

Design Assistance Team (DAT) Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

What is the Design Assistance Team (DAT) program?

A program of the Architects Foundation and administered by Communities by Design (CxD), DATs bring together architects and other multi-disciplinary experts to work alongside the residents and stakeholders of host communities on key local issues. Every project is community-driven and includes meaningful public participation in an intensive process that matches professional expertise with public values and aspirations for a place. The DAT program methodology is based on three primary tenets: utilizing a multidisciplinary team approach; ensuring the objectivity of all participating team members; and requiring broad, inclusive public participation in the process.

Who can apply for the Design Assistance Team (DAT) program?

Any community is eligible to apply for a DAT project. The program has historically worked in communities ranging from less than 500 residents to large urban jurisdictions with more than 1 million people. Every community is required to form a broad-based local steering committee as a part of its application. However, lead organizations have included planning departments, public agencies/local governments, metropolitan planning organizations, community development organizations, neighborhood associations, downtown organizations, universities, and other related groups.

How is the program funded?

The program is sponsored by the Architects Foundation, a non-profit organization headquartered in Washington, DC. The Architects Foundation is the philanthropic partner of the American Institute of Architects. It is a 501(c)(3) organization that is supported by corporate donations, philanthropic grants, and contributions from private individuals.

What is the typical project scope? Does the program provide architectural services?

The DAT program works at the urban/community scale. We do not provide architectural services, though we do produce conceptual sketches to illustrate potential development, connections, and public spaces in a given project area. The project areas have ranged in size from a few blocks of a main street in a small town, to a district or downtown, to a single neighborhood or an entire community. The scope and scale of a project depend upon the priorities a community has identified. The program has also worked at a regional scale involving multiple jurisdictions when appropriate.

What is the DAT process?

Each DAT consists of two visits. During the first visit, the project team leader and AF staff meet with local experts and representatives of community stakeholder organizations to gather information about the scope of the project

and community priorities. Based on this scoping visit, the leaders then choose other national experts for the team, all of whom serve on a pro bono basis. This team of 5-7 volunteers return to the community to facilitate public workshops to develop an action plan for the future.

What is the cost to the community?

The Design Assistance Team is not a traditional grant program. DAT communities receive pro bono services through the program, and the Architects Foundation commits to covering all of the costs of bringing the team members to the community. In-kind donations are critical to the process, both to ensure that hard project costs are kept as minimal as possible, as well as to encourage broad community support, participation, and commitment. The program does not provide any direct funding to communities. In-kind donations can include such elements as: discounted team member lodging; donated team & community event meals/catering; advertising & publicity; donated meeting facilities & team workspaces; team & meeting supplies.

Where else has this process been used? What are the typical outcomes?

The DAT program has worked with over 250 communities since the 1960s. Each project has resulted in a series of key priorities and recommendations formulated in a presentation and final report. DAT communities have built effective platforms for collaboration and collective action involving the entire community. The Design Assistance Team program has a six-decade track record of community impact that has generated billions of dollars in sustainable development and led to some of America’s most celebrated places. The outcomes of this work are well recognized and produce novel approaches to community problems. Impact surveys with dozens of participant communities have reported that 98% identify “strategic focus” and “new ideas and recommendations” as key program outcomes and 89% of respondents reported the initiative’s ability to build “long lasting community trust.” As the International Association of Facilitators has noted, “Thanks in part to your superb efforts, we have concrete proof that group facilitation and group process methodologies yield significant, measurable results.” The International Association for Public Participation applauded the program for contributing “a replicable set of values and a process that can be broadly applied to urban design and sustainable communities; and the development of a participatory culture and applied values that explicitly recognize the central place of the public in the design of the built environment.”

Who is the team made up of? What is their agenda?

Each DAT interdisciplinary team is made up of national experts from across the country, selected by the program and customized to fit the key issues present in the community. Teams can include (but are not limited to) transportation experts, architects, urban designers, economic and finance experts, planners, landscape architects and engineers. This is not another team of consultants. Consultants work for somebody. DATs work for everybody. The team’s mission is to serve the public interest by observing community conditions, listening to community values and aspirations, and applying their best professional expertise about the current issues and opportunities facing the area. Team members are deliberately selected from places outside the community and state, are not paid for their service, and are prohibited from pursuing business development opportunities that result out of the DAT. They are engaging in public service on behalf of the host community.

Who should participate in a DAT?

Everyone with an interest in the future of the community should attend and participate, and all members of the community are welcome.

What is the goal? What are the final products?

The goal of the process is to produce a set of implementation strategies that are grounded in the reality of the local context and designed to build momentum for significant community progress. The process is designed to involve as many participants as possible, developing a shared understanding of a community's values and aspirations for the future, and applying professional analysis and expertise in the public interest to produce a set of strategies that lead to collective action and momentum for change. The team's final products include a presentation to the community on the final evening of the process, and a final report delivered and available online a couple of months after the event.

How does a community apply for a DAT, & when is the application due?

Communities have two options for submitting a DAT application: 1) complete and submit an application through the [online application portal](#); or 2) download the [DAT Application](#), complete and compile your materials, and then email your compiled PDF application to communitiesbydesign@aia.org. Applications are due on **December 4, 2026**.

Are there any additional online resources for communities interested in applying for a DAT?

Applicants seeking additional information about the DAT program, the application, or the review process should consult the [Architects Foundation Website](#). Additionally, video resources describing the DAT program are available on CxD's [YouTube channel](#). Communities by Design will hold informational webinars on [October 7](#) and [October 21](#) to provide an overview of the DAT program and the 2027 application cycle. Technical questions about the DAT program or the application process are always welcome; inquiries should be directed to CxD staff:

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