



Working Parents, Thriving Cities



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About the National League of Cities

The National League of Cities (NLC) is dedicated to helping city leaders build better communities. Working in partnership with the 49 state municipal leagues, NLC serves as a resource to and an advocate for the more than 19,000 cities, villages and towns it represents.

About the Institute for Youth, Education, and Families

The Institute for Youth, Education, and Families is the go-to place for city leaders seeking to improve outcomes for children and families. With expertise in early childhood success, education & expanded learning, promoting a culture of health, youth & young adult connections, and economic opportunity & financial empowerment, the YEF Institute reaches cities of all sizes and brings together local leaders to develop strategies via technical assistance projects, peer learning networks, leadership academies, and Mayors' Institutes.

Working Parents, Thriving Cities

MOST CHILDREN IN THE UNITED STATES GROW UP IN HOMES IN WHICH BOTH PARENTS MUST WORK IN ORDER TO SIMPLY MAKE ENDS MEET. WORKING PARENTS LIVING IN POVERTY OR WITH LOW-INCOMES HAVE UNIQUE NEEDS THAT MAY BE DIFFERENT FROM THEIR HIGHER-INCOME PEERS OR WORKERS WITHOUT CHILDREN. IN THE 11 MILLION HOMES HEADED BY A SINGLE PARENT, CHALLENGES WITH ECONOMIC SECURITY AND BALANCING FAMILY NEEDS ARE EVEN MORE SIGNIFICANT.

Parents struggling to maintain long-term, full-time employment often lack essential job skills, opportunities to connect with employers, access to information about job openings, and support services for their children.

A car breaking down, a child's emergency room visit, or even a school meeting can lead to unplanned absences or late arrivals that can derail a working family on the edge of poverty. A number of historical trends in many cities, such as disinvestment in public schools; the disappearance of industry from urban centers; high-cost of child care; and gaps in transportation to areas with more jobs have created a scenario in which barriers to employment may be particularly prevalent for parents in cities. Often, these barriers are more significant for low-income parents of color, particularly single mothers whose struggles are compounded by the gender and race pay gap and who experience higher rates of poverty than households led by two parents and those led by white single mothers.

Cities, however, can "flip the script" for thousands of struggling parents and their children by shaping a family-centered approach to workforce development - one that targets services and supports to parents with a goal to strengthen the economic health of workers' families.

With support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the National League of Cities (NLC) conducted a scan of municipal efforts to improve the employment outcomes of parents and identify promising strategies.

This review of local parent employment efforts across the country revealed a disconnect between the aspirations of cities to improve economic mobility for families and the absence of a specific focus in city workforce development strategies on parent employment outcomes.

The good news is that city representatives participating in NLC’s scan agreed that parent employment is key to overall family economic success and that cities have the ability to move the needle on family outcomes.

This represents a missed opportunity and should stand as a wake-up call for municipal leaders and other stakeholders. In order to correct many of the systemic problems that low-income families face, cities need to adopt a parent employment focus as central to their policy and programmatic approaches.

The scan produced several findings that highlight a small, but growing number of cities actively striving to improve employment outcomes for parents. This report provides key findings from the scan, along with a discussion of family-centered workforce strategies cities can pursue to boost economic mobility for families.

Impetus for Action

Balancing work and home responsibilities is nothing new. However, more parents are having to work multiple jobs in order to stay afloat and more single parents are juggling the alignment of work with childcare and school schedules while navigating complex systems. With these growing challenges, supports for parents in the workplace are crucial for stable employment and family economic health.

Nearly 18 percent of our nation’s children live in poverty. Various research studies have shown that persistent exposure to poverty at a young age triggers stress hormones that can lead to poor cognitive, emotional and self-regulation skills in adulthood – necessary functions for steady and secure employment as an adult. For these reasons, the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics identifies “secure parental employment” as one of 41 national indicators used to measure the well-being of children in the United States.

