

As people of faith, we should know our local community.

We are *better citizens* when we appreciate the challenges our local leaders face. We are *better advocates* when we can use personal experience to share community needs with elected officials. We are *better neighbors* when we understand the lives our sisters and brothers live.

Know Your Community Treasure Hunt



How does public policy come to life in your community?

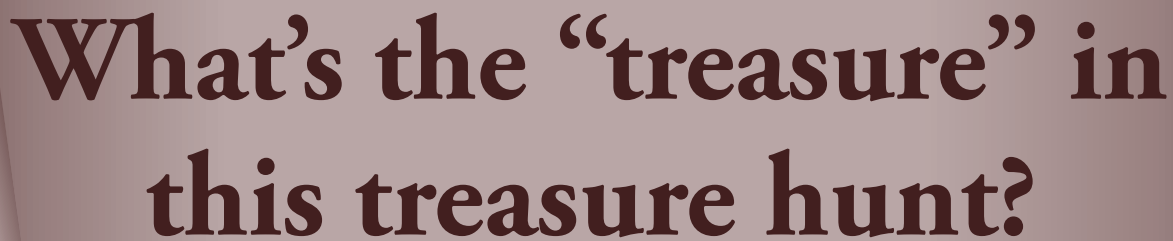
Many of the programs and services that exist in local communities are there as a response to *public policy*. Your local governments perform many social service functions because the law requires it.

How do members of your community work together to meet each others' needs?

Local charities help carry out those functions...and often, they step in where laws do not meet all the needs in the community.

How can you find out the best answer when someone asks you for help?

Learning the *policy context* for outreach and service programs helps you be a more effective volunteer or leader.



What's the “treasure” in this treasure hunt?

We're inviting you to go on a treasure hunt in your local community...and we want YOU to tell US what the treasure is!

On your treasure hunt, we predict you will discover information about your community that you never knew before. You might meet people who do jobs you think are important, or learn new ways to help members of your community who need you. You could learn more about the natural resources in your area and how to protect them, and you might decide to work to strengthen certain services in your community.

Instructions

The **Know Your Community Treasure Hunt** is a series of challenges. You can do the treasure hunt by yourself, but it's more fun in a group—like a religious education class, ministry team, women's group, or even your choir! The treasure hunt is suitable for youth and adults.

- For each challenge, you will do a little background research on an issue in your community. Most if not all of the issues are common in all communities in the U.S. The research mostly relies on information you can find online easily.
- After you do your research, you (and your group if you have one) will take a field trip to meet people in your community who work in that issue area and to see facilities or programs operating in your community.
- Document what you did, using the forms provided at the back of this handbook or on the Treasure Hunt website (www.texasimpact.org/treasurehunt). Finish all twelve challenges in a single year to receive a prize from Texas Impact!

The Challenges



Challenge 1: Employment

Knowing the answers to the following types of employment-related questions can help you identify issues far beyond the economic sustainability of your community—the types of jobs available can also impact community members' physical and mental health. Who are the major employers in your community? Are there lots of locally-owned businesses and industries in your area, or are most businesses parts of larger corporations headquartered elsewhere? What types of jobs are available in your community (for example, low-paying, service jobs, or high-skilled, technology jobs)? What is the unemployment rate? The answers to these questions can shed light about the jobs—or lack thereof—available in your community and help you better understand what services are most needed and appropriate in your local area.

Assignment (Send us the information you find, plus a picture of yourself at your local job office):

1. Find out what the local unemployment rate of your community is.
2. Visit your local workforce development board (information can be found at <http://www.twc.state.tx.us/dirs/wdas/directory-offices-services.html>) and schedule a time to meet with a staff person that can help you determine the top three most pressing employment needs in your community.

Challenge 2: Environment

We are all connected to the environment through the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the food we eat. Protecting the health of our local environment is directly connected to protecting the health of our local families—especially children and the elderly. At the same time, the way our lives and communities are structured (for example: urban sprawl, electricity generated by burning fossil-fuels, and a consumer-based economy) depends upon industry that has environmental impacts.

Assignment (Send us the information you find, plus a picture of yourself at one of the locations you identify in #2):

1. Find out what the major source of environmental pollution is in your community and its related health impacts, if any.
2. On a map, locate the following:
 - a. Where your water comes from (probably a river or reservoir)
 - b. Where your water is treated
 - c. Where your electricity comes from (probably a power plant)
 - d. Where your trash goes after it gets picked up

Challenge 3: Criminal Justice

One in every 27 adults in Texas is in prison, or under probation/parole. Placing attention on how or why people become involved in the criminal justice system and what happens once they do can paint a complex picture that encompasses a variety of issues such as mental health, poverty, education, and racial disparity.

Assignment (Send us the information you find, plus a picture of the visitor pass from the local jail):

1. Schedule a tour of your local jail and speak to jail staff about the trends and issues they encounter on a daily basis.
2. Visit a local reentry program or halfway house and speak to individuals returning home after incarceration to learn more about their personal stories and the barriers they may be facing in coming back to their communities.

Challenge 4: Affordable Housing

Having safe, reliable shelter is essential for all families, but many are not able to access quality, affordable housing. The U.S. government classifies affordable housing as housing that is 30% or less of family income.

