



City-Level Approaches to Spur Job Creation and Economic Opportunity to Improve Health and Equity through COVID-19

Over the past several months, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has endangered the health and economic well-being of millions of individuals throughout the United States. Given the magnitude of the pandemic, all levels of government as well as non-governmental entities have an important role to play in mitigating these effects. As efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19 continue, cities are playing a leading role in addressing the unprecedented challenges of the pandemic and aiding communities in building resiliency.

Many cities are using this time of momentous change to address longstanding disparities and to plan for long-term health and economic improvements. Recognizing that families and communities of color are heavily impacted by the growing economic divide in this country, many cities have also focused on promoting health and economic equity in their recovery plans. In this issue brief, NLC highlights strategies that can be adopted by city leaders to advance economic opportunity in light of the devastating impact of COVID-19.

Key Takeaways

- **The health and financial impacts of COVID-19 have exacerbated longstanding barriers to health and employment.** Communities of color have been particularly hard hit, threatening to widen existing health and economic disparities.
- **Cities are advancing innovative approaches to job creation, employment, and economic opportunity through their COVID-19 recovery initiatives.** Given the relationship between employment and health, these strategies may also help improve health outcomes and advance long-term economic mobility.
- **As many city budgets have been hit hard by COVID-19, strategies that focus on existing city resources and strengths are key.** Promising approaches include intergovernmental collaborations; partnerships with anchor institutions; programs to support social enterprises, small businesses, and entrepreneurs; and initiatives to boost tech access and adoption for residents and businesses.

COVID-19 Has Exacerbated Existing Barriers to Health and Employment

The coronavirus pandemic has created unprecedented financial and public health challenges in cities across the country. Between January 21, 2020 and October 22, 2020, the U.S. experienced approximately 8.3 million coronavirus cases and more than 221,000 coronavirus-related deaths.¹ The social distancing policies enacted to slow the spread of COVID-19 have caused many businesses to furlough or lay off staff, cut hours, or close entirely, leading to a sharp spike in unemployment. Because most Americans get health insurance through their employer, this wave of unemployment has resulted in many losing their health insurance coverage during a time when they may need it most.² According to one estimate, 21.9 million Americans exited the labor market and an estimated 5.4 million Americans lost their health insurance between March and May 2020.³

In addition to erecting new barriers, the pandemic has also compounded longstanding barriers to employment related to health, well-being, and security. Gaps in education or employment are known to limit employment opportunities, particularly for people living in low- and middle-income neighborhoods.⁴ The layoffs and furloughs that resulted from COVID-19, as well as disruptions to in-person learning, have likely widened or created these gaps. A lack of access to child care, stable housing, and food security, all of which present significant barriers to finding and maintaining employment, have been exacerbated by workplace and school closures and losses of income.^{5,6,7,8} In addition, there is evidence that the stress and social isolation associated with these challenges have led to deteriorating mental health^{9,10} and increased substance use,¹¹ which can create barriers to employment.¹² At the same time, the pandemic has restricted social support and forced many existing mental health and substance use treatment services to close or reduce their operations.¹³

While the pandemic has had impacts across communities, people of color, particularly Black Americans, have been disproportionately affected by the virus. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show that nationally, Black Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanic Americans account for a disproportionately high share of hospital stays related to COVID-19.¹⁴ In the majority of states that report COVID-19 data by race and ethnicity, Black people account for a higher share of confirmed cases and deaths compared to their representation in the total population.^{15,16} People of color have also been heavily burdened by the economic consequences of the pandemic. In April 2020, 61 percent of Hispanic Americans and 44 percent of Black adults experienced a job loss or decrease in income due to COVID-19, compared to 38 percent of White adults.¹⁷ Moreover, although nearly a third of small businesses are owned by people of color,¹⁸ minority-owned businesses were largely left behind by federal relief programs, such as the Paycheck Protection Program.^{19,20} As a result, there is a particular need for local interventions that identify and address the health and financial impact of COVID-19 on communities of color.