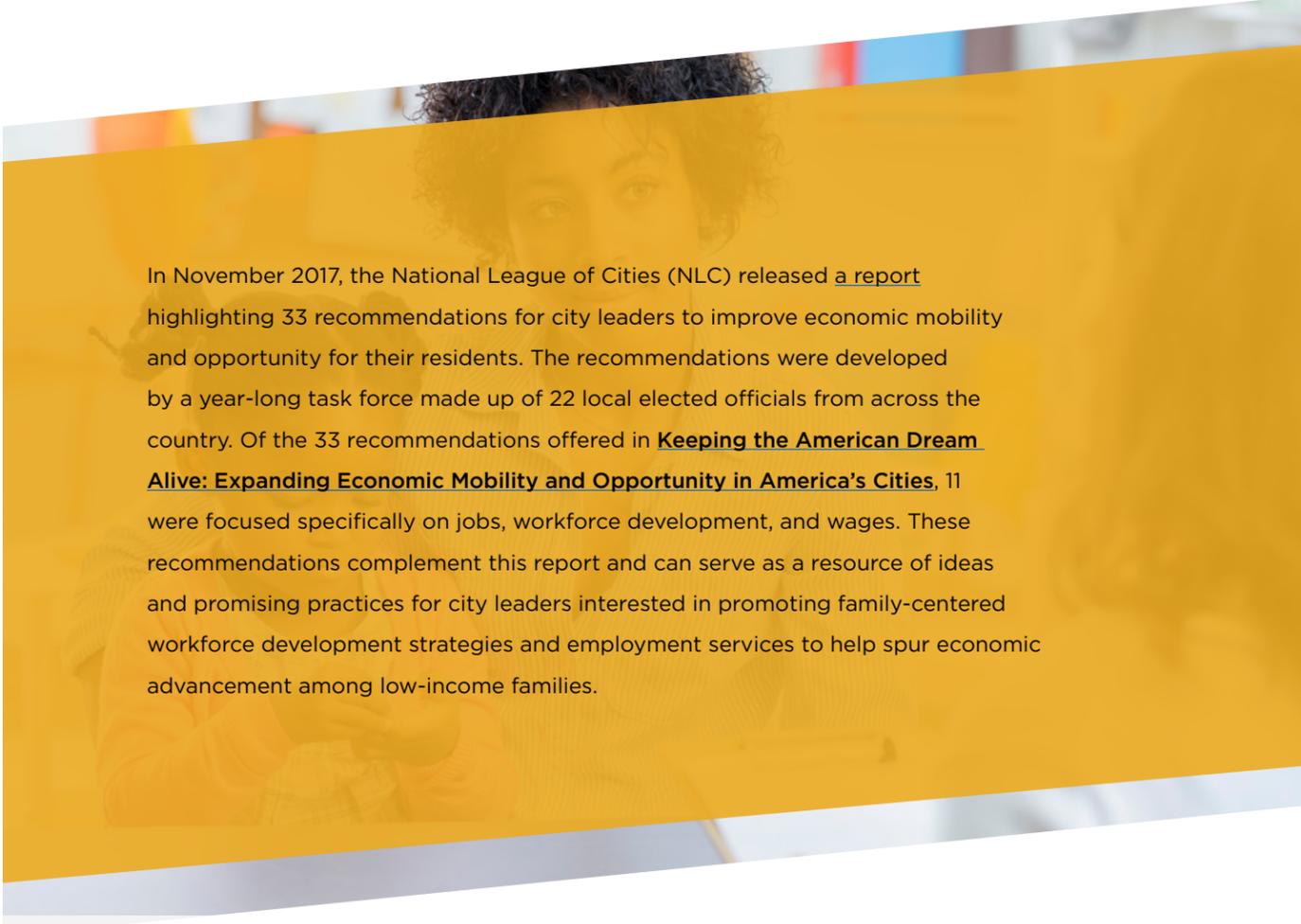
But not all parents are able to maintain full-time employment. Although the U.S. unemployment rate has hovered at a 10-year low of roughly four percent, the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s KidsCount data center found that 28 percent of children under age 18 did not live with a parent who had secure full-time, year-round employment in 2016. Children of color were more likely to live with a parent who did not have secure, full-time employment than white children.

Working families who live in poverty or with low-incomes often struggle with having adequate access to health and mental health services; consistent, high-quality child care for their children; nutritious meals; transportation; affordable housing; safe and secure neighborhoods; a living wage; and predictable or consistent work hours—making it more challenging for them to acquire the necessary skills or knowledge needed to move up the economic ladder.

Additionally, parents often need to take time off from work to tend to a sick child or attend a parent-teacher conference. Lower-wage jobs often have little to no paid time off for sick leave or to support their children’s educational or health needs – a problem compounded for single parents who do not have a second adult in the household to help meet their child’s needs. Second and third shift workers must balance caretaking responsibilities for children and ensuring a safe and healthy environment at home in their absence.

Many city leaders see first-hand the struggles of low-income families in their communities and are committed to boosting their economic mobility. While they may pursue many paths to support economic opportunity for residents, workforce development programs present a unique way to focus on the employment success of parents as a key driver of family and neighborhood economic success.

By taking a closer look at the workforce strategies and employment services available in their cities, local leaders can implement “family-centered” employment strategies that are designed to ensure that parents have the equitable opportunities and supports needed to ensure that their families are economically stable.



In November 2017, the National League of Cities (NLC) released [a report](#) highlighting 33 recommendations for city leaders to improve economic mobility and opportunity for their residents. The recommendations were developed by a year-long task force made up of 22 local elected officials from across the country. Of the 33 recommendations offered in [Keeping the American Dream Alive: Expanding Economic Mobility and Opportunity in America’s Cities](#), 11 were focused specifically on jobs, workforce development, and wages. These recommendations complement this report and can serve as a resource of ideas and promising practices for city leaders interested in promoting family-centered workforce development strategies and employment services to help spur economic advancement among low-income families.

