

COMMUNITY FOCUS REPORT

2021 UPDATE

A series of white papers on the report's 11 primary topics will be published on a rolling basis ahead of the 2021 edition. For news, podcasts and more information, visit springfieldcommunityfocus.org.



CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Low voter turnout remains stubborn
Red Flag even while opportunities
that encourage engagement expand.

2021 UPDATE: CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

► FOR PODCASTS, NEWS AND MORE, GO TO [SPRINGFIELDCOMMUNITYFOCUS.ORG](https://springfieldcommunityfocus.org)



BLUE RIBBONS Robust civic engagement · Interest in volunteerism and nonprofit support · Improved voter outreach and education efforts



RED FLAGS Low voter turnout · Difficult to identify active voters · Misinformation affecting participation

New resources foster online and in-person participation

Though the pandemic limited in-person interactions, citizens of Springfield and Greene County continued to build social capital in the community through volunteerism and support of local organizations, nonprofit collaborations, voter activity and civic input on important local issues.

Despite economic and social shut-downs to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, people connected through virtual formats to make a difference in their community. But in-person

volunteerism and nonprofit support saw decreases, and civic progress in the region continues to be impacted by low voter turnout and registrations. A widening divide over issues of trust in the election process has also taken hold.

BLUE RIBBONS

Civic engagement around local issues has been robust, especially to help guide Springfield's future growth. Engagement with local civic issues and leaders helps build greater levels of trust



PHOTO COURTESY OF REBECCA MILLER/DRURY UNIVERSITY

An estimated 2,500 citizens marched over the Martin Luther King Jr. Bridge in downtown Springfield on June 6, 2020, in a peaceful protest following the murder of George Floyd while in police custody in Minneapolis in May 2020.

COVID-19 IMPACT



Since March 2020, there have been collective efforts by area businesses, United Way of the Ozarks, Community Foundation of the Ozarks, Community Partnership of the Ozarks and other local organizations, along with city leaders and the Springfield-Greene County Health Department, to collaborate and work together during the pandemic. Important aspects of that from the start have been to create a coalition of partners, educate the public and encourage citizen participation.

Managing the pandemic has become a consistent part of the community conversation. A key role in those early efforts was to create a central hub for COVID-19 communications.

For months during the early stages of the pandemic, city and health department leaders held thrice-weekly health news briefings, along with virtual town halls, to provide detailed, updated information from local trusted sources. More people started watching and participating through multiple virtual channels, weighing in on important matters that helped guide decisions. As a result of the pandemic, it's been estimated by the city that record use of virtual channels increased citizen engagement by nearly 30% between 2019 and 2020. In addition, there was a coordinated effort to reach out

to registered neighborhood associations and share ways they could check on their neighbors.

The Springfield-Greene County Library District hosted COVID-19 vaccine clinics conducted by the Springfield-Greene County Health Department at almost 10 branches. Through those clinics, health workers vaccinated more than 300 individuals in Springfield and Greene County.

United Way of the Ozarks, along with the City of Springfield, Greene County, the Community Foundation of the Ozarks and the Community Partnership of the Ozarks, helped create and coordinate the Have Faith Initiative. This effort brought together a broad array of faith leaders in Springfield and Greene County to work on a coordinated response to the pandemic, and to increase communication between the faith community and government leaders. It became a model nationally. Faith leaders convene regularly through virtual channels to hear weekly (now bi-weekly) updates from governing bodies and to discuss responses.

Despite these efforts, Springfield's summer 2021 surge in COVID-19 cases—as well as vaccination rates, which have remained below state and national rates—caught the attention of national news media. The full vaccination

rate for ages 12 and older in Greene County did increase four percentage points during August to 46.2% compared to 51.9% in Missouri and 60.4% nationwide. As of October 2021, the vaccination rate had topped 50%.

Volunteerism has come into play as well, with hundreds signing up to help give vaccines or support the efforts at community-wide testing and vaccination events. Nearly 40 volunteers have been Give 5 graduates or a health professional they recruited.

