



What Are Sister Cities?

Information for U.S. and International Communities

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SCI Affiliations Policy

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What Are Sister Cities?

What is Sister Cities International?

Sister Cities International (SCI) is the national headquarters for sister city, county and state programs in the United States. The U.S. Sister Cities program traces its roots to 1956 when President Dwight D. Eisenhower proposed a People-to-People citizen diplomacy initiative. Originally a part of the National League of Cities, SCI became a separate, non-profit corporation in 1967 due to the tremendous growth and popularity of the U.S. program.

For almost 50 years, SCI has empowered citizen diplomats as they engage in meaningful international exchange programs. SCI assists cities, counties and states with every phase of the twinning process, providing support, networking and outreach for current and future sister city programs. SCI organizes an Annual Conference and other state and international meetings; publishes monthly newsletters and other materials that support the work of sister cities; and administers a wide variety of public and private sector grant projects. These projects include everything from municipal training and community problem solving, to exchanges of media managers, thematic youth exchanges and professional internships focused on a volunteerism, aging, healthcare, public safety, the environment, and more.

What is a Sister City, County or State Relationship?

A sister city, county or state relationship is a *broad-based, officially approved, long-term partnership* between two communities, counties or states in two countries. 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.

Sister city partnerships have the potential to carry out *the widest possible diversity of activities of any international program*, including every type of municipal, business, professional, educational and cultural exchange or project. Sister city programs are also unique in that they inherently involve the three main sectors in a community: *local government, businesses, and a wide variety of citizen volunteers* (and civil society or non-profit organizations).

What is the Difference Between a Sister City and a Friendship City?

Various terms are used around the world to describe a long-term partnership between two communities: sister cities (United States, Mexico), twin cities (Russia, United Kingdom), friendship cities (as with relations between Japanese and Chinese cities), *partnerstadt* (Germany), and *jumelage* (France) all denote the same concept of partnered communities.

Although “sister cities” is the commonly used term in the United States, some U.S. cities have formed “friendship city” relationships with communities abroad. Often, there is no difference between these terms. For example, a “friendship city” relationship might be more active than a “sister city” relationship. If there is a difference in meaning, it is that “friendship city,” in the United States tends to refer to a partnership that is slightly limited in scope.

SCI encourages U.S. communities to use the term “sister city” instead, unless there is a specific purpose for limiting the range of the partnership. The most important thing is that these relationships should not

be entered into casually; there must be a commitment to develop support from your city hall and community as a whole for the affiliation, keeping it active, with substantive programs, over the long-term.

How Do Sister Cities Find Each Other and Develop a Relationship?

Cities find each other in many different ways. Sometimes it is a top-down process, where two mayors meet and become friends, then involve the rest of their community. Other times, it is a bottom-up process where a group or individual in the community, an educator, a businessman/woman, a service club or an ethnic association, take the lead and organize a sister city committee, then request that their elected leaders form an official partnership. Some cities link because they share the same name, or celebrate the same famous festival. Charming odd coincidences or chance meetings sometimes also lead to a sister city affiliation.

SCI also acts as a matchmaker, utilizing its “Cities Seeking Cities” section of the International Community Resource Center (ICRC), which enables communities to “meet” one another by reviewing on-line profiles. All communities, both U.S. and international, must complete a “Request for a Sister City” form in order to participate in this on-line service.

In general, it is wise for cities to pursue a relationship with a community that is as similar as possible in terms of geography, population, industries and interests. On the other hand, there are many successful “marriages” of opposites.

