

Measuring Well-being in American Cities: Perspectives from Cities and Subject Matter Experts

Prepared for National League of Cities

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By Katie Horton, JD, RN, MPH and Naomi Seiler, JD

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Introduction

Well-being includes people’s physical, mental, and social health, and the opportunities they have to create meaningful futures. It considers basic needs like food, housing, education, employment, and income. It includes social and emotional needs like sense of purpose, safety, belonging and social connection, and life satisfaction. And it is tightly linked with the well-being of our communities, our environment and our planet. – The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation¹

Developing common measures of well-being for American cities is a critical step to advancing policy change and investments that improve health and equity. The National League of Cities (NLC) is conducting research to assess city-level well-being initiatives to support a mindset shift from singular economic measures to a broader understanding of all the factors that influence well-being. NLC’s goal with this research project is to improve well-being in cities and to potentially create a model to scale across the United States.

NLC asked the George Washington University (GWU) to conduct a series of key informant interviews with selected city leaders and national subject matter experts (SMEs) to better understand efforts underway to measure well-being and to use data to inform policymaking in various communities. The research and information gathered in this project will support cities currently engaged in NLC’s Cities of Opportunity (CoO) initiative, among other national efforts, to develop a more holistic framework to measure a community’s well-being, and to build support for adoption and use of that framework and indices in policymaking.

Methodology

GWU conducted research to identify potential cities and SMEs to interview for this project. PubMed, google scholar and a number of other electronic resources were used for this purpose. A list of potential city interviewees was shared with NLC, and interviewees were prioritized based on factors including experience with well-being measurement, location, and city size.

Non-city SMEs were selected based on their experience with well-being measurement or other comparable national efforts. Two separate interview guides were developed—one for the city interviews and one for SME interviews. Interviews with leaders from 5 cities and 9 SMEs (see tables below) were conducted, recorded and transcribed.

Cities:

City	Interviewee	Approach to measuring well-being
Santa Monica, CA	Julie Rusk, <i>Founder - Civic Well-being Partners</i>	Santa Monica’s well-being efforts originated through the now-closed Office of Civic Well-being in city government. The well-being initiative centered around the

¹ <https://www.rwjf.org/en/cultureofhealth/taking-action/outcome-improved-population-health--well-being--and-equity/individual-and-community-well-being.html>

	<p>Catalina Langen, <i>Co-Founder, Program Manager - Civic Well-being Partners</i></p>	<p>idea that Santa Monica should go beyond economic indicators and use the science of well-being to shape and improve policy. Since closing the office, Julie and Catalina have launched Civic Well-being Partners, an organization that uses its well-being index to help cities advance well-being, among other projects.</p> <p>https://santamonicawell-being.org/about/well-being-project</p>
<p>Tacoma, WA</p>	<p>Jacques Colon, Tacoma 2025 Strategic Manager</p>	<p>Takoma 2025 is the community’s vision for Takoma’s future. With defined indicators and other ways to measure progress, it is a plan that guides where the city of Takoma-as both a local government organization and a community-is going over the next 10 years. It is also a plan that helps the city direct its efforts and resources in ways that reflect the community’s evolving needs. A comprehensive planning effort engaged city residents, highlighted the city’s most pressing problems, and targeted those problems with concentrated action. This targeted approach and the city’s demonstrated capacity for collective action have the potential to make Tacoma a healthier and safer city.</p> <p>The Tacoma 2025 Steering Committee identified four Core Values to shape the process and Tacoma’s vision: Opportunity, Equity, Partnerships, and Accountability.</p> <p>https://www.cityoftacoma.org/tacoma_2025</p>
<p>Green Bay, Wisconsin</p>	<p>Joseph Faulds, Human Resources Director at City of Green Bay</p> <p>Natalie Bomstad, Executive Director, Wello</p>	<p>As a 501(c)(3) organization, Wello has a decade of experience working in Greater Green Bay to improve health and well-being. Formally known as Live54218, Wello's purpose is to co-create community conditions that are fair and just to drive high levels of health and well-being for all.</p>

	<p>Mario Gonzalez, Communications and Marketing Manager at Wello</p>	<p>Wello “uses the science of well-being to help the Greater Green Bay community thrive.”</p> <p>Wello conducts a bi-annual resident health and well-being survey, shares that data with the community, works with network partners to identify innovative solutions to improve health and well-being and amplifies the ideas that are most effective at creating sustained change.</p> <p>https://wello.org/about/</p>
<p>Louisville, KY</p>	<p>T Gonzales, Director of the Center for Health Equity at the Louisville Metro Department of Public Health and Wellness</p>	<p>In June 2006, Louisville Metro Department of Public Health and Wellness (LMPHW) established the Center for Health Equity (CHE) which was the first of its kind within a municipal government. CHE was created to advocate for a Louisville Metro where everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be healthy and reach their full human potential. CHE prioritizes policies, partnerships, and performance to advance health equity. Every three years, CHE releases a Health Equity Report which examines the root causes, or social determinants, of health inequities in the community.</p> <p>https://louisvilleky.gov/government/center-health-equity</p>
<p>Kansas City, MO</p>	<p>Jeffrey Williams, Director, City Planning and Development Department City of Kansas City, MO</p> <p>Kyle Elliott Division Manager, Long Range Planning & Preservation at City of Kansas City, MO</p>	<p>FOCUS (Forging Our Comprehensive Urban Strategy) is Kansas City’s Comprehensive Plan adopted in October 1997 (it is currently being revised and updated). The City of Kansas City, Missouri and its residents partnered to develop an action plan for the community. The plan sets priorities and guides decisions to assure Kansas City is a thriving, people-centered community. Seven distinct, but interwoven component plans were developed to detail the action steps needed to make the FOCUS vision and policy</p>