How the Scan was Conducted

During the first half of 2018, the National League of Cities conducted a scan of city parent employment efforts comprised of four components:

1. A survey of 53 municipal leaders and staff designed to gather information about how cities prioritize parents as a targeted group for employment services and what strategies are in place to boost and measure their employment outcomes.
2. A set of 13 follow-up interviews with cities selected from the survey respondents to gather more information about strategies and local priorities.
3. A convening that brought together representatives from 10 of the cities for a more in-depth examination of city efforts and allowed participants to share ideas and ask each other questions.
4. Two site visits to cities to explore first-hand city efforts, meet with local stakeholders, and gather more detailed information (Chattanooga, Tennessee and Jackson, Mississippi).

This report shares findings and information gathered from all four of these efforts and will use the term “scan” to refer to these four components combined.

The NLC Parent Employment convening brought together representatives from the following ten cities and organizations:

- United Way for Greater Austin (Texas)
- City of Chattanooga, Tenn.
- Towards Employment (Cleveland, Ohio)
- City of Grand Rapids, Mich.
- City of Jackson, Miss.
- Capital Area Michigan Works (Lansing, Mich.)
- City of Las Vegas
- City of Pittsburgh
- City of Walla Walla, Wash.
- City of Washington, D.C.

Key Findings

NLC'S PARENT EMPLOYMENT SCAN FOUND THAT CITIES HAVE PROMISING OPPORTUNITIES TO ADOPT TARGETED STRATEGIES THAT MEET PARENTS' EMPLOYMENT NEEDS AND IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR THEIR CHILDREN, DESPITE THE FACT THAT THEY TYPICALLY DO NOT HAVE AN INTENTIONAL, FAMILY-CENTERED APPROACH TO WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT POLICIES AND PROGRAMS.

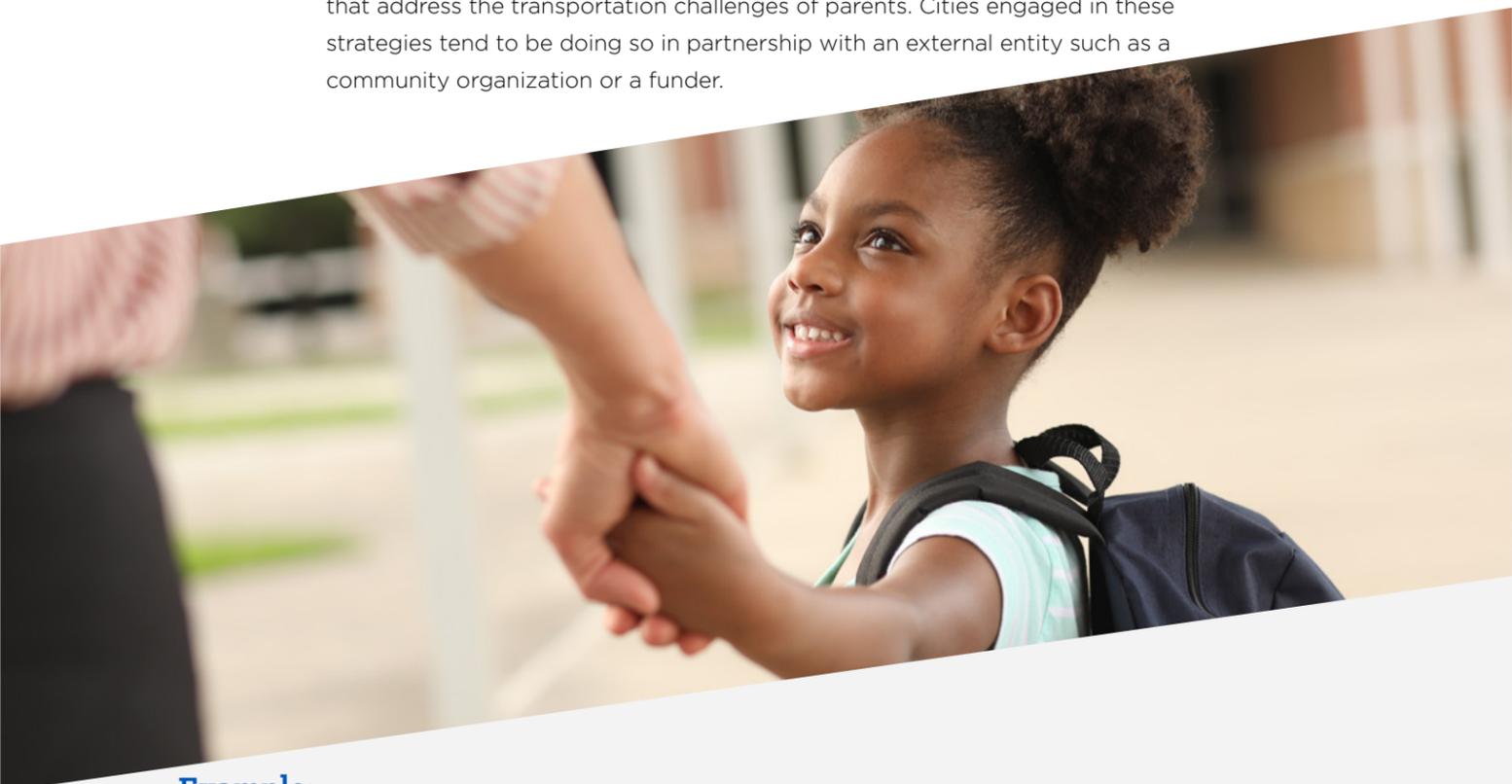
- ▶ **The majority of scan participants agreed that when parents achieve successful outcomes in employment it can have lasting positive impacts for cities on family and neighborhood stability. However, city workforce development strategies are rarely targeted specifically to parents as a priority population.**