Here are some examples of the different ways that communities find each other:

- New Brunswick, New Jersey has a large population of Hungarian-Americans. This common ethnic heritage was the central factor in New Brunswick linking with Debrecen, Hungary. Similarly, African Americans form the core group of the Portland, Oregon – Mutare, Zimbabwe Sister Cities Committee.
- 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. Also, sister cities can be sister ports, as with Seattle, Washington and Kobe, Japan.
- Communities with the same name often consider partnerships. Toledo, Spain and Toledo, Ohio are sister cities, for example. Even Horseheads, New York found a city with the same name – in Japan. The Chinese characters used in Bato, Japan (BA-TO) mean “Horse-head(s).”
- Diplomatic staff at post around the world, Peace Corps volunteers and business travelers often contact SCI regarding communities they are aware of which share interests and would be perfect matches for one another.
- 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, and the contacts made, the two cities developed a successful partnership.
- An elementary school class in Washington State lobbied the mayor of Gig Harbor, Washington, to find a sister city after learning about the concept from their teacher.
- Many sister school, university, YMCA, or Rotary Club partnerships have developed into a formal sister city link.

Once two cities 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, including:

- The two cities 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 who are 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. These official delegations should include, 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 city 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. These projects then become a concrete success story to build on – a statement that the program will be active and meaningful for both sides. Such first exchanges could 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.

Important Factors for U.S. Communities to Keep In Mind When Developing a Sister City Partnership with a City Abroad

City Hall Vs. Citizen Volunteers

In most countries in the world, sister city programs are formally managed by an international relations division or some other official representative at city hall. There are obvious historical and practical reasons for this, such as centuries of cultural influence of Confucianism in East Asia, or a history of greater central control of local government in Indonesia or the NIS.

The United States, with its tradition of more individualistic *volunteerism*, is more the exception than the rule. It is therefore critical, as a matter of basic protocol and to tap the full potential of their sister city program, that the local government in the U.S. city maintains an active interest and involvement in the sister city programs. In practical terms, this means the mayor taking time to visit with delegations; designating a contact person/support staff for sister cities at city hall; both sending and hosting selected city officials for substantive municipal exchanges and training involving local government themes, such as the environment, public safety, or city planning; and minimal support for administrative costs for the volunteer committee.

At that same time, U.S. communities need to request that their counterparts abroad set up a committee of interested volunteers in their community, if they do not already have one. U.S. mayors can be effective in communicating the need for more citizen participation in their sister city. Also, U.S. leaders need to clearly communicate to their counterparts that they have designated their volunteer committee be the official arm of sister cities in their city.

Resources

It is sometimes the case that the more city hall-driven programs in international cities, even in developing countries, have more resources for sister cities than their more volunteer-based U.S. counterparts. If this is the case, the U.S. committee will need to make sure to tap their city's full potential for fundraising through city hall support, major corporate support, recruitment of additional individual members, appropriate service fees, and fund-raising events that have an impact.

Clarifying Objectives

There is often a very strong interest in “economic development” on the part of international cities who are seeking a U.S. partner. While U.S. cities also have an increasingly strong interest in this area, both will need to carefully discuss with each other exactly what they mean by “economic development.” In many cases, a compromise will have to be reached between those interested more in business activities, versus educational and cultural exchanges. It is not an either/or situation – both educational and cultural exchanges, as well as opportunities to explore economic development should be part of a great sister cities program.

Cultural Differences

When U.S. cities host groups from abroad, the tendency is often to be informal. While this has its own unique charm and appropriateness, it is important to recognize the expectation of many international guests for more formality. It should be a given, for example, that any international guest be offered a drink (e.g. coffee, tea) when first arriving, since this is the standard custom in almost every city or village in the world.

Distinguished, high-ranking officials from abroad need to be formally recognized as such – rank and seniority are very important in many cultures.

Language

More often than not, English is the mode of communication in international meetings. Americans need to be highly sensitive to the difficulties faced by non-native speakers since we are usually fortunate to have our language in use. For non-native speakers ...

- Explain key vocabulary words and concepts in advance
- Give easy-to-understand summaries and clear analogies and metaphors for long explanations
- Give *time* to formulate questions
- Build in opportunities for rest – listening to a foreign language is hard work
- Provide quality interpretation and/or translation when critical for deeper understanding, and
- Make every effort to learn as much as possible of the language of your sister city – three new words a day should be considered a minimum to be a true global citizen.

