse efforts needed coordination. In 1967, the Town Affiliation Association of the U.S. (already popularly know as Sister Cities International) was created. Its newly elected president, Ambassador George V. Allen, and the all-volunteer board of directors persevered through those early years of little funding and questionable prospects. Due to cuts in federal spending, the Association supported itself on member city dues and grant funds. The National League of Cities provided office space, access to office equipment

and other services. Over time, membership and interest increased and the association adapted to the growing demand.

Entering New Territories

In 1979, the very first U.S. and People's Republic of China links were created. San Francisco made waves by forming a 'friendship' relationship with Shanghai, China. In celebration of the event, a sister city newsletter shows Mayor Diane Feinstein clinking glasses with Ambassador Wing Bingham. Despite Cold War tensions, U.S. cities had already initiated sister city relationships with the Soviet Union in 1973.

Programs at that time focused on basic urban problems such as water and sanitation, health, housing, education and transportation. Begun in 1977, the national Technical Assistance Program (TAP) worked to create training programs to increase employment, establish cooperatives and credit unions or to create appropriate small-scale industries. Development agencies realized that industrializing countries experienced the same urban problems as developed nations. The sister city movement provided a mechanism for communities to share their experiences and growing pains. TAP focused on a spiral out benefits system. For example, a city project to improve surface drainage would indirectly aid the urban poor. These citizens would gain better sanitation and possible employment from the project. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) provided seed grant money for the project.

In the mid 1970's, the Town Affiliation Association began the School Affiliation Program. Through this program, youth gained greater sensitivity toward other cultures and a broader global perspective. In one program, Oakland, California and Fukuoka, Japan spent a school year exchanging artwork and conducting workshops on the Japanese culture. One child, when initially asked about Japan, knew very little beyond vague generalities. At the end of the school year, the same child responded to the same question, "Oh, Mrs. Korich, you know they are just exactly like us. They just go about things differently than we do."

The national organization also launched the Volunteer Training for Youth Leadership Development initiative. Formed in 1979, this program added a new dimension to Sister Cities International's focus on grassroots training.

Emphasizing two-way relationships, sister cities often reciprocated in kind for previous activities. In 1972, Seattle experienced a prolonged period of unemployment and needed supplies. Remembering the aid it received after WWII, Kobe, Japan sent several thousand tons of rice that winter to its sister city.

Celebrating a 25th Anniversary

The Town Affiliation Association marked its 25th Anniversary in 1981. By that time, 720 U.S. cities representing 85 million citizens were linked to over 1,000 communities in 77 nations around the world. In addition, the association's name evolved to its current form, Sister Cities International.

Sister Cities International achieved several goals by its 25th Anniversary: It created a two-way street for cultural understanding; put a human face to international news and reports; and it stressed the commonality of urban problems and the resulting interdependency of humanity. Sister Cities International continued “to fulfill the desire of millions of Americans... to learn of similarities as well as differences and hence to chart a better road to understanding of the world.” (Congressional Record, Mar. 17, 1981).

During the 1980's, a focus on municipal twinning developed. Mayors began to focus on relationships that offered technical assistance in municipal development. Similar to TAP, these exchanges worked on citywide issues such as solid waste management, urban planning, emergency response training and emergency management.

Cities also concentrated on international trade development. Building on their sister city relationships, participants developed economic interests with practical benefits. In one joint venture, a Baltimore, Maryland business sent engines to a business in Xiamen, China. Factories in China used the engines in excavating equipment and forklift manufacturing. Despite ongoing debate on international trade, these cities took initiative and implemented durable business ventures at the grassroots level.

End of the Cold War and Creating New Ties

In September 1991, an unprecedented gathering of 220 Soviet officials and citizens arrived for the U.S.-U.S.S.R. Sister Cities conference. Held in Cincinnati, Ohio, organizers noted this was the largest-ever gathering of Soviet citizens in the U.S. With the U.S.S.R.'s troubled political and economic situation, delegates discussed developing local government, citizen involvement, education and the environment. Trade and creating business ventures also featured importantly at the conference. From there, the mayors visited their individual sister cities for five days. The conference sought to encourage international understanding and communication amongst ordinary citizens. This event followed the failed August coup against President Mikhail Gorbachev and preceded the eventual independence of the Soviet Republics at the end of 1991.

Capitalizing on the growing world economy, many sister city members developed lucrative business agreements with their partners. Vermont's Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream company, for example, started a factory in Karelia, Russia. The company served 3,000 Russians a day and offered the same profit-sharing framework to its Russian employees as found in the American company. While not a primary goal, business relationships were a natural by-product of sister city exchanges.