City leaders expressed the benefits of a parent-centered approach, such as a more stable tax base, reduced foreclosures, better educational outcomes for children, and overall neighborhood stability. However, cities tend to take a more universal approach to workforce development, which often does not consider the unique needs of parents. Scan participants noted that cities often respond to the needs of employers when developing workforce development strategies and that employers often do not give special considerations to parent job applicants or benefits for employees.



► **A small number of cities are actively taking steps to address the specific needs of parents, though they are in the early stages of these efforts.**

Only a small handful of cities are beginning to focus on parents as a targeted population for employment-related services through city-wide planning, changes in programming or city level legislation. Parent-centered strategies cited by scan participants include paid leave legislation; direct outreach to parents about services; child care strategies; two-generation education efforts; and strategies that address the transportation challenges of parents. Cities engaged in these strategies tend to be doing so in partnership with an external entity such as a community organization or a funder.



Example:

The United Way of Greater Austin spearheaded a community-wide two-generation effort designed to build economic opportunities for families - meeting the needs of children and their parents together. In 2018, a group of local leaders, including representatives from the **City of Austin**, finalized the *Family Opportunity Roadmap*, a five-year strategic plan for Austin and the broader county outlining goals, performance measures and action steps to develop a two-generation ecosystem of support for families.

Though the city was not leading the effort, Mayor Steve Adler and other city staff played key roles in the development and implementation of the initiative, including an official letter of support from Mayor Adler. Formally launched in December 2018, the five-year plan includes strategies to connect services and supports for children from birth through age 12, workforce and educational training for parents, and health, housing and economic supports for families.

► **Cities implementing programs to support parent employment frequently rely on partners to drive the effort, including community organizations, workforce investment boards and foundations.**

Though some cities may seek to address parent employment challenges, most cities do not have a specific goal, mandate, or even have capacity to act on their own. Cities often must rely on local partners to implement strategies that meet the needs of families. In some communities, organizations that have a specific goal related to family-centered employment or two-generation strategies will seek support or partnership from city government to accomplish their objectives. Partnering with organizations that reflect the diversity of a city's population of parents is a key way to ensure that the city's outreach efforts are equitable and reach all parents.

Survey respondents indicated that cities collaborate most with local or regional workforce investment boards, community-based nonprofit organizations, community colleges or other educational institutions, and chambers of commerce or local employers. Survey respondents were less likely to collaborate with state or county agencies.

Example:

