



Contact:
Bill Valladares
william@gafcp.org
404-739-0043

Amy Henderson
ahenderson@gmanet.com
678-686-6226

Partners Aligned to Improve Georgia's Struggling Civic Health

ATLANTA— Georgia's civic health is still not strong, according to the second edition of the Georgia Civic Health Index (CHI), released today by Georgia Family Connection Partnership (GaFCP), the Georgia Municipal Association (GMA), and the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC).

Civic health in the Peach state has declined in most of the 21 civic engagement measures that examine the way Georgians interact with each other, their communities, and in political life since the first report was published in 2013. During the past six years:

- voting in local elections dropped from 29th to 40th,
- volunteering dropped from 34th to 44th,
- contacting a public official dropped from 34th to 49th,
- group membership or participation dropped from 28th to 49th, and
- donating to charitable or religious organizations dropped from 40th to 47th.

This matters, because research has linked civic health to economic resilience; workforce development; child development, adolescent well-being, mental health, and other public health outcomes; access to opportunity; community vitality; lower violent crime rates and youth delinquency; and reduced mortality.

“We’re taught that our democracy belongs to all of us, yet only some of us choose to belong to it, and for too long too many others have been excluded from our systems of government and civic life,” said Sterling Speirn, CEO of NCoC. “Enhancing civic life requires a broad-based alliance of public and private organizations—and individuals—to get involved. It also requires that we focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion. Declining civic participation rates tell us our democracy may be down, but it is certainly not out. The stakes are high and every day more and more people are rising to the challenge.”

Georgia is certainly not out, either. Some indicators from the 2019 report suggest promising opportunities for our state:

- The frequency that Georgians provide food, housing, money, or help to friends or extended family matches the national average, ranking 29th, with Georgia millennials engaging in this way at rates higher than both the state and national averages.
- Georgia ranks 29th for frequently talking to or spending time with people of different racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds.

Partners Aligned to Improve Georgia's Struggling Civic Health (continued)

- Georgians post views about political, societal, or local issues on the internet or social media at a rate above the national average, ranking 13th.

“Georgians of Latin descent are poised to help improve our state’s civic health crisis,” said Latino Community Fund Executive Director Gilda Pedraza. “Nationally, Latinxs are 14 times more likely to be entrepreneurs than the general population, and Latinxs in Georgia demonstrate high levels of optimism for the future. A third of the Hispanics in Georgia are in K-12, so we need to demonstrate to our younger generations the value of engaging in civic life and encourage them to invest and re-invest in their own communities as they grow up.”

Also encouraging, is that various aspects of local civic health appear to be strong. Data gathered from Bibb, Camden, Cook, Fayette, Stephens and Washington counties reported higher percentages of contact with family and friends than the state average. County-specific data also found higher percentages of volunteerism. These communities are beginning to develop targeted strategies to improve the areas that their local data revealed are lower, and momentum is building to address these issues at the city and county levels across the state.

“Georgia’s Cities are home to more than 43 percent of the state’s population, providing the opportunity to bring people together to foster better engagement in cities,” said GMA Executive Director Larry Hanson. “Cities host activities, festivals, and other events that bring people together to engage and interact at the local level. We’re going to take this report as a challenge to foster more connectivity among city residents. Being connected to each other is critical for our health, government, community, and family.”

Statewide organizations that serve every community in Georgia already are committed to helping reverse the declining trend in civic health. GaFCP and critical partners like GMA are ready to embed strategies to improve civic participation—informed by six years of data—in all 159 counties across the state.

“Local government, public and private organizations, the faith sector, and residents have vital roles in improving Georgia’s civic health, building locally to improve large-scale outcomes,” said GaFCP Executive Director Gaye Smith. “Georgia has a lot of work to do, and with that in mind, GaFCP will continue to work with partners on civic engagement projects across the state—and provide communities with the data they need to improve their local civic health.”

Download the report and recommendations about how to help improve Georgia’s civic health at gafcp.org/georgia-civic-health-index.

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About Georgia Family Connection Partnership

Georgia Family Connection Partnership (GaFCP) is a public-private partnership created by the State of Georgia and investors from the private sector to assist communities in addressing the serious challenges facing children and families. GaFCP also serves as a resource to state agencies across Georgia that work to improve the conditions of children and families. Georgia KIDS COUNT provides policymakers and citizens with current data they need to make informed decisions about priorities, services, and resources that impact Georgia’s children, youth, families, and communities. For more information, visit gafcp.org.

About the Georgia Municipal Association

The Georgia Municipal Association (GMA) anticipates and influences the forces shaping Georgia’s cities and provides leadership, tools, and services that assist municipal governments in becoming more innovative, effective, and responsive. Created in 1933, GMA is the only state organization that represents municipal governments in Georgia. Based in Atlanta, GMA is a voluntary, nonprofit organization that provides legislative advocacy, educational, employee benefit, and technical consulting services to its members. GMA represents all 538 cities in Georgia. For more information, visit gmanet.com.