



Strengthening Your Local Workforce

A Municipal Action Guide

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THE CHALLENGE

America's local elected leaders understand that the economic vitality of their cities and towns depends on the availability of skilled and qualified workers. In growing numbers, mayors and council members also understand that they have an important role to play in strengthening the local workforce. Working with others in their communities, municipal officials have the power to help residents develop the skills they need to succeed, and to contribute to local and regional economic growth.

A stronger workforce is not just good for economic development. Enhancing the skills and the capacity of local workers can lead to improvements in quality of life, reductions in poverty, and enhanced social cohesion and civic involvement as citizens see their own stake in the success of the local and regional economy.

But how can cities play a more assertive and productive role in workforce development, an area of work that traditionally has been dominated by others? NLC's work has identified a number of possible avenues for municipal action.

STRATEGIES

Apply a "systems change" approach. A local workforce development system is made up of an array of organizations and entities that span the public, private, and nonprofit sectors of a local economic region (see box). These organizations include those on both the "supply side" and the "demand side" of the labor market. Strong connections across the system are essential. But people — including workers, employers, and service providers alike — may not see workforce development as a "system." In addition, gaps in the system may impede local residents' access to skills and jobs.

A systems change approach to strengthening workforce development aims to find ways to "unblock" the system so that the key parts are working in sync to meet local and regional objectives and serve the economy. Many cities, for example, might find that local organizations and agencies working to reduce poverty are not involved to the degree they should be in discussions about workforce development. Or you may find that your city's economic development agencies aren't sufficiently connected to training providers and others in the workforce development system.

Learning to view workforce development, economic development, and poverty reduction as part of a broader system (one that is regional as well as local) helps municipal officials and others identify gaps in current programs and investments, as well as opportunities for "outside-the-box" solutions.

Align your workforce efforts with a broader vision for your local economy. In order to develop a successful strategy for strengthening the local workforce, your city needs a clearer sense of the future. In particular, you will want to align your workforce strategy with a vision for the local and regional economy and the types of industries and businesses that people want to see in your city or town. You will want to develop a vision not just for the economy but for the local workforce as well.

What kind of workforce will your city need in order to achieve its desired future? What will it take to upgrade worker skills to match the city's vision for the local economy? What type of skills and training are desirable to employers and businesses in your community? To what extent does your local workforce development system prepare residents for the kinds of jobs you want to see in the community?

Answering these questions will help local officials and their partners determine what's plausible, while ensuring that you can build the best possible future for your city or town.

Build on your city's strengths. Every city or town needs a workforce development strategy that builds on local assets. Local efforts to strengthen workforce development should therefore be based on a detailed understanding of the current skills and capacities of local work-

Who Are the Players in YOUR Local Workforce Development System?

Community Colleges	County Social Service
Trade and Technical Schools	Agencies
Public Schools	Faith-based Organizations
Universities	Economic Development
Cooperative Extensions	Offices
Employers	Business Associations
Community-based Organizations	Unions
Local Governments	Chambers of Commerce

ers, as well as the full range of existing resources that can support training and learning opportunities for residents.

In addition, your city or town will want to explore the role of workforce development in supporting existing industries and businesses in your community. For example, if local businesses offer decent jobs, what can your city do to help those businesses grow — and to help local residents develop the skills to support that growth?

Make the most of the city's current investments and programs. Cities have an array of resources they can devote to strengthening the local workforce. In addition, there are many municipal programs and policies that may not at first glance seem relevant, but that can be leveraged to enhance training and job placement opportunities.

City decisions relating to economic and community development, for example, can have major impacts on residents' access to quality training and decent jobs. Other potential platforms for city involvement in workforce development include: municipal transitional jobs programs (see sidebar); community development block grant (CDBG) programs; city hiring practices; and local participation in state and federally funded programs ranging from Enterprise Communities to the redevelopment of brownfields.

ACTION STEPS

Study the situation. The city can lay the groundwork for a local effort by researching the need for enhanced workforce development, as well as the community's capacity to prepare workers for jobs. What is the level of unemploy-

The key for cities is to think in new ways about existing investments and programs and how they could support the city's workforce development goals.