In planning for a new normal, cities face immense pressure to respond to residents' immediate needs and to restore a sense of safety and stability. At the same time, they must manage constrained budgets and address a range of competing priorities. City leaders can help impacted communities recover sustainably in part by partnering with local organizations to design programs that promote job creation and economic opportunity.

Why Job Creation and Economic Opportunity?

The ability of a person, family, or group to improve economic circumstances for themselves and for future generations is foundational to health and well-being. Mobility is commonly measured by the likelihood that a low-income individual or a child of low-income parents will move into a higher income bracket during their lifetime. The U.S. lags behind other high-income countries in measures of economic mobility – an American child born into a low-income family is less likely to improve their economic situation than low-income children born in peer countries, such as Canada or the United Kingdom.²¹ Even within the U.S., rates of economic mobility differ starkly across racial and ethnic groups, with Black Americans experiencing the lowest rates of economic mobility.²² This divide is due to a number of systemic factors, including racial segregation, income inequality, poor school quality, lack of social capital and family instability.²³ It is also impacted by more downstream barriers to employment, such as justice involvement;^{24,25,26} gaps in education or employment;²⁷ mental health and substance use disorders;^{28,29,30,31} lack of child care;^{32,33,34} housing insecurity;³⁵ and limited technical or interpersonal skills^{36,37}.

Prioritizing job creation, employment, and economic opportunity can also impact community health. In a recent article, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation examined a robust body of research demonstrating that a person's economic status is closely tied to their health care access, health outcomes, and life expectancy.³⁸ They note that lower-income Americans have lower life expectancies and are more likely to have multiple chronic health conditions, and attribute these outcomes to a number of clinical, behavioral, and environmental factors.³⁹ For example, lower-income Americans are more likely to be uninsured, have no usual source of care, and delay or fail to obtain preventive care.⁴⁰ Poor health can also lead to reduced income, leading to a "health-poverty trap," a cycle in which a person's health does not improve because of poverty, and a person's poverty does not improve because of health.⁴¹ Implementing initiatives to lift no-income and low-income Americans out of poverty can help break this cycle.

There are many avenues that cities can use to prioritize job creation, employment, and opportunity as they seek to recover from the impact of COVID-19. Recognizing that most state budgets have been hit hard by the pandemic, this issue brief will focus on how cities can leverage existing strengths, stakeholders, and resources to advance economic opportunity and health for their residents.

City-Level Strategies for Drawing Upon Existing Strengths and Resources to Advance Opportunity

As the nation recovers from the impacts of COVID-19, city leaders can use existing political capital and resources to improve the health and economic mobility of their residents. Their actions during the initial improvement stages have the potential to set the trajectory for long-term health and economic resiliency. The following strategies utilize existing city resources and have the potential to make a positive impact on the economic mobility and health of city residents:

- Collaborating across federal, state, and local governments to finance and improve delivery of basic services;
- Partnering with anchor institutions and other local stakeholders to work toward shared health and economic goals to advance equity;
- Leveraging the knowledge and networks of social enterprise organizations to address structural barriers to employment;
- Helping entrepreneurs and small businesses adapt to the challenges of COVID-19 through grants that target high-need areas, such as essential and minority-owned small businesses;
- Facilitating data collection to measure and improve programs aimed at advancing economic mobility and improvements in community health; and
- Ensuring technology access and adoption for all community members.

Each of these strategies is explored in more detail below.

Collaborating With Federal, State, and Local Governments

City leaders are collaborating with county, state, and federal governments to ensure appropriate resources and regulatory flexibility to respond to the impacts of COVID-19. Indeed, much of the funding for COVID-19 economic recovery has come from the federal government through legislation like the CARES Act⁴² and the Families First Coronavirus Response Act.⁴³ However, in the coming months, greater federal and state advocacy from cities will likely be needed. City leaders can share first-hand accounts that describe how strengthening the social safety net and ensuring health care access would promote socioeconomic opportunity in their communities.

