

COVID-19 RESPONSE IN CITIES:

Supporting Full Access to Public Infrastructure and Broadband

COVID-19 is exacerbating the problems created by insufficient critical infrastructure and a lack of broadband access in communities across the country. Residents are being required to work, learn, and engage with city governments and other service providers remotely, often with insufficient broadband access. Streets and public infrastructure are being used differently. Meanwhile, many city budgets have been hard hit by the pandemic-related economic crisis. Data collected by NLC in June 2020 found that 65 percent of cities were forced to delay or completely cancel capital expenditures and infrastructure projects. As cities, towns and villages determine what projects they can and cannot afford to pursue, local leaders can follow these steps to make sure the infrastructure is sustainable and broadband access is expanded.

1 Close the digital divide to ensure that all residents can access government services and connect to work, healthcare and education.

Access to online services and supports remains unequal. More than 19 million Americans live in households without internet access. Among those least likely to have reliable access to high-quality, in-home connections and enabling technology: low-income residents, residents in rural areas, and residents of color. With many libraries and other facilities offering public computer access still closed or operating under reduced hours, significant segments of the population remain essentially offline. What local leaders can do:

- Assess the digital divide on a neighborhood level across your community. Tools like the American Community Survey and partnerships with school systems, local universities, and trusted community groups can help cities understand which households lack access and why. Reasons can include inadequate infrastructure, cost burdens, lack of devices or a need for additional skills training.

- Support resident access to devices. Communities can help residents get access to devices that can close the gap, such as mobile hotspots, laptops and smartphones. Local nonprofits, businesses, libraries, and school systems can serve as trusted partners for obtaining and distributing devices.
- Ensure everyone has a connection. City leaders should tailor their plans for closing the digital divide to individual neighborhoods. Consider a wide variety of options, including: providing subsidized access to existing internet service providers; connecting residents to federal or state programs for support; amplifying and expanding existing public wi-fi infrastructure; or making long-term investments in municipal or public-private broadband networks.
- Develop residents' digital skills. City leaders can also help ensure that residents who receive help with internet access and devices develop the skills they need to use them safely and confidently.

In **Columbus, OH**, the City partnered with the library system and nonprofits to provide computers for \$20 for families in need, with distribution at a centrally-located library branch. Columbus City Schools provided Google Chromebooks to students without devices at home to ensure that remote learning could still happen productively.

2 Build on local transportation options so residents can safely travel today and tomorrow.

Before the pandemic, many cities were working toward long-term goals for expanding more efficient and sustainable mobility options for residents. Now, they are balancing those goals against the need to ensure safety and mobility during the crisis. As cities move through various phases of opening or restricted activity, they must continue to improve transportation options to safely meet the needs of every neighborhood. What local leaders can do:

- Use updated transportation data and advanced modeling. Smart use of data and modeling can help cities adjust operations and set priorities. City leaders and transportation officials may have to rework transit routes to maintain at least some level of service across all neighborhoods, but transit must meet residents' mobility needs in order to remain viable. [Read more on NLC.org.](#)
- Emphasize safety and hygiene. Cities should maintain safety and cleaning protocols that will reestablish riders' trust in transit, while communicating their commitment to doing so. Travelers are more likely to return to public

transportation during and after the COVID-19 crisis if they feel the proper actions are being taken to ensure their safety.

- Expand and connect bike and trail networks across the city. Cities have seen a significant increase in biking and trail use, based on the understanding that these activities allow residents to practice physical distancing while getting outdoors to exercise. COVID-19 could be your city's opportunity to [explore new ways to enhance non-vehicular mobility](#).
- Think about alternative transportation options. Cities can consider on-demand shuttles or micro-mobility options (e.g., bike and e-scooter share programs) for areas where transit routes or fixed-stop service are not available.

In March 2020, the **Philadelphia, PA**, saw a 150-percent increase in trail use and a notable increase in bike share program utilization compared to 2019. The city [responded quickly to a public petition](#), closing Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive to motor vehicles to create more space for cyclists and pedestrians to operate safely.

