

THE 2013 CIVIC HEALTH ASSESSMENT



Shaping Kentucky's Future Together

**Alison Lundergan Grimes
Kentucky Secretary of State
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THE 2013 CIVIC HEALTH ASSESSMENT: SHAPING KENTUCKY'S FUTURE TOGETHER

Secretary of State Alison Lundergan Grimes is Kentucky's chief advocate for civic engagement and literacy. In addition to encouraging an enthusiastic and educated electorate in her role as Chief Election Official, Secretary Grimes is passionate about promoting active citizenship as a means of moving Kentucky forward.

Getting Started: The Civic Health Index and Initiative

Immediately upon taking office in January 2012, Grimes worked with state and national partners to release Kentucky's first ever *Civic Health Index*. Using data from the 2010 Census, the *Civic Health Index* examines various aspects of civic participation, including voter turnout, political involvement, volunteerism, group membership, and community and family relationships, comparing performance among demographic groups and to other states. Overall, the report shows civic engagement in Kentucky is generally waning.



From November 2012 through May 2013, Grimes held a statewide series of roundtable discussions at Kentucky's universities and colleges to create new partnerships and formulate innovative strategies to improve civic engagement in Kentucky. The 15 public forums took place across the Commonwealth, reaching every region of the state.¹ In addition to panels comprised of elected officials and leaders in education, business, and the community, active audiences filled with students and local residents shared their experiences and insights.



The geographic breadth of the Initiative was crucial in accommodating Kentucky's cultural diversity, and the discussion at each roundtable reflected the particular community's unique attributes. In addition to the live discussions, forum attendees were invited to leave written comments and suggestions, and social media facilitated remote participation.

***Lessons Learned:
Intentional Acts Toward a More Engaged Kentucky***

The discussions at each roundtable were structured to address the key concepts of (1) civic engagement, (2) political action, and (3) social connectedness. No matter the topic, the common theme of “intentional acts” emerged. Secretary Grimes hopes this summary of the challenges our community and state are facing and the solutions being implemented will inspire you to take intentional acts of your own to be more civically engaged.

A. Civic Engagement



“Be a citizen of your community, not just a resident.”

—David Tandy, Louisville Metro Council Member

Civic engagement is a broad concept. It encompasses myriad ways of making a difference in your community, from contributing time and/or money, to belonging to a group, to participating in public works. While the *Civic Health Index* indicates Kentucky’s civic engagement is on the decline in all areas, the topic of volunteerism dominated many of the Initiative roundtables.

Beyond the obvious benefits to those directly served by volunteer organizations and activities, volunteerism has important implications for volunteers, their employers, and the community as a whole.

Panelists and audience members touted the personal and professional rewards reaped by volunteers. Whether they learn skills or information they can use personally or meet new people with similar interests, giving and receiving go hand in hand for active volunteers.



Employers that enable staff members to be involved in their communities also benefit. Company volunteer programs improve relations with the surrounding community, enhance public image, and foster

cohesive, motivated workforces.² Facilitating volunteer activity may even give employers “an advantage in recruiting Generation Y talent.”³



And the economic impact of volunteering is tremendous. The value of one volunteer hour in Kentucky is estimated to be \$17.91.⁴

So with all the reasons – tangible and intangible – to volunteer, why does Kentucky rank 43rd among the 50 states in terms of volunteerism?⁵ Roundtable participants suggested a variety of reasons for volunteer apathy, including demanding schedules and social disconnectedness caused by technological advancements.

But the discussions focused on how to improve that statistic. A common theme among the forums was that it’s important to instill the virtue of volunteering at a young age. While families can and should create a culture of giving back, opportunities for service learning make our classrooms an ideal environment in which to learn the value of volunteerism. Service learning correlates to such positive outcomes as greater academic achievement and leadership skills and increased likelihood of voting and giving back to the community.⁶ And civic education shouldn’t be confined to social studies. Students can be engaged in any classroom.

“Volunteering isn’t about making time, it’s about allocating time.”

– Hon. Mark Kelly Easton, Circuit Judge

Want to incorporate service learning in your classroom?

The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse has great ideas for all ages.
<http://www.servicelearning.org/slice>

Campuses across Kentucky are implementing service learning with great results. Nearly every higher education institution that participated in the roundtables has a dedicated service learning program, either requiring or providing opportunities to contribute to the community. And 18-29 year olds are more likely to volunteer today than in the past.⁷

Employers are also embracing their roles as valuable members of their communities. Some, like Transylvania University, have volunteer release time programs for staff. Others directly provide or organize service activities, like Pikeville Medical Center’s free health screenings and community outreach programs. Some employers use community involvement as a factor in employee assessments. Still others might match or provide incentives for employees who contribute to non-profit organizations.