Important Factors for International Communities to Keep In Mind When Developing a Sister City Partnership with a City in the U.S.

Volunteerism

If your sister city program is administered directly by the local government in your city, then you will need to be fully acquainted with the U.S. system of *volunteerism*. There is a lot of variety with regard to how sister city programs are structured in the United States, but here is the typical framework:

- *Mayor as Honorary Chair.* The mayor's level of interest in the program will vary from city to city and mayor to mayor in the United States
- *Staff person at city hall or the "Liaison to the Sister Cities Committee."* The level of administrative and programmatic involvement by this person also varies from city to city. This position can be found in a wide variety of departments, such as the mayor's office, the economic development department, international relations office, the city manager's office, the parks and recreation department or the cultural affairs department.
- *Executive Director or Coordinator of the non-profit organization "Sister Cities."* Some cities have a full-time or part-time *non-city hall staff* person to administer part of the work of the program. This person works on behalf of the legally incorporated Sister Cities non-profit organization (on behalf of the city government and the various volunteer committees).
- *President and Board Members.* Many cities have an overall president of their sister cities program. These people are volunteers who rise up to these leadership positions inside the volunteer sister city program.
- *Committee Chairs and Individual Volunteers.* Many/most U.S. cities have chairmen or chairwomen of each of their sister city committees. Almost all U.S. sister city programs are heavily dependent on many volunteers to support their program.

Funding

You need to realize that most local governments in the United States do not have large budgets for international affairs – that volunteers are the backbone of most U.S. sister city programs. In general, this has to do with a long tradition in the United States of local self-government (the *federal system* of national-state-municipal levels of government) and the common suspicion of what some perceive as "big government." Some local governments in the United States do not contribute any funds at all to their local sister city programs, which means that *all* sister city program efforts will be carried out by volunteers, requiring a great deal of their time and many out-of-pocket expenses. Although the receptions you receive from your U.S. hosts may not be as fancy (expensive) as what you can provide, you should show appreciation for the hard work and many sacrifices made by individual U.S. volunteers, and for any sponsorship by U.S. businesses which support sister city events.

The United States is a Big Country

The United States is a very culturally, geographically, ethnically and religiously diverse nation. An experience you have with one person, city, neighborhood or region may not be the same elsewhere, so keep an open mind and continue learning about the complex society, history, politics and cultures of the United States. You may also, at some point in your interaction with your sister city, work with women, minorities and people with disabilities in prominent leadership roles.

Americans are More Informal

Generally speaking, Americans can be quite informal and direct compared to people from other cultures. Americans tend to value clear, direct communication. If something is bothering you, they will expect you to tell them. Most Americans are uncomfortable having to “read someone’s mind.” We say: “The squeaky wheel gets the grease.” Be certain to communicate and clearly explain what is polite and expected in your culture and why – and try some American customs as well!

What Do Sister Cities Do?

Sister city programs inherently involve a unique kind of partnership and involvement of the three main sectors of a vibrant, productive community, county or state – *the local government, business and private voluntary sectors* (civil society or non-profit organizations and individual citizen volunteers). Sister city programs, perhaps more than any other international program, involve the widest possible diversity of exchanges and projects. Basically, anything that goes on in a community can become – and has, in one city or another – the subject of a sister city project, including healthcare, environment, arts, education, economic and business development, public safety, municipal training, youth, and much more.

What Makes a Successful Sister City Program?

1. *Solid support and involvement from:*

- City Hall – the mayor as honorary chair; a staff person designated at city hall to support the sister city program; direct involvement of various city departments in municipal, economic development, technical, public safety or other exchanges; various direct and in-direct (in-kind) support for sister city activities, such as assistance with administrative costs and receptions.
- Business sector, with an opportunity for both corporations and small businesses, as well as individual business people, to contribute their time and/or financial or in-kind support. The local Chamber of Commerce and other key organizations should also be actively involved in the sister city program.