		<p>principles a reality. Neighborhood self-assessments were performed as a part of the FOCUS process.</p> <p>https://www.kcmo.gov/city-hall/departments/city-planning-development/focus-the-city-s-comprehensive-plan</p>
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National experts/other SMEs:

Organization	Contact person
WIN Network	Soma Saha, MD, MS Executive Lead
CityHealth (former, currently Hopkins)	<p>Shelley Hearne, DrPH Deans Sommer and Klag Professor of the Practice in Public Health and Director of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg SPH Center for Public Health Advocacy</p> <p>Formerly founding President of CityHealth and Executive Director of the Big Cities Health Coalition</p>
Funders Forum on Accountable Health	<p>Jeffrey Levi, PhD Professor of Health Management & Policy at the Milken Institute School of Public Health; former Executive Director, Trust for America’s Health</p> <p>Dora Hughes, MD, MPH Associate Research Professor of Health Management & Policy at the Milken Institute School of Public Health</p>
Rippel Foundation	Bobby Milstein, PhD, MPH, Director of System Strategy
City Health Dashboard	<p>Lorna Thorpe, PhD, MPH Principal Investigator</p> <p>Professor of Epidemiology, Director of the Division of Epidemiology; Vice Chair of Strategy and Planning in the Department of Population Health, NYU School of Medicine</p>

County Health Rankings	<p>Marjory Givens, PhD, MSPH Senior Scientist and Associate Director University of Wisconsin-Madison Population Health Institute, Associate Director and Co-Director, County Health Rankings & Roadmaps (CHRR)</p> <p>Kate Kingery, MPA Senior Sustainability Leader, University of Wisconsin-Madison Population Health Institute and Deputy Director, County Health Rankings & Roadmaps (CHRR)</p>
RAND	<p>Anita Chandra, DrPH, MPH VP and Director, RAND Social and Economic Well-being</p>

Findings

The following section reflects the key findings from GW’s interviews with five cities engaged in a variety of efforts to measure well-being, and from a set of interviews with a range of national experts. Each finding is followed by relevant quotes (de-identified to preserve participant anonymity).

Findings from city interviews

Interviews were conducted with city officials or civic leaders in five cities that are using a range of approaches to measure well-being and to incorporate well-being indices into the policymaking process: Green Bay, WI; Louisville, KY; Tacoma, WA; Santa Monica, CA; and Kansas City, MO. While the cities vary significantly in what and how they measure well-being, certain key themes emerged across the interviews regarding why cities took on new ways to measure well-being; how they decided what areas to measure; and challenges and opportunities that have arisen along the way.

Why and how participants started measuring well-being

Initial impetus

Most participants’ well-being initiatives grew out of either a specific precipitating event or goal. These precursors could be negative – such as a string of adolescent suicides, or the identification of significant health disparities among different portions of the city. Other cities saw shifts in their workforce or economic structure as motivation.

“Top of mind for our city in particular was this idea of how do we attract and retain talent, I think that was a lot of the initial conversation that started the well-being work.”

“We know that when companies are looking to relocate places they're looking at not just the tax breaks they might get but also what is the Community going to look like. How healthy and happy is the community? That's where our well-being work comes in.”

“For us, the changing tobacco market was a precipitating event. We needed to analyze the impact and make the case for more policy change. Our center and our work helped do that.”

“The kids were really experiencing difficulties. There were a couple of very public suicides of teenagers that over a couple of year span really got people thinking like, what are we really doing? How could we be working better? So, from there, the city decided to take a step back and really look at the well-being of the community as a whole. And then our office was set up to produce this well-being index and spread the work of embedding it throughout the city. We saw ourselves kind of as the innovation team within city government.”

“I think an important part of the origin story is the work on youth well-being, which kind of came out of several tragedies in the community. We were doing some work around collective impact and working with the schools and the NGOs and community leaders on a youth well-being report card and a more collaborative, integrated approach to some of the youth and family work.”

“This revelation around life expectancy and the differences between neighborhoods—that really was the jumping board off into our more integrated wellness planning between our planning department and Department of Health.”

Limitations of other measures of public health

Participants noted the limitations of conventional measures of public health. For example, some noted that existing national data sets do not necessarily provide city-specific information. In addition, these data sets come with significant lags, making it difficult to get “real-time” assessments of well-being. The use of GDP or other measures of economic productivity, meanwhile, can offer an overall economic view but offer little insight into the lived well-being of individuals and communities.

“You know, we are really at the mercy of national data sets, maybe every three or four years—right, it's not very frequent. The data sets need to be updated more often.”

“The concept of GDP has been used to measure progress in our communities for a long time now, but what we're seeing is even in high GDP countries or communities, that doesn't necessarily correlate to really good health outcomes, nor does that correlate to high levels of well-being.”