For example, cities can support changes to programs administered through federal-state partnerships, such as Medicaid, that would contribute to economic mobility and population health. Studies link Medicaid coverage to increased intergenerational economic mobility, higher educational attainment, and higher wages,^{44,45} as well as a lower likelihood of medical debt or catastrophic medical expenses.⁴⁶ In addition, studies of the Medicaid expansion population show that the majority of enrollees believe that Medicaid coverage has made it easier for them to work.⁴⁷ Medicaid coverage is also associated with improved access to care and health outcomes,⁴⁸ and will likely play a key role in ensuring that people who have become uninsured as a result of COVID-19-related job loss will be able to access health care during the pandemic.⁴⁹

However, in the 15 states that have not implemented a Medicaid expansion,⁵⁰ many people who have experienced job loss related to COVID-19 have fallen into a coverage gap; their incomes are too high to qualify for Medicaid but too low to qualify for ACA Marketplace subsidies.⁵¹ As a result, people in non-Medicaid expansion states may be less likely to have health insurance during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to better support health and financial well-being, some states are using Medicaid waivers, state plan amendments, and other administrative actions to temporarily modify Medicaid eligibility.⁵² Modifications include expanding coverage for COVID-19 testing and testing-related services to uninsured individuals affected by COVID-19, decreasing income and resource restrictions for some individuals, and extending eligibility for programs that enroll uninsured hospital patients in Medicaid coverage.⁵³

Recognizing that many municipalities will face similar challenges in promoting employment and other factors that affect health (e.g. housing, education, etc.), city leaders may also benefit from collaborating with nearby cities, counties or towns. The city of St. Louis, Missouri, has partnered with neighboring municipalities to coordinate services, share savings, and improve their communities.

In the short term, city leaders can leverage a variety of existing federal and state funding streams to promote economic opportunity and mobility. For example, they can assist community members and businesses with applying for loans or technical assistance. However, the health and economic uncertainty brought about by COVID-19 has created a strong case for permanent systemic change in federal systems and the social safety net. This pandemic has exceeded the capacity of existing systems to support citizens without piecemeal interventions. For example, Congress has temporarily extended and enhanced safety net programs like unemployment insurance, in recognition that the typical duration and amount of benefits are insufficient to help families during the current crisis.⁵⁴ Rather than waiting for the next crisis to define potential changes to safety net programs, city leaders can advocate for proactive investment in long-term strategies to increase community resilience.



St. Louis, Missouri

The 24:1 Municipal Government Partnership (MGP) brings together 24 cities in North St. Louis County to collaborate on key services, such as policing and forestry.⁵⁵ Through shared services and contracting, MGP has saved participating municipalities over \$1 million.⁵⁶ The MGP is one element of the 24:1 Initiative, a place-based community development effort led by residents of Missouri's Normandy school district to reduce infant mortality, decrease childhood obesity rates, help families save for college, provide home repairs, mitigate food insecurity, and improve other facilitators of community health and prosperity.⁵⁷

Forming and Enhancing Community Partnerships with Anchor Institutions

City leaders can look to anchor institutions to assist with economic mobility and health of city residents. Anchor institutions are often the largest employers within a city, such as colleges, universities, and hospitals.⁵⁸ As major employers, anchor institutions provide income and employer-sponsored health insurance to a significant portion of city residents. Many cities already have existing relationships with anchor institutions, given their size and influence.