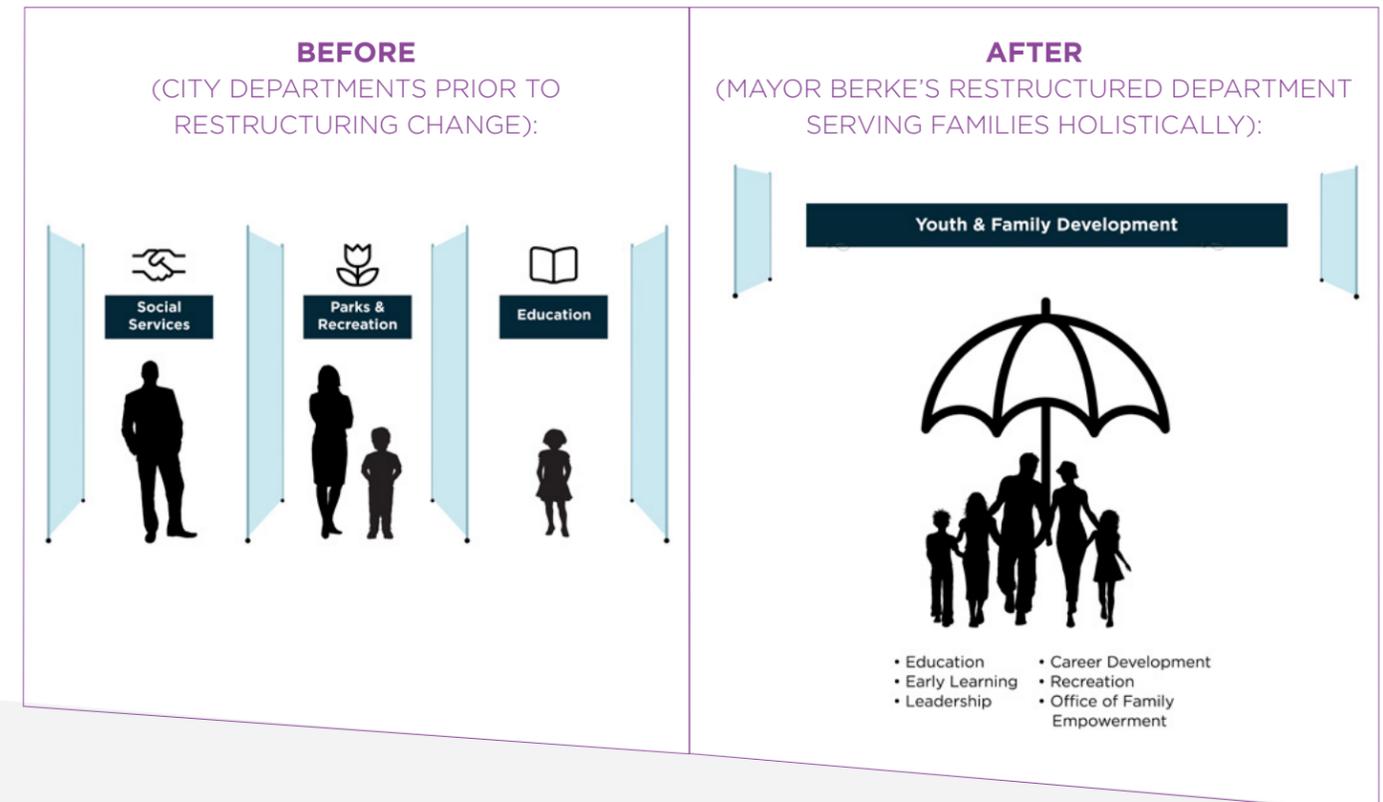
The City of **Cleveland, Ohio**, in partnership with Cuyahoga County and the local Workforce Investment Board, contracts with several local employment agencies to provide residents with workforce development services. One of the key agencies involved, Towards Employment, has a goal to increase the economic mobility of adults with barriers to employment, including criminal justice involvement, so they can better care for their families and strengthen the community. This family stability lens extends to providing essential supports - either directly or through partnerships - that parents rely on to pursue training and employment, such as child care and transportation. Towards Employment also engages other providers to enhance participant success before and after employment through substance abuse prevention education, financial literacy and parenting skills. The city's partnership with this agency demonstrates a commitment to a holistic approach of family and community stability through employment success.

➤ **In many cities, programs and policies that support parents span several city departments or agencies, often resulting in the duplication of efforts or siloed approaches.**

Navigating the often-fragmented system of workforce services provided by city agencies and community organizations is both time-consuming and challenging for parents who are struggling to find work, ensure care for their children and make ends meet. Due to the broad nature of parents' employment needs, programs and services are often divided among several different departments and city offices reflective of administration divisions. For example, programs that provide care for children may be provided out of early education departments, parks and recreation for summer programming, or education. Workforce development and other support services may be administered in two additional departments. And local community organizations support programs that also may overlap with city services and programs, all creating a complicated web of programs and locations for families to understand and navigate.

In an environment of sharply constrained resources, some city leaders are breaking down divisions in city departments and restructuring services and programs to align the supports offered to families by considering their needs during the decision-making process.

**City of Chattanooga:
Restructure of city departments to better serve families**



Example:

Mayor Andy Berke of **Chattanooga, Tenn.** sought to address what he observed as a siloed system of services for families. Soon after becoming mayor, he streamlined the Social Services and Recreation Departments under one “Youth and Family Development” department, allowing the city to provide connected services to entire families through the office’s six areas of focus: Education (including literacy, early childhood development and cultural influence), Office of Early Learning, Leadership, Career Development, Recreation and the Office of Family Empowerment. The office of Family Empowerment was designed to empower families toward self-sufficiency and provides case management and crisis intervention services. The office runs programs focused on employment, self-sufficiency, family empowerment and emergency services. By combining these services and programs under one department, the city is better able to align resources and coordinate efforts that directly serve families.



The City as a Model Employer

City governments are often the largest employer in a city, if not a region, and therefore have the potential to impact the largest number of families as well as influence other employers' practices. Cities with a mission to improve the employment outcomes of parents can lead by example by becoming a model employer.

A city can review its overall benefit and compensation package to ensure that it meets the needs of working parents employed by the city. This can include paying living wages and offering competitive benefits such as retirement contributions, health benefits, paid leave and flexible work schedules. By first examining human resources policies, cities can ensure that the benefit package is equitable and competitive across all full-time hourly and yearly salary employees as well as consider offering low-cost benefits to part-time employees who may not be able to work full-time due to family obligations – including caring for young children or elderly parents.

