



## **Sister Cities International: An Introduction**

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## OUR MISSION

*Promote peace through mutual respect, understanding, & cooperation – one individual, one community at a time.*

## ABOUT SISTER CITIES INTERNATIONAL

Sister Cities International is a nonprofit, citizen diplomacy network that creates and strengthens partnerships between U.S. and international communities to increase global cooperation at the local level. Headquartered in Washington, DC, Sister Cities International promotes sustainable development, youth involvement, cultural understanding, and humanitarian assistance. As an international membership organization, Sister Cities International officially certifies, represents, and supports partnerships between U.S. cities, counties, states, and similar jurisdictions in other countries to ensure their continued commitment and success. The Sister Cities International network represents more than 2,500 communities in 137 countries around the world.

### History

Sister Cities International traces its roots to 1956 when President Dwight D. Eisenhower proposed a people-to-people citizen diplomacy initiative. Originally part of the National League of Cities, Sister Cities International became an independent, nonprofit organization in 1967 due to its tremendous growth and popularity.

Sister Cities International is unique in that it aims to increase global cooperation through long-term, mutually beneficial partnerships at the local level. It works to motivate and empower private citizens, municipal officials and business leaders and awaken them to the advantages—and increasingly, the necessity—of being internationally engaged.

### What we do

Throughout its history, sister city programs have responded to rapidly changing global needs and realities. While Sister Cities International's mission initially focused largely on encouraging cultural understanding, it has grown to reflect the complex global realities and interconnectedness of our changing world. Today, sister city partners engage in a vast array of mutually beneficial, innovative and meaningful projects, including:

- Arts and Culture
- Business and Economic Development
- Disability Awareness
- Education
- Emergency Preparedness
- Environment
- Healthcare
- Humanitarian Assistance
- Municipal Training
- Public safety
- Women in Leadership
- Youth Involvement

The programs undertaken in local sister city organizations are as unique as the communities themselves and the goals and needs within them. All programs, however, are rooted in the concept of personal exchange.

### Leaders in a global mission

Sister Cities International is the sole, official U.S. counterpart of other international organizations that utilize the concept of town “twinning” to encourage global understanding and cooperation. Sister Cities International creates strategic partnerships with many of these organizations to help our mission gain momentum around the world.

While different terms are often used to describe long-term partnerships between two communities (sister cities for the United States and Mexico; twin cities in Russia and the United Kingdom; friendship cities in Japan and China; partnerstadt in Germany; and jumelage in France), all denote the same concept promoted by Sister Cities International.

## WHY HAVE A SISTER CITY?

As the world becomes increasingly smaller, communities face numerous opportunities—and challenges—that require a global perspective. A sister cities program enables citizens to become directly involved in international relations in a unique and meaningful way, bringing long-term benefits to both the U.S. community and its partner abroad. Whether linking with a metropolitan city in Germany, or a small village in Ghana, communities learn and grow as a part of its sister city partnership.

On the most basic level, sister city relationships allow citizens to exchange ideas, gain an international perspective, and increase their understanding of global issues. However, many sister city programs go further, lending economic growth and development to both their home and partner communities, or humanitarian support to regions in need. While sister cities build the foundation for increased tourism, reliable business contacts, and cross-cultural awareness, they also foster a desire to reach out to the world's less developed regions and build personal bridges to world peace.

## WHY BELONG TO SISTER CITIES INTERNATIONAL?

Sister Cities International assists cities, counties, states, and similar jurisdictions in other nations, in every phase of the twinning process. Communities interested in establishing sister city partnerships benefit from Sister Cities International's extensive experience and legacy in creating lasting, meaningful partnerships of all types around the world. Members remain in contact with knowledgeable staff eager to lend guidance and support to ensure the success of both budding and mature relationships. Members also benefit from the ability to network with other successful city-to-city partnerships. Sister Cities International's Annual Conference is specifically organized to aid members in this networking process.