Partnering for change

Most participants established strategic outreach and partnerships to involve the community early on in the process of assessing and measuring well-being. Multiple participants noted that this process was important not only for community buy-in, but to truly inform what the city decided

to measure. Engagement in the beginning of the process can be supplemented with ongoing participation, such as through a community advisory board.

“When we talk about well-being as a community, how do we define it, how do we measure it, how do we act on that? We need the community to tell us.”

“We tried to be more intentional about how we were uplifting and centering resident experience -- you know lived experience in our Community, so there were a number of different touch points throughout that process to do that. Touchpoints with residents, partners, the city etc....”

“The starting point is our strategic plan, and what's really great about our strategic plan is that it was developed by the community, so when we talk about what is community and well-being, it's the community's vision for what is well-being....”

“Our well-being work was a community driven process, and there were workshops and events held throughout the city over a number of months in a number of locations, with a number of different groups. And we're talking about not just representative groups like cities sometimes do but more open invitations to the Community as a whole to come brainstorm ideas with us.”

“We have a community advisory board for our well-being and health equity work. We use this consistently to get guidance about what matters to our community.”

“I would say our well-being work was driven by the community, and it was sort of city hall with community leaders and the public schools. We had a lot of leadership support from the superintendent and some key principals as well as parent leaders. But we also had a local college, which is our community college that's here and NGO leaders and neighborhood activists.”

City government engagement

City engagement has been critical to the success of well-being index initiatives. For the majority of interviewees, well-being measurement was specifically housed within city government, creating inherent buy-in. Alternatively, well-being work can be hosted by a civic partner, but participants noted that city support is still crucial.

“We had been working with the city on a number of different issues since our inception, and so they were a critical part of our work. One of the things that was really important was the city involvement.”

“Then there was this sort of mayor's challenge phase of initially creating a well-being index from 2013 to 2015. Embedding well-being in the city manager's office and in city processes was a high priority. And then COVID hit. We were able to secure and transition some of the assets that we had, including all the data and some of the tools and

practices and website and learnings and a little bit of money and move outside of city hall to figure out what does the next chapter of this work look like...”

“It's something that we've gone back and forth on quite frankly -- does it make sense to embed this right within the city government, and as I described, we just have this unique geography. We work with partners across the county so maybe it's not city centered but is it county centered. Once you do that, you really should make it coalition centered.”

“While maintaining a separate nonprofit entity, it benefits not only the city, in particular, but again also those surrounding municipalities in the county.”

“And so the Center sits within the public health department, and it's okay that they're all city employees. Our work informs city governance, and we have a strong relationship with city leaders because we sit in our city government.”

“There was a lot of transitioning happening in the city. At the time, we had a change in leadership. In the space of a really very few short years, we had a couple of city managers and a couple of mayors. I think that's always important to note. Part of the story for cities is how those politics impact our work. The new city manager asked me to create the office of civic well-being because really the goal of all of this was not have sort of a small, siloed boutique project over on one part of the city, but to really be embedding this well-being framework, measurement and action into city governance.”

“So in 2017, when the office was created, we really started to use the framework in the budgeting process. And that was a first step for this scaling and spreading. We had been kind of doing the index and some small scale cases until in 2017, we started to really double down with a focus of embedding this in the city's budget. And the reason for that was because the budget process is something that touches all departments. And this was the beginning of really trying to make sure that well-being wasn't seen as a standalone initiative but was integrated within all city work.”

What cities measure and how they use it

Approaches to measuring well-being vary considerably

The cities that participated in interviews apply a broad range of definitions and approaches to measuring well-being. Measurement ranges from a focus on a single guiding measure, such as life expectancy, to developing an index based on a set of measures. Some participants use surveys related to well-being. Cities can also draw on existing data at the state or national level.

“We use a handful of data sets that are both national, state and local level data so some of the base data is from the American Community survey and census data that provides, of course, the basic demographics and incomes and housing types, for example. Then we have some state level data, especially around environmental indicators.”

“When we think about how we measure well-being, we really look at the World Health Organization, quality of life survey.”

“When we started, we were looking at the life expectancy that was very different within that same 317 square mile area I talked about. A difference of 16 years life expectancy. So, within an area that you can drive from one part to another, with no greater than a half an hour, you basically have a generation difference between life expectancy. But this was the base measurement we used to start our well-being work.”

“So the equity index was a way to collect data around the indicators of our strategic plan and really helped visualize and map those indicators.”

“We identified that we were really not using shared data. For instance, we've been for a long time using something called the EDI or the early development instrument. We have, you know, all sorts of data inside the schools. We had social, emotional data about kids through the healthy kids survey that was administered to seventh, ninth, and 11th graders. And so, we then through that process came to this construct of well-being and that the idea of data about youth in particular, the developmental milestones and the sort of population data that gives us kind of an understanding of youth well-being and family well-being. And that then led us more broadly to well-being of our community. So it was through a community process of trying to figure out how to collect good data that our broader well-being initiative started.”

“The starting point was traditional administrative data. So that could be everything from certain census data or the updates that happen to the census through the American community. Or it could be public health data. So administrative data was number one. Number two was the survey. And the survey that we used was created by NAF as an open source. It's a little bit like the Gallup survey. It asks some things about individual well-being. That told us a lot about behaviors and somewhat about attitudes and access in areas that the research and science says leads to well-being. And then the third area included some pilot projects that I think has a lot of promise for the future -- its sort of mining of social data and big data.”