Don't go it alone. Collaborating with others is the only way to achieve lasting improvements in local and regional workforce development systems. With so many entities, organizations, and sectors playing a part in workforce development, it is essential to work in a collaborative way with all of the key players to build buy-in and achieve lasting change.

Working collaboratively also can help minimize duplication of effort so you know that your city is using everyone's time and resources as efficiently as possible. Among the keys to collaborative success: devote the time you need up front to develop consensus and buy-in around the mission of the collaborative; appoint a high-level city staff person to participate in (and, if needed) coordinate the effort; and focus on small-er, focused projects at the outset to keep people engaged.

Cities' "Points of Power" in Workforce Development

Positional — Local officials' position of elected leadership and their capacity to build political will enable them to raise the profile of workforce issues and drive action.

Programmatic — Existing city programs already provide relevant services to low-income residents and others, and can be used as a platform for change.

Departmental — Resources from city departments and municipal responsibilities (e.g., for economic development) can form the basis for city leadership on workforce issues.

Locational — As home to many of the key stakeholders in the local and regional workforce development system — including workers, educational institutions, employers and others — cities are a natural focal point for action to strengthen the system.

ment in the city? To what degree are local employers able to meet their hiring goals? What skills are current and prospective employers looking for — and how do their needs match with the skills of the population? By survey-

ing employers and gathering data from city agencies and community organizations, local officials will have the information they need to help forge a plan of action for moving forward.

Get a better sense of “the system.” Local officials also can take the lead in figuring out the contours of the local workforce development system. Identify key stakeholders, and bring them together to discuss their role in the system and any gaps or problems they see. There will probably be an array of existing institutions and organizations that are already working on these issues. As a result, it is important to approach your outreach with the understanding that you are not looking to critique anybody’s work but to make the system function better as a whole.

Make the case for action. Municipal officials often will have to take the lead in making the case for a stronger workforce development system for their cities and regions. Speaking on behalf of the city as a whole, mayors and city council members can help people understand how workforce development connects to the community’s broader goals. Among the key talking points: highlight the connection between building a more highly skilled and more capable workforce and your city’s future economic development success. Avenues for advancing your views include news articles; community appearances; speeches before business groups; and other convenings.

Participate in local Workforce Investment Boards. The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 authorized communities to create Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) made up of business representatives and others with a stake in the workforce development system.

Local governments can play a role in making sure that the WIBs are accountable to the public purpose of strengthening local and regional workforce development systems. City leaders also can help make sure resources are used efficiently to benefit local residents and the local economy.

Convene local stakeholders. City officials can play a crucial role in strengthening local workforce development by convening key stakeholders and creating a process that

enables them to achieve consensus on priorities and goals. As conveners, municipal officials can help make sure that all of the players demonstrate a commitment to the work by devoting the necessary time and resources to the collaborative effort. One key to convening success: hire an outside facilitator to help the team manage inevitable conflicts and steer members toward consensus strategies and solutions.

The success of local efforts to strengthen workforce development will depend on good-faith support from all participants. For cities, that means providing dedicated, high-level staff support; making sure the effort has an advocate or champion on the council or in the mayor’s office; and , if necessary, providing seed funding to get activities off the ground.

Adapted from *Lessons and Insights from NLC’s Workforce Development For Poverty Reduction Project*, Phyllis Furdell, National League of Cities, 2002. (See *Resources list*.)

Promoting Transitional Jobs

One option for cities seeking to strengthen workforce development is to promote transitional jobs. These jobs combine skill development and related services with time-limited, wage-paying jobs, typically in public and nonprofit agencies.

According to *Transitional Jobs: A Workforce Strategy for Cities*, a publication of NLC’s Institute for Youth, Education, and Families, municipal leaders can take a number of steps to promote transitional jobs, with a focus on residents facing significant barriers to employment.

Among the roles for city officials: engaging the business community by encouraging employers to provide permanent positions for participants in transitional jobs programs.

For more information, visit www.nlc.org/IYEF/yefpublications.aspx to access *Transitional Jobs: A Workforce Strategy for Cities*.

