

How-To Guide 2024

Building Local Capacity for Environmental Equity and Social Resilience: CivicSpark

ecoAmerica's How to Guide is a resource for US leaders and their stakeholders to address climate challenges wherever they are living and working.

OVERVIEW

The Civic Spark guide helps individuals and organizations build capacity and address emerging environmental and social equity resilience challenges, providing an outline of how to undertake project planning, fundraise, leverage data, and work together in partnership with others.

STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

1. Identify a pressing capacity need amongst local agencies and organizations in your community.

Identifying a specific and prevalent local need, and developing a program that is flexible enough to continue meeting that need in changing conditions and priorities over time, is a key first step to CivicSpark's successful program model that other organizations could employ. CivicSpark was created to fill a large capacity gap in the community resilience field that developed in California over the past decade. Local, state, and non-profit agencies were passing new policies and receiving new community resilience funding, but they did not have the ability to implement these policies and fully utilize that funding. CivicSpark founders focused on anticipating where the policy landscape and resulting funding were heading, and contacted those who were receiving project funding. While federal and state funding priorities can change year to year (e.g. one year could be water management, another year composting initiatives), CivicSpark has developed a program that adapts to current local agency needs.

2. Determine whether emerging leaders, with your support and mentorship, would be able to fill this capacity need.

Many capacity challenges can be resolved through the devoted efforts of an emerging leader, with the mentorship of an experienced local staff member. In order for a program like CivicSpark to succeed, the Fellow needs to receive ongoing support and mentorship from the site supervisor. The project partner, in turn, benefits from the expertise and support of the staff. CivicSpark's success over time is tied to our focus on

building and sustaining relationships with project partners, Fellows, and alumni. From our first conversation, CivicSpark ensures that our project partners know the importance we place on positive partner experience and successful project outcomes. After a decade of successful operation and investment in our partners and Fellows, we have seen the power of support and mentorship come full circle. Not only are many of our earliest host sites longstanding CivicSpark partners, many of our earliest Fellows have built successful community resilience careers and some demonstrate leadership through becoming project partners themselves, sponsoring the newest generation of Fellows.

3. Develop a specific project (or series of projects) that emerging leader(s) could work on to further capacity, such as through research, planning, and implementation activities.

The CivicSpark program model is adaptable to many areas of focus—we listen to the needs of prospective project partners and help tailor their ideas into a project focus that will both benefit their community in the short and long term, and allow them to attract high quality Fellow candidates. We work closely with partners throughout every step of the process to ensure that their project will not only benefit the organization and/or community through capacity building, but is designed and structured to offer mentorship, professional development, and support to the Fellow. The core focus on relationships is how CivicSpark has been able to grow local capacity while simultaneously building green workforce pipelines.

4. Decide whether it makes sense to partner with an existing program like CivicSpark to meet your project needs, or to create your own program.

For some organizations, the time and financial investment in growing a program from scratch is unfeasible. In such cases, partnering with an existing program may be a more appropriate solution. While CivicSpark is flexible and our past project portfolio is very broad, our program must adhere to the parameters of the AmeriCorps model. For example, we are currently limited to California, Colorado, and Washington projects. We are happy to recommend similar programs outside our current region to interested parties.

5. In either case, pursue funding from government, private or philanthropic organizations to support planning and implementation of your project.

CivicSpark requires a project match from the project partner that varies slightly in each state. Many of our partners utilize funding from national organizations and/or philanthropic organizations to support planning and implementation. We can provide resources to help guide potential partners to possible funding avenues or connect them with current partners that have been successful in securing funding.

6. If creating your own program, develop a sustainable financial model to operate the program, including the staff support necessary to administer the program (operation, management, communications, outreach, etc.) and the ability to provide a livable wage or stipend for emerging leaders to participate in the program.

CivicSpark has a full support staff—operations, management, communications, outreach, etc.—that works behind the scenes to support Fellows and develop resources and relationships. With well over 100 Fellows to support (and plans to double that number), a skilled and effective team is critical. Many CivicSpark staff are Fellow alumni, which adds a critical depth of understanding and experience to our operational model. Our budget also prioritizes competitive financial support and exceptional training for our Fellows. Those interested in replicating this model should factor in the necessary operational staffing and support for emerging leaders—financial and professional development—when developing the program budget.

7. Develop a specific project scope of work that also includes training and educational materials.

When developing the project scope of work for emerging leaders, consider how the benefit will last beyond the service year and how to create resources to support the holistic development of both Fellows and partners. CivicSpark has developed a robust professional development plan that Fellows are required to complete. This includes in-person training focused on project and personal development, leadership projects that Fellows complete with their cohort, and service projects to benefit their local communities. We provide project partners with educational materials and networking opportunities throughout the service year to share insights and best practices.

8. Create metrics and benchmarks to assess whether capacity goals are being met.

The AmeriCorps model has reporting requirements that our team regularly completes and analyzes to ensure our projects are on track. These requirements range from reporting on project progression to evaluating the project partner's support for the Fellow's professional development. As part of our commitment to consistent improvement, CivicSpark also pursues external evaluations and collects additional internal metrics. This supplemental data collection and analysis is a critical aspect of continuing to grow and adapt our program in ways that are responsive to partners, Fellows, and a changing funding and policy landscape. In addition to specific reporting requirements, we recommend strategically defining your own metrics for success, and revisiting these metrics over time.

STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

9. Launch the project in partnership with an existing program like CivicSpark, or on your own once funding is secured.

Launching the program is an exciting time, as outreach, recruitment, and relationship building begin in earnest. Once the projects are rolling, make sure to provide consistent support and problem solve collaboratively with your partners and Fellows.