2. *A broad-based sister city committee:*

The best long-term indicator of success for a sister city program (since elected officials come and go) is a broad-based sister city committee, made up of many individual citizens who are enthusiastic supporters of the sister city program. Every effort should be made to recruit people from various professions, a youth delegate, people from different ethnic and religious groups, both women and men, and people with disabilities. Citizen volunteers in the United States and abroad contribute an enormous “cost share” to the local program through their time and various out-of-pocket expenses, including annual individual and family membership fees, travel expenses abroad and hosting expenses at home.

3. *Forming alliances:*

To maximize limited resources and the potential outreach and impact of the sister city program in the community, every effort should be made to form additional alliances within the overall sister city program, such as sister schools or twinned Rotary and Lion’s clubs.

4. *Excellent communication links:*

It is essential to have excellent communication links, including reliable phone, fax and Internet communications, with back up fax and phone numbers when necessary. Fax machines should be kept on at night. Communication from a sister city should be responded to immediately to maintain good relations. Even if a decision concerning a proposal has not been reached, a quick reply saying, for example, “Thank you for your fax – we will respond to you after our meeting next month,” should be sent promptly, acknowledging receipt of an important proposal or letter.

5. *Sensitivity to cultural differences:*

Sister City projects should be reciprocal and jointly planned, executed and evaluated. Also, there needs to be time built into actual exchanges for cross-culturally sensitive feedback to avoid serious “culture bumps.” Formal time for cross-cultural discussion, to learn about more complex layers of culture, such as the changing role of women in society, child rearing methods or how decisions are actually made in local government or businesses, should be built into all exchanges and projects.

6. *Clear objectives:*

To maintain excellent, two-way communication and to keep the program active, it is important that cities meet at least every other year to develop a *Memorandum of Understanding* about what they plan for their partnership, including frank discussions about areas of interest, realities of budgets and other important details in carrying out proposed exchanges or projects.

7. *There are a variety of low-cost exchanges that should occur every year, even if it is not possible to have a physical exchange of people. Some suggestions are:*

- An annual “state of the city” letter between the two mayors
- Exchanges of the city annual reports and city plans by officials at city hall
- Exchanges of children’s artwork, letters or sister school programs through the Internet
- 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).

8. *Regular exchanges:*

It is essential to agree on regular, sustainable exchanges of people that will take place every year or, at the very least, every other year. There are many possibilities for this, including teacher and student exchanges, municipal internships for city officials in key fields, young business leader internships sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce, or participation at the largest annual festival in the sister city.

9. *Willingness to take risks:*

All relationships, like friendships, need to take a risk once in a while with a larger or more ambitious project, to stay fresh and to achieve their full potential. Such projects require a high degree of planning, fund raising, and time and effort, but they also can be a very positive, life-transforming experience for all involved.

SCI Affiliations Policy

The SCI Board of Directors has recently made some significant changes to SCI’s affiliations policies. The policies now in effect are:

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

- New affiliations will be considered official only when SCI has received copies of the sister city agreement(s).
- SCI will recognize a new sister city affiliation between a U.S. and an international community, even though another affiliation may exist between that international community and a different U.S. city, only if a cooperative agreement among all involved cities is filed with SCI.
- SCI's existing policy of U.S. cities affiliating with only one sister city partnership in an international country still applies.
- SCI will consider a relationship to be active unless notified otherwise. SCI will provide guidance in periodically evaluating a relationship. SCI will also assist in revitalizing a relationship or in terminating a relationship, if the partners agree it is not working out. Terminated agreements may be designated as a "Sister City Emeritus." Under this category, relationships which are no longer active will still be honored, but the international city will be available for another sister city partnership.
- SCI 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 SCI to support the affiliation. The only country immediately affected by this policy change is Cuba. SCI will now officially recognize U.S.-Cuba sister city affiliations, upon receipt of a copy of the signed sister city agreement.