



## Partnerships to Advance Community Priorities with STAR

The [STAR Community Rating System](#)® (STAR) is the nation's first comprehensive framework and certification program for measuring local sustainability, including environmental stewardship, economic stability, and social equity.

- STAR was developed between 2008-2012 by more than 200 technical experts and local government representatives. It includes more than 500 quantitative and qualitative metrics for local sustainability.
- More than 100 communities of all sizes have used STAR to measure current conditions and plot a course towards greater sustainability.
- Nearly 40 communities have achieved STAR certification.
- [STAR Communities](#), the non-profit organization that administers the rating system, is supported by many philanthropic partners, including the Kresge Foundation, Summit Foundation, and Surdna Foundation.

### STAR Communities

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# Memphis-Shelby County, TN

*“STAR gives funders a very specific understanding of conditions in the community – a current baseline – so we can focus our efforts on the areas of greatest demonstrated need.”*

--Lauren Taylor, Program Director for Livable Communities, Hyde Family Foundations

It's an issue that trips up many local sustainability offices – staff, elected officials, and community members have lots of worthwhile project ideas, but with limited capacity, which ones should be prioritized? And with limited resources, how can those priorities get funded?

In Memphis-Shelby County, TN (pop. 950,000), the city and county governments' first major sustainability effort was the 2008 [Sustainable Shelby](#) plan, which set the agenda for the joint Office of Sustainability created in 2011. Even with just two (eventually three) full-time staff members, the office accomplished or made headway on many of the initiatives, as shown in its [2014 progress report](#).

With support from HUD, the [Hyde Family Foundations](#), and other partners, the Office of Sustainability was also actively involved in development of the [Mid-South Regional Greenprint](#), a 25-year plan to create 500 miles of greenway trails and 200 miles of bike paths. The Greenprint process involved more than 80 organizations across three states, which provided a great opportunity for the Office of Sustainability to meet and form relationships with other agencies and community groups.

Building on the success of this collaborative effort, the Office of Sustainability turned its attention to repurposing its supporting citizen group, the Sustainability Advisory Committee, who had struggled to find focus.

Fortunately, in January 2014, Memphis-Shelby County was accepted into the [Leadership STAR Community Program](#) with a scholarship from [the Funders' Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities](#) (TFN). The program provides staff support and services to a cohort of communities as they work through the [STAR Community Rating System](#)® (STAR). STAR is the first comprehensive rating system and certification program for measuring local sustainability in the US. The rating system addresses seven wide-ranging categories, from health and safety to the economy and jobs, as well as more traditional areas like climate and energy and the natural environment.

“Once we dug into the STAR framework, we realized that there are many things related to sustainability that aren't led by our office,” said John Zeanah, Administrator of the Office of Sustainability. “STAR gave us a unique opportunity to look beyond our Sustainable Shelby plan and move outside our comfort zone to see what else was important for us to measure.”

Quantitative measurement of sustainability conditions and trends is a key feature of the STAR Community Rating System, which can be challenging for some communities that have focused more on actions and planning, as in Sustainable Shelby. Through a partnership with [Global Green USA](#), Memphis-Shelby County collected data from local sources and national databases on everything from tons of waste sent to a landfill or incinerator to trends in homicide rates.

Global Green developed a “quick start” method in Memphis-Shelby County to pull data together as efficiently as possible. “The goal was to minimize the time spent presenting about what STAR was and to roll up our sleeves and get to work,” said Walker Wells, Vice President of Programs at Global Green. “Since the staff had already done a lot of legwork on the easily collectable data, we could zero in on the remaining objectives and identify the ones they would like to achieve, then decide what it would take to get that data or take those actions.” After the initial meeting, Global Green lent support and capacity to the sustainability staff as they finalized their application for STAR certification.

Gathering the data meant forming new partnerships, both inside the government and with community groups. “Given the size of our office, and our relative newness, relationships with others is how we get our work done,” said Zeanah. “STAR really gave us the chance to engage agencies and contacts that we hadn’t quite leveraged since our office came into existence.”

“We hear that from local governments a lot, actually,” said Hilari Varnadore, Executive Director of STAR Communities, the DC-based nonprofit organization that administers the rating system. “STAR is a management tool that helps everyone from the police department to public works see their role in building a sustainable community. STAR also recognizes important contributions from other local partners, such as universities, community foundations and nonprofit organizations, which can generate ongoing momentum for sustainability efforts.”

In February 2015, Memphis-Shelby County earned an impressive 4-STAR Rating (out of 5). “We knew from the publication of Sustainable Shelby that change would not come overnight, but the 4-STAR rating shows we are making great progress toward a more sustainable and livable community,” said Memphis Mayor AC Wharton, Jr.

Shelby County Mayor Mark H. Luttrell, Jr. agreed. “The 4-STAR rating validated the good work by the city and county to become more sustainable, but gave our staff a blueprint for how to achieve even greater results.”

The 4-STAR achievement has also galvanized the Sustainability Advisory Committee with a new sense of purpose. “While we’re proud of our accomplishments, the areas of Built Environment, Climate & Energy, and Equity & Empowerment stuck out needing improvement,” said Zeanah. “Now we have work groups for those areas, which will help us score better in the future, but more importantly, take action in those priority areas. STAR gives us a roadmap of critical actions that we can consider and examples from other communities to study.”

Identifying gaps also positions the community to be able to talk knowledgeably about its priority areas when reaching out to philanthropic partners. For example, the Hyde Family Foundations, along with the Community Foundation of Greater Memphis and The Assisi Foundation of Memphis, are supporting development of an interactive dashboard of sustainability indicators and metrics for Memphis-Shelby County citizens. This project, a TFN [Partners for Places winner](#), will utilize data gathered for STAR to propel Memphis-Shelby County towards new heights in all areas of sustainability.



## STAR and Philanthropy

Whether your community has a long history of collaboration between local government and place-based foundations or is just starting out on this path, STAR provides a unique opportunity to evaluate your community’s strengths and challenges in order to direct resources efficiently and effectively to the areas of greatest need. Here are ways your community can use STAR:

- **Support a Scholarship:** STAR’s [Leadership Program](#) offers scholarships to cities and counties that have support from a community foundation to pursue STAR certification. The process and results will reveal valuable insights about community trends and build new partnerships.
- **Invest in a Priority Area:** If your community is already [STAR-certified](#), that’s a perfect conversation starter for the local government and community foundations to talk about priority needs highlighted by the STAR analysis and discuss opportunities for collaboration.
- **Apply for Partners for Places:** Did you know TFN has a specific category in its [Partners for Places](#) grant criteria for STAR-certified communities targeting an area identified for performance improvement? This is a great opportunity for the local government and community foundations to team up and apply for up to \$75,000 in matching funds!



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*Photos courtesy of Memphis-Shelby County*