The pandemic did affect overall volunteer levels, which were lower than previous years, as were donations when many fundraising activities were postponed or forced to transition to hybrid or virtual events. Many corporate budgets tightened during the pandemic, too, making corporate donations a challenge.

There's optimism, however, that volunteering in person is returning with safety measures in place. While donations have been more solid than some expected, there is some concern that in the next year, potential donors will look at American Rescue Plan Act funds nonprofits may receive as the answer to fulfilling their budget needs. However, most of those funds will go toward specific programming, not operations, which could leave some agencies scrambling.

2021 UPDATE: CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

► HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE SPRINGFIELD? SUBMIT YOUR RESPONSE AT [SGFENGAGE.ORG](https://sgfengage.org)

and community ownership, according to area leaders.

Forward SGF is a prime example. In the spring of 2019, the City of Springfield launched an extensive public process to identify community priorities and focus efforts for a 20-year comprehensive plan guiding the city's future. Community engagement was identified as an essential component of developing vision, goals and objectives.

Through the end of 2019, 57 Forward SGF workshops were held, engaging nearly 1,500 participants. Altogether, nearly 2,500 people participated in-person during in the process. In addition, virtual engagements numbering nearly 6,000 illustrated online participation through a series of surveys and mapping. While engagement waned as the pandemic ramped up, Forward SGF is back on track and expected to present a plan for additional input in the fall of 2021.

Other channels for community feedback in Springfield include the Citizen Satisfaction Survey, a Community Development Needs Survey, the Community Partnership of the Ozarks' Ozarks Alliance to End Homelessness System Survey, and a Housing and Community Development Needs Survey. In addition, citizens were given opportunities to share input for planning the public/private Grant Avenue Parkway project, the daylighting of Jordan Creek and other placemaking efforts. And Leadership Springfield, a nonprofit that develops leaders in the area, experienced an increase in demand for programs and community engagement.

Engagement around national issues that affect Springfield and Greene County has also been high. In the summer of 2020, thousands gathered locally—inspired by similar demonstrations nationwide—to protest racial injustice in response to the death of George Floyd, a Black man killed by a white police officer during an arrest. Derek Chauvin, who knelt on Floyd's neck for more than nine minutes, was convicted of murder in June 2021. Floyd's death and the demonstrations led to the Springfield Mayor Ken McClure creating the Equity and Equality Initiative in 2021 that will include a strategic vision

for the city. In 2020, Prosper Springfield launched phase two of the Prosper Springfield Initiative and created the Equity and Prosperity Commission. The EPC is reviewing and developing action items from the many community recommendations and surveys. The EPC has a focus on equity and equality and will develop a new action plan, as well as new goals for poverty reduction, now that the city has three years of data. More than 50 volunteers are involved between the mayor's and Prosper Springfield's initiatives.

In another response, United Way of the Ozarks is partnering with Springfield Rotary Clubs and the Rotaract Club to host the United Academy for Inclusion & Belonging, providing United Way partner speakers for their meetings, and providing service project ideas for their members. Earlier in the year, United Way received a grant from the CFO to offer the classes for free to United Way's 22 partner nonprofits; to officers of the Springfield Police Department; and to the board, staff and alumni of Leadership Springfield. The program consisted of six virtual, two-day diversity development classes led by Missouri State University's Division for Diversity and Inclusion staff.

With strong volunteer structures in place, **interest in volunteerism and nonprofit support** continues to be an important and recognizable part of community engagement—even if actual volunteerism waned or went virtual during the height of the pandemic. One access point is Volunteer Ozarks, a free community web portal to help people connect with 132 participating nonprofits and more than 160 volunteer opportunities. More than 500 people visit the site weekly, and thousands of connections have been made since the portal was developed in 2018 by KY3 and the United Way. In the first seven months of 2021, 87% of users were new to the site, suggesting interest in volunteerism is strong. One new initiative through the city, Clean Green Springfield, attracted 1,000 volunteers to help clean up outdoor areas through a series of activities held April through June 2021.