Sister Cities International members benefit from grants and programs initiated by the international office in Washington D.C. Sister Cities International's partnership with the Wheelchair Foundation, for instance, allows sister city communities to send wheelchairs to their counterparts abroad through a program called "Wheelchairs for Peace." Other programs have revolved around domestic violence prevention, local governance, and HIV/AIDS education and prevention. Two of our current programs are the Sister Cities International Network for Sustainable Development and the Youth and Education Network. To find out about these opportunities and many more, please visit the Sister Cities International Web site at <http://www.sister-cities.org>.

Sister Cities International offers numerous member services including:

- **Grants:** Eligibility to participate in all Sister Cities International grant programs, such as: "The Sister Cities Network for Sustainable Development," "Wheelchairs for Peace," "Open World Leadership Program," "Africa HIV/AIDS," "Emergency Preparedness," and the Islamic student exchange program (YES).
- **Publications:** Subscription to all Sister Cities International publications, including quarterly issues of *Sister Cities International Newsletter*, a bi-weekly e-Newsletter, the annual membership directory, and instructional guides covering all aspects of local program development.
- **State Coordinators:** U.S. members receive support from a dedicated and experienced volunteer in the state, who will make personal visits to your community. State Coordinators supply a mentor element to communities that are interested in developing sister city partnerships but need advice on how to get them started. They also offer their professional expertise to already-established programs that want guidance in developing or reorganizing their programs.

- **Meetings and Conferences:** Sister Cities International’s Annual Conference provides an opportunity for sister city programs from around the world to network, learn about new innovations and share experiences. State Coordinators also hold regular meetings to provide these same opportunities at the state level.
- **Awards Programs:** Eligibility to participate in Sister Cities International’s Annual Awards Program and the Sister Cities International Young Artist Competition, where your community can gain national recognition for your achievements.
- **Insurance:** Opportunity to purchase discounted supplemental medical traveler’s insurance, board member liability insurance, and event insurance.
- **Access to Sister Cities International’s Web site** at <http://www.sister-cities.org>, which features:
  - ❖ “Cities Seeking Cities” list, requests for sister city partnerships along with detailed community profiles and contact information for both U.S. and international cities
  - ❖ Tools and techniques that promote outstanding sister city programs
  - ❖ Contact information for sister cities around the globe
  - ❖ Stories about local sister city partnerships, which reaches hundreds of people each day
  - ❖ Updates on programs conducted by local sister city organizations with support from Sister Cities International
  - ❖ News about sister city programs around the world

## HOW TO GET INVOLVED

### Membership

Sister Cities International offers membership to U.S. cities, counties, states and territories, as well as international communities that have a recognized sister city relationship with a U.S. community. In addition, corporations, associations, businesses, educational institutions, and individuals are also invited to join the Sister Cities International network. Membership categories:

#### *Voting Members*

- U.S. cities, counties, states and territories (including towns, villages, or incorporated areas of any size)
- International communities that have a recognized sister city relationship with a U.S. community
- Municipal associations

#### *Non-voting Members*

- Corporations
- Nonprofit organizations
- Embassies
- Individuals

### Forming a sister city partnership

Any official jurisdiction—whether it is a borough, village, township, city, county, state, or similar jurisdiction in other nations—can become a member of Sister Cities International and begin to build a sister city partnership. A sister city, county or state relationship becomes official with a signing ceremony of the top-elected officials of the two local jurisdictions, following approval by the local city councils (county commissions or state legislatures), as appropriate. However, your community does not have to have a sister city, or a sister city committee in place, to become a member of Sister Cities International.