Want to be part of a group effort to make a difference? Many schools, communities, and organizations sponsor a day or week of service. Search for these to get started:

- National Volunteer Week
- Martin Luther King, Jr., Day of Service
- Kentucky Gives Day
- United Way Day of Caring

Finally, while technology might have an isolating tendency, many agreed that social media platforms can play a valuable role in promoting volunteer opportunities, especially among younger populations. Indeed, Americans spend approximately 27 percent of their online time on social networking sites.⁸ That might explain why organizations like the United Way and YMCA are already taking advantage of popular tools like Facebook and Twitter.

Organizations like the Red Cross and Habitat for Humanity are also tapping into technology with mobile apps to recruit volunteers. And databases are popping up to connect civic-minded individuals with volunteer programs that fit their interests.

B. Political Action

Political action is an act by a citizen to influence a government or institution. Although most often associated with voting, political action also includes discussing politics, contacting public officials, and buying or boycotting goods.

Want to volunteer but don't know where to start?

Visit the Cabinet for Health & Family Services' Commission on Community Volunteerism & Service website for volunteer centers throughout the state.

<http://chfs.ky.gov/dfrcvs/kccvs/volunteer.htm>.

In West Kentucky, check out Murray State University and United Way of Murray-Calloway County's *GetConnected*, <http://www.volunteermurray.org/>.



The rates of voter registration and participation in Kentucky are slightly higher than the national average. But at 66.9 and 46.8 percent respectively, there is room for improvement in both areas. Attendees cited diverse reasons for voting. Whatever motivates you to make your voice heard, you can be sure it's one of the most important ways you can make a difference.

Across the state, roundtable participants shared ideas for increasing voter registration, including intra-school competitions and student-driven registration drives. Registration drives at Kentucky State University generated more than 1,000 new voters in the November 2012 General Election! Many campuses embraced the online tool TurboVote, <https://turbovote.org>, for increasing registration. Yet there was a consensus that due to the prevalence of negative advertising and polarizing media, especially online, we should not rely too heavily on technology to bolster election activity.



Political action does not begin and end at the ballot box. Fewer than 10 percent of Kentuckians contacted an elected official in 2010.⁹ Minorities, unemployed individuals, and those under the age of 25 were least likely to engage in political action.¹⁰

**Contacting elected officials is an important form of political action.
Follow your representatives on Facebook and Twitter, or find them here:**

- State: <http://lrc.ky.gov/Legislators.htm>
- County: <http://www.kaco.org/en/county-information/county-officials-information.aspx#>
- City: <http://www.klc.org/directory/>

To bridge this gap between elected officials and those they represent, we must build a two-way street. In addition to citizens reaching out to local and state officials to raise issues important to them, government leaders must be accessible to their constituents. Some elected officials are increasing access through technology, placing more services and information online, including through social media. Others are eschewing technology in favor of personal interaction. For example, Henderson Mayor Steve Austin hosts regular public forums for constituents to voice questions and suggestions.

Roundtable participants agreed that understanding how government works makes it easier to take political action. Internships, scholarships and youth leadership programs like the American Legion Boys State and American Legion Auxiliary Girls State help foster this level of comfort. On the local level, Whitley County Judge/Executive Pat White is developing an internship

program for students, and the Pikeville Chamber of Commerce has a dedicated student seat. And groups like Leadership Kentucky and similar local programs around the state are giving adults already active in their communities the tools to help steer our state in the right direction.



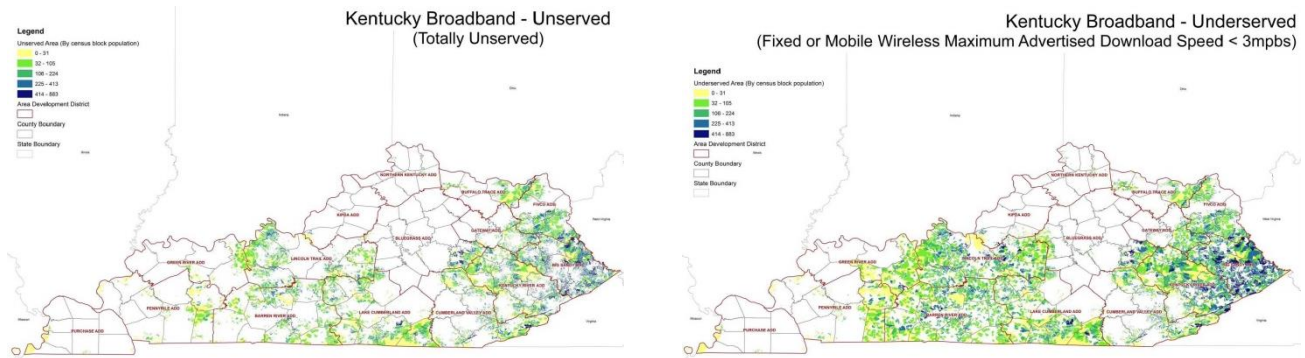
Finally, the influence educators have can't be understated. Like volunteerism, political action is a learned behavior. Programs like *Project Citizen*, <http://new.civiced.org/programs/project-citizen>, can turn classrooms into centers of political activity, cultivating behaviors that last a lifetime.

