
RELEARNING THE SKILLS OF COMMUNITY¹

Sarah Byrnes[©]

If there's anything I've learned while helping to organize Common Security Clubs in communities around the nation, it's that there is no "one size fits all" club. They are as different as the individuals who comprise them. But a common thread is that clubs provide a way for people get to know each other. It's an old-fashioned concept—knowing your community—but it's badly needed in our time of increasing insecurity and isolation. "We usually spend about 45 minutes on a 'check-in' with each other," says Paul Miller in Boston, whose club has been meeting for two years. "The focus is simply on hearing each other, and providing support whenever possible. People get to air their concerns and receive affirmation." "People at first resist simply receiving—they think they can't show up to a potluck empty-handed. We tell them it's okay—it's okay to receive if you need help." "We're taking baby steps toward a new type of community," adds Jared Gardner, a facilitator in Portland, Oregon. "We want people to feel connected and empowered. That's what the groups are all about."

In the past, neighbors knew each other and engaged more naturally in mutual aid, sharing common resources and helping those in need. Nowadays, our mutual aid muscles are out of shape and pretty flabby. Clubs help us to start flexing and stretching them again, little by little. Clubs also chip away at our resistance to being helped. "People at first resist simply receiving—they think they can't show up to a potluck empty-handed," Jared says. "We tell them it's okay—it's okay to receive if you need help. We say we're putting the 'luck' back in potluck." Often, club members find they can be helpful in ways they don't expect. "People downplay what they are able to offer," says Lil Hosman in Portland. "I know how to sew a button on a shirt, and you probably don't. That's something concrete I can offer. And it helps me to help you. It's amazing how quickly people diminish when you take away their ability to be useful."

Some clubs even experience conflict. "We had some participants for whom the unemployment experience was too fresh. It was too raw to talk about," says Amanda Soarez in Portland. "The group ended up getting pretty small, but we came up with a cool mutual aid project where we set up a shared sewing machine at our church for the community to use." Amanda is now facilitating a second group, and this time the experience is much different. "Our group has only met twice, but we've already decided we want to keep meeting beyond the five sessions outlined in the guide," she says. "We meet in people's houses, and everyone is from the same neighborhood. I think that has helped us gel as a group—people are already sharing rides and planning neighborhood improvement projects."

Not all clubs find that mutual aid and social action emerge from their meetings. Nancy Hitson in Corvallis, Oregon reports that because participants in her club were so spread out geographically, it was harder to find ways to support each other. "The curriculum was very valuable, the materials and videos were really great," she says. "But our group didn't take steps beyond learning." "We hope that in each club, connections are formed, and new ideas are encountered," says Chuck Collins, founder of the Common Security Club network. "Bringing people together can be a challenge, and just overcoming isolation is a huge step."

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Sometimes mutual aid does emerge unexpectedly, even in groups whose main focus is learning and discussion. “We have a group of six or seven people who like to talk about the economy,” reports Grace Braley in Maine. “But when one of us had surgery, we all pitched in to help out—people watched his dog, bought groceries—that kind of thing.” Simple things like this can make a world of difference. And it’s these kinds of steps that can transform our communities and our economy, one button at a time.