

CITIES OF OPPORTUNITY

Advancing Systems Change for Equity in Triple Crisis

2019-2020 Action Cohort Final Report



About the National League of Cities

The National League of Cities (NLC) is the voice of America's cities, towns and villages, representing more than 200 million people. NLC works to strengthen local leadership, influence federal policy and drive innovative solutions.

NLC's Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (YEF Institute) helps municipal leaders take action on behalf of the children, youth, and families in their communities. NLC launched the YEF Institute in January 2000 in recognition of the unique and influential roles that mayors, city councilmembers and other local leaders play in strengthening families and improving outcomes for children and youth.

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And all of this is only possible because of the work of the teams from the cities of **Dubuque, Iowa; Duluth, Minnesota; Las Vegas, Nevada; Napa, California; and South Fulton, Georgia.**

From Pilot to New Action Cohort, and Expanded Components

This is an extraordinary time as cities face three critical concurrent challenges: a once-a-century pandemic, an unprecedented economic crisis, and an outpouring of calls for racial justice. The scale and scope of structural racism and inequities that pervade institutions and policies cannot be addressed by single projects or programs. Only a comprehensive approach can meet this moment and respond to the complexity and scope of today's challenges. This approach has been at the heart of Cities of Opportunity (CoO) from its inception in 2018, the urgent need for which is further underscored by the triple crises of 2020.

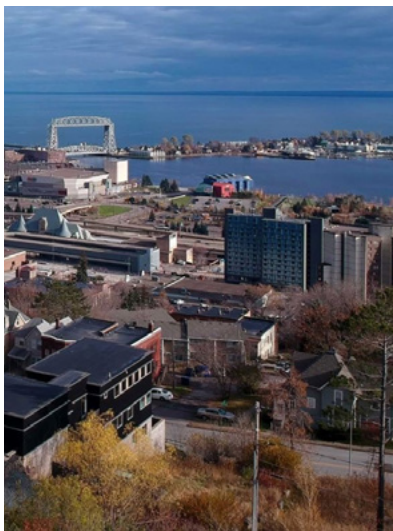
Starting with a 12-city action cohort pilot in 2018, CoO has just completed its 2019/2020 action cohort and is embarking on a third, adding deeper support for city-specific capacity-building for cross-issue policy and systems change. CoO has also expanded with two new virtual components: Community of Practice, each focused on one specific topic (currently city and health system partnerships); and Learning Lab, an ongoing opportunity for targeted peer conversations. As well, CoO encompasses the Mayors' Institute which focuses on a key issue and its impact on health. Together these components meet cities where they are at, build city leaders' capacity for holistic change, develop a deeper bench of change agents within city governments, and bring more cities into the CoO community. All components are undergirded with a focus on strengthening vital foundational capacities required to address any specific issue the city may work on: Equity, Data, Civic Engagement, Multi-Sector Collaborations, Financing and Sustainability. All of the efforts within the broader initiative, while of value to cities of all sizes, have strong representation by small and mid-size cities.

South Fulton, Georgia





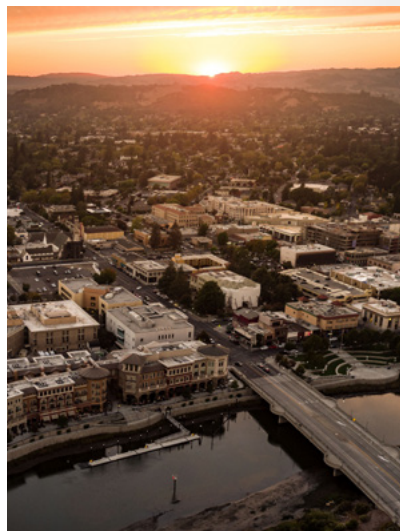
Dubuque, Iowa



Duluth, Minnesota



Las Vegas, Nevada



Napa, California

This report focuses on the progress and accomplishments of the 2019-2020 CoO Action Cohort. The teams included city government and external partner organization leaders from the cities of **Dubuque, Iowa; Duluth, Minnesota; Las Vegas, Nevada; Napa, California;** and **South Fulton, Georgia**. The cohort commenced with an in-person opening convening in October 2019, a virtual mid-point convening in June 2020, and a virtual closing convening in November 2020. (Evanston, Illinois, started in this cohort and withdrew in mid-2020 due to demands of the coronavirus pandemic, especially as its team lead headed the city’s Health Department.) Along with the pilot, this CoO Action Cohort produced abundant insights and lessons especially from small and mid-size municipalities.

