

## **Lessons and Insights from NLC's Workforce Development For Poverty Reduction Project**

### **Overview**

From 1998 until early 2002, NLCI conducted a project to assist local officials to reduce poverty by connecting low-income residents to economic opportunities for self-sufficiency. This project, Workforce Development for Poverty Reduction, demonstrated the importance and feasibility of effective local action to reduce poverty. With significant direct technical assistance, NLCI has helped five cities to use economic, community, and workforce development efforts to reduce poverty. The strategies implemented by the five cities that participated in this project were rooted in the local context, addressed local realities, and drew upon local capacities and strengths.

The three articles in this series share some of the important lessons and insights from this project based on NLCI's observations and analysis of the experience of the five cities. The articles are based on the following key insights:

*Municipal government is important to local efforts to reduce poverty through workforce development strategies, providing key resources and capacities.* The project demonstrated that cities have many resources, programs, and policies in place that can have a positive and important impact on the assets and opportunities available to low income urban residents. These include economic and community development departments, municipal transitional jobs programs, and state and federal monies for specific initiatives and programs such as Enterprise Communities and brown field redevelopment. Municipal governments also have an asset in their elected officials. These officials have the political power, the resources, and the contacts both to put issues related to the common good on the agenda locally and to become catalysts for strong action.

*"Systems thinking" is key to successful poverty reduction efforts at the local level.* A systems change approach to creating economic opportunities for low-income residents was a key strategy in NLCI's project. Many municipal leaders view both workforce development programs and poverty reduction programs targeted to individuals to be in the domain of other people and organizations. Learning to look at poverty reduction and workforce development functions as part of a system was a key shift in perceptions for the city officials and others who participated in the NLCI project. Local officials learned to look out of the box at potential solutions that were not necessarily new programs. This shift in perception required the participation of organizations from every sector, and framed poverty reduction efforts in terms of the local economy. Local elected officials were thus enabled to take a new look at their roles and responsibilities regarding poverty

reduction. In this light, they also saw how poverty reduction strategies could be targeted to places—like neighborhoods and economic regions—as well as to individuals. With this new perspective, city officials were able to state their concerns about poverty in terms of the local economy in order to engage the business community to participate.

*Poverty reduction requires collaborative strategies and collaborative leadership from city hall.* NLCI's work demonstrated that a local network of leaders directing resources towards a common agenda is the key to efficient use of local resources and effective local results. Through collaboration it is possible to connect and coordinate existing resources. Because it is not necessary to start from square one, local services are more cost effective.

Local systems can be improved through this type of collaborative effort. This can be an effective strategy when there is both leadership and support from a city's elected officials and cooperation from relevant local agencies and organizations. Without both, neither local systems nor outcomes for the poor are likely to improve. It was important to all local stakeholders to understand the process of collaboration and the role of facilitative leadership.

In the cities that NLCI provided with significant on-site technical assistance, local leaders took impressive steps to move forward on a poverty reduction agenda. In this series of articles, NLCI is pleased to share its work in these cities with other cities ready to address their important role in framing solutions to economic disparities and inequality in their communities.

*Lessons from NLC's Workforce Development  
For Poverty Reduction Project*

**A “System” Approach to Workforce Development Can Help Cities  
Achieve Economic and Social Goals**

Municipal officials throughout the country recognize that workforce development can be a crosscutting solution to the challenge of reducing poverty, as well as a key tool in promoting economic development. But what does it take to ensure the success of local initiatives to connect these issues? This is the question that the National League of Cities (NLC) attempted to answer through its three-year Workforce Development for Poverty Reduction Project.

One important lesson from the NLC's Workforce Development for Poverty Reduction project was that a systems change approach could work to create a workforce development system more responsive to the needs of low-income workers. That means taking a critical look at the whole local workforce development system and identifying specific problems that impede local residents' access to skills and jobs before identifying strategies for change.

By thinking about the local “system” for workforce development and poverty reduction, the five cities participating in the NLC project were able to zero in on major issues and barriers affecting low-income residents' access to higher-wage employment. In fact, many discovered that there was no local system at all, but a collection of programs, and that itself was a major issue. Changing a system—or non-system-- as complex and diverse as workforce development takes time and sustained attention. The success of these efforts has depended in large part on the degree to which local government and other players have invested the time and resources needed to create long-term paths out of poverty for low-income residents.

**What is the “system?”**

A local workforce development system is made up of an array of organizations and entities that span the public and private, and for-profit and nonprofit sectors of a local economic region. Key stakeholders in a local workforce development system may differ from city to city, depending on the local economy and local culture. In general, these organizations include, on the one hand, those on the ‘supply’ side of the labor market that include workers themselves and/or that provide support services to the unemployed or prepare them for jobs through education, training, and job search assistance. The organizations on the ‘demand’ side are those that create the jobs and that need workers to fill the jobs—economic developers and employers. Stakeholders in a local workforce development system can include community colleges, public schools, employers, community-based organizations, county social service agencies, faith-based organizations, economic development offices, unions and local government entities.