EXAMPLES OF PROGRAMS

Cleveland, Ohio (pop. 444,313): Cleveland’s Department of Economic Development has a program to train residents in brownfield remediation techniques as Environmental Technicians. Funding for the training comes from the US Environmental Protection Agency, Workforce Investment

Act, the City of Cleveland Empowerment Zone, and Youth Opportunity Grant monies. The training is offered at no cost to participants, many of whom represent hard-to-place populations, including ex-offenders, and those with limited educations.

Hartford, Connecticut (pop. 124,512): Hartford's Future Workforce Investment System is a multi-partner initiative that works to address the issues surrounding a lack of preparedness of youths, ages 14 to 24, to meet the present needs of area employers. The initiative provides a comprehensive approach to preparing youth to become self-sufficient and contributors to the local economy. The program builds workforce skills and connects young people to work experiences and educational resources. The initiative also includes the Hartford Connects online system that connects multiple youth-serving agencies to better coordinate services.

Jacksonville, Arkansas (pop. 30,506): The Workforce Alliance for Growth in Economy (WAGE) is a worker-training program developed through the cooperation of the state, the Local Employer Advisory Council, employment and training agencies, industrial development foundations, local literacy councils, and the city government. Six local employers hold classes in their places of business, open to both employees and the general public. Its first graduating class in 1994 found jobs with an average annual salary of \$17,500. Over 200 students are now employed as a direct result of WAGE training. The 200 WAGE participants employed through the program earned a total of \$3 million in income, which yielded a \$15 return on each \$1 invested in this program. This program received a 1996 Innovation Award from the NLC.

Louisville, Kentucky (pop. 554,496): The Kentuckiana Healthcare Workforce Initiative aims to reduce shortages in the Louisville health care industry. Greater Louisville Inc. (GLI), the city's chamber of commerce, received a \$3 million grant from the U.S. Labor Department to implement the program. GLI works with hospitals, education institutions, and community organizations to recruit and train workers in various health care professions, from nursing to lab technology. Populations targeted for recruitment include unemployed mothers with grown children, unemployed or underemployed workers, existing hospital workers, and legal immigrants enrolled in English-as-a-second-language classes.

Pasadena, California (pop. 144,133): To connect low income residents to economic opportunities, municipal officials participating in the NLC Workforce Development for Poverty

Reduction project adopted a systems change approach when assessing the City's Maintenance Assistance and Services to Homeowners Program (MASH). MASH is a publicly-funded transitional jobs program which also provides free maintenance and service assistance to low-income elderly homeowners. At the system level, the city reached out to other institutions – like Pasadena City College – to support their reform efforts. At the program level, the City increased the number of people served, expanded recruitment efforts to enroll more women, and offered participants a range of new opportunities for skills improvement and personal support.

Resources

Lessons and Insights from NLC's Workforce Development for Poverty Reduction Project, Phyllis Furdell, National League of Cities, 2002, www.nlc.org/resources_for_cities/programs___services/poverty_reduction_strategy_project/9717.aspx.

Transitional Jobs: A Workforce Strategy for Cities, Julie Bosland and Abby Hughes Holsclaw, National League of Cities, 2006. www.nlc.org/YEF/yefpublications.aspx.

www.gsa.gov/fdac/, *Catalogue of Federal Domestic Assistance*, U.S. General Services Administration.

Building Learning Communities: Workforce Development and the Future of Local Economies, National League of Cities 1995 Futures Report. For copies call, (202)626-3131.

www.doleta.gov US Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration. <http://www.doleta.gov/usworkforce/wia/policy.cfm>, Workforce Investment Act Information.

www.aspenwsi.org, Workforce Strategies Initiative, Aspen Institute.

<http://www.nawb.org/>, National Association of Workforce Boards.

www.naswa.org, National Association of State Workforce Agencies.

For more information, please visit the Economic Vitality page on NLC's web site at http://www.nlc.org/inside_nlc/7253.aspx or contact Melissa Germanese at 202-626-3000 or germanese@nlc.org.