CoO is about systems building -- comprehensive, sustained efforts that cannot be done in a year. Effective strategies for policy and systems change, while based on a shared framework of multiple levers to drive a comprehensive agenda, must be tailored to each city’s situation. To this end, CoO delivered city-centered, context-specific technical support to build mindset, structures and actions to catalyze momentum for change, with targeted technical assistance from NLC’s systems transformation strategic partner Consilience Group.

Each city made the mindset shift to connect multiple issues that intersect with health, and catalyzed broader partnerships to advance equity and improve health that will sustain well into future years.

NLC deeply appreciates the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s multi-year support for this complex, long-term work. Beyond a funder, RWJF is a valued thought partner on this journey toward a holistic approach to advance a Culture of Health and build Cities of Opportunity.

Advancing Equitable Policy and Systems Change in a Pandemic: Achievements of Action Cohort Teams

After analyzing their city’s context across the CoO issue areas including housing, economic opportunity, city planning and health, each city identified strategic priorities to work on during the cohort year. While there were diverse strategies across the cohort, each city contextualized their priorities within a shared framework that positioned them to continue their journey toward meaningful policy and systems improvement during, and after, their cohort year.

When the pandemic hit, we proposed the teams might want to alter their CoO priorities in the new triple-crises context. However, all cities determined their strategies and work plans were still relevant. Moreover, several noted that their CoO work to date had strengthened their ability to respond to the crises. In the face of unprecedented challenge, every city team made significant strides in advancing equity and addressing vital community needs – responding to the needs of the hour while advancing their CoO agenda. Significantly, all teams completed their cohort experience with clear, documented action priorities that will guide continued work over the next two years.

Across the board, all Action Cohort cities centered equity, changed policies and/or practices, and launched or accelerated sustainable structures to infuse equity and health in city work for years well beyond their CoO cohort activities.

- ◆ In deep work with their childcare coalition partners (childcare providers, Greater Dubuque Development Corporation and Northeast Iowa Community College), **Dubuque** achieved a state legislative win on raising income eligibility and lessening the cliff effect for families to receive Child Care Assistance as a vital component of their local economic opportunity system. Dubuque is building on its distinctive role among its partners to champion other local and state policy change to expand access to childcare, in consultation with staff from NLC’s early childhood team.
- ◆ Based on their CoO framework, when pandemic small-business relief funds became available, **Duluth** established a scoring criteria that prioritizes equity to determine grants for small businesses owned by women and people of color. A vital lifeline during the pandemic, the city will build on this to develop a supportive ecosystem for these entrepreneurs in the coming years.
- ◆ With an original CoO strategy to incorporate Health in All Policies in their general plan update, **Napa** leveraged their CoO partnerships to build on a city council resolution declaring racism as a public health crisis to catalyze new mechanisms to assess and infuse Equity in All Policies through all city policies. Their CoO work led to a federal grant to do an analysis of their manufacturing base to inform future strategies.

- ◆ **Las Vegas** City Council adopted an Equity Resolution for a city-wide Diversity, Equity & Inclusion initiative across all its departments and services, and now has a structure for implementation. [See the video](#) on the initiative to ensure all residents have opportunities to grow, contribute and reach their potential.
- ◆ **South Fulton** completed updates on its zoning ordinances with equitable improvements (including preserving and updating agricultural land use), adopted by City Council at the end of 2020. As well, the Council passed an ordinance to welcome all members of the community as pre-requisite to achieving equity and attaining better socioeconomic outcomes. This work has set the stage for infusing equity in its upcoming comprehensive Master Planning process.

They strengthened community engagement and nurtured citizen stakeholders to ensure residents are authentically part of developing and implementing solutions that affect their lives.

- ◆ **South Fulton** created a Resident Stakeholder Group with 12 city residents from all seven districts. This group will lead public engagement for goals in the city’s CoO Workplan into the next one to two years. They will partner with the city to ensure the community is presented and have a meaningful voice when decisions are made.

“ Our resident volunteers spent the summer sorting our shared agency and structure, its mission/ vision, values and priority areas, and how it can do its work as representatives to the city and to include more residents. Residents bring a cross section of skills and life experiences. We will come together through the lens of our collective history, data and story.”

