

What Can I Do?

A SERIES TO HELP UTAHNS ENGAGE



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What City Council Members Can Do to Strengthen the Impact of Utah Girls and Women

UTAH WOMEN & LEADERSHIP Project

Utah is full of engaged, passionate individuals who frequently ask the question, “What can I personally and/or professionally do to strengthen the impact of Utah girls and women?” To provide specific answers to that question, the **Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP)** hosted a series of “think tank” gatherings to collect best practices for various stakeholders interested in supporting and empowering Utah women.

OVERVIEW

This idea sheet is based on several 2021 remote gatherings of more than 25 former and current city council members representing a variety of jurisdictions across the state of Utah. Their discussions focused on ways to magnify women in government, community/youth outreach, policy development, encouraging and mentoring, and shape the conversation. Local elected officials can play an important and influential role in strengthening the impact of girls and women in their communities.

MAGNIFY

Magnifying the work of women in municipal government will help inspire girls and women to get involved in civic and government functions and to run for office. Engaged city council members can:

- Ensure that women and girls see the contributions of female city council members so that they can envision themselves in similar roles.
- Raise the profile of the work of other women on committees and highlight their contributions within the city or town.
- Host small group gatherings, such as “Coffee with Council Member” with a specific focus on the young women to capture their interest early.
- Help women and girls see where they can be involved without giving up their other priorities. Help them change their mindset from an “either/or” to an “and” mentality.

- For women city council members specifically: Be confident in modeling what it means to have a voice, advocate for your communities, and partner with others in city government. Be honest about the need for thick skin in such roles.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Encourage women of all ages, backgrounds, and stages of life to get involved within their communities. Help them understand there are always ways to be involved and that they have a voice. Strategies to do this can include the following:

- Make a concerted effort to get women to volunteer or serve in positions within the city or town as a stepping-stone to future, higher-level roles.
- Sponsor Youth City Councils and mentor youth to help them learn how elections are run and how to lead. Assist girls in these Councils specifically to have the confidence to run as a mayoral candidate for the Council.
- Let youth shadow you at work, and have different officials and staff speak about their preparation, pathways, and current roles.
- Speak in your community. Engage with your schools and meet girls’ groups specifically (e.g., Girl Scouts, school clubs, young women groups).
- Involve Girl Scouts in flag ceremony events at municipal functions. Involve girls in Citizenship in the Community, as this does not have to be tied to a scouting organization.

- Form coalitions with organizations that have a stake within your jurisdiction and community. Ask if they have programs that focus on women and girls.
- Find ways to engage and involve women and girls who may not speak English or are in minority communities. Their voices need to be heard.
- Engage in conversations and activities with girls and women by being visible in neighborhoods and communities.

POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Policies and practices influence the participation and engagement of women. Create and foster an environment where city council members enable women and girls to contribute, resulting in better solutions for all residents. City council members can:

- Help residents (particularly women) learn how to get items added to city council agendas and how to advocate. Add agenda items that are important to women and girls.
- Work with other municipal leaders to ensure equal representation on committees.
- Create policies that generate equity and improve flexibility for women working in local government; make the changes visible both inside the city and with businesses operating in the community.
- Increase flexibility for government workers, including positions that align with school hours.
- Evaluate prerequisite requirements and ensure that they are balanced (e.g., avoid masculine bias) to support a diverse candidate pool.
- Evaluate all city policies, procedures, and job descriptions to identify and eliminate existing gender biases embedded within the documents.
- Focus time on issues and concerns that are important to women and girls. Invite groups focused on women (and led by women) to the table to assist with the development of policy. Provide more input to the mayor. If you think it, be willing to say it out loud.

ENCOURAGING AND MENTORING

Utah ranks poorly in terms of women running for and serving in political office. For women to lead, additional support is needed, and for girls to aspire to become leaders, they need to see more women leading now. To achieve this, city and town council members can:

- Invite women to participate in committees, boards, or commissions. Pay attention to and encourage women who attend and participate in city meetings or who express their views on the city's social media platforms.
- Recruit women to apply for all positions in city government and to run for elected office. Convey to each woman that she can make valuable contributions, and mentor her through the process.
- Change the perception that women with young children cannot be involved. Encourage young mothers to participate in their community in whatever capacity works for them.

- Engage male allies in the cause of expanding women's political participation at all levels.
- Raise awareness and promote training programs and other resources available to women, such as how to run a campaign and get involved (e.g., Real Women Run, Women's Leadership Institute). Encourage women to raise their aspirations for what is possible.
- Leverage networks and resources to help women fundraise more effectively and make connections with power brokers and influencers.
- Create a five-year plan focused on getting women in the "pipeline" of talent for future political and appointment positions. Do this early and often.
- Establish a structured mentorship program within city government. Help women connect with each other to discuss, brainstorm, and solve problems.
- Educate all Utahns on the critical importance of having more women serving in public office.

SHAPE THE CONVERSATION

Promoting and highlighting the voices and contributions of women and girls creates an environment where they can thrive. Ensure that a broader spectrum of voices are heard and celebrated in your community. This can be done as follows:

- Start a newsletter and include a section called "In My Own Words"; invite women to contribute. Foster conversations in the newsletter on topics that matter to women in the community (e.g., human trafficking, poverty, domestic violence).
- Use social media and foster relationships with reporters/writers; encourage them to expand the types of stories they tell and voices they amplify.
- Find ways to publicize the contributions of women. When you see women doing something good, recognize them in a city council meeting, on the city website, Facebook page, etc. Make it a general practice to highlight women of all ages.
- Raise awareness of the need for broader representation by providing unconscious bias training for city and town employees and departments.
- Be cognizant of how you talk about women, which words you use, and what they imply. Language matters. Help shift culture and perceptions. Train all council members on nuance, context, and the use of language.

CONCLUSION

When women and girls participate and engage in meaningful ways in their communities and in civic life, decision making and problem solving are enhanced. As city council members understand their influence and speak up, they can create a culture of inclusion, raise awareness of local issues, and take action to increase the impact of women and girls in their communities and throughout the state.

Utah Women & Leadership Project • www.utwomen.org • uwlp@usu.edu

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