Well-being data actively informs policymaking

Participating cities regularly use their well-being data to inform policymaking. A commonly cited example is the use of well-being data to inform budget decisions, allocating resources where needed to improve well-being or determinants of well-being. Cities also offered examples of the data informing specific policy decisions to promote community well-being.

“We want a common foundation of facts to begin our conversation about setting policy. The only thing we ask is let's make the data electronic and shareable and let's put together frameworks, where we can easily access it and share it with others.”

“For example, we use our well-being data to tell us where to build streetlights. If we only had a certain amount of money, and you know X number of street lights to replace... How would we prioritize them? That's how we use our well-being data.”

“We overlay the data that we've collected, with the equity index and that composite score to make a calculation. We take our initial scores and multiply them by an indicator

number of the index to help us prioritize and identify areas of the city that need more investment first.”

“One example of how we use our well-being work and health equity report is on healthy foods. We have lack of healthy nutritious food in certain areas of our community where people just struggle to find it. It has been exacerbated by full service grocery stores exiting the market here. That includes most of West level, which is more predominantly black residents. But certainly, having the greatest impact on, I would say, on Black residents and on some of our older residents. Last fiscal year in response, our Metro council allocated \$3.5 million to go towards the development of a community grocery store. And so that project is housed within the center for health equity. That policy change was based on our analysis and work. You know, we don’t necessarily need data and maps to demonstrate that people don’t have enough quality food to eat in our community, but it’s also a tool that we can use—and we do use it.”

“We have used our equity reports to address reduction in tobacco use. We revised our smoke free ordinance based on the data and reports we produce. We updated our ordinance for hookah and e-cigarettes, and in our state that’s not a small thing.”

“Our work on well-being and equity has shaped our policy on paid parental leave. I’m offering 12 weeks paid parental leave now for folks who are having a child, adopting a child and that’s for our metro government employees.”

“So part of what we did there is we worked with the planners to extract data from the index about a particular area of the city. And so as the downtown community plan was being created and adopted, and some policy recommendations came forth, we were able to really help center those land use discussions in data about people more than we had in the past. In the past you might use census data, of course, but a lot of these technical plans are very centered on things like traffic counts and density and that kind of thing. Centering policy on well-being made it much more about people. Similarly, in one of our neighborhoods, as we were making zoning changes, we really centered it around well-being.”

“There was relatively low rates of fruit and vegetable and healthy eating across the city that surprised everybody because you’d think in a place like our city, where we have, you know, five farmer’s markets, the access to fresh fruits and vegetables would be good. But in one neighborhood, we also found a huge gap between eligibility of people for the SNAP program, food stamps and people who are actually using it. People were leaving money and resources on the table, and that was the same community where we had a market match program where you could double the value of the food stamps at the farmer’s market. So using our well-being data, we were able to see a more complete picture. We did a bunch of educational initiatives with our African-American community. Something called the greens festival and we had a campaign to get more people signed up for food stamps.”

“So it wasn’t like we were doing a lot of looking at individuals per se. I mean, we were looking at groups. People who said that they had higher levels of economic worry for

instance, or do they have \$400 in the bank in case of a crisis? I mean, we could see that certain racial and ethnic groups had lower rates of economic well-being. We also have found some interesting data about personal behaviors, like getting at least six hours of sleep and connecting socially with people at least a couple of times a week. We use our well-being data for a wide variety of purposes.”

“What has been helpful for us on the planning side is we've worked a lot with our health department. The well-being work is informing our city planning. The health benefits or the health detractors in the physical environment we've started to incorporate into our plans.”

“Using our well-being data, we created an incentive program for our opportunity zones. We basically prioritized those areas that had lower life expectancy, and those areas could benefit more. Helping out those target populations became higher priorities. We directly use those data points that target those areas to help those who need it most.”

“Our parks department recently looked at reorganizing its maintenance teams, and they've actually created a maintenance team that is focused on the parks that are within the lowest life expectancy zip codes. They structure their work teams to be able to have a team specifically looking at those parks within those areas.”

“Our strategic plan had about 800 recommendations, and we had the same person who put the plan together go back and evaluate that plan. About 65-70% of the things recommended got implemented out of that plan. This is all from our well-being data analysis and policy recommendations.”

Well-being and equity

For most interviewees, measuring well-being is central to efforts to advance health equity and justice. Participants noted the importance of measuring not only disparities but also community assets. Multiple participants specified that measuring social determinants of health, and not only outcomes, is crucial to being able to address inequities caused by those systemic factors.

“Our well-being work is our way of mapping and visualizing equity across the city by census block groups. It helps to guide our resource allocation and policymaking.”

“So, in the first draft of the strategic plan, equity was identified as its own area but realizing that equity really has to do with everything that we're trying to measure and achieve for the Community, we made it a more overarching topic that is then incorporated into each of the other goal areas. So, if you look at the plan as a whole, now you'll see that each goal area has equity mentioned within each of the focus areas under each of the measures as well.”

“A few years ago, we said we want to place broadband in this region of the city, because we think that's where we'll get the best help to people who may not already have good network connection. And we were able to work with city leaders to show them our index

and how we measure broadband access already and other patterns of inequities to help redirect where they were putting their pilot in the city.”

