

Cities of Opportunity:

Healthy People, Thriving Communities Executive Summary – Highlights from 12-City Pilot

July 2019

Cities of Opportunity (CoO) are places where all residents can reach their full potential and live productive, fulfilling and healthy lives as part of a thriving community. Yet in cities across America, the life expectancies of residents who live a few miles apart, and sometimes even blocks apart, vary by as much as five, ten or even twenty years. Multiple social determinants of health – income, education, housing, transit, family and social supports, and community safety – all play a role in how long we live and how well we live.

City leaders are uniquely positioned to advance cross-cutting approaches that address underlying factors affecting the health of their residents and the vibrancy of their city. The National League of Cities (NLC) launched Cities of Opportunity in October 2018 to strengthen the capacity of city leaders to work in a more holistic way to address the root causes of poor health. NLC recruited cities in a competitive application process to pilot the initiative, to support the design and development for a broader number of cities as we move to scale.

The 12 pilot cities are: **Atlanta, Georgia; Birmingham, Alabama; Charlotte, North Carolina; East Point, Georgia; Fort Collins, Colorado; Grand Rapids, Michigan; Hopewell, Virginia; Huntington, West Virginia; Lansing, Michigan; New Orleans, Louisiana; Rancho Cucamonga, California; and Roanoke, Virginia.**

Cross-City Takeaways

The pilot affirmed key elements of the initiative and pointed to ways to improve the next stage of Cities of Opportunity.

Design of the pilot cohort:

- City-centered, context-specific technical assistance to meet cities where they are and strengthen needed capacities to achieve desired results.
- Connecting equity, social determinants and health resonated with cities and helped them accelerate shifts in mindset, practices and policies. Alignment across city-departments strengthened cities' capacity for action.
- Thought partnerships with peer cities and subject matter experts, and strategic use of data, helped cities tackle challenges, identify solutions and guide policies and practices.

Work in other national initiatives:

- Pilot cities accelerated their work in other initiatives such as Invest Health and Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership.

Improvements for the future:

- The pilot occurred over a highly constrained time period (six months) with limited resources. Cities made notable progress and more time is needed to build further traction in their work. Expanding the duration of future cohorts will increase opportunities for exchange with experts and peer cities. And increasing resources will support strategic partnering for more robust policy and systems change.

Strength of the NLC Brand:

- NLC was the catalyst pilot cities needed to amplify efforts and acknowledge the interplay of health with multiple issues that come together in cities every day. The effort helped to inspire collaboration across city agencies and bring in a broader set of champions. By bringing gravitas, credibility and executive-level connections with cities, NLC opened the door for city leaders to apply the resources they do have to operate at a higher level.

“There is great work being done across our city, but until now we haven’t had a way to make sure we are leveraging all our assets. The CoO initiative has been a catalyst and accelerator for an entirely new approach to City services and partnerships - we now have a structure to work across silos with a shared focus on equity and data-driven policies and practices across our community.”

Mayor Jasmine Gore

City of Hopewell

Pilot Cities’ Accomplishments

The 12 cities brought different contexts and challenges, and they moved in different ways and speeds; but they all advanced in “distance traveled” toward a more holistic way to address social determinants and the intersectionality of their work across city departments. *These accomplishments are essential early steps; many future steps are to come.*

Changes in Policies, Practices and Programs:

- Equity in city plans and development requirements – codifying equity policies and practices into the city’s master plans/plan elements and agreements with developers
- Atlanta built hyper-local hiring requirements into their solicitation for Environmental Impact Bonds for innovative green infrastructure projects.
- Grand Rapids developed a new objective for health equity and Health in All Policies in the city’s new Strategic Plan.
- Charlotte is building equity into Charlotte 2040, the city’s first comprehensive plan update in 45 years, by advancing its practices of engaging city residents.
- Hopewell designed and launched the Community Enhancement Initiative to operationalize the city’s comprehensive plan by cross-linking city and community resources to improve quality of life for city residents, to be guided by a new city dashboard.
- Rancho Cucamonga developed a Community Engagement Policy with a Health Equity Framework that is being implemented across all levels and departments of the city.

- Strategic investments by anchor institutions – intentionally align investments by anchors and other partners with the city to improve the health of residents and the strength of the city
 - Huntington recently secured funding from a major hospital to invest in community and neighborhood economic development in targeted neighborhoods.
 - Roanoke has deepened relationships with their top health system and university anchors and catalyzed conversations for creating an integrated “strategic endowment fund” for sustained investments in the health and vibrancy of the city.
- Structures to connect plans with resources and data-driven dashboards – data support to track progress and use of resources, and to drive continuous improvement
 - Lansing is building a citywide data infrastructure for aligned policies and practices, encompassing their program-based budgeting system.
 - Rancho Cucamonga developed a data framework for guiding the planning of future programs, policies and strategies.
- Leverage equity and other social determinants in city development – creative approaches to advance equity through city priorities and decisions
 - East Point’s City Council unanimously adopted the Cities of Opportunity Resolution to guide equity considerations in all development decisions that come before the Council.
 - Fort Collins is connecting childcare expansion with incentives for development as a cross-cutting lever for economic growth and enhanced housing developments.

“The most value provided by the CoO pilot is on how to leverage our major medical stakeholders; how to work with them on broader issues like employment and housing. And participation in Cities of Opportunity required our city leadership to step away from the daily routine of our jobs and plan for the future.”

Cathy Burns

City Manager

City of Huntington

Improvements in Governance Structures and Processes:

- Structures to work across silos and sustain systemic change – accountability across city departments to align actions and support residents
 - Birmingham is operationalizing the Mayor’s Comprehensive Community Initiative with a model of governance, accountability and staffing structures for a “no wrong door” service model for all city neighborhoods.
 - New Orleans has kicked off a structure to support people in low-barrier homeless shelters by aligning three departments: Health, Housing & Community Development and Workforce Development.

“Just getting different department heads together to see how CDBG is allocated was eye-opening! Funding may be assigned to different departments – what are the long-term costs of that, and how could that be better deployed for greater benefit to the city? What are strategies for breaking down department-level walls? How can we get our biggest returns from limited dollars?”

Brian McGrain

Director of Economic Development & Planning

City of Lansing

What's Next

The next stage of Cities of Opportunity will engage more cities to drive change in policies, programs and practices. NLC will build a pipeline of cities through learning networks and communities of practice and support new cohorts of cities advancing action to improve social determinants of health to move to scale.

“Our diversity is our strength! As we continue to grow it is critically important that we continue to think outside the box to maintain a multi-cultural community through systemic and holistic equity that ensures equitable revitalization and development that provides housing for all and leaves no East Pointer behind.”

Mayor Deana Holiday Ingraham
City of East Point

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