## WHAT MAKES A SUCCESSFUL SISTER CITY PROGRAM?

The strongest and most successful types of sister city programs incorporate the three main sectors of a vibrant, productive community, county or state: local government, business, and civil society/citizen volunteers. Successful sister city programs will have:

- Support and involvement from city hall and the business sector
- Broad-based support and involvement from the community
- Alliances with like-minded organizations
- Strong communication links
- Cross-cultural awareness
- Clear objectives
- Willingness to grow and take risks
- Regular, ongoing exchanges

Even if your community lacks the resources to make trips between the two countries, there are a variety of low-cost exchanges that should continue to occur every year:

- An annual “state of the city” letter between the two mayors
- Exchanges of the cities’ annual reports and city plans by officials at city hall
- Exchanges of children’s artwork, letters or e-mails
- Periodic exchanges of interesting newspaper articles that show how society, technology, the environment, etc., are changing in your city
- Cultural festivals, movies or speeches that celebrate the culture of the sister city (foreign students or business people from the nation of the sister city can be guest speakers)

### **HOW DO SISTER CITIES FIND EACH OTHER? LOTS OF DIFFERENT WAYS!**

- A city with a significant population from abroad will initiate a sister city relationship. For example, New Brunswick, New Jersey’s large Hungarian-American population led to a link with Debrecen, Hungary.
- A number of sister city ties have been formed after a U.S. or foreign company opened a factory in a city abroad, or when two cities have very similar economic bases, such as two ski resort communities.
- Communities with the same name often consider partnerships. For example, Toledo, Spain, and Toledo, Ohio, are sister cities.
- Diplomatic staff at posts around the world, Peace Corps volunteers and business travelers often recommends matches, based on their knowledge of specific communities.
- The owner of Japan’s Western Village, a theme park near Imaichi, Japan, visited Rapid City, South Dakota, after seeing the film “Dances with Wolves,” which was filmed near Rapid City. As a result of this visit, the two cities developed a successful partnership.
- Many sister school, university, YMCA, or Rotary Club partnerships have developed into formal sister city links.
- Cities undertake sister city partnerships for humanitarian purposes, such as New Orleans partnering with Tegucigalpa, Honduras after Tegucigalpa was devastated by a hurricane.

### **HOW TO CHOOSE A SISTER CITY**

Communities find each other in many different ways. It may be a top-down process, where two mayors meet and become friends, and then involve the rest of their community in the relationship. Or it could be a bottom-up process, where a group or individual in the community—an educator, businessperson, service club or ethnic

association—takes the lead and organizes a sister cities committee and then requests that their elected leaders form an official partnership.

Communities interested in building sister city partnerships can also utilize the “Cities Seeking Cities” section of Sister Cities International’s Web site, which enables communities to “meet” by reviewing online profiles.

Creating a sister cities partnership is like entering a marriage. It is a long-term commitment and thus requires a lot of “courting” to ensure that the best partner is chosen.

In general, it is wise for cities to pursue a relationship with a community that is similar in geography, population, industry or interest. The following are some of the factors which should be taken into account when selecting a sister city. Keep in mind that this is only a loose guide to assist in your search. However, while some cities choose their partner based purely on commonalities, others find greater success and fulfillment via the adage “opposites attract.” Your choice depends entirely on your objectives: economic development, diverse cultural exchange, humanitarian assistance, etc.

*Overall factors to consider:*

- Is there genuine interest on both sides?
- Is there a long-term commitment to the relationship?
- Is there adequate financial support for exchanges and maintenance of the relationship? If you are working with an underserved region, are you capable of covering expenses they might not be able to handle?

Make a realistic assessment of what makes a successful sister cities relationship, and capitalize on the existing strengths of both communities. Remember that a desire to learn from and share experiences with a sister city can often balance the lack of similar characteristics with a potential partner.

*Look at the general characteristics of both communities:*

- What the goals and objectives of each partner?
- Are there similarities in population, geographic location (mountains, desert, lake, or port), key industries, and ethnic population?
- Does the community already have existing linkages with other universities, businesses, YMCA, or Rotary clubs?
- Does the city have sister cities in other countries? Are they successful?
- What will be the role of the local government and the sister cities committee in the relationship?