3 Prioritize access to parks and outdoor spaces in all neighborhoods.

Stay-at-home orders and the cancellation of many recreational activities have underscored the importance of public spaces. Across the country, open spaces and parks are delivering mental, physical and social health benefits to residents during this stressful time. In response, cities are finding creative ways to improve their public spaces – including parks, sidewalks, roads and neighborhood streets – to provide outdoor access for all. What local leaders can do:

- Ensure that access to the outdoors is available in all neighborhoods. According to the [Trust for Public Land](#), 100 million U.S. residents do not have a park within a 10-minute walk of home. The closure of parks at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis had a disproportionately negative effect on vulnerable populations. City leaders can respond to these disparities by keeping parks open and prioritizing projects that increase open space access in areas where it does not exist.

In April 2020, the **City of Oakland, CA**, launched its Slow Streets Program to support safe physical activity and alleviate overcrowding in parks and on trails. The initial program set aside 21 street miles for exercise. This program expanded to address safety at 15 essential places (e.g., grocery stores, food distribution sites, and COVID-19 testing sites) around the city with higher rates of traffic incidents and crashes.

- Close more streets if possible. At a time when road travel is down due to business and school closures, cities continue to close streets and parking lots to private vehicles to allow for proper physical distancing and encourage exercise.
- Open public space for dining and retail. During the COVID-19 crisis, more cities are experimenting with using public space for outdoor dining and retail. These actions have a number of benefits, from supporting local businesses and the local economy to providing additional opportunities for residents to get outside and feel connected to the community.

4 Focus on critical water infrastructure to continue service and avoid costly maintenance backlogs.

Assuring universal access to safe, clean drinking water is a public health priority, especially under stay-at-home orders. However, most cities have maintenance backlogs in their water mains, and many stormwater systems are either under consent decrees or improperly designed for a changing climate. These problems can prove catastrophic, resulting in service cutoffs and flooding. Even with current budget constraints, local leaders should prioritize moving forward with drinking water, stormwater and sewer infrastructure projects to ensure the health of residents and to maintain a minimum level of service for all users. State-mandated rate freezes and shut-off moratoria may make it harder to complete these capital infrastructure projects. What local leaders can do:

- Take advantage of utility discount programs. These programs provide relief for the most burdened households while encouraging some level of payment. Program offerings include: extensions to payment deadlines; customized payment plans; level/fixed payment plans; alternative payment methods; payment of credit card fees on behalf of the customer; and waivers of fines and fees.

Follow federal guidelines. Cities can rely on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Integrated Planning Framework for Municipal Stormwater and Wastewater and Proposed 2020 [Financial Capability Assessment Guidance](#) to help schedule and sequence projects to meet Clean Water Act requirements in a more affordable manner.

The **City of Raleigh, NC**, worked with Wake County to establish the Utility Customer Assistance Program in response to COVID-19. Qualified customers are eligible for up to \$240 each fiscal year, applied directly to their utility accounts. The City is also accepting customer and corporate donations to provide additional emergency fund assistance to residents in need.

5 Continue to provide opportunities for resident input.

By providing and expanding online forms of public engagement, city leaders can help residents stay involved in local government in a safe manner even when in-person services and meetings begin. As residents have grown more comfortable with the remote meeting format, many have enjoyed the ease of access to their city officials. If possible, cities should consider options for continuing online public comment during public meetings even after the threat of COVID-19 has passed. What local leaders can do:

- Ensure a range of online engagement options. Cities should provide options using multiple platforms and technologies to ensure that disconnected residents are not left out of decision-making processes. However, there is a fine line between too few and too many options. City leaders should focus on developing the most popular (and easy-to-access) options that allow residents to share their opinions and perspectives.
- Provide alternatives for those who can't (or don't want to) participate online. Local leaders should ensure that cities are providing alternative forms of notice and participation for residents who are unable to attend meetings in person or to participate via high-bandwidth platforms. Notice of meetings may be provided in print publications, through community organizations, phone calls, or texts. And, "offline" participation options can include written or emailed comments or phone dial-ins for meetings. This will ensure that city leaders are getting a fuller representation of public opinion and sentiment as tough decisions on government services and budgets continue.

The civic engagement team in **Salt Lake City, UT**, created a "Practices for Engagement in the Time of COVID" guide to support city staff members as they adjusted feedback and engagement methods to meet current needs. The guide includes resources to bridge the digital divide and a pro/con list for common engagement tools and platforms. This has enabled the City to provide a variety of opportunities for safe, remote input from residents as distancing needs continue to evolve.

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