When connections are missing among any of these elements and they do not work smoothly together to serve the local workforce, it means there is a block in the system. A systems change approach to a workforce development system aims to find ways to unblock the system so that the key elements are working in sync in order to meet local goals and serve the local economy. This might mean that a key organization may have to change internally in some way in order to better connect with the system as a whole. Economic development programs, for example, traditionally have not viewed poverty reduction as a valid outcome of economic development activities. Poverty reduction was more of an abstract concept or utopian idea. In terms of “systems thinking,” however, it becomes a concrete, measurable goal.

### **What is a ‘system change?’**

Through the collaborative process, each team was able to engage in ‘systems’ thinking. Thinking in terms of the system led to strategies for ‘systems change.’ This process was a means to an end—connecting low-income residents with economic opportunities for self-sufficiency through workforce development strategies.

Under the NLC project, each city team conducted an analysis of its local workforce development system, looking through the lens of how the system was working to connect low-income residents to better economic opportunities. Based on this analysis, each team went on to identify what needed to be improved. For example, in one city the team found that information about jobs and training was not reaching people in low-income communities. Another city team discovered that low-income workers had few opportunities to get the skills they needed for available jobs. And in another city, it was apparent that the various players in the local workforce development system knew little about each other, rarely worked together, and viewed the other players in the system as competition.

Cities participating in the NLC project found that by looking at the big picture and identifying barriers between low-income residents and higher-paying jobs, they could build consensus around solutions. Each team identified both short-term and long-term solutions. Short-term solutions were designed to be steps toward the long-term goals. In most instances, these solutions very clearly met the definition of “systems change” i.e., they had some positive impact on the workforce development system by making various elements of that system work more productively together to create economic opportunities for low-income workers.

### **Achieving Systems Change**

*Pasadena links residents in temporary publicly funded jobs to training opportunities and permanent jobs*

In Pasadena, California, municipal officials adopted a systems change approach by joining with others to fundamentally reform a city program that puts low-income residents to work rehabilitating public housing. The program, called Maintenance

Assistance to Homeowners (MASH), was created in 1979 as a way to provide free maintenance and service assistance to low-income elderly homeowners. A secondary goal was to have in place a last-chance employment and training program for economically disadvantaged city residents, who could be hired by MASH on a temporary basis to perform maintenance jobs.

The Pasadena Leadership Team, the group established to develop and carry out the NLC initiative locally, viewed MASH as a program that was ready for larger impacts, based on the idea that simply providing last-chance jobs and rudimentary training was not enough to get low-income individuals on track to living-wage jobs. An analysis of the program revealed that less than half of all MASH participants were able to transition to full-time work. Moreover, the study found that the program was not structured to help participants improve their basic skills or obtain positions outside of city government.

The bottom line was that MASH was working as a program but not as part of a useful system to help Pasadena achieve its goals for low-income workers. The city was not linked in a meaningful way to key players in the local workforce development system.

“To us, MASH was a chance to look at how the system really works for very hard-to-employ persons in poverty, and to change the elements of that system to better link this target group with living-wage jobs, health benefits and more,” said Patsy Lane, Director of Human Services, Recreation and Neighborhoods for the City of Pasadena.

Over the course of the NLC’s three-year project, the City of Pasadena made a number of improvements to MASH. 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. The City also devoted new attention to helping MASH graduates obtain private-sector jobs.

At the system level, the effort toward internal reforms called on the city to reach out to other institutions that could support the reform effort. For example, Pasadena City College now provides basic skills training for MASH participants, and 12 participants to date have enrolled in a computer training program administered by the local Urban League chapter.

The city’s commitment to connecting workforce development and poverty reduction brought about potentially far-reaching changes in the workforce development system itself. The city’s convening and empowering the collaborative team led to strengthened relationships and cooperation among workforce development stakeholders in the community. Because of its emphasis on improving economic opportunities for low-income residents, the city emerged as a credible and committed partner in the local workforce development system. By recognizing the city as a stakeholder in the local workforce development system, the system itself benefited through the resources that the city could provide in the form of economic development dollars and the advocacy and support from local elected leaders for the mission of the team, to create economic opportunities for Pasadena’s low-income residents.

According to Pasadena City Council member, Joyce Streater, “The collaborative team got people in power to work together in new ways and bring things to the table to improve income and employment of a hard-to-employ group—as a collaborative, we took important steps to improving the system.”

*Modesto team links low-income residents in poor Hispanic communities to living wage opportunities*

In Modesto, the NLC project team’s analysis of the local workforce development system proved that the system wasn’t working for the city’s low-income residents. The majority of Modesto’s low-income population is Hispanic workers who live in specific neighborhoods of the city and who are employed primarily in seasonal low-wage agricultural jobs. According to the team’s analysis, the existing workforce system was not addressing the need to provide economic opportunities to this population. Further, the community-based organizations in the neighborhoods where these workers lived were not connected to the workforce development system.

In response to these problems Modesto Leadership Team (MLT), with resources from the city, the county, a local foundation and HUD, created an ongoing program that trains low-income Hispanic residents for career opportunities in the construction industry. In the process of creating the new training program, the team worked to develop the capacity of the community-based organizations that were the key links to the Modesto’s Hispanic neighborhoods. By investing in building the capacity of these organizations, which were part of the MLT, the city was able to strengthen the team while establishing trust and communication with an important segment of the city’s population.