Community partnerships between cities and anchor institutions can serve several functions. Partnerships can encourage local job growth by working collaboratively to encourage local hiring and purchasing, especially in ways that can promote racial and socioeconomic equity. Cities can work with anchor institutions to improve local earning potential by working to build pathways to middle-skill jobs — that is, career-entry-level jobs that require technical training beyond high

school, but not a four-year college degree — through targeted hiring, skills training, and tuition remission policies. They may work to improve population health by coordinating initiatives that connect residents to services that improve health and well-being.⁵⁹ For example, partnerships between the city of Cleveland, Ohio and its anchor institutions are already working to address needs and opportunities in the region. Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio is investing in neighborhood improvement, including a focus on housing.⁶⁰ Another Cleveland initiative, Evergreen Cooperatives, is bringing together anchor institutions to support green jobs at worker-owned cooperatives and spur sustainable economic development in the region.⁶¹

Rather than only engaging in discrete, episodic projects with anchor institutions, city leaders should also seek to build sustained community partnerships with anchor institutions that can impact longer term health and economic outcomes of city residents.⁶² City leaders can enhance community partnerships by integrating anchor institutions more fully into city planning and policy discussions, and by aligning workforce training needs with local employment opportunities. In cities without pre-existing relationships with anchor institutions, COVID-19 recovery planning provides an opportunity for city leaders to form partnerships with the anchor institutions in their cities so that they may work together to improve the economic opportunity and health of city residents. Organizations like the Democracy Collaborative support cities and anchor institutions in advancing anchor partnerships. For example, the [Healthcare Anchor Network](#), includes long-term partnerships that address housing, violence, among other issues.

Waco, Texas is partnering with anchor institutions through Prosper Waco, a collective impact initiative aimed at improving education, health, and financial stability in Waco and McLennan County. Sustained collaboration between city government, major health care organizations, academic institutions, and business leaders has led to increases in median household income, youth employment, college and vocational school graduation rates among economically disadvantaged students, and household net worth.⁶³



Waco, Texas

Prosper Waco brings together the City of Waco and 82 partner organizations⁶⁴ through 12 working groups to work toward 17 benchmark indicators that in turn support three overarching goals. Prosper Waco's collaborative structure enables the City of Waco, its anchor institutions, and its nonprofits to replicate effective programs, seek collaborative grants, disaggregate data, and measure and work toward the same outcomes.⁶⁵

Prosper Waco has spearheaded several initiatives to help provide job seekers with valued skills and connect them to local employers. One example is the McLennan Community College (MCC) Work Readiness Certificate (WRC), an educational program focused on entry-level job skills valued by local employers. The certificate was developed through a partnership between MCC, the Center for Occupational Research and Development (CORD), the Greater Waco Chamber of Commerce, and local businesses. The Waco Employer Resource Network (WERN) is comprised of job training programs, social service programs, staffing agencies, and local employers. WERN helps job seekers find full-time jobs more quickly, supports individuals to help them maintain employment, and helps employers fill job openings and reduce turnover among entry-level employees. In 2017, the City of Waco awarded pilot funding to two local nonprofits – Caritas of Waco and Heart of Texas Goodwill Industries, Inc. – to employ WERN staff members.

Leveraging the Knowledge and Networks of Social Enterprises

Social enterprise organizations aim to address a basic unmet need or solve a social or environmental problem through a market-driven approach.⁶⁶ Cities can build or leverage relationships with such organizations to improve economic mobility and health, either directly or through existing relationships with local community-based organizations. Social enterprise organizations, which are typically launched through grassroots community efforts, work to advance economic mobility by employing and providing skills training to people who face significant barriers to employment, such as homelessness, incarceration, substance use, mental health conditions, and/or domestic violence. They can also assist their communities by using their products and services to create social or environmental impact; in some cases, social enterprise employers can work to remove or reduce barriers to employment for low-income individuals by providing shelter, child care, treatment for substance use disorder, and/or criminal record expungement.^{67,68}

The history of social enterprise organizations in the United States suggests they can be an important partner for cities interested in promoting economic mobility during COVID-19 recovery. These organizations came to prominence in the 1980s and 1990s as government funds for nonprofit organizations dwindled following the country's economic downturn in the late 1970s.⁶⁹ A report by the American Enterprise Institute estimates that in 2017, 9.6 million Americans could have benefitted from programs led by social enterprise organizations, meaning that they faced at least one barrier that is targeted by social enterprise, had incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level, and were unemployed.⁷⁰ Given the historic levels of unemployment resulting from COVID-19, the number of potential beneficiaries of social enterprise approaches has surely only increased since then.