C. Social Connectedness

Social connectedness involves communicating and interacting with our family, friends and community members. Kentuckians have a strong connection with their families but rank near the middle in terms of relationships with neighbors.¹¹ Many of the citizens who attended the roundtables observed that we live in a global community, and the Internet makes it easy to connect with causes far beyond our hometowns. But our relationships – especially face-to-face interactions – within our communities are suffering.

Particular attention must be paid to including all demographic groups at the table. Panelists highlighted the need to listen to challenges facing a particular group before attempting to respond to them.

Despite the seeming stranglehold technology has on many of our lives, Kentucky ranks 47th nationally in terms of using the Internet to communicate with family and friends.¹² This comes as no surprise since Internet access is not ubiquitous in many rural areas of the Commonwealth,¹³ and Kentucky is the 8th most rural state in the nation.¹⁴



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Ultimately, panelists and audience members viewed technology as both a blessing and a curse, almost uniformly observing the need to use it in addition to, not in place of, in-person interaction.

***Moving Forward:
The Civic Health Challenge***

Creating and maintaining an engaged, informed citizenry is an ongoing effort. Public forums like the Civic Health Initiative roundtables are a good start, but as Centre College President John A. Roush pointed out, we must continue talking about the common good!



In the wake of the Civic Health Initiative, the Secretary of State’s Office and civic partners around the Commonwealth are keeping the discussion going and working together

to create tools for future success. From creating a centralized resource for civic-minded people and groups, to supporting teachers incorporating service learning into classrooms, to helping youth leadership programs reach more young Kentuckians, the Civic Health Initiative already has an important legacy in the renewed efforts and coordination it has inspired.

Secretary Grimes encourages you and your organization to keep the conversation going and take intentional acts in your own community to help us rise to the challenge of improving civic engagement in Kentucky. Together, we can ensure Kentucky’s future is bright!

¹ Locations for the roundtable discussions were Western Kentucky University (Barren County), Eastern Kentucky University (Madison County), Kentucky State University (Franklin County), Transylvania University (Fayette County), Murray State University (Calloway County), Northern Kentucky University (Campbell County), University of Kentucky (Fayette County), University of the Cumberland (Whitley County), Centre College (Boyle County), Morehead State University (Rowan County), Elizabethtown Community & Technical College (Hardin County), Henderson Community & Technical College (Henderson County), University of Louisville (Jefferson County), Hazard Community & Technical College (Perry County), and the University of Pikeville (Pike County).

² “Volunteering as a Benefit,” *Entrepreneur*, Dec. 27, 2007, available at <http://www.entrepreneur.com/article/188360> (last accessed July 24, 2013).

³ “Volunteering as a Benefit,” *supra* n.ii..

⁴ “Independent Sector’s Value of Volunteer Time,” *Independent Sector*, available at http://www.independentsector.org/volunteer_time (last accessed July 24, 2013).

⁵ Institute for Citizenship and Social Responsibility (“ICSR”), *2011 Kentucky Civil Health Index* (2012), p. 15.

⁶ “Impacts of Service-Learning on Participating K-12 Students,” National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (May 2007), available at http://www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/k-12_facts/impacts (last accessed July 24, 2013).

⁷ National Conference on Citizenship, *Millennials Civic Health Index* (2013), p. 4.

⁸ Greg Finn, “Study: 27% Of Time Online In The US Is Spent on Social Networking,” *Marketing Land* (Apr. 16, 2013), available at <http://marketingland.com/study-27-of-time-online-in-the-us-is-spent-on-social-networking-40269> (last accessed July 24, 2013).

⁹ ICSR, *supra* n.v, p. 9.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*, p. 12.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ Commonwealth Office of Technology, Commonwealth Broadband Maps, available at <http://technology.ky.gov/oet/Pages/CommonwealthBroadbandMaps.aspx> (last accessed Aug. 12, 2013).

¹⁴ “Percent urban and rural in 2010 by state,” United States Census Bureau, available at <http://www.census.gov/geo/reference/ua/urban-rural-2010.html> (last accessed Aug. 12, 2013).



EKU
November 13, 2012



Murray State
January 31, 2013



Centre
March 26, 2013



Henderson
Community
College
April 9, 2013



Hazard Community College
April 24, 2013



KSU
November 30, 2012



Morehead State
April 24, 2013



MOREHEAD STATE
UNIVERSITY



Henderson Community College
April 25, 2013



University of Kentucky
March 20, 2013



WKU
November 8, 2013



University of Louisville
April 18, 2013



University of Cumberland
February 16, 2013



University of Pikeville
May 1, 2013



Transylvania University
January 8, 2013



NKU
February 16, 2013