The involvement of the city of Modesto in workforce development issues has created an important link between the city’s economic development office and the low-income neighborhoods of the city. According to Kenni Friedman, Modesto city council member, “We spend all our energy recruiting businesses, but turn our backs on our people who need skills. Job training is the slice of economic development that we’ve ignored too long. We can no longer afford to neglect this element.”

*Dayton opens up opportunities in tool and die industry to low-income residents*

Officials in Dayton, Ohio, faced a systemic problem very similar to Modesto’s: low-income, inner-city residents had minimal, if any, access to skills development opportunities and career path information. Dayton’s solution: using neighborhood “job coaches” to provide one-on-one counseling to residents to help them find and keep living-wage jobs. The Dayton Leadership Team (DLT) also set out to provide more career path information at the City’s One-Stop Job Center, while working directly with employers in tooling and machining and other industries to create jobs and career paths for low-income residents.

A key systems change brought about by the DLT has been the adoption of better strategies for connecting local economic development efforts to the task of providing economic opportunities to the city's low-income residents. The tool and dye industry, for example, was having difficulty finding workers to fill its needs—a problem due at least in part to the fact that the industry had little connection to other parts of the local workforce development system. Employers in the industry did not have adequate descriptions of jobs they had available, nor could they accurately assess the skills needed for these jobs. Through the Dayton Department of Economic Development, the DLT conducted a detailed analysis of all the jobs in the tooling and machining industry in Dayton, the skills and experience needed for each position, the education and training needed for each, and where to find the appropriate training in the area. Working with the Dayton Machining and Tooling Association this took six months to complete. Employers in the industry now had something to share with school counselors and employment and training organizations.

According to Norm Essman, Economic Development Manager for the City of Dayton, the DLT's work has opened training and employment opportunities to low-income workers that had not been available before. "As economic developers, we are realizing that boomers are retiring. We are creating all kinds of jobs and don't have people to fill them. Business didn't realize that yet, but the DLT did and started engaging employers to help them deal with this reality. We have been able to convince the tool and die sector that they need to look at job paths and career ladders and work with the Job Center, social service organizations and educational institutions to get the workers they need."

*Flint creates more effective and user-friendly workforce development system for city's poor.*

In Flint, Michigan, the analysis of the system itself entailed collaboration and was the beginning of a key system change. The team looked at the local workforce development system and realized that none of the organizations involved were working well together across sectors and that a "silo" culture existed. In struggling through the collaborative process, the team created a more coherent system in which various organizations were cooperating to achieve the Flint Leadership Team's goals. Working together through a collaborative process led to greater cooperation and partnerships among the team member organizations. These partnerships, in turn, improved outcomes of individual member organizations through more effective programs, thus improving the system as a whole.

The NLC Project helped Flint bring about new partnerships across sectors in the area of workforce development. The city economic development department is working with the Urban League and the local administrative arm of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) to train low-income residents for new jobs generated by a Brownfield's Redevelopment project funded by the U.S. EPA. Local colleges, county social service offices, WIA, and community based organizations have partnered on a number of skills training initiatives, as well a "community forum" where residents can express their needs and concerns and where relevant agencies can provide information at the community level.

An important system change element in Flint was an agreement across workforce development organizations to address needs of both workers and employers. The Workforce Development Board itself redirected its investments from an initial focus on work-first activities to fostering skills development for low-income residents. All of the participants realized that they could not solve long-term socio-economic problems alone, and that by working with partners, they could achieve better outcomes.

*Oklahoma City links enterprise community residents to career path opportunities.*

For the Oklahoma City team (OKC team), systems change has meant partnering with a hospital in the city's Enterprise Community to link low-income residents to entry-level jobs that can serve as a first step in a real career ladder in the health care industry.

The focus of the OKC team's work is a skills training program developed at the Oklahoma University Medical Center (OUMC). The program targets low-skill, entry-level employees to enable them to be certified as Advanced Unlicensed Assistants (UAU)--a new position between nurse aid and LPN. Created by the Oklahoma Nursing Certification Board, the training program was a response to the severe shortage of nurses in the state. Although OUMC had planned to train only 56 of its own employees, the OKC Team is working with the hospital to train 200 individuals per year in order to help meet the need for UAUs throughout the healthcare industry.

The OUMC training program allowed the OKC team to open up opportunities for living wage jobs to low-income residents in the city's enterprise community. In addition, Dee Hoshal, President of DeMarge College and member of the OKC team, saw the training program as an opportunity to place welfare recipients trained as nurse aides at the college in jobs at OUMC, where graduates would have more advancement opportunities.

"I see that the partnership with OUMC will enable us to fill a critical need in the medical field, move the working poor into better jobs, and also open up entry level jobs for the unemployed poor in an near the enterprise community," said Hoshal.

### **(Sidebar) About the Project**

City officials are taking leadership in many ways to address poverty in urban areas. This article is one of three that highlights lessons learned from the work of city leaders participating in NLC's Workforce Development for Poverty Reduction Project

Administered by the National League of Cities Institute (NLCI), NLC's education and research affiliate, The Project provided an opportunity to five cities to create economic opportunities for low-income residents through workforce development strategies. NLC supplied technical assistance to each city to form a collaborative team of local stakeholders, convened by an elected official. Cities were not provided any funding for projects, programs or staff.

