

Let's Get Engaged

A non-partisan voter registration and Get-out-the-vote toolkit for University/Community

Here's What We Did:

This guide was developed from a Get-Out-The-Vote(GOTV) effort conducted by Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) ASPIRE students and Mosby Court residents.

ASPIRE is a living-learning program focused on community engagement and Mosby Court is a public housing development located less than 2 miles from VCU's academic campus. Contained within this guide are the insights and practices that resulted from the joint GOTV effort. When using this guide, please keep in mind that all community-campus activities should comply with university policies and local law.

Here's Why We Did It:

The idea for the nonpartisan GOTV effort came directly from leaders of the Mosby Tenant Association and Mosby residents participating in a leadership program. The leaders and residents indicated that they wanted to partner with the ASPIRE students to design an intervention to mobilize voter turnout in the 2012 presidential election. The primary objectives of this effort were to: 1) increase the number of people who actively vote in the Mosby community, 2) help develop leadership skills among the Mosby residents, and 3) empower residents to become civically engaged.

The ASPIRE students primarily assist with efforts that are of real concern to the community and have been initiated by community partners. Thus, the GOTV project was readily accepted by the students because it met the overall aim of ASPIRE. When considering such an effort, it is important that students not sit in a classroom discussing the project, but, instead, that they talk with community partners about their priorities as they relate to voting. This will ensure that the project reflect the interests and priorities of the community partner, which is critical for success.

Here's How We Did it and You can do it too:

A plan was developed to guide the implementation of the GOTV project. This plan was based on a 3-pronged voter engagement model, which included: 1) voter registration, voter education and 3) getting residents to vote on election day. Before implementing the voter engagement model, key elements of community engagement practice were utilized to promote the highest level of participation by the Mosby residents. These practices included clarifying the purpose of the GOTV effort, building trust through the establishment of relationships, and seeking commitments. Additionally, the students worked with the residents to identify the resources in the Mosby community that could be used to support the project. Using an asset based approach helped the residents to identify the strengths of their community e.g. a community center, relationships with other organizations, residents trained to conduct voter registration, etc...

Details About The Voter Engagement Model

1. Voter Registration:

The first step was to register eligible Mosby residents to vote. To reach the unregistered voters, the students and Mosby residents were divided into small groups and went door-to-door to register voters in the Mosby precinct. The group also identified Sister Circle, a local non-profit, as a potential partner and hosted a second door-to-door voter registration drive during a Mosby based breast cancer walk sponsored by Sister Circle.

A. Key Components:

- Two door-to-door voter registration events were held in the Mosby community in the month before the November election. The students and residents planned and prepared 30 days prior to the event, which helped everyone to gain a better understanding of community processes.
- Identify nonprofit partners to assist in your voter registration campaign.
- Students and residents were provided voter registration training to ensure that everyone complied with the law and understood the rules.
- Students and residents were sent out in teams to knock on doors for safety reasons and to increase accountability. Going out in teams also help students to apply what they learned about civic engagement to a "real life" event.
- All forms were reviewed as soon as they were returned to check for missing information. The students and residents were required to return to the address listed on the form to complete missing information.
- It was discovered that many Mosby residents needed information about Restoration of Rights.

2. Voter Education:

During the second step of the approach, the ASPIRE students and the Mosby residents hosted a voter education luncheon in the Mosby community. State delegate Jennifer McClellan talked with the residents about why it is important to vote. Michael Brown, former chair of the State Elections Committee, explained to the residents what they should bring to the polls and what to expect on election day. The residents were able to register to vote during the luncheon. The ASPIRE students greeted the attendees, served lunch, and distributed literature.

B. Key Components:

- Food is an important incentive to motivate residents to attend the voter education event.
- It is .
- Provide election day information such as polling place locations, rides to the polls, ID to bring to the polls, etc...
- Discuss what is at stake if you do not vote and why it is important to vote every year.
- Invite elected officials and residents from other public housing developments to your event.

3) Get-Out-The-Vote

The last step was to turnout the vote on election day. The Mosby residents and the ASPIRE students started election day by pounding the pavement knocking on doors reminding people to vote. They also provided people with info about the free shuttle to the polls, which was operated by St. Paul's Episcopal Church. It's estimated that 100+ Mosby residents rode the shuttle to the polls. After knocking on doors, the students and residents passed out free doughnuts and T-shirts to those who voted.

C. Key Components

- Distributed flyers reminding residents to vote and giving instructions for riding the shuttle
- Made voting “easy” and fun on election day by providing free transportation to the polls, and handing out doughnuts and T-shirts.
- Asked everyone within sight if they needed a ride to the polls.
- Find ways to build excitement around election day.

Lessons Learned

- Trust and respect are the glue that hold together a successful campus-community engagement project.
- Personal contact such as door-to-door knocking is critical. Sitting at a voter registration table inside of a building is ineffective unless there is an event in the building.
- Community engagement practices are not prescriptive. Use the practices that work for your geographic area.
- Plan ahead for when and where you will hold your GOTV events.
- Record names/addresses of the people you register so you can follow-up with them and encourage them to vote.
- Invite as many residents as possible to participate in the engagement process
- Post flyers in multiple sites in the community.
- Take lots of photos
- Evaluate, evaluate, evaluate
- Have fun and celebrate your success!