



build a better hometown
 Have a weekend?
 An afternoon?
 An hour? Improving where you live can start with the smallest step. Local leaders and accidental activists share 15 strategies that made a difference in the real world.

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YOU'VE THOUGHT IT BEFORE, haven't you? If you were in charge of your block, your neighborhood, your town, you'd make some serious changes. Here's the secret: You don't need to be in a position of power—or have untold amounts of free time—to make a difference. All it takes is the right idea and follow-through. “The popular myth is that those who make change reach some big, massive tipping point,” says Nilofer Merchant, author of *The Power of Onlyness*. “But it's a myth. Real change makers simply say, ‘I see something that I think matters.’”

Once you've zeroed in on what matters to you locally, Merchant promises that doing something to improve it isn't a huge leap. “We have to grant ourselves permission to take the first step,” she says. When you think, “What difference could I possibly make?” you're trying to imagine 38 steps ahead. Instead, Merchant suggests asking, “What is the first thing I could do?”

Think of it as micro-activism. “Doing things on a smaller level feels good,” says Ashley Ford, a New York City essayist whose own micro-activist moment—a tweet encouraging others to pay off kids' delinquent school lunch accounts—blossomed into a nationwide movement that raised more than \$150,000. “It makes you feel connected to your home and the people who live around you.”

Use this list of ideas as inspiration, as motivation—or even as a checklist to work down. And don't be shy about amplifying your efforts through social media: Tap your network for help, post photos of your accomplishments, and give a shout-out to others who get involved. The more you use your voice, the more your neighbors will want to join in.

1

Try a New Store

Dissatisfied with your city's downtown? The best way to improve it, says David Downey, CEO of the International Downtown Association in Washington, D.C., is to shop and spend time there. "Engage business owners in a conversation to learn their story and additional ways you can support the economy," he says. Buy your cupcakes from the neighborhood bakery instead of the supermarket, go to city events, and frequent the farmers market in town rather than the bigger one in the next county.

3

Turn Off Your Engine

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, elevated levels of air pollutants like benzene, formaldehyde, and acetaldehyde have been detected during the afternoon school-pickup rush. Talk to your principal or PTA about reducing idling in your area. Spreading the word is as simple as writing a letter to fellow parents with a doable request: All drivers should turn off their engines when they expect to be parked for more than 10 seconds. If idling is necessary for temperature control, suggest restricting it to five minutes. (That may also be the law—search the web for your state's idling rules.)

2

Look Out for a Neighbor

Illness, fire, divorce, job loss...when someone in your community is in crisis, rally your network to pitch in. As soon as Adriana Silva of Springfield, New Jersey, heard of a single mom of four in need of winter clothes for herself and her kids, she knew where to turn: the Springfield Moms group on Facebook. "I felt the urge to help," says Silva. "And other moms responded within minutes." After a few days, the group collected seven bags of clothes for the family. "It's not easy to donate every time someone is in need, but if everyone helps a little, it makes a huge impact," says Silva.



4

Reinvent the Carpool

We should all be walking more and driving less—for our health and the environment—but on busy mornings, going on foot takes time you don't have. One creative solution, from Nancy Thompson, a certified urban planner and founder of the advice website Useful Community Development: "Organize a human school bus project." Take turns with other neighborhood parents to walk kids to school. With enough families in the rotation, everyone will reap the physical benefits, with minimal schedule disruption.

5

Sit by the Street

People may move to an area for the school district or the commute, but they stay for the neighbors. "Meeting neighbors can be a challenge in certain communities," says Mike Lydon, founding principal at Street Plans, an urban-planning organization in New York City. Meet yours by setting up patio chairs on your front lawn or stoop—and give a wave to all who pass by. Another idea of his: "We call it 'streeting.' If you live on a low-trafficked residential street, get a permit and organize a potluck in the road."