The lessons that have emerged from NLC's work with the five cities--Dayton, Ohio; Modesto, California, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Flint, Michigan; and Pasadena, California—are presented in this series of articles through three 'lenses'—1) a 'systems thinking' approach rather than a programmatic approach to improving economic opportunities for low-income workers; 2) collaboration as the key process for achieving systems change; and 3) importance of city leadership and support to provide credibility and empower the teams.

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## **Municipal Leadership for Poverty Reduction**

- Collaborative leaders must inspire commitment and action by catalyzing, convening, energizing, and facilitating others to create visions and solve problems.
- Collaborative leaders take responsibility for building broad-based involvement of the appropriate community of interests.
- Collaborative leaders lead as peer problem-solvers by helping groups create visions and solve problems but not by making the decisions and doing the work for the group.
- Collaborative leaders sustain hope and participation by valuing all participation and input and by helping set incremental goals and celebrations along the way.

--[www.pew-partnership.org](http://www.pew-partnership.org)

NLC's Workforce Development for Poverty Reduction Project shows that municipal governments can play a vital role in local efforts to help lift low-income residents out of poverty by connecting them to higher-wage jobs and careers

Looking across the five cities taking part in the project, the project illustrated the many ways in which city hall and elected officials can provide leadership and support for poverty reduction strategies—for example, by entering into collaborative partnerships to develop workforce strategies that target the needs of the poor.

The project yielded important insights regarding the powers and resources that elected municipal leaders can leverage in order to deal with urban poverty. At the individual level, city officials can provide leadership to local collaborations, and at the institutional level, cities can play an important role by leveraging the resources of municipal departments such as economic development, community development, planning, and parks and recreation.

### **Why Municipal Government?**

Municipal government is not always seen as a key force in workforce development; indeed, for most of the project sites, this was a new arena for elected leaders. Because resources for support services and employment training for the disadvantaged and other unemployed generally come from federal, state, county and private nonprofit sources, municipal government often takes a back seat in decisions about local workforce development policy and resource allocation. However, there are good arguments for city officials to play a leadership role in framing policy for local workforce development systems.

Local government has responsibility for the “common good.” In addition to municipal government, stakeholders in the local workforce development system include workers, the unemployed, employers, families, neighborhoods, public schools, educational institutions, community-based organizations, federal, state and county program operators, and many more. Elected municipal leaders are the only people in the community who represent the interests of all players.

Economic development is a municipal government responsibility. City government is generally the key force in local economic development decisions. These decisions, in turn, generally revolve around such issues as the quality of the local labor force and residents’ quality of life, which is a factor of such things as the local poverty rate, economic disparities and workers’ skill levels. All of this makes improving the effectiveness of local workforce development systems an economic development strategy and an important responsibility of municipal government. In addition, it is municipal government that ends up having to cope with the results of poverty, such as crime, homelessness, and distressed neighborhoods.

Reducing poverty through workforce development increases the competitiveness of the local economy. A city’s success in the global economy depends on a strong quality of life for residents, jobs and business growth, effective governance for the region, and economic opportunity for all. Moreover, in order to create a competitive, “world class” economy, a city must ensure it has a quality work force. By helping all residents become productive workers, municipal leaders take important steps toward increasing the competitiveness of the local economy.

Cities are well positioned to play a prominent role in local efforts to reduce poverty through workforce development strategies. Cities have the political power, the resources and the contacts to put issues related to the ‘common good’ on the agenda locally and to become catalysts for strong action. Elected officials can leverage a number of different points of power, as follows:

- Positional—their position of elected leadership and access to political will;
- Programmatic—city programs already in place that provide relevant services to low-income residents;
- Departmental—resources from city departments and municipal responsibilities themselves; and
- Location—cities themselves as both key to the health of the local economy and where the highest concentrations of poverty exist.

Research shows that cities can be successful. NLC’s work in the area of what cities can do to reduce poverty has demonstrated that cities have many resources, programs, and policies in place that can have a positive and important impact on the assets and opportunities available to low income urban residents. Through its experience with projects helping city officials link economic and workforce development to poverty reduction, and in conversations with local officials and program operators, NLC has learned the following:

- City leaders can become effective partners in local workforce development systems in order to better link poor residents to economic opportunities.
- City officials can organize collaborative networks of local stakeholders and can lead these groups to agreement on common local agendas for action to better connect low-income residents to economic opportunity.
- City leadership in the areas of poverty reduction and workforce development can lead to positive systems change at the local level.
- City leadership in the area of poverty reduction and workforce development can lead to effective coordination of local, state, federal and private resources to meet the needs of low-income residents for better economic opportunities.