For parents struggling to find work after being incarcerated, cities can support reintegration efforts by eliminating practices that exclude people from employment based on criminal records or by implementing policies that ease expungement efforts. In the U.S., one in 12 children under the age of 18 has experienced parental incarceration, predominantly impacting children of color due to the high incarceration rates among

blacks and Latinos. Instituting a “ban the box” policy which removes questions about criminal convictions on city job applications and defers consideration of these issues until after hiring officials have examined the qualifications of the applicant can ultimately help parents with a criminal record join the workforce. Another more expedient option for cities is to assist residents with the process of expunging criminal records. For example, the City of Detroit’s Project Clean Slate has helped expunge over 239 records since 2018 by connecting them with attorney and providing application assistance and workforce services.

Stable housing is one of the most important factors for families to thrive. Cities can incentivize employee recruitment and retention through housing incentives that promote family financial stability and access to housing. Baltimore city employees working for the city for at least six months may receive up to \$3,000 toward buying a new home within the city limits. In addition, the homeowner’s loan is forgivable over five years, reduced by 20 percent for each year of occupancy. Informing residents about this benefit through improved outreach may help incentivize unemployed or underemployed parents to apply for municipal jobs.

► **Very few cities directly fund parent employment initiatives but rather braid funding sources (city, county, state, federal and philanthropic) to create a patchwork of services and programs to ensure that parents’ needs are met.**

The survey results demonstrated that in cities that have services and programs geared specifically toward parent employment, very few were funded solely with municipal dollars. Other funding sources include federal funds such as Community Development Block grants, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and funds distributed through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Some cities support education for parents through state funded assistance. Many cities act as a coordinator and rely on local non-profit partners and their philanthropic partners for services.

Example:

The City of **Lansing, Mich.** participates in the Lansing Area Economic Partnership (LEAP), which is a coalition of local leaders dedicated to growing the local economy through business development. This coalition works with Capital Area Michigan Works! (CAMW), a network of resources for employers and career seekers. In partnership with the American Job Center Network, this entity serves the two counties within the capital region to recruit and provide education and training opportunities for potential employees as well as employment retention strategies for their network of employers. CAMW receives funding from the state of Michigan’s Talent Investment fund, Health and Human Services, “Partnership. Accountability. Training. Hope.” Program (PATH) as well as funding through the federal Department of Labor, WIOA and TANF. The city does directly fund financial education and counseling for parents through the Financial Empowerment Center, while serving a coordinating role in provision of direct employment services.

► **Child care assistance was the most frequently reported strategy used by cities as a way to address the needs of working parents.**

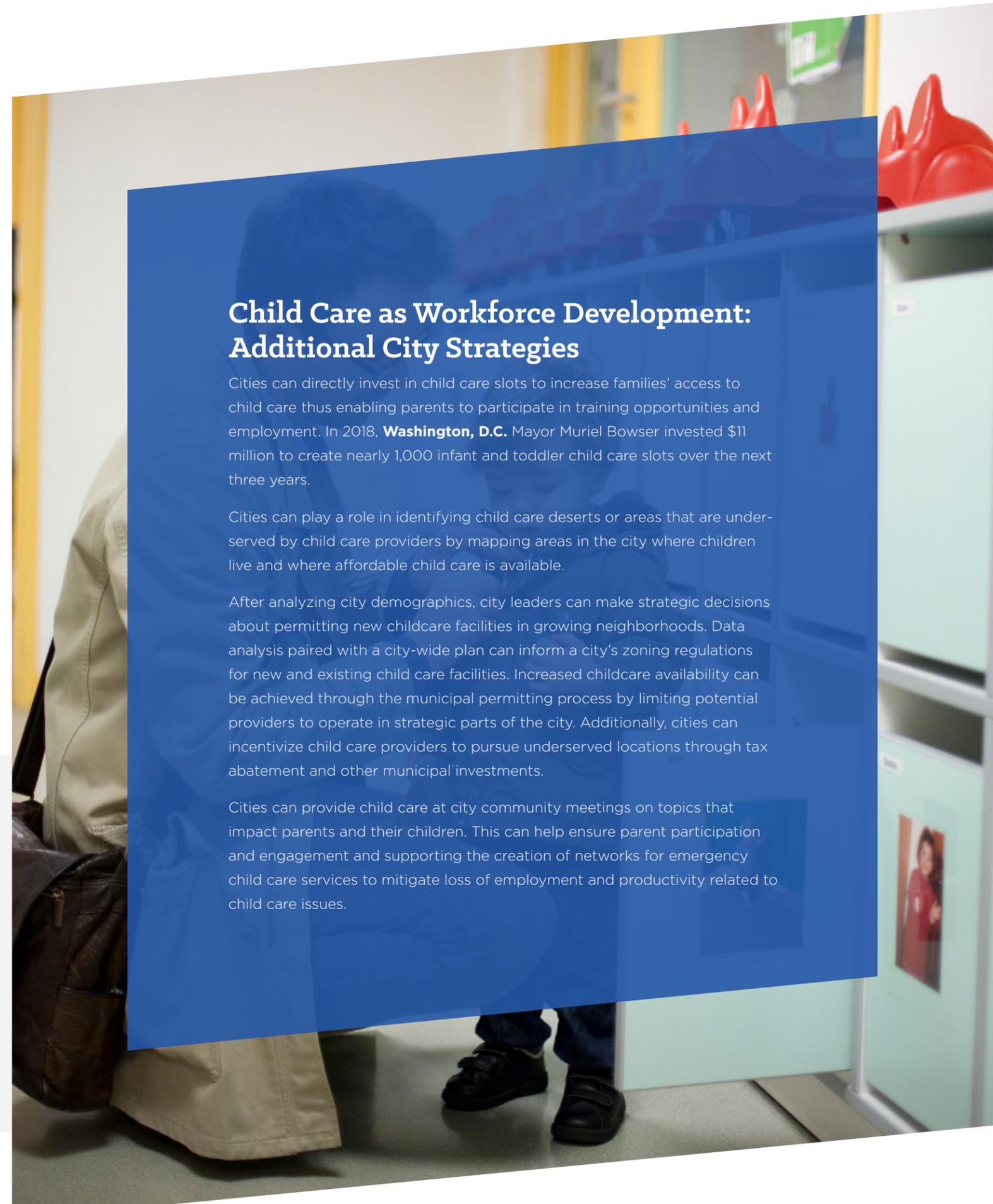
For families with low-incomes, publicly funded child care and early education helps parents retain employment. According to a study conducted by the Economic Policy Institute, single mothers of young children who received assistance paying for child care were 39 percent more likely to be employed after two years than a similar group of mothers who did not.