Another success story is the new

SUCCESS STORY



The League of Women Voters of Southwest Missouri, a consistent advocate and resource for civic participation, initiated several programs to increase voter education and participation in the November 2020 election as the pandemic surged.

To assist voters for the 2020 election cycle, the league led a coalition of 10 nonpartisan organizations that collaborated to conduct virtual candidate and issue forums for the 2020 primary and general elections. The effort continued for the April municipal election in Springfield.

The other organizations included Drury University, Missouri State University, Ozarks Technical Community College, the NAACP Springfield Chapter, Junior League of Springfield, Leadership Springfield, KSMU, Be Civil Be Heard and the Springfield-Greene County Library District. All members of this coalition share a nonpartisan approach to providing information about important election issues. The common goal was to “excite, engage and educate our communities to increase voter turnout,” according to the league. Each organization hosted or co-hosted a forum, which were all presented virtually due to the pandemic. In addition, the coalition hosted an information interview on the ballot issue of Medicaid expansion and about Amendment 3, intended to repeal portions of the voter-approved Clean Missouri initiative.

The virtual forums were recorded and made available to the public on participating organizations' online platforms and through social media. In addition, KSMU promoted the forums and rebroadcast the informational Amendment 3 forum. Recordings of the forums were hosted also on the Springfield-Greene County Library District's website.

Volunteer Leadership of the Ozarks group, a collection of nonprofit volunteer managers from various organizations that meet quarterly to compare best practices. VLO's goals are:

- Connect Springfield-area volunteer leaders in order to learn from each other, promote the sharing of ideas and best practices, and maximize volunteer referrals by learning about each other's organizations and volunteer opportunities
- Develop creative solutions to common challenges and barriers in volunteer management
- Work together to reengineer volunteerism to best accommodate and benefit from the increasing number of retirees available to volunteer

2021 UPDATE: CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

► FOR PODCASTS, NEWS AND MORE, GO TO [SPRINGFIELDCOMMUNITYFOCUS.ORG](https://springfieldcommunityfocus.org)

- Raise the profile of volunteerism and volunteer leadership within its own organizations (including executive leadership and boards)
- Ensure volunteers feel fulfilled and valued in their volunteer work.

Leadership Springfield also provides many volunteer opportunities through its curriculum as volunteerism and community engagement are cited as paths to leadership. The organization's Signature Class, an intensive yearlong program for professionals, has more than 130 active volunteers serving on committees and contributing as program advisors. Participants also routinely organize volunteer projects during the class experience itself. Its Access Class, a shorter experience designed for people new to the area who want to get involved in the community, has graduated 193 people from nine classes since its 2019 launch. An additional 99 graduates attended three classes customized for Springfield Public Schools.

Nonprofit leaders are optimistic that volunteerism will meet or exceed pre-pandemic levels once people feel it is safe to help in person. United Way has also been working on ways to help people understand how local government and community organizations work to build trust and help citizens feel more engaged. As part of that effort, the organization partnered in 2021 with the Springfield News-Leader to create the monthly "Find Your Cause" series, which highlights community Red Flag issues, the work being done to combat each issue, and outlines volunteer opportunities.

It's also the model for one of United Way's active volunteer programs, Give 5, which connects retired Greene County seniors to nonprofits and volunteer opportunities. In August 2019, results of a study conducted for United Way showed a strong link between volunteering and successful aging. Of the nearly 100 Give 5 participants surveyed, more than 81.7% were still volunteering six months after completing the program, giving an average of 17 hours per month to one or more agencies.

Through its 12th class ending in February 2020, the program operated with



PHOTO COURTESY OF COMMUNITY FOUNDATION OF THE OZARKS

Staff members from the Community Foundation of the Ozarks, Community Partnership of the Ozarks and United Way of the Ozarks worked together to clean up downtown Springfield during a Clean Green Springfield event in May 2021.

in-person tours and programming. As a response to the pandemic, four virtual class sessions were held between October 2020 and July 2021, graduating 41 participants who selected on average three volunteer opportunities each. Altogether, nearly 240 participants have graduated from the Give 5 program.