COUNCILMEMBER NAEEMA GILYARD, City of South Fulton

- ◆ Through authentic relationships cultivated for years with key neighborhood stakeholders and intensified since the pandemic, **Las Vegas** brought together resident leaders with the city, county, businesses and other organizations to develop and implement expanded short- and long-term career pipeline programs.

“ We changed the way we did Community Engagement, first in our Historic Westside area and then with departments across the city. Now, rather than waiting for the city to take action, the community feels empowered and have tools to take action. We now see different leaders step forward – to take the lead on the food co-op, to establish the Health & Wellness center. Instead of being forced to go out of the community, they now feel invited to the 3500 sq. ft. community space. Next we’ll figure out how to program it in response to the wants of the community.”

NALANI AKI, Administrator, Neighborhood Revitalization and Community Engagement, Office of Community Services, City of Las Vegas

They addressed complex collaboration challenges with multiple partners and invested in the hard work to share power and achieve shared ownership. CoO provided tools and methods to align partners toward common goals. This includes attending to power differentials and dynamics and supporting distributed leadership.

- ◆ **Duluth** built a new relationship with a construction training program in the Twin Cities to bring a satellite to Duluth. That and partnering with a new affordable housing organization will expand career pathway training and worker skills in a city with both high unemployment and worker shortages.
- ◆ **Napa** added a city representative to the board and committees of the Workforce Alliance of the North Bay to institutionalize deeper alignment of the city’s needs and economic development strategy, and to provide insights and opportunities for collaboration between economic development, workforce programs and workforce housing.
- ◆ In target neighborhood revitalization areas, **Las Vegas** launched technical assistance to empower churches and non-profit organizations to become community-based developers for affordable local housing and other community amenities.
- ◆ **Dubuque** catalyzed a structure to sustain accountable cross-sector leadership to drive increased access to childcare as an essential workforce support in the city and region. This includes the city and large partner organizations stepping aside to allow the right community-based partner to take the lead.

“ We provided the support to share power and lift up one of our childcare partners as lead of the collaborative – because they are stronger at bridging cultures with the childcare provider community.”

KRISTIN DIETZEL, Vice President of Workforce Solutions, Greater Dubuque Development Corporation

“ I think the underlying factor or driver of a city’s capacity to drive policy and systems change is not their size or population. Rather, it’s more about the strength of the relationships between the decision makers from public and private entities and the broader community. Dubuque has historically had good working relationships that can be leveraged to implement changes relatively quickly and effectively.”

PAUL DUSTER, Director, Community Initiatives, Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque

They strengthened city leaders’ capacities to work in a more aligned and integrated way across city functions.

- ◆ **Napa** applied data-based decision making to clearly define problems and next steps, supporting a more aligned way of working across city departments.
- ◆ **South Fulton** developed data and city profiles that were not available before for this three-year-old city, to be used as a baseline for subsequent quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis that would provide a shared view as the basis for coordinated action. They are using this powerful tool to educate residents, inform policy makers, and support future planning efforts.
- ◆ **Las Vegas** implemented new policies, procedures and practices to improve city staff competency and accountability across city departments on partnering with community stakeholders and drive equitable economic development.

And, assailed by the ravages of the pandemic, city leaders rose to the challenge to serve their residents and communities with innovative policies, programs and practices. In the process they identified opportunities to sustain effective changes beyond the pandemic.

- ◆ They proactively reached out to listen to residents, businesses and stakeholders and adapted city ordinances and rules to make things work for their constituents. They intend to carry the flexibility, rapid response and proactiveness forward in city practices.

“ The City of Duluth developed a new grant program for impacted businesses. The response was incredible. We were super flexible in our requirements. We distributed \$1.4 Million to 135 small businesses. To hear them say “we were on the edge and you helped us” was deeply rewarding. We were able to bring an equity lens to this work, and have set up a scoring process to elevate historically marginalized communities. Because of CoO, we are better equipped to incorporate those key parameters into our work.”

ADAM FULTON, Deputy Director, Planning & Development, City of Duluth



“ Public engagement on YouTube did really well, and gave us new ways to engage residents that “met them where they were.” We were able to make tweaks so we have a product that reflects the value and interests of the community. Our 18-month process to update our Zoning Ordinance is in its final state now to be adopted by Council by the end of the year. (adopted December 2020)”

MARISSA JACKSON, Planner, Community Development and Regulatory Affairs, City of South Fulton

“ We stood up a 500-person Homeless Quarantine/Isolation facility in two weeks. We built it, pulled it together from nothing. When we bring the community together and empower them to tell us what they want, we were more proactive and effective by working together!”

