

Mitchellville's SHIP initiative a model for small cities

By Jacob Holland

In the summer of 2018, Mayor Carl Lee Griswold of Mitchellville, a small city in southeast Arkansas, began searching for a way to change his community and reached out to University of Central Arkansas's Center for Community and Economic Development (CCED). He wanted to bring citizens together and work on many initiatives in the area, but he needed direction. He also knew, to create lasting change, he needed to keep the focus on building camaraderie and bonds among community members.

On July 17 CCED partnered with The City of Hope Outreach (CoHO) to help make Griswold's vision a reality. CoHO, a nonprofit based in Conway, facilitated the creation of the Mitchellville Self Help Improvement Program, or SHIP. SHIP hosts citywide meetings to hear concerns of the constituents, conducts surveys, and engages in project development to solve many of the community's most pressing tasks.

In addition to helping establish the nonprofit organization, CoHO offered advice for community engagement, training sessions for board members, and strategic planning. At the trainings, CoHO offered sessions on grant basics, program development, and fundraising strategies. CoHO also helped facilitate community meetings to better understand community challenges.

Moving forward, the leaders of SHIP have an ambitious agenda in front of them, including:

- Beautification of Mitchellville by restoring dilapidated properties in the area.
- Improving city amenities, such as adding new equipment to the local playground.
- Historic preservation, including renovations of the old City Hall and registering the building with the National Historic Preservation Society.
- Downtown revitalization to support community gathering and engagement, which leaders hope will lead to positive and lasting change for the community.

Dr. Phillip Fletcher, founder and executive director of CoHO, encourages other communities to engage in projects like the SHIP initiative because of the unique benefits of the collaboration between nonprofits, local government, and citizens. Most importantly, Fletcher believes in the strength of community and the power of citizen-led initiatives.

"In the context of communities like Mitchellville, it's important to have private citizens involved," he said. "They know what they need and what resources they have."

He also advises local and nonprofit leaders to be thoughtful and intentional with projects like SHIP.

"Communities can't do everything at once," Fletcher said. "You need to find small initiatives that you can accomplish that build success and momentum towards the next big project."

"The older population's high energy and willingness to learn is what is so special in Mitchellville," Fletcher said. "The older citizens want to leave a positive legacy for their children and grandchildren."

Even in follow up meetings, Fletcher has witnessed sustained commitment to take on projects and get involved in tasks they have never done before. For instance, Mitchellville will host its first community carnival on Nov. 10.

Mayor Griswold has already seen significant progress in his community because the citizens are taking ownership of the initiative. Community members help SHIP leaders identify areas of opportunity and propose potential solutions. Griswold reports that volunteerism in the community has increased dramatically.

Griswold encourages other community leaders to follow the SHIP model.

"This kind of community project brings people together and improves quality of life in the process," he said.

The SHIP initiative is an excellent example of how local government, citizens, and nonprofits can work hand in hand to promote community development, and in turn be more economically viable. To learn more about community engagement, nonprofit development, and economic development, contact UCA's Center for Community and Economic Development at cced@uca.edu or visit www.uca.edu/cced.



Jacob Holland is an intern with UCA's Center for Community and Economic Development. He is a pre-law student at the UCA Honors College majoring in Political Science and Public Relations. Email Jacob at jholland15@cub.uca.edu.