Another indicator of volunteer interest was United Way of the Ozarks' 2021 Day of Caring, which was well attended in spite of the pandemic, though significantly reduced from pre-pandemic years. Community Partnership of the Ozarks, an umbrella organization for numerous programs and collaboratives, noted in its 2020 annual report that CPO had used 9,596 volunteers who gave 35,895 hours along with donated services valued at nearly \$7 million. More than 68,000 people were served through CPO programs, services, education and community awareness campaigns.

The area's sizable faith community contributes to strong community engagement through collaborations with nonprofits and with the Council of Churches of the Ozarks, an ecumenical organization that includes 72 member churches and more than 4,000 active supporters. According to its 2020 annual report, volunteers and programs served more than 81,200 people across 49 Missouri counties. That includes sharing food, hygiene and holiday assistance to nearly 26,000 families; giving safe shelter, caregiver education and daytime supervision to more than 26,000 adults; providing

meals, clothing, mentor services and holiday gifts to nearly 14,500 children; and providing food delivery, non-emergency medical transport, essential home repairs and advocacy to 6,700 seniors.

Financial support and donations for area nonprofits were low as the pandemic began but are returning to pre-pandemic levels. According to United Way, its 2020 donation campaign raised \$2,483,401—down only 1% from \$2,510,584 in 2019's campaign, indicating community resilience. In 2020, Council of Churches reported \$1,292,126 in donations, an increase of more than 7% from its 2019 report.

In addition, the Community Foundation of the Ozarks' Give Ozarks event, held in March 2021, raised a total of \$718,728 among 157 participating agencies (roughly 60% of which were in Springfield) through 9,187 gifts. Operating online only for 12 hours (versus 24 in previous events) and accepting no cash or checks ahead make direct comparisons to previous Give Ozarks events impossible. However, the online-only donations over 12 hours of 2021 surpassed online donations over 24 hours in previous events. In fact, the CFO accepted record gifts of \$76.5 million during its 2020–21 fiscal year due to a number of factors, including donors who left planned gifts to benefit their communities.

Increased voting services and strong collaborative education efforts encouraged voter engagement. To help educate voters prior to the November

2021 UPDATE: CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

► HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE SPRINGFIELD? SUBMIT YOUR RESPONSE AT [SGFENGAGE.ORG](https://sgfengage.org)

2020 election, members of the League of Women Voters distributed 20,000 voting guides to more than 250 locations in Greene, Christian and Webster counties. The league also extended its Vote411.org online registration option to the primary as well as the general election and conducted more than 50 voter registration drives. In addition, 12 drive-through notary events assisted voters with absentee ballots.

The league's work continues with regular registration opportunities and "Meet the Electeds" events, designed to allow attendees direct face time with elected officials. Though usually held in person, the recent events had to go virtual via Zoom. These events have featured local and state representatives and senators along with members of the City Council, the Greene County Commission and the mayor.

To encourage college students to engage in voting, the league collaborated with Paws to the Polls, a nonpartisan campus initiative at Missouri State University that focuses on increasing civic engagement through voter participation and literacy for college students. In addition, for the 2020 election, the league led a coalition of nonpartisan organizations to conduct virtual candidate and issue forums made accessible by multiple platforms. (Read more in the Success Story.) One collaborator, the Springfield-Greene County Library District, also worked with the league to hold six outdoor registration and notarization opportunities at six different branches beginning in June 2020. The library also partnered with the league for nine of the drive-up registration events that fall.

The library actively advocates for voter registration and can register voters at any branch or through the Mobile Library seven days a week. The district also paid fees for two reference librarians to become notaries at the Library Center and Library Station branches. In August 2020, the library began offering free notary service for citizens who planned to vote absentee with a mail-in ballot for the November election. Altogether, they notarized 544 ballots.