SCOTT CARTER, Project Manager, Office of Community Services, City of Las Vegas

“ We realized that we don’t really need many rules that we had in place! (e.g., making people come to City Hall to do paperwork). The practicality and immediacy in response to COVID removed artificial guidelines and constraints the city had previously operated under – and we were able to do it so much faster! At the ground level this becomes transformative: meeting people where they are and just do it!”

KATHI THOMAS-GIBSON, Director, Office of Community Services, City of Las Vegas

“ As a city/region so dependent on retail, tourism and hotel taxes, we were faced with a catastrophe. We took a deeper look at what matters – e.g., what can we do to allow restaurants to serve outside. That complicated, legal stuff that gets in the way doesn’t really matter. We must help businesses stay alive and have the city stay alive. A good functioning government can really help people and be a force for good rather than a series of red tape! That’s been inspiring.”

MIKE WALKER, Senior Planner, Community Development, City of Napa

“ The pandemic has really highlighted disparities and inequities and accelerated a lot of work for us at Providence St. Joseph Health to better target disparities. We go out and find what residents think they need, not just what we think they want – to do what they’ll find sustainable and welcome!”

REBECCA WEBSTER, Senior Community Health Program Coordinator - Community Investment, Queen of the Valley Medical Center, Napa, CA

“ We pivoted quickly as a city to make zoning ordinances and other rules work for our residents and businesses. We asked the City Council to empower the City Manager to adjust parking rates based on what is happening downtown. Moving forward we can continue to be more flexible – we can adapt beyond the pandemic!

In November/December we were all hands on deck to put together an agreement with Simmons Pet Food, Inc., who is bringing 270+ good-paying jobs to town. I’m pleased to say we got the deal done in a mere 5 weeks — a new record for everyone here, as this type of deal normally takes anywhere from 5-10 months.”

JILL CONNORS, Economic Development Director, City of Dubuque

“ The pandemic helped shine a light on the important work in our city and how many of our systems are so fragile: food assistance, mortgage assistance. Now we realize what is happening behind the scenes and people are coming together to make that happen!”

PAUL DUSTER, Director, Community Initiatives, Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque

See CoO teams’ achievements in their own words:
Table 1 – *Summary of City Accomplishments* and *What’s Next*.

Benefits of the Action Cohort: Assessment by City Teams

Each team completed a final assessment to identify the most and least helpful elements of their participation, their most proud accomplishments, what will best position them for progress over the next two years, and what they did not get from CoO that would have been helpful.

- ◆ Concrete policy changes were achieved: the Equity Resolution and implementation structure for city-wide diversity, equity & inclusion in Las Vegas; the state legislature’s ratification of expanded income eligibility for child care in Dubuque; and updates to zoning ordinances (conclusion of 18-month process) in South Fulton.
 - ◆ CoO teams also built foundations and allies to catalyze or sustain policy change over time: the Resident Stakeholder’s group in South Fulton; the city’s role in the Workforce Alliance in Napa; the distributed leadership in the childcare coalition in Dubuque; and Duluth’s equity criteria to lead to building an ecosystem that supports small businesses with women and BIPOC entrepreneurs.
 - ◆ Though comprehensive, cross-issue policy change was something all CoO cities aspired to, they found efforts to rally allies to do so overwhelming, especially in this pandemic year. NLC can better ascertain cities’ “readiness” to build allies to drive comprehensive policy change in future cohorts, with tools and assistance to support practical policy progress during the Action Cohort year.
- ◆ The teams derived significant value from provided project planning and management tools and coaching. Detailed Action Workplan templates were roundly lauded. Team members noted it helped them monitor progress and keep on track, support lead persons to achieve milestones, and were practical and relevant as adjusted when actions were completed or needed tweaking. Furthermore, the cities greatly value the workplans positioning them to make continued progress in the next one to two years. The overarching Action Roadmap tools had more limited benefits, with some teams noting minimal flexibility to adjust to the evolving context of the pandemic.



