

Citizen Participation

“Greene County is a growing urban area with a small town’s heart. When we see the face of need, we respond with our time, talents and resources.”

— Annie Busch,
former Director, Springfield-Greene County Library District and
Springfield Chamber of Commerce’s 2008 Springfieldian of the Year

BLUE RIBBONS (2004 – 2007)

- Citizen Involvement
- Volunteerism
- Charitable Giving

Citizens of Springfield and Greene County have demonstrated, time and again, how freely they open their hearts to help fellow citizens in need and how readily they invest in their community. In previous *Community Focus* reports, citizen participation has garnered blue ribbons for citizen involvement, volunteerism and charitable giving, with community members freely giving their resources, time and talents to address needs in the community, as indicated in the chart below.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION VOLUNTEER CHART

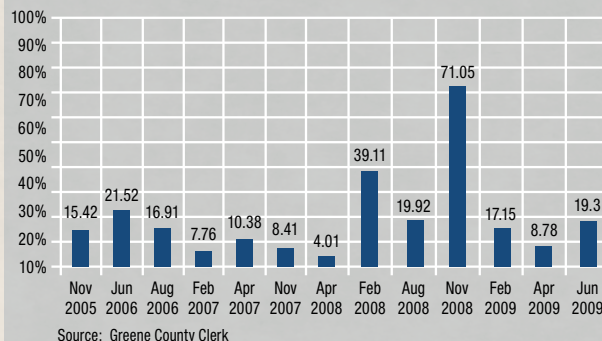
ORGANIZATION	VOLUNTEERS			VOLUNTEER HOURS		
	2004	2006	2008	2004	2006	2008
St. John’s Hospital	654	682	675	138,477	147,695	141,580
CoxHealth	1,263	1,981	1,319	129,029	141,250	116,345
United Way of the Ozarks	3,572	5,482	1,921	28,840	35,395	24,754
Community Partnership of the Ozarks		7,064	10,447		26,590	40,428
Junior League of Springfield	160	190	235	11,000	19,000	29,164
Springfield/Greene County Library				4,632	5,115	13,000
Springfield Conservation Nature Center				15,441	16,385	14,183
League of Women Voters of SW MO				1,500	1,645	2,534
Retired Senior Volunteer Program of the Council of Churches of the Ozarks			1,499	262,820	247,740	190,596
Higher Education Institutions in Springfield					126,973	188,244

CURRENT STATUS OF 2004 – 2007 RED FLAGS

■ Voter Turnout

The 2004 *Community Focus* report identified voter turnout as a red flag. Specifically, although voter registration was high for Greene County, voter turnout fluctuated based on ballot issues. Unfortunately, this continues to be a concern for the Greene County community. Besides record voter turnout for the November 2008 presidential election (71%), turnout rates continue to fluctuate on a regular basis.

GREENE COUNTY VOTER TURNOUT BY PERCENT



■ Children in Poverty

Members of the community have been particularly generous in helping address the overall red flag issue of children in poverty (see Early Childhood report). The Community Foundation of the Ozarks (CFO), for instance, has worked to improve the lives of children in poverty through the Grantmakers’ Challenge for Children which has, as of January 2008, reached over \$16.7 million in pledges and contributions. The Grantmakers’ Challenge cornerstone project is the Enhancing Children’s Healthy Opportunities (ECHO) Project, which implements integrated prevention-oriented services in two high-risk Springfield schools.

CFO GRANT AND DISTRIBUTION TOTALS (FISCAL YEAR)

2003	\$3,685,655.60
2004	\$4,701,039.78
2005	\$4,903,121.76
2006	\$7,880,318.62
2007	\$8,371,512.00
2008	\$13,263,562.00
Since Inception (1973)	\$64,090,268.13

EMERGING ISSUES

Although citizens continue to contribute and care about their neighbors, participation levels are highly dependent on residents’ income and education. A 2008 survey by sociologists from Missouri State University of the community’s social capital revealed some bright spots as well as several tears in the fabric of community engagement. Social capital refers to the formal and informal networks of trust and reciprocity that connect people. Communities with high levels of social capital generally have residents who are happier and more willing to work for the benefit of the community; they also generally have lower rates of crime and violence. Social networks represent important resources that can be mobilized to address community issues and problems. Compared with a national sample, residents of

Springfield City Hall



Springfield-Greene County had larger social networks than the national average and were more likely to believe that people in general and their neighbors and coworkers are trustworthy. Participation in voluntary organizations, another indicator of social capital, was similar to the national sample, and local residents were more likely to consider religion an important part of their lives and exhibited less trust in national and local government. However, this survey revealed several concerns and emerging issues that bear watching including trust in area institutions, sense of alienation, voter turnout and mobilizing community action.

◆ Trust in Institutions and Government

Trust in institutions and government depended on one's level of income and education. According to the 2008 social capital survey, local citizens with lower income and education levels exhibited substantially less trust.

◆ Sense of Alienation

Distressingly, the social capital survey found that 35% of local residents believe that the people who run the Springfield-Greene County community do not care about them and only about 25% (compared to 37% nationally) believe they can make their community better. Those who felt alienated generally were lower on the income and education scales. The report concludes that "efforts are needed to draw more lower-income and less-educated individuals into civic participation and community work" (p. 24). This split between the community's haves and have-nots reduces community residents' ability to work together, particularly with local government, to address the community's problems.

◆ Voter Turnout

There was an alarmingly low 9% voter turnout for the April 2009 local election, which compared unfavorably with the 17% turnout for the February 2009 primary election and the record 71% turnout for the 2008 presidential election. This is, perhaps, another indicator of the alienation many feel with respect to local government. Fluctuation in voter turnout has been a consistent issue of concern.

◆ Means to Mobilize Community Action

The local media environment appears to be shifting, consistent with national trends. A survey by the Springfield Public Schools (SPS) of frequent voters in school elections (typically 60 years old, college educated, living in south Springfield) indicates that reliance on newspapers for information about SPS has gone down (44% in 2005, 49% in 2008) but Internet use has risen (3% in 2005, 5% in 2008) as has reliance on specialized school newsletters and publications (10% in 2005, 14% in 2008). This shift in how people use media suggests that traditional ways for mobilizing people toward community action may not work and new ways will have to be found to encourage all citizens to participate in shaping their community for the better.

