



# Guide to establishing sister city relationships

A sister or friendship city relationship is formally created when the mayors or highest elected or appointed officials from two communities sign a memorandum of understanding establishing the partnership. However, this is usually the result of a long process that involves the local sister city organization along with the municipality and other local institutions. While process can also be very different for each community and can vary from culture to culture, this guide can serve as a point of reference in guiding communities through the process.

## THE STEPS

- **PLANNING PROCESS** The first step in developing a new sister city relationship is to ensure everyone is on the same page. This would include the local sister city organization and the highest elected/ranking official, provided this individual approves and formalizes the partnership. The contact information for local sister city organizations may be found by using the “City Search” tool on the Sister Cities International website at <http://www.sistercities.org/>.
- **RESEARCH PHASE** Sister City relationships are strategic long term partnerships that should be mutually beneficial, and identifying potential partners is the foundation to developing a successful relationship. If you don’t already have a potential sister city in mind, below is a list of data points that communities should look for similarities when identifying potential partners.
  - **Population size** Some variance in city sizes is natural, but choosing a sister city of a similar size usually ensures good symmetry between municipal governments, community groups, private organizations, as well as similar challenges/opportunities
  - **Geography** Similar geographic qualities, whether it’s ports, deserts, lakes, mountains, climate, etc. often means that cities will be able to share valuable knowledge related to the respective challenge or opportunity associated with each quality
  - **Industries**
  - **Academic institutions** High school and university exchanges, which are often a part of any relationship, require similar counterpart institutions that should be identified early in the process
  - **Cultural institutions** This may include museums, music venues, community centers
  - **Preexisting Relationships** This may include, but is not limited to: mayoral relationships, trade relationships, expatriate/diaspora communities, faith-based groups, and personal experiences ranging from study/work abroad to marriages
  - **Historical or ancestral connections**

Many communities have developed criteria or policies to guide their research or to evaluate inbound inquiries, whether from cities abroad or local residents, in order to manage the volume of requests as well as ensure that potential relationships are both appropriate and sustainable. If you are interested in developing such a policy please email [membership@sistercities.org](mailto:membership@sistercities.org) for more assistance as part of our Governance and Policy Services.



# Guide to establishing sister city relationships

Sister Cities International works with U.S. and global members on establishing new partnerships through the **Cities Seeking Cities** program. This program provides members with hand-in-hand assistance in researching potential partners, developing a line of communication through various channels, consulting in international protocol matters, and ultimately serving as a resource for any questions throughout the correspondence. For more information on the Cities Seeking Cities program please visit our website at <http://sistercities.org/cities-seeking->

you need assistance in targeting appropriate contacts within the international community, please contact [partnerships@sistercities.org](mailto:partnerships@sistercities.org) for staff assistance through our **Cities Seeking Cities** program. A template for this letter may be found under the toolkits and templates section of the SCI Member Area <http://www.sistercities.org/toolkits-templates>.

- **DEVELOP LINE OF COMMUNICATION** The next step in the process is to develop a line of communication with the prospective community by sending a letter of introduction from one mayor to the other. This letter should introduce your community, identify why you are interested in developing a sister city relationship, identify potential program/exchange opportunities, and identify a point of contact for this initiative. This is when international protocol should be followed in order to ensure a positive experience. Provided symmetry is a key aspect of international protocol, if your local sister cities organization operates through the work of community volunteers it is good practice to identify a volunteer contact as well as a contact within the mayor's office. If
- **CORRESPONDENCE PHASE** Once the letter has been received by the international community and a line of communication has been established, the next several months should be focused on learning more about the each other's communities, identifying program/exchange opportunities, discussing local involvement, and developing a work plan that establishes short and long term goals for the partnership. Many cultures will recommend a physical exchange during this phase, but often various means of technology is used to effectively communicate. This period is also a great opportunity to implement a program to "test the waters." This program could include a youth pen pal exchange, municipal/professional best practice, or other knowledge-sharing exchange, among many other opportunities. Many communities may send non-mayoral delegations during the correspondence and planning stages-whether that be the city manager, council members, local business professionals, or volunteers.
- **DEVELOP PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT** Both communities have decided to move forward and formalize the relationship. In order for a sister city, county, or state partnership to be recognized by Sister Cities International, the two communities must sign formal documents which clearly endorse the link. The partnership agreement can range from the ceremonial, with language focusing on each city's commitment to fostering understanding, cooperation, and mutual benefit to the precise, with particular areas of interest, specific programs/activities, or more concrete goals related to anything from numbers of exchanges to economic development. Sister Cities International has developed a toolkit and template that will assist in creating this document and can be found under the toolkits and templates section of the SCI Member Area here: <http://www.sistercities.org/toolkits-templates>.
- **SIGNING CEREMONY** Once the partnership agreement has been developed and both communities have approved the document, the two highest ranking officials will sign the document, which is often done during a formal signing ceremony. While it is important to tailor these ceremonies to fit your specific communities, Sister Cities International has developed a guide to this process and can be found under the under the toolkits and templates section of the SCI Member Area here: <http://www.sistercities.org/toolkits-templates>. Once the



## Guide to establishing sister city relationships

---

agreement has been signed, please send an electronic copy of that agreement to Sister Cities International at [membership@sistercities.org](mailto:membership@sistercities.org). The partnership will then be added to your communities profile on SCI website and a certificate will be issued recognizing the partnership.

- **IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION** Sign, sealed, delivered. It is time to implement programs and plan exchanges outlined in the work plan developed during the early months of this process. It is good practice to set a date, whether within the next six months to two years, to evaluate the partnership and make adjustments if needed. If you ever come across any issues, concerns, or are looking for program ideas, please do not hesitate to contact Sister Cities International.