Parents of school-age children also experience challenges finding care during non-school hours when they are at work. The average school-age child attends school for six and half hours a day 180 days a year compared to the average American worker who works over eight hours a day for an average of 260 days a year, leaving an 80-day gap parents need to navigate. This does not include days when schools are closed due to weather.

Though most cities have some kind of child care strategy in place for working parents, cities participating in the scan struggled with having sufficient resources to fully support the child care needs of parents working or participating in workforce development services. Federal child care supports for parents often do not adequately supplement the costs of quality child care. Cities cited the scarcity of quality child care slots as a barrier for working parents, as well as hours of service (especially for shift workers) and reasonably accessible by available transportation. Cities shared a desire to co-locate child care with adult education and workforce training services when possible.

Example:

The City of **Las Vegas, Nev.** made a commitment to expanding pre-K options for children after a commissioned report found that almost 18 percent of the city's children under the age of five lived in poverty and only 30 percent had access to pre-K education. In 2018, the city launched the Strong Start Go Mobile Pre-K Academy which offers three high-quality, affordable mobile pre-K classrooms in predominantly black and Latino neighborhoods. The program provides half-day pre-k classes along with workshops and educational activities for parents.



Child Care as Workforce Development: Additional City Strategies

Cities can directly invest in child care slots to increase families' access to child care thus enabling parents to participate in training opportunities and employment. In 2018, **Washington, D.C.** Mayor Muriel Bowser invested \$11 million to create nearly 1,000 infant and toddler child care slots over the next three years.

Cities can play a role in identifying child care deserts or areas that are underserved by child care providers by mapping areas in the city where children live and where affordable child care is available.

After analyzing city demographics, city leaders can make strategic decisions about permitting new childcare facilities in growing neighborhoods. Data analysis paired with a city-wide plan can inform a city's zoning regulations for new and existing child care facilities. Increased childcare availability can be achieved through the municipal permitting process by limiting potential providers to operate in strategic parts of the city. Additionally, cities can incentivize child care providers to pursue underserved locations through tax abatement and other municipal investments.

Cities can provide child care at city community meetings on topics that impact parents and their children. This can help ensure parent participation and engagement and supporting the creation of networks for emergency child care services to mitigate loss of employment and productivity related to child care issues.

► **Transportation challenges were reported as a key barrier to employment success for parents and many cities are actively taking steps to address local transportation gaps.**

Punctual arrival and consistent attendance in employment, as well as training programs or apprenticeships, are dependent on efficient transportation. However, low-cost transportation options can be inaccessible to low-income families in certain geographic areas. In many cities and towns, public transportation is limited or inconsistent. High housing costs and gentrification often forces low-income families away from transportation hubs and increases dependence on personal vehicles that are costly or need frequent repairs. These challenges can increase the length of commutes, especially adding on travel to school or child care facilities. Without access to reliable transportation options, parents risk loss of employment or other opportunities. Cities participating in the scan agreed that transportation is both a necessary support for working parents but also an essential element of a city's economic growth.

City leaders can collaborate with major employers to coordinate public transportation routes and timing. City planning offices often have authority or influence over publicly funded transportation options and traffic patterns, presenting an opportunity for cities to consider better scheduling and routes for working parents to attend work and ensure their children are cared for in their absence. Businesses have a vested interest in reliable employee participation and therefore may be interested in informing the city's transportation plan or even subsidizing the cost of transit for workers.

