



The Junior League in a Time of Civil Unrest: A Guide for Nimble and Responsive Action

SUMMARY

This guide to action and long-term preparation takes lessons learned by Junior Leagues in communities affected by civil unrest and racially motivated violence and summarizes them in a checklist format to help other Leagues respond to and prepare for these situations more effectively.

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Over the past few years, a growing number of Leagues have faced incidents of civil unrest, racially motivated violence, and hate crimes in their communities. From Ferguson to Charleston to Orlando to Baton Rouge to Dallas, communities have experienced crisis situations that bring with them tension, trauma, and a need for nimble, responsive action on the part of community organizations. So, how does a Junior League prepare for and respond to such a situation?

Civil unrest. . . is something that we should all be thinking about, because it is possible. . . this could happen to any city.—Allie Chang-Ray, Junior League of St. Louis

The guidance provided in this document is based on lessons learned from Leagues that have faced such tragedies, in the hope that all Leagues will be equipped to handle a crisis in their communities should it occur.

What to Do Right Away

Assume a leadership role

Leadership in a crisis situation is very different from leadership in a time of normal conditions. Everyone in a leadership position will be under enormous psychological and mental strain due to the stressful and tense environment. The sooner a League's leadership recognizes and learns to deal with uncertainty and unpredictability, the better, in order to come together and:

- Take care of the immediate safety of League members and staff.
- Be flexible with League plans and shift gears when a crisis occurs, so that the Board and membership can engage actively with the issues at hand.
- Make the best decisions under the circumstances for the League and community. In leading, keep the Mission at the forefront, especially when facing opposition.
- Understand that though a leader may feel personally unprepared to face a crisis, she can seek and receive help from AJLI, other Leagues, and other community groups.

Reach out to League members

When community unrest or violence occurs, immediate communication with members is crucial:

- Find out if they are okay. Be sure, first and foremost, to find out if any League members (or their loved ones) have been directly impacted by events.
- Share the findings with League members and encourage them to reach out and lend support to each other.



Formulate the League's position and plans

Members and community partners will want to know: "What is the League going to do in response to this?" Leagues will not have everything figured out. The important thing is to be honest about what is happening, and open up communications.

- Ask members what they know. Junior League members are trained civic leaders highly involved in the community, meaning they may have knowledge, contacts, updates, ideas, experience, skills, and/or suggestions that can help shape the League's response. Tap into the deep well of knowledge and ability that is the League's membership -- and don't forget Sustainers.
- One of the challenges Leagues will face in developing a response is that on some topics there may be divergent views within the League – from whether the League should say or do anything at all to what should be said or done. Leaders should make sure that the League is a place where it is possible to express divergent views and have conversations about these differences that are respectful and heard. The League's purpose is educational and members can and will educate each other.
- Reach out to community partners. Your community partners might have information or ideas to share and may have projects underway that are relevant to the crisis at hand. Seek to partner with them in meeting needs, rather than approaching them with pre-defined solutions.
- There may be many new organizations and initiatives springing up in response to the crisis. Leagues must be careful when suggesting actions to members to make sure these opportunities are legitimate and appropriate.
- Leagues should also not forget that there will be needs and opportunities to help after the headlines die down, as well as those really immediate opportunities.
- Leagues can help bring community stakeholders together to plan community-wide strategic responses.
- Keep the channels of communication open, as crisis situations are fluid and unpredictable.

Well into the unrest that followed the arrest of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, our members wanted to hear why emails hadn't been answered, why nothing had been coordinated as a response, why no information had been disseminated that they felt would have been a good thing for our League to be a part of in terms of rebuilding the city.—Cylia Lowe-Smith, Junior League of Baltimore

Two weeks after the unrest began in Ferguson, we saw that the residents living in the immediate community were afraid to come outside and were in dire need of basic supplies, from diapers to food. So we partnered with some local churches to help, and our members assisted with the different efforts going on in the region.—Allie Chang-Ray, Junior League of St. Louis

Support immediate community needs

While working on the League's position and plans, there may be certain things the League can step in to do right away and address immediate community needs. Members will appreciate being part of the early response.

- Contact organizations with ties to the affected community—churches, youth centers, community centers, etc.—including the ones the League has not previously partnered with. These groups may need help with activities such as collection drives, meeting basic needs, and spreading the word about how to access services.
- Determine how and where the League can help and act quickly and efficiently to provide support.
- Update members on League plans. Be sure to be proactive in your communication with members during this time.



Educate, train, and support your members

Members will need a space to understand and process these types of traumatic events.

- Bring in community leaders, organizations, and experts to talk with the membership about what is going on in the community, the circumstances that brought about unrest, and what can/will be done.
- Share any relevant events and trainings being held by other agencies in the community with members and encourage their participation.

