

◆ Sunday, Aug. 15, 2004

St. Cloud Times Editorial Board

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Our view

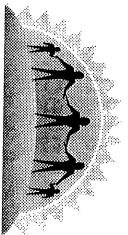
Social capital is important resource in community

Editor's note: This is the first of two parts.

How connected are you to your community?

That question gets a lot of attention today through Friday, thanks to a six-part series compiled by the Times news staff.

The impetus of this informative and engaging series is a recent survey on Central Minnesota's social capital, or how much people are connected to one another and their communities.



The overall survey news is good: Most area residents are well off in terms of social capital, especially based on comparisons with national studies and two Midwestern cities. But that doesn't mean there isn't work to do.

Why measure social capital?

Social capital is important because a growing body of research shows communities rich in it tend to have higher educational achievement, better performing governmental institutions, faster economic growth, and less crime and violence. In other words, a better quality of life.

Steve Joul is president of the Central Minnesota Community Foundation, which wanted to survey this area's social capital. The Times is a co-sponsor of the study.

Joul said the intent was not just to find out how connected people are now, but to use survey results to determine how and where the area's social capital should be strengthened.

Ideally, three to five years from now, another survey will be taken and show if, amid rapid growth, the area's social capital is growing, maintaining or shrinking.

First big challenge

One key finding driving the Times' news series is the lack of social capital among young adults. The survey found people 18 to 34 have the least social capital.

Yet if Central Minnesota wants to retain young adults so they become old adults who are rich in social capital, efforts must start now to improve their connections. That can happen in a variety of ways and through many sources.

For some, it might be learning about a community connection through work or via an Internet chat room. For others, it might start with participation in a church or recreational event. Heck, it can even be as simple as talking to a stranger at the store or helping out that neighbor you've never met.

Clearly, building social capital is not difficult. More important, doing so improves your and this area's already-stellar quality of life.

Coming Monday: Some ways to start building your community connections.

◆ Monday, Aug. 16, 2004

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Reaching out to community helps your social capital

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It takes two basic elements for Central Minnesotans to boost their community connections and retain and improve our quality of life:

- Awareness of opportunities.
- A willingness to pursue them.

Regardless of your current connections, or social capital, there are many steps you can take to bolster those and, more importantly, reach out to help others strengthen their ties.

As this week's Times news series "Connecting with your community" shows, adults aged 18 to 34 need the most help building community connections. With that in mind, consider these suggestions.

Reach out

Helping others boost their social capital is a big challenge. Yet one of the best resources to use in addressing it is tapping the connections area employers already have with employees.

As a starting point, the Times is challenging employers and employees to participate in the 13th annual Make A Difference Day on Oct. 23.

Businesses and employees can determine their own level of involvement. Maybe it's a one-time fund-raising drive. Or better yet, maybe a business teams with a school and then provides employee volunteers at the school all year long.

Regardless of the size or scope of the effort, let us know about it and we will share it with readers through the Times Opinion pages. For information, call 255-8762 or send an e-mail to rkrebs@stcloudtimes.com.

Your own ties

Building your own social capital hinges mostly on your willingness to try. The strategies to achieve are really quite simple.

For example, professor Robert D. Putnam and author Lewis M. Feldstein, the two driving forces in the social capital field, offer 150 ways at their Web site, www.bettertogether.org.

A sampling includes:

- Organize a social event where you live.
- Donate blood — with a friend.
- Start a book club or monthly lunch group.
- Greet people.
- Avoid gossip.
- Visit local merchants.
- Bake extra and share.

And, of course, applying many of these ideas not only strengthens your ties, but it also does the same for those on the receiving end of your effort.