*Look at economic issues:*

- Socio-economic conditions
- Language/cultural patterns and barriers
- Market analysis of industries
- Investment climate/present investment levels
- Liberal versus restrictive trade climate
- Port city-port connections
- Invisible trade (education, high-tech, service, exports)
- Trade exchange potential
- Number of tourists
- Presence of foreign businesses/factories locally
- Local businesses engaged in international activity

*And political factors:*

- History of diplomatic relations
- Present degree of cooperation between U.S. and international country in political, economic, commercial, and cultural fields
- Level of government bureaucracy
- Diplomatic presence
- Honorary consuls

## **HOW TO ESTABLISH A SISTER CITY PROGRAM**

Sister city programs are as unique as the communities developing them. Most local programs do fall within three main types of organizational structures: the association, the city commission, and the corporation.

**Association:** An association is a group of people joined for a common purpose, often without a formal structure. Ordinarily it is not incorporated, but uses the same methods and forms used by corporations. This type of structure is usually found in small to medium-sized cities with an informal sister cities program, as well as among programs with little community-wide fundraising or funding.

**City Commission:** A city commission is put together formally by municipal ordinance and carries out its functions as an arm of city government. The mayor usually appoints the members of the sister cities commission, and the commission is responsible for affiliation policy and direction.

**Corporation:** The corporation is a legal entity with its own name. It is made up of individuals that must follow the laws regarding corporations. Sister Cities International strongly suggests incorporation of sister city programs, and applying for tax-exempt status under the statute 501(c) (3) of the IRS tax code.

## **HOW ARE LOCAL SISTER CITY PROGRAMS FUNDED?**

Local sister city programs fund themselves in various ways. Many, if operating as part of the city commission, receive funding from their city budget. Others, operating as voluntary citizen organizations, rely on membership dues, fundraising campaigns (ranging from bake sales to black tie galas), and other community-based donors willing to support the mission of the sister cities organization to support their activities.

Local program budgets vary accordingly, from hundreds of dollars to millions, depending on the community, their structure, and their program goals.

## **YOU'VE FOUND A COMMUNITY THAT YOU WANT TO BE YOUR PARTNER—NOW WHAT?**

Once two communities have found each other, it is very important that they not rush the formalization process. Sufficient time should be taken to develop a strong base of support for the partnership in both communities:

- The two communities should share information, including their best brochures, city reports, and videos, if available.
- Each community should develop strong city hall and business support and, most importantly, a broad-based committee made up of a wide-range of citizens interested in supporting the partnership. This committee should not consist of only one ethnic group, nor be dominated by a single individual.
- Official delegations should visit both communities, including, but not be limited to: the mayor (or another high ranking city official); representatives of the business community; the acting president, chair and/or city liaison for the sister cities program; an educator; and a person or group to highlight local culture, such as a performing artist.
- It is often desirable to carry out a specific, substantive exchange or project of interest to both sides prior to formally linking as sister cities. Examples include an exchange of children's artwork, an internship involving city officials focused on city planning or the environment, hosting a business delegation, and/or a cultural arts performance.

## **SISTER CITIES INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMS**

As part of its mission, Sister Cities International administers a number of international-level programs for the sister cities network:

### Sister Cities International Annual Conference

The Sister Cities International Annual Conference is held every summer and is an excellent opportunity for dedicated sister city volunteers, elected officials, professionals and international colleagues to network and learn from one another. The conference includes interactive workshops, invigorating speakers and international events. It is held in communities where the sister cities movement is strong and thriving.

### Young Artists Competition

Sister Cities International's "Young Artist Competition" aims to encourage youth, ages 13 through 18, from all parts of the world to express, through original artwork, their concept of the sister cities' mission through the competition's yearly theme. The artwork is judged on the basis of originality, composition, and theme interpretation. Winning entries are exhibited each year at the Sister Cities International Annual Conference and then are on display in various sister city communities across the country.

## Sister Cities International Annual Awards Program

Sister Cities International established the Annual Awards Program in 1962 to recognize exceptional sister city programs. A distinguished panel of judges reviews the programs, and the winners are honored at the Sister Cities International Annual Conference.

