

UNIVERSITY TIMES

Serving Faculty & Staff Since 1968

VOLUME 54
ISSUE 3: SEPTEMBER 24, 2021

Civic Action Week combines discussions and service projects

Wednesday, September 22, 2021



Alex Toner (center) helped sign up volunteers during Pitt's Day of Caring in 2019, the last year faculty and staff participated in the day of volunteer projects. (Aimee Obidzinski | University of Pittsburgh)

By SUSAN JONES

Last year, Pitt's signature fall volunteer opportunities — Pitt Day of Caring for faculty and staff and Make a Difference Day for students — were curtailed because of the pandemic and organizers instead developed online educational and engagement events for Civic Action Week.

This year, organizers are bringing back the in-person volunteer events and building on the conversations that happened last year for the second Civic Action Week, from Oct. 4 to 9. This year's theme is Dialogue, Deliberation and Disruption.

"We had reached a point before COVID that we wanted to start to innovate and rethink what service and community engagement look like for our populations," said Shenay Jeffrey, assistant director of PittServes, which is working with the Office of Engagement and Community Affairs to organize the week.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement sparked deep conversations last year that continue now, and part of the week's activities include carrying on that dialogue through speakers and workshops.

"We know that the work that we did with direct service was much needed; it was essential," Jeffrey said. "We also wanted to complement that in a strategic way around more in-depth conversations, but also to showcase that there are many different ways to make an impact on your society and to be civically engaged."

"Not only is it, I think, a big difference when you can get people together to talk and deliberate and really think about some of the critical issues that are facing neighborhoods and communities in the region," said Alex Toner, assistant director of community, "but when you really get people out in the community, working alongside those residents and neighborhood leaders, understanding the intersections of some of these areas, I think it makes much more of an impact and gets people engaged in ways that Zoom really can't."

All of the events for Civic Action Week fall under six Pathways for Public Service and Civic Engagement (click on the links to find opportunities in each category):

Community Engaged Learning and Research: Connecting coursework and academic research to community-identified concerns to enrich knowledge and inform action on social issues.

Community Organizing and Activism: Involving, educating, and mobilizing individual or collective action to influence or persuade others.

Direct Service: Working to address the immediate needs of individuals or a community, often involving contact with the people or places being served.

Philanthropy: Donating or using private funds or charitable contributions from individuals or institutions to contribute to the public good.

Policy and Governance: Participating in political processes, policymaking, and public governance.

Social Entrepreneurship and Corporate Social Responsibility: Using ethical business or private sector approaches to create or expand market-oriented responses to social or environmental problems.

"We wanted to again go deeper, and think about how we bring about change; who brings about change; what change is not being brought about; and what does change look like," Jeffrey said.

The week will kick off with two keynote addresses — one with University leaders from 10 to 11:30 a.m. and another with community leaders from 4 to 6 p.m. — discussing what Dialogue, Deliberation and Disruption mean to them and how they are being used in their work.

The speakers and workshops throughout the week will be open to the Pitt community for in-person attendance, and anyone else who is interested can access the livestream. The in-person service projects are limited to Pitt faculty, staff and students because of liability issues. Jeffrey said most of the projects will follow universal COVID-19 precautions such as masking and social distancing.

The service projects will mostly take place on Oct. 8 and 9. Like previous years, the Friday projects will be completed by faculty and staff, and the Saturday work is primarily for students. Jeffrey and Toner encourage people to sign up early to get the pick of the projects. Registration and a list of projects can be found [here](#).

Toner said in 2019 a record number of faculty and staff — more than 300 — turned out for Pitt Day of Caring, and they're hoping to get more this year.

The 10 projects on Friday are with community groups such as People's Oakland, Operation Better Block in Homewood, Family House, and the Oasis Project at Homewood's Bible Center Church. Toner said faculty and staff will gather between 8 and 9 a.m. for a kickoff with coffee and doughnuts and then they will be bussed to their work locations, returning between 2 and 3 p.m.

There are two groups — Millvale Community Development Corp. and Friends of South Side Park — getting attention from Pitt employees and students over the two days of service.

A new addition this year are three service projects during the week: Western Pennsylvania Conservancy landscaping work at Parkview Drive and Boulevard of the Allies on Oct. 5; Grounded Strategies for work on their garden beds in the Hill District on Oct. 6; and Friends of the Riverfront trail maintenance near the Hot Metal Bridge on Oct. 7.

"We hope people walk away from Civic Action Week this year moving toward action in their individual and professional lives," Toner said.

"I think being civically engaged is probably at the forefront, more than it has been in this current decade," Jeffrey said. "I would say in many ways COVID has taught us a lot about how we are in relationship with each other, and how much that affects everyone. And I think that's the lesson within what we think about civic action, that our actions are collective."

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