What to Work on With a Longer View

Know your community (then and now)

Social unrest does not happen overnight. It is important for the League’s leadership and members to have a solid understanding of the cultural background and history of its community:

- Learn about race relations and other civil rights issues in your community.
- Stay abreast of current events in the community and take note of the potential for tension.

Get a seat at the table... and keep it

Having a “seat at the table” is all about the visibility, presence and reputation the League has in the community. This comes partially through the League’s community programs and how the work is promoted and circulated. However, it also entails conscious relationship development with a wide intersection of community stakeholders. Do an informal audit of the League’s external relationships:

- Does the League have a presence on relevant commissions, coalitions, committees, panels, advisory groups, think tanks, etc.? Do you belong to your state’s nonprofit association (or equivalent in Mexico, Canada, and the UK)?
- Has the League met or worked with the community’s political leaders?
- Is there at least one League representative at important community conferences and events?

Being proactive in both sustaining/renewing existing partnerships and pursuing new ones will position the League so that if/when a crisis situation arises, the League will be included in any wider community response.

We came up with a training program for our League for this year. Unlike Baltimore and Ferguson, we did not have the backlash. We had a community that really showed love in order to combat this hate crime. What we did was offer a panel with three prominent civic leaders from the Charleston area who presented Women Making a Difference in Cultural and Social Inclusion.—Dorothy Thaxton, Junior League of Charleston, SC

We’ve had panels to help our members understand the circumstances that perpetuated the separation of those who have from those who have not, understand poverty through simulations, and re-establish a Diversity & Inclusion committee.—Allie Chang-Ray, Junior League of St. Louis

That was a big lesson learned for me, that within 10 to 15 years, our League had been removed from some of the critical issues, some of the harder conversations about what was going on in our region that we were no longer considered relevant or able to assist, even though we had a full League of over 500 women. We were denied the opportunity.—Allie Chang-Ray, Junior League of St. Louis

We had a long, rich history of social activism, community involvement, and were, for many years, the go-to organization in our community to get things done and to be considered players or, as Allie puts it, to have a seat at the table, but somehow we lost that along the way.—Cylia Lowe-Smith, Junior League of Baltimore



Develop members' cultural competency

Part of developing a civic leader is developing her cultural competency, and far too often this is brushed over or overlooked. Diversity and inclusion training should not be reactive, but a part of the core training the League implements as a part of its Mission to build a better, stronger community.

- Provide a space for members to learn how to talk about their differences (including race, religion, sexual orientation, etc.).
- This allows them to understand the issues, process their learnings, and be equipped to mobilize when a crisis situation involving racial or ethnic tension and civil unrest does occur and contribute to the response in a meaningful way.
- Listen to members; they will have feedback on what training they feel they need in order to cope with and respond to the situation at hand.
- These are difficult discussions; be sure to provide time/space to reflect and process.

Consider the long-term response

Examining the underlying issues brought to light during these types of crisis situations may help inform the League's future programming.

Resources

Fall Leadership 2015: Governance Plenary

http://www.ajli.org/?nd=resource_detail&resource_id=1635

Webinar Wednesdays: Junior League Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Values in Action:

Claiming a Seat at the Table When Crisis Hits

http://www.ajli.org/?nd=resource_detail&resource_id=1711

Building Blocks for Diversity & Inclusion (*Note: this resource is in the process of being updated*)

http://www.ajli.org/?nd=resource_detail&resource_id=96

Forward through Ferguson

<http://forwardthroughferguson.org/>

- Contains the report used by The Junior League of St. Louis when assessing community needs, post-crisis.

Media Relations 101: Tips for Effective Media Relations

http://www.ajli.org/?nd=resource_detail&resource_id=1547

See pp. 3-4 on managing a crisis.

Crisis Management and the Media: Special Report

http://www.ajli.org/?nd=resource_detail&resource_id=1584

Crisis Communication Plan: Nonprofit Toolkit

http://www.ajli.org/?nd=resource_detail&resource_id=2087

National Council of Nonprofits: Find Your State Association (United States only)

<https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/find-your-state-association>

(*Note: not every state has a nonprofit association. In the absence of one, the United Way can often serve a similar purpose.*)

As Junior League leaders, one of the ways that you help to make these communities better is to help your members to understand these issues; to have open dialogue about these issues. . . So that if and when something happens you have women who are prepared, who are trained, and who are mobilized.—Vicki Clark

After the events that occurred in Ferguson, in 2014, we assessed a report from The Ferguson Commission and identified financial empowerment as a way the League might begin to address those underlying issues. We identified a range of potential strategies, including advocating for relevant policy changes such as increasing the minimum wage, and helping “unbanked” families access financial education and services.—Allie Chang-Ray, Junior League of St. Louis