Many benefits can accrue to cities that take leadership to address poverty. The cities that participated in the NLC project benefited in important ways from leading an initiative to create economic opportunities for low-income residents. Participating cities reported:

- Recognition as credible partners in local workforce development systems;
- More effective partnerships with business groups and community based organizations;
- Greater awareness on the part of local business regarding its role in workforce development and poverty reduction issues;
- More effective and useful communications with neighborhoods and client groups; and
- Increased trust in local government.
- Improved economic opportunities and outcomes for low-income residents

### **Cities Have Multiple Opportunities to Use Workforce Development Strategies to Reduce Poverty**

Traditionally, cities have neither recognized nor embraced the opportunity to make workforce development an important city issue locally. But it is clear from the project that cities have many opportunities to be very influential in the local workforce development system by:

*Participating in Local Workforce Investment Boards:* Cities have played various roles in local workforce development in the past. Some have been administrators of public employment and training programs such as CETA and JTPA, and many today serve as the fiscal agents for WIA. Some cities have no responsibility for federal funds for employment and training; rather, the surrounding county serves as the fiscal agent. NLC's experience with this project indicated that the city's role as fiscal agents for WIA did not create any advantage in accessing funds for the team's projects. In fact, cities that were not fiscal agents for WIA, at least under this project, were more successful in accessing funds for their programs. Being the fiscal agent for federal employment and training funds did not ensure that the city was seen as a key player in local workforce development policies or programs.

The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) system in some areas has been criticized for seeming to be more focused on competing with private sector employment agencies than on any sense of public purpose. Local government may be the only player that can define, articulate, or take on the role of making WIBs accountable to this public purpose. In addition, city leaders, as stewards of federal money, have a responsibility under WIA to pay attention to the use of these resources even when not acting as fiscal agents. Elected leaders are ultimately responsible under WIA.

WIA offers city leaders a venue for addressing the integration of poverty reduction strategies with local workforce development resources.

*Example:* In Dayton, the NLC project team took advantage of the opportunity to work with the WIB. The Dayton team saw the WIB as more than a federal program. Because the city council member who provided leadership to the team sat on the local WIB, he was able to bring the poverty reduction agenda and other concerns of the team to the WIB and incorporate them into the WIB's overall strategy for the area.

*Example:* Because he was part of Flint's collaborative team, the Chair of the WIB in Flint brought the team's concerns to the WIB and redirected its investments from a primary focus on work-first activities to fostering skills development for low-income residents.

*Connecting existing city programs to the resources of the local workforce development system:* Cities have existing programs and resources that either provide services to low-income residents, such as publicly funded transitional jobs programs, or that provide resources to specific neighborhoods or areas of the city, such as community development block grant (CDBG) programs. Decisions made in city departments of economic development or community development, for example, can have major impacts on low-income residents. Decisions about resources and programs in these departments can be directed in ways that address needs of low-income residents.

*Example:* The Pasadena team saw an opportunity to use the city's Maintenance Assistance and Services to Homeowners Program (MASH), a publicly –funded transitional jobs program, to connect low-income residents to economic opportunities in new ways. As a result, the MASH program is becoming a model for improving the effectiveness of other workforce development programs in Pasadena.

*Example:* The Flint Economic Development Department, working with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, has committed to redevelop brown field sites in Flint, and with the assistance of the NLC project team, has partnered with the Urban League and the WIA office to train local residents for the cleanup jobs generated by this effort.

*Example:* The office of economic development for the City of Dayton led the sectoral strategy initiated by the NLC project team to connect low-income residents to training and opportunities in the machine tool industry.

*Connecting the local workforce development system to local needs and to the regional economy.* Elected municipal leaders determine local economic development policies and programs and they also have opportunities to sit on local WIBs. Thus, elected leaders are in a position to bring regional economic issues as well as the needs of low-income populations in the city to the table. Elected leaders are in a position to articulate the connections between economic development, workforce development and the needs of low-income residents and to set the visions for the city and the region.

*Example:* In Modesto, the council member who provided leadership to the team saw the opportunity to work with low-income Hispanic neighborhoods to improve economic opportunities for these residents as a long-term economic developmental strategy for the area.

*Example:* The Oklahoma City team was able to meet the project goal of providing skills training to low-income residents and, at the same time, to address the region's critical need for skilled workers in the medical field.

*Leading New Initiatives:* Under the NLC project city leaders were given the opportunity to take the lead to launch a new local initiative. NLC set the agenda broadly—to use workforce development strategies to increase economic opportunities for low-income workers—and provided assistance with the process of collaborative team building. In accepting this leadership role, elected officials in the five cities succeeded in making poverty reduction a local priority that would lead promoting region wide economic development; reducing skills shortages that keep employers away; and reducing racial and income disparities.

## **Successful Municipal Leadership**

The ease and success of local efforts to improve the effectiveness of local systems such as workforce development depend to a high degree on the right kind of leadership -- leadership that can set the vision, convene, think broadly, empower, and allocate resources. It is at the elected level of city government where these powers reside.

But, in order for elected officials to provide the necessary leadership, they need to understand the leadership roles that lead to a successful collaborative effort. Based on the NLC project, the following are some to the essential leadership roles in this process.

### *Establish the vision*

The first role for the city leaders participating in the NLC project was to **establish the vision** under which local stakeholders would be brought together. The importance of reducing inner city poverty and economic disparities had to be articulated. In addition,

the leader had to establish credibility as someone who recognized and wanted to solve the problem. Contributing to this credibility was the recognition that the greatest pockets of poverty are in inner cities and thus an issue the city needs to address by providing leadership, advocacy, and resources.