LEGISLATIVE IMPACT



In the November 2020 election, voters narrowly passed Amendment 3, which asked Missourians to reverse key parts of a "Clean Missouri" redistricting overhaul approved by voters in 2018. Those who opposed the bill, including the League of Women Voters of Southwest Missouri, said it was a threat to democracy and the fair redrawing of district maps. The league has made fair maps a priority at national and state levels to ensure fair representation of all citizens.

The measure eliminated a nonpartisan state demographer previously used for districting approval and returned the task to bipartisan commissions in the House and Senate appointed by the governor. If those commissions become deadlocked on redrawing maps, the decision goes to six Missouri Court of Appeals judges. In addition, language in Amendment 3 suggests maps could be drawn based on the number of adults eligible to vote—not based on an area's population. If that happens, according to the league, Missouri would be the only state in the country to discount 1.5 million children, immigrants, international students and incarcerated citizens. Communities of color would be significantly under-represented.

With 2020 Census data now being released, redistricting will start in the coming months. The league and other organizations encourage citizens locally and throughout the state to advocate for fair redistricting. One recent effort to encourage advocacy is the People Power Maps Project, a statewide organized effort. The league has encouraged local submissions of maps that might identify neighborhoods of citizens seeking to gain or preserve representation.

Missouri Gov. Mike Parson said in August that he did not plan to call a special 2021 legislative session to start redrawing district maps, which means the process likely won't start until early in 2022.

While no voting reform bills passed before the end of the 2021 legislative session, several proposed bills could add more voter restrictions in Missouri. One introduced bill (HB 334) would require stricter voter photo identification, which could adversely affect racial and ethnic populations. Another includes a proposed voter-roll cleanup that makes it easier to remove inactive voter registrations. Other bills would have imposed more restrictions on petitioning for citizen-led ballot initiatives.

RED FLAGS

Low voter turnout continues to be a challenge. Greene County's adult population is estimated at 237,000, yet only 168,458—about 71%—were actively registered for the November 2020 election. Among those registered as active voters, meaning the address of the voter is current, 85% turned out in person or by absentee ballot to cast a vote during the pandemic. That means nearly 40% of Greene County adults did not vote.

The numbers are dramatically lower for local elections. Greene County's April 2021 election included mayoral races for Springfield and several Greene County towns, in addition to deciding four Springfield City Council seats and three at-large spots on the seven-member R-12 School Board. Although pre-election rancor led to an unusual amount of partisan campaign activity and community conversation, only 23,914 ballots were cast—a 13.25% turnout among 180,432 registered voters. (Inactive

voters—those who have not updated a registration address—were not included in the calculations.)

Local issues and the selection of elected leaders shape the community and impact its future. Though efforts by dedicated organizations to educate the community, to register voters, and to encourage eligible adults in Greene County to vote reflect a Blue Ribbon, those efforts must continue to help increase civic participation in the local election process, which remains a Red Flag. An important aspect of that effort is to grow the number of registered active voters with more convenient opportunities such as combined polling locations offered by the Greene County Clerk's office. The Greene County Clerk's office does offer five central polling locations for accessibility purposes each election day, as allowed by state law, and was the first county in the state to offer more than one central polling location. The current locations include the City

2021 UPDATE: CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

► FOR PODCASTS, NEWS AND MORE, GO TO [SPRINGFIELDCOMMUNITYFOCUS.ORG](https://springfieldcommunityfocus.org)

Utilities Bus Transit Center, Cox South Hospital, Mercy Hospital and on the campus of Missouri State University.

It's also important to increase public awareness about updating addresses in voter records after a move within the county, or **risk becoming an inactive voter**, a status that continues to be an issue. Fluctuating registered voter counts and recent changes to the way counts are reported—with inactive voters removed from the rolls per federal law—make it difficult to track voter turnout. The Greene County Clerk's office no longer counts in the pool of registered voters anyone deemed inactive for election day turnout numbers, due to no confirmation they continue to reside in Greene County. An inactive voter is so defined if mail is returned from an address and the voter, after direct follow-up from the Greene County Clerk's office, does not update their address of record after 30 days in the voter registration file.