During the mid 1990's many U.S. mayors conducted exploratory tours to countries in Asia, including India and Vietnam. The mayors addressed common urban issues; experienced the culture; facilitated mutually beneficial economic opportunities; and promoted new sister city partnerships. The United States Information Agency (USIA) co-sponsored one trip with the Vietnam-U.S.A. Society as the sponsors in Vietnam.

Some innovative programs from this time period involved a grant to sponsor Russian and American newspaper partnerships within the sister city framework. Over the course of two years, the news agencies exchanged management, created U.S.-based internships, conducted on/off site

training. Where appropriate, joint venture partnerships were considered. Through this exchange, Russian newspapers learned about sustained independent management and the U.S. news agencies gained insight into the operation of independent Russian print media.

Another innovative program promoted the age-old tradition of apprenticeships, but with a new twist. For example, Austin, Texas and Koblenz, Germany exchanged students to train in auto mechanics, baking and carpentry. These apprenticeships focused on area teenagers instead of the traditional twenty-year-old age bracket. The Austin apprentices gained skills that were in great demand in the U.S.

In addition, the Internet offered another medium for communication. Through the introduction of e-mail in 1993, Sonoma, California could communicate instantaneously with its sister city Kaniv, Ukraine. As one organizer noted, e-mail is the most cost-effective method to create personal communication between distant cities.

Sister city supporters grew concerned in 1995 when the U.S. House of Representatives passed legislation to eliminate the United States Information Agency. With vocal support from the U.S. Conference of Mayors International Affairs Committee and concerned sister city members, Sister Cities International continued with renewed support from the government. USIA eventually merged with the U.S. Department of State and became the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.

The Millennium and Beyond

Many programs took new form and Sister Cities entered the century invigorated and ready to tackle the current global issues. Staff communicate with members around the globe through an extensive website and produce electronic publications to support local sister city programs. Numerous government agencies and private entities provide seed grant money for initiatives.

Sister Cities International now facilitates a Sustainable Development Network. The network bases its programs on the policies outlined by the international community such as the UN's Millennium Development Goals. With numerous successes already to its credit, the Network helps cities exchange ideas and develop their programs. Louisville, Kentucky and Tamale, Ghana participated in a videoconference with Casablanca, Morocco and Chicago, Illinois. The more experienced cities offered advice on how the Louisville-Tamale committee could develop a five-year plan on environmental sustainability. Featured at the World Bank conference, the event became a case study of citizen diplomacy aiding international development.

Sister city youth programs continue to grow and strengthen. In 2001, the U.S. government launched the Friendship Through Education (FTE) consortium, through which Sister Cities International was an active participant. The program aims to help American school children network and learn from Islamic counterparts overseas. As a result of the consortium, Sister Cities International became a participant in the Youth Exchange and Study (YES) program. Through this program, students predominantly from the Middle East study for a year in the U.S. On a

2004 exchange, students from Gaza, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Pakistan, Syria, West Bank, Tunisia and Yemen lived in the U.S. for a year with host families and attended a leadership summit in Boulder, Colorado. To further the youth program's goals, Sister Cities International developed a Youth and Education Network in 2004.

With the introduction of the International Community Resource Center to its website in 2001, the Internet shrunk the distance created between communities by language and geography. By 2004, Sister Cities International began offering its members innovative translation tools for communicating with sister communities, databases for reporting local successes and a fundraising database for local communities. Many members utilize the translation software and it is one of the most frequent sites visited on the web. The program continues to evolve and improve with new software.

While approaches and attitudes have changed, one underlying theme remains – the value of local citizens reaching out to each other globally. Despite the international climate, individual citizens reached out and discovered the reality behind the rhetoric. A sister city friendship ended the Cold War for many individuals in 1973, not the Soviet government's collapse in 1991. Burlington, Vermont addressed the Palestinian and Israeli conflict by forming a tripartite city relationship. Images of African countries moved beyond stereotypes of helplessness and isolation. Instead, images developed of emerging nations undertaking municipal improvement and economic growth. Concerned international citizens included themselves in the picture of modern diplomacy. The grassroots tradition remains strong in all sister city programs – a testimony to its founders' early vision and success.

For more information about the history of the sister city movement in the United States, see "Peace Through People: Fifty Years of Global Citizenship" published by Sister Cities International with Butler Books of Louisville, Kentucky. Copies are available for purchase through www.butlerbooks.com. A printable order form is included on the toolkit CD.