Assignment (Send us the information you find):

1. In a family of four both parents work 30 hours per week earning federal minimum wage (\$7.25 per hour), or one parent works full-time and the other roughly half-time, then that family will be in poverty. The 2014 Federal Poverty Guidelines set the poverty line for a family of four at \$23,850 per year. For this family of four making roughly \$21,500 per year, try to find quality, affordable housing in your community.
2. Learn about the process for applying for public housing options in your community and make recommendations for the example family of four.

Challenge 5: Homelessness

When we think of homelessness, we tend to think of a person huddled under blankets sleeping on the steps of a church. It is important to recognize that alongside this more visible homelessness, there are many other individuals and families experiencing homelessness that we do not see. Learning more about the stories of these individuals can help one understand about the needs, strengths, and weaknesses in one's community.

Assignment (Send us the information you find, plus a picture of yourself serving food at the soup kitchen):

1. Visit a local homeless shelter and find out more about what the homeless population looks like in your community and what services are available for them.
2. Serve a meal at your local soup kitchen and listen to the story of at least one person who is homeless.

Challenge 6: Education

Quality public education can be a great equalizing force in our society. Local communities have a large impact on both school performance and future opportunities for children. They operate schools, implement and enforce state laws and policies, develop and implement their own educational policies, hire and supervise professional teaching staff, and raise money to pay for schools (usually through property taxes plus special bond issues).

Assignment (Send us the information you find, plus a picture of the visiting pass from the school and the agenda from the school board meeting):

1. Visit a low-performing school in your district and schedule a time to meet with the school nurse or school counselor. Find out about the top needs and problems facing the school and the children in the school.
2. Attend a school board meeting and identify who the education decision makers are in your community.

Challenge 7: Local Leaders

While most news coverage focuses on policy issues of state and national significance, local leaders shape many of the decisions that impact us on a daily basis, and some local leaders will go on to become state or national figures. It is important to build relationships with local elected officials, both to impact short-term local legislation and to prepare for the possibility of their becoming state or national elected officials.

Assignment (Send us the information you find, plus pictures of the Council agenda and of you with the Mayor or a member of the City Council):

1. Find a local issue to study and identify who the local leaders are that can influence or make decisions on that issue.
2. Learn the names of all your local City Council members and attend a local City Council meeting.

Challenge 8: Utility Assistance

Regardless of whether a family is working or not, money can be tight and families might not be able to cover the cost of utilities. Often families who are trying to keep the lights on or the heat running will turn to congregations for help.

Assignment (Send us the information you find and some comments about how easy or difficult it was to find this information):

1. In some communities, multiple groups or agencies might offer utility assistance. If your community can access a 2-1-1 help line (or visit <http://www.211.org>), call or go online to see what sources of help they say are available in your area. Are there other sources of assistance?
2. Find out, as best you can, all the places where families could go in your community for utility assistance and how much money is available. Is it easy to find this information, or did you have to call multiple people or offices? Is there often a shortfall between the amount of money that's available and need?

Challenge 9: Public Transportation

Many families in Texas are unable to afford their own personal transportation and rely on public transportation. Public transportation has the added benefit of being good for the environment. How would your community rate in terms of public transportation?

Assignment (Send us the information you find plus a picture illustrating the strengths/weaknesses of your public transportation system):

1. Determine all local forms of public transportation.
2. Select an address or intersection from a low-income neighborhood in your community, and plan out how you would get from there to the nearest grocery store or doctor's office and back. How long would it take you? Are there different schedules for different days of the week? Report back on any perceived shortcomings (access for low-income families, relation to grocery stores, schools, benefits offices, etc.) Bonus points for sending us a picture of you using the public transportation in your community.

Challenge 10: Mental Health

Mental health conditions affect everyone: grandparents, children, neighbors, community leaders, and the people with whom we worship. An estimated fifty percent of people will meet the criteria for a diagnosable mental health condition at some point within their lifetime. In 2009, the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) gave Texas' mental health services a "D" grade and the Texas Department of State Health Services acknowledged that Texas' mentally ill population was not receiving adequate mental health care. Texas ranks 50th among U.S. states in mental health expenditures per capita. Texas also ranks far below the national average in the number of mental health professionals per 100,000 residents.

Assignment (Send us the information you find, plus a picture of yourself with a member of your local law enforcement agency):

1. Find out what mental health services are available in your community for low-income individuals without health insurance.
2. Visit your local law enforcement agency and ask them about their approach in dealing with the individuals they encounter who have a mental illness.

Challenge 11: Food Assistance

Only half of Texans eligible for food assistance are receiving it, causing the state of Texas to leave almost \$4 billion in federal SNAP benefits unused each year. These are dollars that low-income families in your community could be accessing to improve their quality of life and lessen the strain on local food pantries, and that would have a positive economic impact on your local community while helping those that need it most.