It's also a problem for voters. While inactive registered voters may still cast a ballot by reaffirming their identity and address on or before the day of the election, there's risk of being purged from registration rolls per federal and state law requirements altogether if they haven't voted in two consecutive federal elections. That may be particularly prevalent among younger populations that move more often, or among people who don't often vote. Encouraging more regular voting and increasing awareness about updating addresses should help increase the number of active registered voters.

Community leaders express concern about the **impact of misinformation and divisive discourse** on community engagement. This concern applies especially to confidence in election integrity and to community health related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Widely shared misinformation about COVID-19 via Facebook and other social media platforms has led to public divides over masking and vaccination

requirements, even as trusted local sources have continued to share science-based information to help citizens make informed decisions. Outside the Mercy Hospital in Springfield on Aug. 14, 2021, a rally by citizens protesting employee vaccination mandates was joined by at least three elected officials. Signs held by protesters included misinformation about the vaccine. Later, CoxHealth CEO Steve Edwards was approached by an Alabama man presenting false vaccine data. The man filmed himself afterwards, making a threatening statement about Edwards. The Associated Press reported on that encounter along with others, including one in which a Kansas commissioner was confronted in a heated meeting over masking. Springfield City Council and SPS School Board meetings have likewise drawn heated and vocal protests. Like the meeting in Kansas, some who oppose the vaccine have compared COVID-19 mitigations to the Holocaust—a comparison others abhor.

There's concern the sharing of misinformation, lack of civility and aggressive tactics have created a toxic atmosphere in which health professionals, school board members and government officials are confronted and, in some cases, threatened. There is also concern that a vocal angry minority—whether in person or through social media—have suppressed civic engagement by those with alternative views who feel discouraged, or fear, about participating in the community conversation. Researcher Barbara Rosenwein, professor emerita at Loyola University Chicago and author of "Anger: The Conflicted History of an Emotion," has expressed publicly that social media can make minority views look more like the majority, and that people validate each other's anger as being just and righteous.

Elected leaders contribute to misinformation too. Locally, a Springfield City Councilwoman has expressed unfounded information about vaccines. And elected state leaders have contributed to

KEY METRICS

Voter Participation in Greene County Elections, 2019–21

	REGISTERED VOTERS	TOTAL BALLOTS	ABSENTEE BALLOTS	TURNOUT
April 2019	174,491	30,160	1,442	17.28%
March 2020	164,697	46,372	1,892	28.16%
August 2020	166,222	53,620	3,638	32.26%
November 2020	168,458	142,752	32,409	84.74%
April 2021	180,432	23,914	1,233	13.25%

SOURCE: GREENE COUNTY CLERK

misinformation about elections through words and actions, including support for backing efforts to overturn the 2020 election results. In May, Republican members of the Missouri House sent a letter to Missouri Gov. Mike Parson requesting a special legislative session to move election reform bills forward. Those bills include stricter voter ID requirements and proposals that would make it harder for petitions to be accepted. The letter included language suggesting there were discrepancies and issues with the 2020 election process, although Department of Justice officials have said there was no widespread voter fraud that could have impacted the outcome of the 2020 election. Gov. Parson said in August he did not plan to call a special legislative session.

Mistrust in the election process and other public entities could contribute to low voter participation. Denise Lieberman, director and general council for the Missouri Voter Protection Coalition, wrote in a May 2020 paper for the St. Louis University Law Journal that misleading information about voting leads to decreased voter participation—as opined also by the Missouri Supreme Court.

The Citizen Participation 2021 Update was produced by Sony Hocklander of United Way of the Ozarks' Give 5 program, with input from Greg Burris, Leslie Carrier, Bridget Dierks, Jessica Hawkins, Lisa Langley, Kathleen O'Dell, Crystal Quade, Carrie Richardson, Shane Schoeller, Cora Scott, Marc Truby and Randall Whitman.