In many instances, social enterprise organizations have been meeting their community's basic needs and providing social support for decades.⁷¹ As such, they can be valuable partners in identifying community needs and connecting individuals to employment opportunities,⁷² particularly as needs increase due to COVID-19 and the economic downturn. Leveraging the networks and expertise of local community- and faith-based organizations involved in social enterprise can allow city leaders to avoid duplicative efforts and streamline initiatives to advance economic opportunity for residents.

The City of Cleveland, Ohio is partnering with a social enterprise employer to provide job training and behavioral health services for incarcerated women. Between 2016-2018, the program assisted 89 women, 40 of whom were released and found employment by 2018. The program has a 0% recidivism rate.⁷³

A photograph of the Cleveland skyline at dusk or dawn. The sky is a deep blue. Several prominent buildings are visible, including the Key Tower on the left with its red 'Key' logo, the Terminal Tower in the center with its flag on top, and the modern, curved Cuyahoga County Courthouse on the right. In the foreground, there are silhouettes of trees and a bridge structure.

Cleveland, Ohio

The Chopping for Change (C4C) program is a partnership between Lutheran Metropolitan Ministry (LMM), the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC) and the Cuyahoga County Office of Reentry to provide pre-release workforce development training and behavioral health services for women in the criminal justice system. Women incarcerated at the North East Reintegration Center (NERC) in Cleveland come to LMM five days a week and engage in a comprehensive program which includes counseling, support services and culinary arts training. This is one of only a few programs in Ohio that releases inmates from prison and places them under community supervision in order to access employment training. C4C provides meaningful work experience for incarcerated women, empowering them to rejoin the workforce upon release, and helping to reduce recidivism.⁷⁴