Assignment (Send us the information you find plus a short reflection on how your community might better be able to help families who qualify for food programs):

1. Identify how much your county is leaving on the table in SNAP benefits by viewing the Texas Hunger Initiative's report *Hunger by the Numbers: Blueprint for Ending Hunger in Texas* (https://bearspace.baylor.edu/Tariq_Thowfeek/public/blueprint.pdf)
2. Figure out what grocery stores in your community accept SNAP benefits by using the USDA's SNAP Retailer Locator (www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailerlocator). Where are they located in relation to families who might need help? Are there farmers' markets in your community that accept SNAP benefits? (Find out here: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/SNAP-FM-0114.xlsx>) Where are they located in relation to families who might need help? Take a picture at one of the grocery stores or farmers' markets.

Challenge 12: Health Care

There are about one million Texans who qualify for benefit programs administered by the state such as Medicaid, CHIP, SNAP and TANF who are not enrolled. Many of these low-income Texas families are living in your community. It could be that they do not know that they are eligible, or they might not know how to sign up. Texas Impact is working with the other members of the Community Partner Recruitment Initiative to recruit faith-based organizations to help make it easier for low-income families to sign up for benefit programs online. This is particularly important for low-income families who are not computer-proficient or do not have easy access to the Internet.

Assignment (Send us the information you find plus a picture of yourself at a location where community members can go to apply for state benefits):

1. Report on the following. If you were not able to use the internet to apply for Medicaid or CHIP, where would you go in your community to sign up? Are there lines and extended office hours? Do any communities of faith help provide these services through the Community Partner Program? Think about how your congregation could participate in programs to help people apply for benefits.
2. Visit with a staff member or volunteer at the location where you would send someone to apply for these benefits. Consider contacting Texas Impact about sending members of the Community Partner Recruitment Initiative team to your community to visit with groups who might like to help.

Helpful Hints

- Consider the possibility of working on this project with other congregations in your community or partnering with your congregation's youth group to complete the assignments.
- Report back to your congregation and to us about what you learn. There are several ways for you to communicate your findings, such as writing a blog post or article for the newsletter, giving a brief presentation during a worship service or religious education class, or creating resource materials for your faith community that contain information about local services.
- If you get stuck, need additional information, or would like a Texas Impact staff member to give a presentation on one of these issue areas, please contact Scott Atnip at scott@texasimpact.org or 512-472-3903.
- Make it FUN!

All-Purpose Script (suitable for phone, email or snail-mail):

Hi, my name is _____. This year I'm participating in a leadership program where I am learning about community needs and resources here in [YOUR TOWN].

I would like to schedule a time for a brief conversation with you or someone from your office to talk about [THE POLICY AREA] in our community. I know you are busy and I want to be respectful of your time. I am hoping for about 15 minutes of your time, and I would be happy to come to your office or the location of your choice.

Please let me know when might be a convenient time for us to talk, or how to go about setting up an appointment with someone else from your office.

I appreciate your work on behalf of our community, and I look forward to hearing more about what you do. Thanks for your attention!

Sincerely,

YOU!

Know Your Community Treasure Hunt Reporting Form

For each challenge, complete this form and send it to Texas Impact via email (treasurehunt@texasimpact.org), fax (512-473-2707), or snail mail (200 East 30th Street, Austin, Texas 78705). You can also report online at www.texasimpact.org/treasurehunt. Feel free to use extra pages if you want to! Questions? Call us at 512-472-3903.

Name of Treasure-Hunter *This can include your name as well as the name of your group if you have one and the names of other members of your group if they want to be included.*

Name of Challenge _____

Tell us about your research. *Was it easy to find the information you needed? If you are working in a group, did one person do most of the work or did you divide it up? Were the questions we suggested the right ones for your community? What else do you think is important to mention?*

Tell us about your field trip. *Was it easy to find the right person to talk to? Were you welcome to visit the facility or attend the meeting? Did you feel awkward? Are you glad you went? What else do you think is important to mention?*

Tell us about your conclusions. *Were you satisfied with what you learned? Are you satisfied with how your community is handling needs in this challenge area? Did you see opportunities to strengthen local services? If so, can you see ways that you or your congregation could help with that? Did you learn of new activities you or your group might like to participate in? What else do you think is important to mention?*

Tell us about your next steps. *Do you or your group plan to follow up on this challenge area? Do you plan to do more challenges? Do you need any support or resources from Texas Impact or other groups to help you move forward? Do you have any suggestions for other individuals or groups who take on this challenge? What else do you think is important to mention?*

Tell us about you. *Please share as much information as you deem relevant about you and/or your group.*

Congregation/Faith Community _____

Address _____

Email (you, a group leader or other contact) _____

Phone _____

Do you have a current mission, outreach or service focus? _____

Are you interested in learning more about Texas Impact? _____

Are there particular issue areas you are interested in learning more about? _____

Are you interested in learning more about policy advocacy? _____

What else do you think we should know? _____



**TEXAS
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people of faith working for justice

Texas Impact was established by Texas religious leaders in 1973 to be a voice in the Texas legislative process for the shared religious social concerns of Texas' faith communities. Texas Impact is supported by more than two-dozen Christian, Jewish and Muslim denominational bodies, as well as hundreds of local congregations, ministerial alliances and interfaith networks, and thousands of people of faith throughout Texas.