### *Convene local stakeholders*

The second role of the city official was that of **convener**. The leader needed to pull together a team of key stakeholders in the local workforce development system. In order to do this, the leader needed to understand the roles of all sectors, as well as such critical issues as funding and responsibilities, city resources, the needs of low-income residents, and how the local workforce development system was meeting those needs.

- Insights from the NLC project suggest that the success of collaborative partnerships rested on specific attitudes on the part of the elected leaders who convened the teams. Leaders of the five city teams needed to acknowledge that:
- Municipal government cannot accomplish alone what can be done in partnership in a collaborative setting;
- All stakeholders need to be part of the partnership;
- The partnership as a whole needs to invest in the development of the capacity of partners who need it.
- The consensus building that is necessary to create and sustain a collaborative partnership should be allowed to take whatever length of time the process requires.
- The city's points of power –elected officials, existing city programs and departments, city resources, political will and influence—will be leveraged when needed.
- Collaborative success requires shared decision making and consensus building with partners under the collaborative having an equal voice.

### *Think broadly*

Municipal leaders leading collaborative partnerships similar to NLC's project need to understand the importance of economic and community development to strategies that link low-income populations to economic opportunity. To reinforce this link, every team participating in the NLC project included someone from the city economic development and/or community development departments.

The conveners in the five cities also understood the potential roles of other city departments. The city teams, overall, included representatives from community development, economic development, recreation, neighborhoods, planning, housing, community affairs, transportation, the mayor's office and the city council.

Understanding the links to other municipal objectives and city departments was not the only way in which the five cities were forced to think more broadly about these issues. Success also required an understanding of the importance of local conditions that may

have an impact on the success and timing of a new initiative.

The fact that the beginning of the project coincided with implementation of the Workforce Investment Act could be seen as either an opportunity or as an impediment to starting something new. Inviting key players of WIA into the collaborative team created positive coordination and policymaking opportunities.

In addition, the devolution of responsibility to the local level under welfare reform created an opportunity to work cooperatively with agencies that administered TANF funds. Elected leaders in Dayton saw these opportunities and invited key county officials to be part of the leadership team. As a result, the county proved to be an important ally for the Dayton team and the success of its strategies to create a more responsive workforce development system.

#### *Empower the team to solve the problem*

In making collaboration work the leader must have the **authority to empower** the group to take action. He or she also needs to understand time frames for real change and the dynamics of collaboration and communicate this to the team.

It is important to know the history of local collaborative efforts and their outcomes. This can be a determining factor in how long it may take to see real change. Dayton, for example, had a history of collaborative decision-making and team building and the team there spent less time working through the collaborative process than the other city teams. The City of Dayton had been part of The Annie E. Casey's New Future's Project, which provided experience to city leaders and others in Dayton that made it possible to start beyond square one in the NLC initiative.

#### *Allocate resources*

Finally, the elected leader needs to **allocate resources** to the team. Regardless of the type of leadership that evolved after the city's initial convening of the collaborative team, NLC's feedback from team members indicates that the team's viability depended on the 'good faith' support from the city. This support occurred in the form of dedicated high-level staff, an advocate or champion from the council or mayor's office, and seed funding, where necessary, to get activities off the ground.

The elected leader in each city assigned a high-level city staff person to manage day-to-day activities of the collaborative and serve as the liaison to NLC. The staff person or coordinator was responsible to the team members working on the initiative. The elected leader either became part of the collaborative or, in the case of the mayor in one city, empowered the team by providing advocacy and support without being on the team. The types of city staff appointed to provide coordination functions to the teams included managers of community affairs and a city's enterprise community and directors of community development, workforce development, and a human services, recreation and neighborhoods department.

Team members agreed that appointing a staff person to work with the team was very important. The staff person had the responsibility of holding the teams together through difficult periods and providing continuity from one phase of the project to another. In each of the five cities, the staff person demonstrated collaborative skill and was able to inspire confidence, trust, and camaraderie with team members. In fact, one team found it difficult to get back on track when there was a change in staff support due to retirement.

The following examples of how project cities provided support to the teams illustrate the variety of ways that this can be done:

- Dayton's Department of Economic Development provided funds for the sectoral strategy research,
- The City of Modesto provided CBDG money to support capacity building activities for community-based organizations. And when the new training center for the construction-training program developed by the Modesto team opened, for example, the mayor and council members were on hand to officiate and celebrate with the trainees and instructors at the center.
- The City of Pasadena used CDBG money to fund expansions of the MASH program.
- In general, the elected leader in each of the five cities who convened the team also advocated for the team to the city council and others, acted as liaison between the collaborative team and city hall, and communicated the vision and goals of the team to other groups such as the WIB.

