

## Getting Started Guide Community Read of the Declaration of Independence

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/CommunityReadTheDeclaration/>

Many Americans have recognized the importance of getting beyond a simple Democrat/Republican divide, breaking out of our own echo chambers of anger, and engaging meaningfully with others in our community who feel very differently about current political issues. But it's hard to have a constructive conversation around differing political views if all you do is jump right into the issues where you differ. It's never easy, but it's *easier* if you start by engaging around shared values.

Well, friends, we have a big opportunity coming up to break through: it's called July 4. And here's a simple, but powerful idea of what to do: ***Hold a Community Reading of the Declaration of Independence***. We have been doing this in my home town for the past 10-15 years, and it's always a wonderful, inspiring, community building event.

Here are some ideas for how to do it in a truly open way. (If you're looking to turn it into an pro- or anti-Trump rally, more power to you, but that's not what I'm advocating here. Instead, this is intended as an investment in community-building and opening lines of communication.)

### **Pick a meaningful time and place for your event.**

- Ideally, a recognized public forum where people gather. In my New England town, we meet on the town common, right in the center.
- Noon is often a good time. Don't go too late in the day as you'll lose people to recreational pursuits. In my town, bells ring at noon, so it gives a nice touch to have everyone gather a few minutes before and then start the reading immediately after the bell-ringing. Feels very authentically 18th century.
- In larger cities, plan multiple simultaneous events at neighborhood locations.

### **Try to get unlikely co-sponsors.**

- Make a genuine effort to go beyond "rounding up the usual suspects" of people you know and those who think like you do. If you're a self-styled progressive, liberal, or Democrat, reach out to your local Republican Party and to conservative groups. If you're from somewhere to the right, reach left. Tell them you're planning a truly open event, kind of like an inter-denominational prayer breakfast. Whatever our current political differences, let's recognize our shared adherence to the American civic religion.
- Reach out beyond organizations through personal email, Facebook, etc. Especially try to get veterans, naturalized citizens, and immigrants -- who often have a deep attachment and familiarity with the Declaration but for very different reasons.

### **Plan a brief, simple program focused on the Declaration of Independence.**

- By promising a short program, you increase the likelihood of participation on a day when people do have other, more fun things to do. It also lowers the probability of wandering into contentious territory.

- Make the reading the centerpiece and put it up front. The Declaration is truly a revolutionary document that speaks for itself. (Take 2 minutes to reread it here: <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/>) The beauty of the text is that it will stimulate people to make all sorts of connections to what is happening today.
- Resist the temptation to feature celebrities or recognized political leaders. This is a great opportunity for all types of people to participate on a very equal basis.

**Sample Schedule.** Here's a typical schedule for how we've done it in my town in prior years:

- 11:50** People gather. Organizers hand out copies of Declaration, annotated to show when to change speakers.
- 11:55** Participants gather into a circle. Organizer explains who will start reading, and that we'll go around the circle, changing speakers as indicated on the handout. Anyone wishing not to read should just let the person on their left know so that person can jump in at appropriate time. Organizer also explains what will happen after the reading.
- noon** Bells ring
- 12:01** Reading begins
- ~12:10** Reading finishes with entire group reading last line in unison: "And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor."
- 12:10** Reading of names of Revolutionary War ancestors from our town and relatives of current residents.
- 12:15** Very brief remarks about meaning of America and the Declaration from a few participants. E.g., newly-naturalized citizens, veterans, etc. (Typically, these are very personal, NOT commentary on current political events.
- 12:20** Formal event ends. People linger and mingle, or leave, as they want.

**Try really, really hard to keep the organized portion of the event away from any anti/pro discussion of current issues.**

- In both pre-event messaging and in any introductory remarks, stress that the point of the event is to reconnect with what unites all of us as Americans, not what divides us.
- If you have any pre-planned speakers, let them know what is, and is not, in bounds given the event purposes.
- ***Trust in the power of the text of the Declaration to get people thinking about its application to today.*** For example, if you adopt a schedule like that outlined above, you could end the event with a simple, "Thank you everyone for coming today. I know that for me, personally, hearing the words of the Declaration spoken aloud and hearing what it means to just a few of our fellow citizens, it has given me a whole lot to think about what those words mean to us today, given our current political situation. I know I'll keep thinking about that, and talking with my friends and neighbors, and I hope you will too."

To share your ideas on how to host this type of event, please visit our Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/CommunityReadTheDeclaration/>