“We changed our Council action memorandum process to coincide with all of this... Most cities have a fiscal note and a policy objective, as part of their policy development and communication process with Councils. We changed our process to include not just the fiscal note, but also an equity index analysis, so any policy that goes in front of our Council now has to have this form attached to it that says what part of the community is this policy or program intended to effect and then, how is that effect going to happen, based on the equity index.”

“We set up a Center for health equity and put out our first report in 2011. I don't think that we were at the point yet about thinking from an equity perspective, but more about helping neighborhood level plans. Now, we do focus on equity. Our work has changed. We have a significant effort on tobacco and alcohol marketing. We talk to stores--the manager or owner of that store--and get them to consider not having a certain type of marketing that might have a disproportionate impact on certain populations at point of sale or on the outside of their stores and things like that...”

“Systemic and institutional racism have everything to do with the outcomes that we have today. That's why our work is so important. We analyze the reasons for this and then find solutions to improve our policies.”

“I think it's also important that well-being data be dis-aggregated so that you can really look at the disparities and the assets in different racial, ethnic groups, different sort of neighborhoods and by age. So this dis-aggregating of data is really key.”

“Our well-being work gives us data about the environment in a neighborhood and the quality of housing connectivity and safety -- all those kinds of things that we're pulling together to give you that sense of that deep disparity.”

“Life expectancy in our city translates to jobs, access to healthcare, access to healthy food and mobility in general. So a great deal of it has to do with the inequalities and the resources provided, and that's been that way for quite a little while. If you look at any of our maps of racial breakdown or crime or investments or things like that there's a dividing line for the city. That has been perpetuated for a very long time, and it's really hard to correct it. Everybody's actively trying to do that, but it's increasingly tough to get in front of that once you've let it go for that long.”

“One of the things that moving to a well-being framework has done for our Community is that it's really allowed us to talk about the social determinants of health in a different way. Before, we would talk about social determinants of health and people will be like well, what does that really mean. And when you talk about well-being in this overall holistic view of our Community thriving or not, I think it brings those pieces in in a way that has been more unifying for our Community than just physical health alone. What we've really appreciated about this framework in general is that it really allows for people

to be called in, and be a part of it, and really start to identify the unique strengths and assets that each of us bring they're all different right.”

“So one interesting question that we asked is around how long someone lived in the Community, as well as if they felt like they were a member of the Community. And what we found was it was more important that you were a member of a Community and then you had a higher well-being score than if you didn't. But the other thing was it didn't necessarily matter how long you've lived in the Community, so it was more about whether you felt like you had that sense of belonging.”

Challenges and opportunities

Initial measure development

City-level participants reported a range of challenges that arose while they were initially developing their well-being indices. Identification of relevant measures was a common challenge, including determining how much to focus on outcomes vs. determinants. Participants also cited staff capacity and agency culture as early challenges.

“One of the barriers is, what are the right indicators to use in the development process? My advice to other cities would be don't overthink it because really what we're looking for are patterns and not specifics. I think it's almost a delay tactic unknowingly for people to really want to get the perfect right indicator or measure that speaks exactly to one thing or the other thing, but the Community is too complex, for that to really be. So that's one challenge -- just getting to the finish line with the indicators and saying it's not perfect, but it's good enough for us to do our work better.”

“Another challenge would be staff capacity and development. Doing the trainings and helping people figure out equity as a concept. Not everybody is familiar with GIS mapping and how to use it. Developing the capacity for our GIS team to support and assist different departments, as well as developing staff throughout departments to be able to use data in ways that maybe they haven't before, is a big challenge.”

“I would say another challenge is normalizing the practice, both for leadership and for staff and figuring out what that normalization looks like for your organization. And then I guess part of that normalization process is the challenge of how you embed data and analysis into practical decision making.”

“One of the real big challenges is the difference between outcome measures and process measures. Usually what I have found is that people fall into one of two camps, and it's not very easy to bring the camps together. As the strategic planning office, we have an outcomes based strategic plan. We work with our staff to really keep asking the question “why”. What is the outcome that the policy change is leaving to?”

“You know for a fact in nearly every community every city anyway, these differences exist and some you would see these disparate outcomes across the Community, no matter what right. But it doesn't look good to publicize it. You know the questions is like okay

well, this is bad so who's responsible for it. Someone will always be at fault. So this is a challenge. How do we make people acknowledge the facts without placing blame.”

“One challenge is culture change. How do you shift work in government so it is responsive and reactive to things that are happening in the community. The work to operationalize change is really challenging. So, having those sorts of tools and practices and keeping things aspirational enough that this is really about change, but iterative, specific and incremental enough that it is doable... Finding that sweet spot is I think often a challenge.”

“Data literacy, the data culture, and the familiarity with using data practices is a challenge.”

“There were some legal issues about data and privacy, and we're very focused on that. It really did help to be partnering with Rand and knowing that when you're partnering with an entity like Rand, they have their internal review processes and quality assurance processes.”

Funding for well-being measurement

Participants fund their well-being initiatives in a variety of ways. Some rely on grants or public-private partnerships. Most expressed concern that without a sustainable funding source, it would be challenging to continue to measure well-being over time.