- ◆ The teams welcomed and enjoyed the cross-city convenings (virtual and in-person) to share successes, models, tools and lessons learned. While they found virtual gatherings useful, with some advantages compared to in person convenings, they missed in-person opportunities to make deeper connections and learn more from other participants. (NLC switched to all-virtual convenings by the second quarter of 2020.)
- ◆ NLC Communications were effective and the group found the overall time required to participate to be appropriate.
- ◆ Team leads conveyed the desire for continued technical assistance from NLC after the cohort completion. There is interest in a CoO Alumni component in the future, where action cohorts can interact with each other and benefit from their experiences. Another idea is to integrate each cohort with “mentors” from other cohorts.
- ◆ Lastly, one city suggested that the cohort be curated in a more focused way based on city size or specific issues they want to solve. Health is broad, as is CoO’s focus on multiple issues that affect health. While cities are attracted to the Action Cohort’s holistic approach to advance health and equity, significant differences in size or areas of focus can diminish opportunities for peer learning.

“Development and discussion of the work plan helped us to consider the most effective routes for achieving goals, and how we could act in the most specific way to coordinate with stakeholders.”
ELEANOR BACSO, Economic Developer, Planning & Development, City of Duluth

“Review of Workplans at our TA sessions was highly valuable not only for helping to keep us on track during the project, but to give us future tasks to continue to work on. There is a lot of value in having future goals so we can continue our work after the end of the project.”
NATHAN MAI-LOMBARDO, Planning and Zoning Administrator, City of South Fulton

Consulting Pool

A new benefit of this Action Cohort was the opportunity for each team to tap \$10,000 in consulting funds to support one or more of their CoO strategic priorities. Three of the five cities took up the offer during 2020.

- ◆ **Dubuque** leveraged this fund with Northeast Iowa Community College’s investment to contract with a cadre of professionals to facilitate partnership design and institutionalize the City’s role in the community’s childcare coalition strategic planning and implementation. The Dubuque County Early Childhood Community Plan was recently presented at the City Council. It received enthusiastic support and Council’s request for options to consider for the city’s upcoming budget.
- ◆ **Las Vegas** embarked upon an ambitious effort to address health equity across the entire city with core operating principles. The Office of Community Services was tapped to lead this effort and retained a consultant/facilitator to build a sustainable structure to engage stakeholders to craft and implement policy and practice changes for equity.
- ◆ **South Fulton** engaged a local academic with expertise in data gathering and analysis to work with their team to determine areas of the city that are the most impacted by negative health outcomes, identify barriers to health, and to communicate the data and stories to the public. City officials are using this in discussions on policy changes.



What's Next

As we launch the [2021 Action Cohort](#), we will apply insights learned from earlier groups to continue to strengthen the program. Key learning and changes include:

- ◆ City core teams must include staff from different city departments plus leaders from external partner organizations. We worked more intentionally with cities during the application process to ensure an effective mix of core team members are committed to this work.
- ◆ CoO strategies must be understood and championed by the city's highest level decision-makers during the course of the entire cohort year. We are adding quarterly Executive Briefings to inform cities' top executives (Mayors and/or City Managers) as the work evolves so they can champion CoO priorities and ensure relevant resource supports.
- ◆ Based on city feedback, we will simplify some of the CoO assessment, planning and management tools, and emphasize Action Workplans to build practical milestones and implementation timelines to achieve the strategies.
- ◆ While cities of all sizes participated in the CoO Action Cohort, with the great proportion small and mid-size cities, we recognize that different size cities have different resource and capacity considerations. So, while many efforts across city sizes are transferable, we are mindful of the need to 'right size' best practices and model approaches. This is all part of our city-centered, context-specific technical assistance.
- ◆ We will design more effective ways for the cities to engage with each other – both virtually and in-person when it is safe to do so. This includes more intentional "matchmaking" for conversations between cities with similar characteristics, such as size or targeted issues.
- ◆ CoO alumni will be supported and encouraged to continue their work by participating in new CoO components added over the past year. All action cohort team members can join the CoO Learning Lab to engage with each other and other city leaders on various topics of relevance (events to date: internal cross-city collaboration and addressing COVID-19 challenges). CoO cities also receive targeted, priority notice about new opportunities, e.g., the upcoming Cities and Health System Community of Practice and Mayors' Institute on Job Creation, Economic Opportunity and Health.

Finally, we are exploring re-allocating travel dollar savings to engage an external evaluation expert to do a thematic analysis of CoO's impact.

NLC will continue to invite city leaders from previous action cohorts to share their insights and advice. We are grateful about their enthusiastic commitment to support new cohort cities. And we are consistently gratified about their continued progress after the formal program ended.

