State of America’s Cities:  
Special Section on Workforce Development

The recent recession has highlighted significant structural changes in the economy and the resulting challenge of building a skilled workforce. To better gauge the current state of the workforce in America’s cities and to better understand how local governments are responding, the National League of Cities included a special section on workforce development in the 2010 State of America's Cities Survey.

**LOCAL CONDITIONS**

Not surprisingly, the majority of city officials (84%) report that unemployment has worsened since last year and that it is either a major (41%) or a moderate (47%) problem for their city. Additionally, six in 10 (63%) city officials report poverty has worsened over the past year; representing the largest percentage of city officials reporting worsened poverty conditions since the question was first asked in NLC’s 1992 survey.

In response to the high level of unemployment and down economy, nearly one in three (31%) report that their city’s involvement in workforce development has increased. Also, when asked the extent to which local workforce development and training is a challenge for their communities, one in two city officials report that it is either a major (10%) or moderate (42%) problem.

**WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS**

The stakeholders that cities most often collaborate with on workforce development activities are chambers of commerce (68%), community colleges (56%) and local businesses (55%). Social Service Agencies (29%), Workforce Investment Board/One-Stop Career Center (24%) and Unemployment Systems (16%) are the least reported collaboration stakeholders (See Figure 1).

The survey results highlight some potential governance and partnership issues between the workforce investment board (WIB) system and city government. WIBs are considered the primary workforce body for the local level and are the central planning authority for federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA) dollars. According to the survey, the second highest city workforce development activity is attending and participating in meetings of the local workforce investment board (42%). On the other hand, workforce investment boards were the second-least reported partner for cities for collaboration on workforce development activities (24%). This could be a sign that the legislatively prescribed pieces of the relationship (such as having a city representative on a WIB) are fairly common and occurring on a local level. Less likely, however, are collaborative relationships between cities and WIBs, which would likely be the result of voluntary decisions between actors.

![Figure 1: Stakeholders Cities Most Often Collaborate with on Workforce Issues](image-url)
WORKFORCE AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

It is generally accepted that workforce development is an integral component to city economic development. According to the survey, cities are engaging in workforce development in ways that are consistent with this understanding by communicating with local businesses about workforce needs (51%) and partnering with chambers of commerce (68%) and local businesses (55%) for workforce development goals.

However, only one in three city officials (36%) responded that their cities connect economic development and workforce development efforts. This disconnect could be a sign that while there lacks a formalized policy relationship between economic development and workforce development efforts on the city level, informal collaborations may be occurring. It may also reflect that while city workforce development and economic development activities involve the same group of stakeholders, the issue areas are handled in separate silos without fully aligning strategies and resources.

LOOKING AHEAD

There is little doubt that future economic competitiveness of cities and the country as a whole will be tied to the ability to train and retrain workers with the skills needed in the 21st century. The results of this survey present signs that although there is still work to do, cities are becoming more engaged in this policy area. It is important to continue to study and understand how cities and other workforce stakeholders come together on these issues and find ways to encourage cooperation and joint leveraging of resources towards the common goal of building a strong workforce.

ABOUT THE SURVEY

The National League of Cities State of America’s Cities is an annual survey of municipal officials that has been conducted for nearly 25 years. For this survey, a random sample of 1,621 local officials from different cities across the country was drawn from the NLC database of municipal officials. The survey was emailed to all of the officials in the sample in late February 2010 and responses were collected in March and April. A total of 349 valid responses were received and tabulated, resulting in a 22 percent response rate. With this response rate, it can be expected with a 95 percent degree of confidence (i.e., in 95 out of 100 random sample surveys) that the answers to the survey questions from another random sample of municipal officials would be within 4.65 percentage points (+/- 4.65%) of the results of this survey.

ABOUT THE PUBLICATION

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The National League of Cities is the nation’s oldest and largest organization devoted to strengthening and promoting cities as centers of opportunity, leadership and governance. NLC is a resource and advocate for more 1,600 member cities and the 49 state municipal leagues, representing 19,000 cities and towns and more than 218 million Americans.

Through its Center for Research and Innovation, NLC provides research and analysis on key topics and trends important to cities, creative solutions to improve the quality of life in communities, inspiration and ideas for local officials to use in tackling tough issues and opportunities for city leaders to connect with peers, share experiences and learn about innovative approaches in cities.