Example:

Pittsburgh, Pa., a city known for its driverless cars, launched an effort to ensure that the benefits of its high-tech transportation innovations can reach all residents. In 2018, the city sought feedback from residents about transportation challenges through "Mobiliti", a two-day community conversation with residents. City leaders intentionally gathered information from parents about their transportation challenges. Parents shared their concerns about the need for reliable public transportation when traveling to work, particularly for shifts during non-traditional commuting hours. They also expressed concerns about transportation to and from child care facilities, schools, training facilities and career centers. The meeting resulted in the development of the "Safe Shift" team which consists of representatives from local transportation and advocacy groups, students and an urban mobility data and analytics company called Moovit. The Safe Shift team identified the needs of shift workers, and they plan to aid these shift workers by providing safe and reliable transit during off peak and unpredictable hours. Safe Shift was one of three finalists for the Ford's City of Tomorrow Challenge and was awarded \$50,000 for its proposed plan.



► **Despite an interest and commitment to parents' employment needs, most cities generally did not have sufficient data readily accessible to assess the specific needs of working families and develop appropriate programs and services.**

Cities have access to data on residents through a variety of sources but often lack a widely shared platform to assess needs and analyze the outcomes of existing services. Without a coordinated data system, it is difficult for city leaders to understand the barriers parents face to employment and how the city can best support them.

An analysis of available data about working parents is an important first step for a city to better understand the services and supports they need. Community partners may be able to enhance access to certain data not readily available through city government sources. The data gathering process also offers an opportunity to identify and convene partners with access to a variety of data, including city agencies responsible for child care, transportation, after-school programs, and social services; community organizations; community colleges and universities; employers; workforce development boards; and school districts.

With access to more advanced data cities can tailor outreach strategies to ensure parents have access to city and community services. Data disaggregated by race and ethnicity and family structure can further help city leaders understand any inequities that may exist in city practices and programs.

Scan participants acknowledged a lack of sufficient data on parents and employment and agreed that data improvements could help drive decision-making address local gaps in services. They also expressed a need for additional investment in technology and data infrastructure to better connect low-income families and families living in poverty to available workforce and employment supports.

Example:

Jackson, Miss. Mayor Chokwe Lumumba envisions the city's economy as one that "invests in the inherent dignity of every citizen in Jackson" across five areas: healthy citizens; affordable homes in safe neighborhoods; a thriving educational system; occupational opportunities in a growing tax base; and a city that is open and welcoming to visitors. The city is currently building out a data portal that leaders believe will help map residents' quality of life and allow for in-depth analysis. Paired with the Mayor's vision, the city can design better interventions to serve residents and close opportunity gaps, particularly for low-income families. The demographic analysis revealed that over 60 percent of youngest working residents (aged 18-24) live below the poverty. Over 40 percent of families with children in the public school system (aged 5 to 17) live in poverty and experience the highest rate of poverty in the city. This population predominantly lives in south and west Jackson and largely consists of unemployed females.

With this knowledge and a data-driven approach, Mayor Lumumba developed a three-year initiative entitled Economic Pathways to Human Dignity. Investments from foundations, like the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, bolstered the city's intentional economic revitalization. The first year will pilot a business incubator that intentionally engages employers and connects small and scalable businesses (often representing underserved communities of color and gender) with wrap-around business development services. The second year will build and staff Access Centers that create inclusive pathways to technology training as well as civic and economic resources connecting under-invested communities with digital skill-building. The "Civic Tech Experience" will expand opportunity to under-invested neighborhoods through three key programs: digital inclusion (digital skill-building), pop-up villages (community outreach), and pathways (hub of resources and services for families). Year three of this initiative will focus on sustainability of the services and programs developed through this initiative.

The city recognizes that historically marginalized communities are often disconnected from the innovation economy and entrepreneurial job creation in the technology, education, creativity, and healthcare sectors. A majority of the existing minority local enterprises are sole proprietorships that have limited revenues and no employees. While this three-year initiative seeks to improve job-seekers' skills aligned with practical mobility pathways in high growth industries, expanding opportunities for entrepreneurs to increase their capacity to employ workers and to scale their enterprises are major areas of growth for long-term sustainability.

Conclusion

NLC's parent employment scan found that city leaders believe there is a lasting positive impact on overall family mobility and neighborhood stability when parents achieve successful, sustainable employment outcomes. However, only a handful of cities had an intentional or targeted approach to addressing the needs of parents in their workforce development or employment strategies. This disconnect underscores an important opportunity for cities.

Cities often engage parents with children under the age of 18 through a variety of city programs and services. A strategic approach that brings key partners together to focus on parent employment outcomes, identifies ways to connect these programs to employment opportunities and creates a more streamlined system of services for working or job-seeking parents can lead to stronger families and stronger communities.



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