“Starting five years ago, the City reached out to schools with the desire to bridge the gap for kids. We also completed an assessment on multi-sector collaboration to improve health. That primed us to be part of the Cities of Opportunity pilot. Since then, our City Council adopted a resolution in 2019 developed with CoO technical assistance to create an Ad Hoc Commission on Equity, followed by engaging the Partnership for Southern Equity to help us develop and implement an Equitable Growth & Inclusion Plan, which is on track to be adopted in summer 2021. Equitable industrial land use, inclusionary housing and economic inclusion are the pillars that will make our plan a reality.”

Equity and inclusion must be built into the system design. It's important to get consensus from the beginning. While I'm the champion, I can't do this work alone. I'm blessed to serve on a City Council where the majority of Councilmembers and Staff are committed to do all we can to ensure that 'equity and inclusion' is more than a cliché. We will equitably revitalize and redevelop our city in a way that allows our legacy residents and legacy businesses to experience and benefit from our growth, while minimizing if not eliminating the negative impacts of gentrification because there's no point like East Point!”

MAYOR DEANA HOLIDAY INGRAHAM, City of East Point, Georgia (CoO pilot, 2018-2019)

“Cities of Opportunity has affected the way we approached our comprehensive plan. We were able to infuse equity and health into our plan update, which was adopted in December 2020. As a result, in January the City Council appointed a Citizen Equity and Empowerment Advisory Board and we will soon turn to our neighborhood plans and carry the same focus on equitable health outcomes. It was very fortuitous timing especially because we only do comprehensive plans every 15-20 years. This will definitely have an effect going forward.”

BOB COWELL, City Manager, City of Roanoke, Virginia (CoO pilot, 2018-2019)

NLC will explore doing more with CoO Alumni. Pending resource availability this may include a well-structured convening of several cities a year hence, which may group alumni from each cohort or mix cohort members together based on interest groupings.

All of this builds toward a community of leaders for systems change who share learnings, build more robust capacities and nurture a deeper bench within city staff/departments. Thus NLC is scaling CoO to more cities, one intentional step at a time.

Table 1 – Summary Of City Accomplishments And What’s Next

CITY	OUR MOST PROUD CoO ACCOMPLISHMENTS	WHAT BEST POSITIONS US IN NEXT 2 YEARS	CONTINUATION STRATEGIES- 2021 AND BEYOND
DUBUQUE	Collaboration across sectors, strengthen and restructured childcare coalition structure Legislative win in State – raised eligibility income for Child Care Assistance	Investment in Dubuque County Early Childhood (DCEC) coalition strategic planning	Implement strategic priorities from coalition’s Community Plan Use DCEC as exemplar for collaboratives in other SDOH issues, e.g., business/economic development, housing
DULUTH	Fast grants to BIPOC & women-owned small businesses using equity criteria Launching toolkit for employers on proactive Diversity & Inclusion practices New relationships with businesses to expand worker skills and career pathways in construction, housing and IT	Eco-system to support women and BIPOC entrepreneurs Partnership for career pathway training to meet needs of city with high employment & worker shortage	Build on criteria developed and learning from pandemic, develop comprehensive, long-term eco-system to support women & BIPOC entrepreneurs Strengthen regional partnership to focus on workforce in the city
LAS VEGAS	Equity resolution passed by Council with new city-wide function in Office of Community Services Implemented CoO workplan – deep community engagement in Historic Westside and sustainable city-wide equity structure	Both! – with continued implementation	Develop plans to implement career development Enhance city policies and practices on ongoing basis to bolster replication of place-based equity strategies in other targeted neighborhoods
NAPA	Expanded focus on Health in All Policies with Equity component Partnership with Workforce Alliance to create a small business recovery task force	Building social equity in all city policies	Leverage city council resolution on Racism as Public Health crisis to build mechanism to assess and consider equity in all city policies
SOUTH FULTON	Creation of Stakeholder Group with residents from all city districts for 21st C planning Pilot Community Gardens in five subdivisions Updated Zoning Ordinances infusing Equity	Zoning update provides concrete policy document for daily use	Build on and deploy all structures/ resources developed during CoO: Stakeholder Group, City Data and Profiles, Community Gardens

Acknowledgments

City Team Participants

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Mayor, City of East Point

The Honorable Sly James
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