“We had our Community foundation really kick us off in a very big way with a three year commitment to funding this measurement work. But finding consistent funding is tough. It was really important that we had multi-year funding for something like this to show ROI.”

“Our well-being work was initially funded through a lot of partnerships, when we were first developing it, so I think the first main partners were through, of course, the city. Our county partners and our utilities division each threw in some money, basically to fund the initial contract to set up this index and set up this work. Since the initial index, it has evolved a little bit, and we continue to bring in small streams of funding to support our work, but it's tough to piecemeal it together—and tough to sustain it.”

“Health systems, in particular, have been helpful by supporting us. We have found a lot of success with the state and national level grants as well to fund the work. We also have several kinds of local grants and our Community businesses are also investors.”

“Our work is funded from the local community, because it is for the local community, so we want that local investment because it also signaling something about what we're doing.”

“So at the end of 2019, we hosted a well-being summit. We had over 900 people attend this summit over a couple of days and we brought in all sorts of people. And then 2020

hit with the pandemic. Our city is really reliant on tourism as a main source of income. As a result, the funding for the city government was just disappearing. There were large cuts to staff and programming that happened following the pandemic. So our office, we were officially done in June of last year. That was driven by this kind of overall major cut to our city government.”

“In the beginning, a lot of the funding for our work came through grants so writing successful grants was very important. When the next director came in, he said our city government needs to say that this is an investment -- it can't just be that we will do this work if we get grant funding. So now, our work is financed through general fund dollars, so it is community tax dollars. It could all go away tomorrow so we must constantly make the case for the Center’s existence. It’s all about ROI and reminding our city leadership that our work matters.”

City-level messaging

Participating cities use a range of themes and framings in support of their well-being measurement work. In addition to the fact that well-being approaches can save cities money, participants noted that more integrated approaches to measuring and addressing well-being can be more effective. Messaging is important across a range of audiences, from community to policymakers to community partners.

“We message around the tree and the roots in the soil -- that seems to have been an effective tool for helping policymakers grasp how to prioritize findings within the equity report.”

“I think this idea that we can be more effective with resources if we work collaboratively in a more integrated approach, you know-the sort of negative impact of silos, if you will, or just to state the positive that the more effective outcomes that can be achieved and the better use of resources. This is what was effective with policymakers in terms of messaging.”

“We so often keep legacy practices going for no good reason, because we don't really know if they're effective. Helping policy makers understand measuring and documenting progress was important for us. It was a key message we shared with policymakers. Saying no to something and cutting things and getting rid of pet projects and stuff is tough but our well-being work helped us trim where we needed to trim and to make the case for other more important initiatives.”

“This idea that we do know what leads to improved outcomes and that we can measure it—that is persuasive to policymakers. And it can, it's not so much about saving us money, but it’s more about how can we effectively invest our time and our resources is really important and does resonate and is true.”

“ROI [return on investment], ROI, ROI. This message is most important to policymakers.”

Subject Matter Expert Interview Findings

This section reflects the key findings from GW’s interviews with subject matter experts engaged in, or familiar with, a variety of efforts to measure well-being. Experts discussed a range of approaches that cities could take to measure well-being, drawing from existing data, new data collection, or both. They offered insights on how well-being data can best be used to support policymaking, and, echoing the cities, offered a range of ways that well-being indices can be messaged to garner support from stakeholders.

What well-being indices should reflect

Existing resources for cities

Various tools already exist for U.S. cities to track a range of indicators. Interviewees included experts who developed, or work with, a range of existing resources including the Cityhealth Dashboard, County Health Rankings, and the WIN Network. Particularly for small-to-medium cities with less staff and resources, these existing resources could be important options or starting points for measuring well-being. Overall, they appear to be underutilized by cities. Small and medium sized cities in particular could benefit from more support and resources to address well-being.

“I think one is we need tools that make it easy for municipalities to not reinvent the wheel, with a new measurement system that just becomes another framework.”

“If you're choosing to do it your own way, you're probably doing it more expensive and disconnected.”

“Large urban areas have a lot figured out. They're not coming to us asking for help - Cook County doesn't come to us and ask for help, the city of Chicago doesn't come to us. But those midsize cities, small cities and rural jurisdictions, you know they're in a very different starting point than a lot of other communities, and so I would say there's a real spectrum in terms of who has the awareness and who has the capacity and desire to develop a dashboard.”

Going beyond traditional measures

Interviewees largely agreed that traditional public health measures – with a focus on health outcomes, and little attention to systemic factors – miss opportunities to meaningfully measure and improve well-being. They noted that while well-being data typically do focus on health, they should expand across sectors to encompass the social and structural determinants of health. Several interviewees also noted the importance of incorporating even less traditional measures, such as civic engagement, into well-being frameworks.

“It's one thing for a health department to be collecting the data, but the accountability is going to be way beyond the health department..., so I would argue that the health department may be the responsible entity for the data and for playing that chief strategist role, but that the recording and the accountability comes from sort of a mayor's dashboard or something like that.”

“So one thing was just basically getting people to move away from narrow perspectives on a whole host of things, including in health, where we tend to be a deficit disease oriented model. And as we move to more positive health, how can a well-being frameworks help us.”