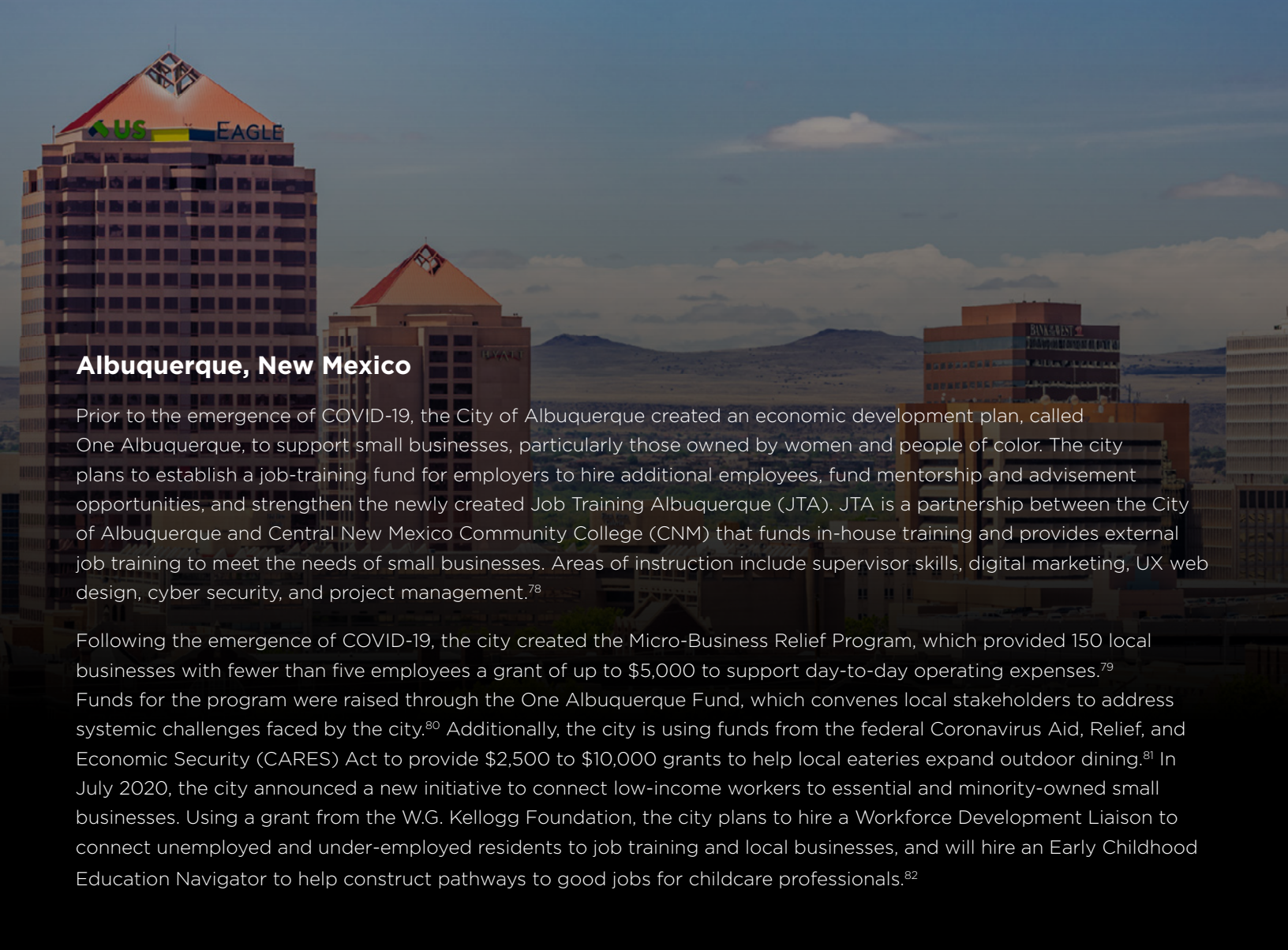
In addition to partnering with existing social enterprise organizations, cities can further develop these programs through grant funding, community development financial institutions (CDFIs), or impact investment initiatives, such as ImpactPHL. ImpactPHL connects investors, philanthropic foundations, business leaders, and entrepreneurs to local organizations that strive to make a positive social or environmental impact. Funding recipients focus on areas such as community redevelopment, job placement for individuals experiencing homelessness, and technological ventures.⁷⁵

Encouraging and Supporting Entrepreneurism and Small Businesses

Like social enterprise organizations, entrepreneurship is another strategy that cities may utilize to promote economic mobility. Entrepreneurism (i.e. small businesses and startups) can promote economic opportunity by both employing and serving community members. With so many small businesses impacted because of the economic slowdown due to COVID-19, business, and more broadly, social life, may never “return to normal.”⁷⁶ In particular, businesses that rely on congregating people (e.g. restaurants, bars, nightclubs, bowling alleys, and theaters) will have to adapt their business models to generate revenue while still maintaining best practices for public health. Meanwhile, businesses that have closed temporarily will need support in reopening once conditions are safe.

Given the immense health and economic toll that COVID-19 has taken on Black Americans and other people of color, it is crucial for cities to support programs that identify and assist entrepreneurs in communities of color who lack access to traditional capital and business services. NLC’s report, [“Keeping the American Dream Alive: Expanding Economic Mobility and Opportunity in America’s Cities”](#) outlines a number of strategies to support entrepreneurship within these communities. For example, cities can match owners of vacant and affordable retail and office space with entrepreneurs who are looking for space to rent. They can leverage city funds to support small business loan programs that provide below-market rate capital to small businesses and engage nonprofit partners to provide technical assistance to small businesses. They can support worker cooperatives and other forms of employee-owned businesses that generate small business growth and new jobs.⁷⁷

COVID-19 has raised a range of unforeseen challenges for entrepreneurs and small business owners. Cities can respond to these challenges by advocating on behalf of their business community to ensure that federal funding allocated to the state is directed to emergency funds to support small businesses and entrepreneurs. In partnership with the private sector, cities can support loan programs or rent concessions for these businesses. Supporting local small business development centers (SBDCs) and other technical assistance programs can also help small business owners adapt to the myriad of challenges posed by COVID-19 and requirements for reopening. Ultimately, fostering the economic success of small businesses can improve the economic mobility and health of individuals and the communities in which they reside.