## **Conclusion**

Addressing the needs of low-income populations in their cities is something local elected officials can successfully address. Cities have the resources to take on significant roles in this area given the right guidance and information about what works. Just getting started can be the most difficult step. The NLC project suggests that the first steps for getting started include the following:

- Articulate the problem—acknowledge that poverty is something that needs to be addressed at the city level.
- Commit to doing something about it
- Create political and civic will to support the commitment
- Research and understand local capacity to go forward

### **(Sidebar) About the Project**

City officials are taking leadership in many ways to address poverty in urban areas. This article is one of three that highlights lessons learned from the work of city leaders participating in NLC's Workforce Development for Poverty Reduction Project

Administered by the National League of Cities Institute (NLCI), NLC's education and research affiliate, The Project provided an opportunity to five cities to create economic opportunities for low-income residents through workforce development strategies. NLC supplied technical assistance to each city to form a collaborative team of local stakeholders, convened by an elected official. Cities were not provided any funding for projects, programs or staff.

The lessons that have emerged from NLC's work with the five cities--Dayton, Ohio; Modesto, California, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Flint, Michigan; and Pasadena, California—are presented in this series of articles through three 'lenses'—1) a 'systems thinking' approach rather than a programmatic approach to improving economic opportunities for low-income workers; 2) collaboration as the key process for achieving systems change; and 3) importance of city leadership and support to provide credibility and empower the teams.

The project was supported through grants from The Ford Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Kellogg Foundation, and John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

## **Creating Collaborations That Count**

*“Experience has shown that when nongovernmental institutions become partners with public agencies, they can sometimes accomplish things that have proved difficult for government to do alone. Today it is at the local level that some of the boldest changes to the concept of the public sector as we know it are being discussed and implemented.”*

--G. Thomas Kingsley and James O. Gibson  
Civil Society, the Public Sector, and Poor Communities, Number  
12 in Series, “The Future of the Public Sector.”

Cities that participated in NLC's Workforce Development for Poverty Reduction Project were required to put together a team of local stakeholders to form a collaborative body to address the agenda set by the project—to find ways to create economic opportunities for the city's low-income residents through workforce development strategies.

The five cities participating in the NLC's Workforce Development for Poverty Reduction project learned a variety of lessons about how best to apply workforce development strategies to the challenge of reducing poverty. They also learned a lot about what it takes to build successful local collaboratives to address these issues.

The literature about collaboration includes countless pointers and pieces of guidance for municipal officials and others who regularly have to reach out, form coalitions and partnerships, and work cooperatively with other stakeholders. This article aims to add to that body of work by drawing on the experiences of the five cities in the NLC project to provide an idea of what seems to work and what doesn't when city hall tries to bring people and organizations together around the issues of poverty reduction and workforce development.

### **Value of a Collaborative Process**

Perhaps the most important fact from the project is that after three years of struggling with ways to create a local workforce development system more responsive to the needs of low-income residents, each team, without exception, reported that its most important accomplishment was getting to the point of being able to work as a collaborative.

Why was this? The Project obtained views from participants about this in a number of ways, and this article is part of our findings from that investigation. The five city teams accomplished many things in terms of new or improved programs, new relationships among stakeholders, improved services in the workforce development system, improved

coordination among stakeholder organizations, and improved outcomes for low-income residents. But for individual team members, these accomplishments, for the most part, were not the most unique aspect of the experience of participating in the NLC project. The unique aspect and what the team members were most proud of was the fact that they could make a collaborative partnership work.

Why was the collaborative process so important to members? Answers, on one level, revolved around the usual opportunities for networking, establishing relationships, brainstorming, benefits to their organizations, improved interagency cooperation, understanding of roles of other organizations, solving a problem. On another level, included in these responses were comments about the opportunity to see things differently, establishing trust, learning to trust, forgetting past competitive relationships, and even overcoming hostilities and dislike of other members.

For individual members of the teams, the process of collaboration involved issues of trust and forgiveness. It would seem, then, that one of the values of a collaborative process is that it provides not only an opportunity to solve community problems but also an opportunity for personal growth. Since social change can both cause and be caused by personal change, the extent to which decision makers can grow or evolve in terms of the way they interact and do business together improves the potential of the group to bring about positive change in the larger world. Thus, collaborative processes offer opportunities for real transformation. This would also explain why the process takes more time than expected and is often described as difficult.

### **Challenges of Collaboration**

The major challenges to undergoing a collaborative process that were reported by the teams were: keeping people engaged, establishing trust and putting aside turf issues; getting team members to see the collaborative effort as part of their regular jobs; working in an environment that did not always provide the needed political or financial support to the team; scaling down from the large picture to manageable projects; and adjusting to the realities of the environment which included institutional differences among members and different perceptions of organizational roles on the team.

The accomplishments reported by the teams mirrored the challenges. The teams reported that their most important accomplishments were: establishing trust, overcoming turf issues, getting all players to the table, keeping people engaged, overcoming institutional barriers, finding financial resources, and deciding on a manageable project for short-term success.

Why was this so challenging? One city team member reported that it took a long time for them to develop trust because many of the members represented organizations that were usually in competition for the same resources to keep their programs going. In another city, a member noted that most of their issues were dealt with in a confrontational manner at first and it took a long time to focus on consensus building. Yet in another city, team

members found it difficult to actually allow themselves to express disagreement and get conflicts out in the open.