“The issue is that there's so much more potential for cities [to measure well-being].... they're running a lot of transactional programs and projects on small narrowly defined programs - you know, disease, body part, population group issues - none of it is really built for system change. And so it's all well intentioned, a lot of it's got the heart in the right place, but it's built with an overarching fragmentation.... The status quo sort of normal ways of measuring reinforces that because you pick small measures and you declare victory on the basis of those incremental changes and nobody's really paying attention to does it add up to more thriving people.”

“The truth is a lot of measurements that comes out of the health world were not picking up other states of being that people really value - their economic lives, their social, emotional, spiritual life.”

“Maslow's hierarchy has kind of always put things like citizen civic participation and democratic engagement as part of the self-actualization, as opposed to a basic need.”

“This broader concept of well-being may be hard to measure but the social connectedness, the social isolation, the social and behavioral stuff may be good intermediate metrics.”

“Just what exactly is well-being - are we talking well-being of people, are we talking well-being of places, are we talking well-being of societies or broader ecosystems and structures?”

A close focus

Interviewees consistently noted that city well-being indices should be small and targeted. A defined set of measures can allow for more focus both on the measurement side and in integrating results into policymaking.

“We consolidated frameworks, because we said city government can't do the Canadian well-being index – they can't do eight or nine, it has to be like five.”

“Your hard work is actually reviewing the data you collect, and really putting it through the filter of whether it's actually telling you about the well-being of your population and community. Nine times out of 10 cities are collecting junk, they're collecting too much and they're collecting junk that gives them very little signal..... So I'm a big believer in data parsimony.”

“They want to do right, they want to do good, but they didn't want something that was going to break the bank that was too far out there.”

The role of self-reported well-being and optimism

Globally, there is growing interest in the collection of self-reported data on well-being and optimism (e.g., the Cantril scale). There has been limited application of these measures in the U.S. context. Interviewees had mixed views on the importance of this kind of data for city-level well-being indices, noting that it is important to better understand the relevance of political climate, religion, and other factors to better inform how to use this data in policymaking. Accordingly, some noted that it is important for such data to be considered only in conjunction with “objective” well-being data.

“There are always data points that get in your craw, so to speak, because they are harder to explain or for them to be explained, with a culturally relevant lens in place. So I think this is a place where our field, on the whole needs to be working more in alignment towards the contextualization of information and to be able to present the longer view, the history of these issues rather than just the instantaneous present day, this is what it looks like.”

“I don't know of many objective measures of well-being because it's so subjective as a concept. You know the ideal [would be] if we came to a good understanding of what well-being meant. Then one can think about proxy measures that would be able to give us a temperature feed on that.... I suppose the areas that I'd be most interested in would be to say well, are the self-reported measures that are being widely used by the Gallups and others, do they resonate with policymakers, and if they do, to use that as some kind of gold standard. And if that is the gold standard, then what attributes of people's lives drive that. And which of those attributes are measurable on a consistent timely basis and, should there be some sort of temperature read on the part of policymakers that gives them useful practical information on the well-being of their community. That's an empirical question..... I think it would be useless if we had measures of well-being that were two to three years old only.”

“And now we're going to get into thorny issues of why black Americans are still hopeful even when other conditions haven't changed. That's why I'm a big believer of bringing in the non-subjective well-being.”

How cities use well-being data

Applying well-being data to policy

Like the city participants, expert interviewees agreed that well-being data can and should be used to inform policy. They echoed the importance of including measures of determinants of well-being, rather than just outcomes, to meaningfully improve well-being. Well-being data can be used to inform policy, particularly if determinants of well-being are integrated. Furthermore, determinants of health may change more quickly than outcomes, allowing cities an earlier view of how effective their policies and investments have been.

“It's been clear to many cities that in order to improve health, they have to deal with housing or they need to really think about some of the education gaps, etc. So we have seen sites using measures of the physical environment to really guide their obesity policy; we've seen cities, using the social determinants of health, to determine where to put community health workers; we've seen hospitals using the data in order to determine where their community needs dollars spent.”

“We've also curated a lot of the changes that need to be made into these arenas of vital conditions which are so interdependent that if you made progress on some you're going to see the cascading benefits in others. It's what we call multi solving one of the other things that is a barrier to cities making progress is their idea that everything somehow can be the focus of its own discrete programs. When really what we want to do is find those areas of great leverage that can solve lots of problems at once.... Early childhood education, ...broadband... There are multi solvers in the universe and that's not part of the script of typical public administration.”

Supporting equity

Like city participants, experts agreed that well-being frameworks can support equity when applied thoughtfully. They noted that while many cities already have efforts addressing equity, the term can mean different things to different people. Some noted that an “equity” lens on well-being work may not be as promising in small or medium cities as in large cities. Overall, different indices can promote equity to different degrees, depending how much they reflect structural inequalities.

“Even when some of those folks now start talking about Community well-being, ... they do not have a strong understanding of structural inequity, systemic reform and other kinds of community and civic variables that matter for well-being.”

“I think that the importance is to be able to complement the person oriented disparities ... with the place oriented inequities so that you're not just having a conversation about the consistent pattern that you'll observe with communities of color having higher rates of chronic conditions, without it being contextualized with the grocery store deserts and the lack of opportunities to access green spaces, or the whole wealth of things that happened in local spaces that prohibit folks from being able to realize their health potential.”