Albuquerque, New Mexico

Prior to the emergence of COVID-19, the City of Albuquerque created an economic development plan, called One Albuquerque, to support small businesses, particularly those owned by women and people of color. The city plans to establish a job-training fund for employers to hire additional employees, fund mentorship and advisement opportunities, and strengthen the newly created Job Training Albuquerque (JTA). JTA is a partnership between the City of Albuquerque and Central New Mexico Community College (CNM) that funds in-house training and provides external job training to meet the needs of small businesses. Areas of instruction include supervisor skills, digital marketing, UX web design, cyber security, and project management.⁷⁸

Following the emergence of COVID-19, the city created the Micro-Business Relief Program, which provided 150 local businesses with fewer than five employees a grant of up to \$5,000 to support day-to-day operating expenses.⁷⁹ Funds for the program were raised through the One Albuquerque Fund, which convenes local stakeholders to address systemic challenges faced by the city.⁸⁰ Additionally, the city is using funds from the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act to provide \$2,500 to \$10,000 grants to help local eateries expand outdoor dining.⁸¹ In July 2020, the city announced a new initiative to connect low-income workers to essential and minority-owned small businesses. Using a grant from the W.G. Kellogg Foundation, the city plans to hire a Workforce Development Liaison to connect unemployed and under-employed residents to job training and local businesses, and will hire an Early Childhood Education Navigator to help construct pathways to good jobs for childcare professionals.⁸²

City leaders should also consider investing in training and technological literacy programs targeted specifically for Minority- and Woman-Owned Business Enterprise (MWBE) owners in distressed communities. With the proliferation of telework (and telemedicine), the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of digital technology and technological literacy for both individuals and businesses. Americans with less education and lower incomes are more likely to continue reporting to work or lose their employment; in contrast, wealthier, more educated adults have been able to work remotely.⁸³ Now, more than ever, technological capacity and literacy is a pathway to economic mobility and health that city leaders can help address.

The City of Albuquerque, New Mexico, has prioritized small business development and entrepreneurship in its economic development plan, particularly for MWBE. In response to COVID-19, the city has acted quickly to support small businesses and boost employment in key industries.

Ensuring Technology Access and Adoption

COVID-19 has spurred a mass transition to remote work, school, and health care, making technology access and adoption more important than ever. Because of the need to practice social distancing, digital literacy, access to technology, and a reliable Internet connection are essential for finding and maintaining employment; completing a degree or training program; learning new skills; and accessing needed health and services. Unfortunately, not everyone has access to these tools. People of color, older adults, rural residents, people with disabilities, and those with lower levels of education and income are less likely to have broadband service at home.^{84, 85} Low-income individuals, people of color, people with disabilities, and rural residents are also less likely to own a smartphone, tablet, or traditional computer.^{86,87,88,89}

Cities have risen to the challenge by implementing a range of innovative efforts to expand broadband Internet access, provide computers to residents, and improve digital literacy. Philadelphia's Digital Literacy Alliance (DLA) has launched a fast-track grant cycle, providing \$30,000 grants to three local organizations in order to connect residents to affordable Internet services and technology; \$25,000 of each grant will be used to create Digital Navigator positions and the remaining \$5,000 will be used to provide computers to those who need them.⁹⁰ The Philadelphia DLA has also announced a new initiative to provide grants to immigrant-serving organizations for targeted digital literacy training.⁹¹ In Baltimore, Maryland, the city leveraged its local public access TV channel, CharmTV, to broadcast daily lessons in language, math, science, and art after public school instruction went remote.⁹² Meanwhile, in Chattanooga, Tennessee, a city-owned Internet service provider has stepped up to provide additional mobile hotspots in locations near large numbers of families with students who do not have Internet access at home.