Awards are given in the following categories:

- Best Overall Program
  - Population less than 25,000
  - Population 25,000 to 50,000
  - Population 50,000 to 100,000
  - Population 100,000 to 300,000
  - Population 300,000 to 500,000
  - Population greater than 500,000
- Innovation
  - Arts & Culture
  - Economic Development
  - Education
  - Environment
  - Healthcare
  - Humanitarian Assistance
  - Municipal Cooperation
  - Public Safety
  - Sports
  - Technology & Communication
  - Youth
- Disability Advocacy and Awareness
- Volunteer of the Year

## **CURRENT PROJECTS**

Beyond the programs listed previously, Sister Cities International also administers a number of special initiatives:

*Wheelchairs for Peace:* Through a partnership with Sister Cities International, the Wheelchair Foundation and local Rotary clubs, sister city members can send wheelchairs to their partners abroad. For more information, please go to our Web site at: <http://www.sister-cities.org/sci/Wheelchairs>.

*The Open World Leadership Program:* Sponsored by the Open World Leadership Center at the Library of Congress, aims to promote ideas of accountability, transparency, and citizen participation in government by bringing Russian, Ukrainian and Uzbek elected officials, political candidates, and emerging political and civic leaders to the United States. The program is being administered by the Academy for Educational Development with Sister Cities International as a sub-grantee.

*Sister Schools:* Initially sponsored by the Hewlett Packard Company, this program gives schools and classrooms in the United States opportunities to “partner” with a school or classroom in another city. Through sister school partnerships, this program emphasizes the role of schools in increasing international knowledge and cross-cultural understanding of students around the world, as well as helping them to become informed and concerned citizen diplomats.

*Sustainable Development Network:* The Sister Cities Network for Sustainable Development is a network of sister city partnerships dedicated to responding to the challenges of achieving sustainable urban development. A current project is the “Waging Peace in our Communities” program which provides resources for four U.S. sister cities and their partners in France to share information on integrating immigrant populations in their communities.

*Youth and Education Network:* This network is committed to promoting and supporting youth programming and youth participation in the sister city movement. Sister Cities International is a sub-grantee to AYUSA Global Youth Exchange Program to develop and implement a week-long intensive leadership program for Islamic students.

## **SISTER CITIES AFFILIATIONS POLICIES**

Only dues-paying members in good standing with Sister Cities International will have their sister city partnerships formally certified and recognized by Sister Cities International.

New affiliations will be considered official only when Sister Cities International has received copies of the sister city agreement(s).

Sister Cities International will consider a relationship to be active unless notified otherwise. It will provide guidance in periodically evaluating a relationship. Sister Cities International will also assist in revitalizing a relationship or in terminating a relationship, if the partners agree it is not working out. Inactive partnerships may be designated as being in “Emeritus Status.” Under this category, relationships which are no longer active will still be honored.

Sister Cities International will recognize sister city affiliations in countries where formal U.S. diplomatic relations have not been established, provided that the U.S. government has at least an “Interest Section” operating in that country and provided that no federal funds are used by Sister Cities International to support the affiliation.

## **SUPPORT SISTER CITIES INTERNATIONAL**

Your support helps Sister Cities International fulfill its mission of creating and strengthening community partnerships around the world. Sister Cities International is a 501(c) (3) organization, and contributions from individuals, corporations and other organizations are tax deductible to the extent allowable by law.

You can honor a birthday, anniversary, holiday, or the memory of a special person with a gift to Sister Cities International. An acknowledgement will be sent to the person of your choice. Sister Cities International also accepts donations of stock.

For more information on supporting Sister Cities International, contact Amy Burchiel at [aburchiel@sister-cities.org](mailto:aburchiel@sister-cities.org). Or, send donations to:

**Sister Cities International**  
**Sister Cities International Annual Fund**  
**1301 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Suite 850**  
**Washington, DC 20004**

*Please visit our Web site at <http://www.sister-cities.org> for more information on sister city programs in your community.*