“If we could agitate all the folks who are collecting the data to break out of the white supremacy systems that were put in place administratively over the past several decades, that would be fabulous. We absolutely need to be disaggregating information responsibly and with the acknowledgement of the multiple intersections of identities that folks have instead of grouping people together and assuming that that's the story right there.”

“In some cities and other cities where the diversity is a lot lower, like much, much, much lower, thinking about [equity] has a different resonance.”

“I think most big cities, probably are well on your way in the context of health, equity, to be honest, ... I also don't know that if any of these cities would embark on a wellness strategy that's not a health equity strategy...”

“Be clear that your priorities have to be with those who are struggling and suffering, and ...[A]verage measures of you know, life satisfaction in a region doesn't give me as a changemaker either in government or outside of government enough leverage to know what to do with that ...It's aggregate measures of well-being in the population, and then the conditions that all people need, and then the discipline to say who is not well, who's benefiting from those conditions and who isn't.

Messaging and Scale-Up

Interviewees agreed that framing and messaging around well-being measures may need to vary depending on the city/audience. This is consistent with the broad variation in language and framing used by the cities participating in the project. For cities that are not yet measuring well-being, “well-being” may have particular associations, e.g., with coastal or blue states. Therefore, other language, such as around civic engagement and robustness, may be more compelling. Experts also noted that non-U.S. examples of well-being measurement may not be persuasive to U.S. cities. However, identifying benefits to change, and recognizing and rewarding progress, are important motivators.

“We mostly say: you can't manage you can't measure.”

“I think you can tell an ... individual, family, civic, or community well-being story that hits on certain notes about the role of the faith community, that hits on those notes of sense of community and personal responsibility, that hits on notes that work across urban and rural and urban.... And well-being in the context of economic opportunity, in the context of community, in the context of not just another government program when we're talking about community building.”

“For the last 15 months, we've told people not to be connected in some respects, and now, how do we bring them back together. And that's an opportunity to construct a new way of thinking around social connectedness that really fits within this definition of well-being.... Because it's connecting people as communities, it's connecting people to programs, it's thinking more holistically about all of those different pieces that we would define as well-being but they may actually define as community building... And when you think about sort of the big health challenges a lot of cities are facing right now around overdose and suicide and mental health, ... you can be building that sense of community and sense of connectedness around isolation issues, around equity issues, around race, there are all sorts of ways that you can be doing it that can fit within whatever the political context is. To me that's how I would differentiate well-being strategies from everything everyone else is doing around equity and social determinants.”

“The vast majority of conservatives also believe in the idea of an even playing field.”

“The US does not think about health or well-being in the same way that other places do: it is not a fundamental right.”

“We did polling and focus groups to recognize and understand what do city officials care about, what resonates with them.... There had to be implementation success in some US city, and what we found was no one gave a crap if Europe implemented effectively - that did not resonate.”

Conclusion: Considerations for NLC and Partners

Based on these findings, recommendations for future consideration include:

Survey cities for additional information

While a number of cities appear to have strong interest in well-being measurement, a comprehensive survey of cities would help gather information and data about a number of factors, including:

- the level of interest in well-being measurement from cities
- the size of cities interested in well-being measurement
- whether cities would prefer to use existing measurement tools or build their own
- whether cities would have interest in a “best practices” workshop or meeting on well-being measurement

These answers, particularly stratified by region and city size, could help inform NLC’s next steps in this area.

Identify key policy areas where well-being data would be relevant

In order to give cities concrete examples, NLC could work to identify specific areas of city-level policymaking where such data would be most pertinent. In part, this area of questioning could be incorporated into the survey suggested above. In addition, NLC could have a call, convening or focus group with relevant experts to identify these policy areas. Identifying these areas in advance could allow NLC, and cities, to “work backward” to determine the most important well-being data to collect.

Consider the role of equity

As discussed in the findings section, experts noted that in some cities, well-being work is integrated in equity efforts; in other cities, the initiatives are distinct. There is no single correct answer to how well-being data should be applied to promote equity. However, a key theme that emerged from the interviews is that unless well-being measurement gets at the underlying structural and systemic determinants of health and well-being, it will not meaningfully address equity.

With this in mind, NLC should consider how to integrate equity into its city well-being work moving forward. It may be appropriate to consult with equity data experts to identify how to most meaningfully incorporate equity, to avoid its being merely a catchphrase.

Pursue exploratory conversations with potential partners

Several SMEs expressed strong interest in potentially partnering with NLC to further city efforts around well-being measurement. A number of issues could be explored including:

- Whether efforts to support well-being initiatives would use existing measures or whether new measures could be developed based upon city interest
- What level of support would be needed to engage a cohort of cities in well-being measurement
- What business model would be used to support efforts around measurement development and technical assistance

Explore federal policy options to support city efforts to measure well-being

One key finding documented the on-going challenges cities have supporting their well-being measurement work. For example, a number of cities commented about the expense related to measurement development and well-being implementation. NLC could begin to explore future routes to more sustainable well-being measurement. For example, a new federal grant program could be developed to support city efforts in well-being measurement and implementation, either through CDC to health departments; as a component of existing Community Health Needs Assessments; or as part of another existing or new federal program. The current work, as well as future survey findings and other NLC efforts, could serve as important tools in advocacy for such a funding stream or program.