Chattanooga, Tennessee

The City of Chattanooga's continued support for Electric Power Board (EPB), a publicly-owned electric power distribution and telecommunications company, has enabled the city to provide Internet access to its residents at unprecedentedly high speeds and at a relatively low price point.⁹³ In the early 2000's, Chattanooga policymakers supported a bold and innovative plan by EPB to build a fiber optic network across its existing electrical network, expecting that the resulting economic development would offset the city's initial investment.^{94,95} In 2010, EPB won national acclaim for being the first company in the United States to offer "one gig" high-speed Internet,⁹⁶ and it has not stopped innovating since then. In 2015, Chattanooga implemented the world's first community-wide 10-gig Internet service, available to all homes and businesses in EPB's service area.⁹⁷ The city's widespread, high-speed Internet has attracted tech firms and other employers to the area, leading to the creation of 2,800-5,200 new jobs between 2011 and 2015.⁹⁸ In 2018, EPB reached 100,000 subscribers and paid off its debt to the city, enabling the company to reinvest its revenue to decrease Internet prices for Chattanooga businesses and residents.⁹⁹

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, EPB partnered with the City of Chattanooga, Hamilton County Schools, the Enterprise Center, Benwood Foundation, and Chattanooga 2.0 to increase access to mobile hotspots, prioritizing areas with large numbers of public school students who did not have Internet access at home. The EPB Quick Connect WiFi hotspots are located in parking lots at schools and other community-based facilities, and are available to all EPB subscribers.¹⁰⁰ In July 2020, EPB and Hamilton County Schools announced a second initiative to bridge the digital divide in Chattanooga; EPB has pledged to provide Internet services to approximately 28,500 economically challenged students and their families, completely free of charge.¹⁰¹

Establishing and Enhancing Data Collection Efforts

Underpinning all of these strategies is the need for city leaders to collect data. Whether it is data on how residents have been impacted by COVID-19, the number of Minority and Women-owned Business Enterprises (MWBE) in a city, or percentage of community members employed by an anchor institution, accurate data is necessary to inform city action or policy change. Accurate data can also help evaluate progress and challenges during COVID-19. Data can help a city track its economic mobility response and monitor new programs to make sure they are delivering desired results. City leaders should work with their partner organizations, (including federal and state governments), anchor institutions, social enterprises, and entrepreneurs to help ensure they can measure the impact of the strategies they employ on economic mobility and related outcome measures.

Considerations

Cross-governmental collaboration, partnerships with anchor institutions, working with social enterprises, support of entrepreneurship, and data collection efforts are all strategies that cities can utilize to promote economic mobility during a COVID-19 recovery period. As cities design and implement these strategies, several overarching questions will be important to consider. These questions include:

- What challenges or disparities existed before COVID-19 that cities can address as part of their COVID-19 recovery strategies?
- How can cities identify and direct resources towards underserved populations?
- How can cities make use of or adapt existing resources to respond to the challenges of COVID-19? How can integration across sectors expand government capabilities to improve economic opportunity?
- How can cities balance short-term needs for stability with long-term considerations to promote economic mobility?
- How can cities collect data and measure outcomes during their recovery periods? How can this information be used to refine or tailor their initiatives?

About the National League of Cities

The National League of Cities (NLC) is the nation's leading advocacy organization devoted to strengthening and promoting cities as centers of opportunity, leadership and governance. Through its membership and partnerships with state municipal leagues, NLC serves as a resource and advocate for more than 19,000 cities and towns and more than 218 million Americans.

About this Project

With generous support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the National League of Cities (NLC) is exploring city-level approaches to spur job creation and economic opportunity to improve health and equity through COVID-19. As part of NLC's Cities of Opportunity initiative, the goal of this brief is to support city leaders in connecting strategies that address economic opportunity at the intersection of health and equity. The intention of the brief is to support city leaders in identifying effective strategies that can be adopted to advance economic opportunity in light of the devastating impact of COVID-19.

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