Individuals were invited to be part of the collaborative because they or their organizations had an important role in local workforce development strategies. In many cases, however, the organization represented had not recognized or taken that role. As a result, the individuals who came together as part of the city teams did not necessarily know each other or have any history of working together. Therefore, partnering with others on the basis of a buy-in on a common vision or goal for group action was the beginning of a process that was a different way of ‘doing business’ for most of the team members.

According to Rick Phillips, executive director of Community Matters in Santa Rosa, CA, “collaborative partnerships are challenging by nature: they take more time than the familiar ways of getting things done; they are messy, and don’t always follow the orderly and linear path we plan; they are tense, as diverse individuals attempt to come to agreement; members must be willing to give up something now to get something later; and they are held together not by rules, memorandums of understanding and contracts, but by relationships between people.”

### **Is it worth it?**

Considering the above description of collaborative partnerships, why did the NLC city teams stay together? Two major reasons emerged from conversations with team members during the final convening of the five city teams. Teams realized they were making a difference and it looked like these differences were going to last.

Making a difference: During the process of growing as a collaborative partnership, setting goals and implementing strategies, it became apparent to the teams that what they were doing was having an impact on the local workforce development systems, decision makers and policy makers, as well as the community itself. Among the impacts reported by the teams were the following:

- Redirection of federal and county funds to areas of greatest need
- Changed business peoples’ perceptions of their roles in workforce development and poverty reduction
- More effective and useful communications with neighborhoods and client groups
- Increased trust in local government through its role in the collaborative
- Changes within institutions and organizations of team members in the ways they did business together.
- City funds and other resources committed to the work of the collaborative teams

Differences that last: The teams also saw that the teams’ focus and the strategies for change they were implementing were relevant to the community and would likely be sustained beyond NLC’s role in the project. They saw evidence of the institutionalization of their efforts into local organizations and the community. Team members reported evidence of sustainability of their work in a number of ways. Collectively they reported:

- New city legislation supporting poverty reduction efforts
- Increased involvement of business and economic development leaders in workforce development initiatives
- Collaborative approach seen as a model to the community
- Changed expectations of client groups on part of program providers and employers
- Changed dialogue around workforce development and poverty reduction in the community
- Improved relationships among local stakeholders, city government and residents
- Increased job placements in for low-income residents participating in team projects

Team members from the five cities agreed that, although the process was time-consuming and difficult at times, the rewards of getting through the demands of resolving conflicts and consensus building were well worth the struggle.

### **Advice from project teams to other cities**

For other cities contemplating taking a collaborative approach to solving local problems, the teams had the following advice:

*Be patient with the process.* Spend the time necessary to make the purpose of the team clear, resolve differences and establish trust among the members. The readiness of any city to do this and its history of working in collaborative partnerships will affect the time it takes to establish a working collaborative partnership.

*Make sure all partners buy into and understand the vision of the collaborative.* What will bring people to the table and hold the collaborative together is a common commitment to the overall mission and vision of the team. Make sure the group understands what it means to focus on the mission of the collaborative and not individual agency goals.

*Strong and engaged city leadership is critical.* The leadership must be at the elected level and accountable to the community. The collaborative needs to have one or more champions on the city council who are regularly involved with the process.

*The city, as the convener of the team, needs to appoint a high-level staff person to manage and coordinate the effort.* Participants in the NLC project regularly testified to the importance of having a strong staff person in place to manage the local collaborative.

*Get the right people to the table.* All relevant sectors need to be included and need to be given equal voices. Different mixes of stakeholders work for different cities. In other words, there is no master list of what partners ought to be involved; it all depends on the goals of the effort. (See side bar for examples of the mix of partners on the teams.)

*Emphasize compromise and consensus but don't avoid conflict.* Both consensus and conflict are part of the process. Many collaboratives fall into the trap of avoiding conflict entirely. The problem with this approach is that it can push important issues under the table and keep participants from addressing important barriers to concerted action on poverty and workforce issues.

*The process needs a professional outside facilitator.* It is important to have a neutral outside party help the team to manage the conflict aspect of the collaborative process and help members come to consensus.

*Invest in the capacity of partners where necessary.* Community-based organizations (CBOs) often bring important and valuable perspectives to collaborative efforts, but they may not have the experience either in workforce development or in working with some of the other stakeholders as an equal partner. This means municipalities and other stakeholders may have to invest in strengthening these organizations so they can play an equal role in the collaborative.

*Design accountability into the collaborative process.* Collaborative partnerships work best when demonstrated commitment of time and resources from participating organizations, a collaborative leader can help to insure that everyone is invested in the effort. This has the added benefit of dividing up the work that needs to be done so individual partners don't get burned out because they are being asked to do too much.

*Focus on manageable projects to keep people engaged.* One way to help insure that a local initiative can survive its gestation period with the required support still intact is to identify smaller, more focused projects that can demonstrate early results. The NLC project underscores the importance of building and maintaining buy-in among local stakeholders by taking a "bite-size" approach to the issues, as opposed to focusing so broadly that results will not be felt for years.

*Focus on the future and not the past.* While critical lessons can be learned from past experience, teams need to focus on the desired future outcomes. Relevant past experiences must fit within this future context; otherwise, teams can become mired in old controversies and history in a nonproductive way.

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