

While town affiliations between the United States and other countries started on an organized basis in the aftermath of World War II, no national effort was initiated until President Eisenhower promulgated the People-to-People program at a White House Conference in September 1956. The President's concept held that the citizens of this country, representing the great strength of the United States, could and should make contributions to improve the image and understanding of our country abroad. The idea was to involve people and organized groups at all levels of our society in personal diplomacy. One of the groups established as a result of the White House Conference was the Civic Committee, headed by the late Boston industrialist Mark Bortman. The Civic Committee had the specific task of promoting sister city relations on a national scale. The Committee asked the National League of Cities, which represents over 15,000 cities, towns and villages in the U.S., to serve as a clearing house in expanding the program among its membership.

Official government participation was confined to occasional advice to unsnarl red tape and to attendance at ceremonial functions. This principle is honored today just as it was first enunciated by the President in underlining the private and voluntary nature of people-to-people contacts. They are intended to build friendship across frontiers, to instill understanding and respect for other cultures and customs, but they are not manipulated by the federal government nor considered to be an adjunct to American foreign policy.

In the early years of the program not more than a dozen active affiliations existed. As their number increased, so did the need for a national office beyond the single staff member of the National League of Cities who had to meet all requests for information and match-making services. Participating cities and those interested in joining the expanding program looked for a national headquarters that could provide information on tested procedures, furnish data on foreign cities that had expressed interest in finding an American affiliation and could effectively manage a clearing-house for requests and the exchange of experiences.

In 1965 an expression of this need surfaced when delegates to the Western Regional Sister City Conference in Portland, Oregon unanimously called for the establishment of a national association. Following this action the League of California Cities and the League of Oregon Cities adopted resolutions supporting the creation of a National Sister City Association. The Executive Committee of the National League of Cities followed suit at its meeting late in 1965.