6

Pay for the Basics

In 2014, Tiffani Ashley Bell was appalled to read that the city of Detroit had cut water supplies to households with unpaid bills. So Bell, who lives in Oakland, California, dug around and discovered a public list of past-due account numbers, was inspired to find people who were behind on their bills, and went on to cofound The Human Utility, which raises money to pay water bills in Detroit and now Baltimore. To help people going without basic utilities near you, Bell says to follow your local news—then get the word out. "Once you identify an issue you're passionate about, there's a good chance other people are, too," she says. "You're never alone in wanting to right a wrong."

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7

Share Your Skills

Are you a whiz at mah-jongg? An incredible cook? The tech-savviest of your friends? Reach out to your local senior or community center to volunteer. "If you have a skill, we can build a class around it," says Kimberley Trusty-Doughty, general manager for volunteer services at the Hillsborough County Department of Aging Services in Florida. Centers are always looking for help, says Trusty-Doughty—even if you can give only a few hours on one day.

8

Level the Local Playing Field

When you hear about kids going without—without lunch, without books, without money—step in with your wallet and voice. After David Quinn, a high school teacher in Edmonds, Washington, learned that some of his students would have to sit out the pricey International Baccalaureate exams because a federal grant had ended, he contacted the media. The result: His state's lieutenant governor filled in the gaps. "This was going to destroy the dreams of my students," says Quinn. "I had to do something."

9

Brighten Up a Dreary Spot

"That long gray stretch of industrial concrete is so uplifting," said no one ever. With an investment of less than \$20, a few hours of your time—and the green light from local officials—you can transform neglected underpasses and walls with sidewalk chalk. "Chalk art is lightweight and reversible—it doesn't impact that structure," says Lydon, recalling a project in New Haven, Connecticut, in which community members pasted blown-up photo portraits of citizens under a stretch of Interstate 91. "Everyone got to look at the smiling faces of this diverse neighborhood. It made the area feel a lot less scary."

10

Chip In for Animals

Animal shelters and rescue groups don't just need monetary gifts, says Gail Buchwald, senior vice president of the ASPCA Adoption Center in New York City. They need supplies. Some collect blankets and towels for bedding. Others turn socks into catnip toys. Many accept unopened food, toys, cat litter, and cleaning products. Donations help shelters spend more on lifesaving care, says Buchwald.

11

Make a Litter Sweep

Frustrated by the ever-overflowing trash can at your local ballpark? Next time you go, Lydon recommends bringing a spare garbage bag and a roll of packing tape to attach the bag to the outside of the can. It's a quick fix—what Lydon calls "tactical urbanism"—and a sign to whoever services the space that it should be maintained more frequently. "You could also make local government aware of the problem—and ask them to add more trash cans—with just a call or an email," he says.

13

Care for Your Elders

There are so many ways to look out for the elderly in your neighborhood, from onetime assists like shoveling snow to regular gigs like walking someone's dog. You could also formalize your aid: "Assign" able-bodied neighbors an elderly neighbor to check in on during emergency situations. "It's about finding ways to protect the most vulnerable members of your community," says Ford.

Easy-entry opportunities to help—at your library, at your community center—often already exist. You just have to ask.

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Talk to a Librarian

Next time you're checking out books, ask your librarian, "How could I help here?" "Sometimes a simple conversation reveals a talent or skill that might be a good match for us," says Dale Spindel, director of the Springfield Free Public Library in Springfield, New Jersey. Easy-entry opportunities to help often already exist. While you're at it, join your local Friends of the Library program, too.

12

Join a Giving Club

Take a cue from 100 Women Who Care, an international group with more than 500 chapters whose members learn about pressing needs in their area, pool their money, and then vote on a cause to support. Since the organization's founding 11 years ago, groups have donated a collective \$17 million. To join or start a chapter in your area, visit 100whocarealliance.org. Or raise funds with your own social circles, from work to book club.

15

Get Your Hands Dirty

That patch of grass at the end of the block? It needs some love. "A planting project is a great onetime event," says Thompson. If you're eyeing public space, you may need permission from local officials to make changes. Designate a date and time and ask volunteers to bring their garden tools and a plant or flower.

