

Cities of Opportunity: Pathway to Equity

A Brief Based on Analysis of Participating Cities

Almost 86% of Americans live in cities. Impacted by local, regional and national conditions and events, cities are marked by continuous change, including becoming more racially and ethnically diverse over the last 10 years.ⁱ While many residents in cities continue to thrive, structural and racial inequities have resulted in deep disparities in health, economic and social well-being—often concentrated in certain neighborhoods or zip codes. These disparities have led to significant differences in both the quality and length of life for residents.

Cities are well positioned to summon the resources and the will to be the engine of change. The National League of Cities (NLC) created the Cities of Opportunity (CoO) initiative in 2018 to build on the important role that city leaders play in addressing social determinants of health (the factors or conditions that influence how well we live, and how long we live) and increasing equity and opportunity for all residents. Generously supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, CoO helps cities strengthen their capacity for systems and policy change so all residents have opportunities for healthy, fulfilling lives. This effort increased in urgency when the COVID-19 pandemic exposed and amplified ongoing inequities, particularly those at the intersection of health, housing, employment, and the built environment. With many cities now seeking to strengthen and develop innovative strategies for an inclusive and equitable economic and social recovery, CoO is situated to meet the expanding needs.

This brief presents some of the innovative and transformational policies, systems, and programs developed and implemented by cities participating in CoO and describes how the initiative has catalyzed their continuing equity work. The discussion draws on the results of an evaluation that included a survey of all 56 CoO participating cities and in-depth interviews with individuals from 11 of these cities.ⁱⁱ (See the table of interviewed cities on page 8.)

Accomplishments among the cohorts range from adoption of equity plans, policies, and sustained structures across city departments; community-driven solutions for inclusive economic growth and workforce prospects; data frameworks for accountability in reducing health and social disparities; improved community engagement; and deepened cross-sector partnerships to leverage assets and respond to resident needs and opportunities. For example:

Charlotte, NC infused equity into its new comprehensive plan, engaging the community and city leadership in a focus on equitable outcomes.

Napa, CA expanded its healthcare partner network as part of developing a plan for health and equity in all policies.

Duluth, MN developed scoring criteria for distributing federal funds that give preference to sustaining and providing equitable opportunities for minority and women-owned businesses.

Grand Rapids, MI collaborated with multi-sector health and other partners on a regional data hub centered on health equity and social determinants.

What Cities Value

The survey and interviews with participating city leaders, staff members, and multi-sector partners coalesced around key observations about the value of the Cities of Opportunity initiative, including:

- ▶ **The initiative provides the structure and tools for sustained, multi-year progress**, in policy development and in implementation and practice. NLC has developed and refined a model across all CoO programs that is based on a deep understanding of how cities work and what cities need to be successful.
- ▶ **Cities have expanded and deepened their understanding of equity**, what it really means for a city, and how to build it out or design and implement equity policies and practices.
- ▶ **Transformational changes in city structures, policies, and approaches** are attributed to the Cities of Opportunity experience. Many of the changes are the direct result of work initiated during the cohort; even more impact comes from what cities describe as the ‘catalytic’ effect of CoO energizing and informing their work as they continue to move forward.
- ▶ **CoO offerings deliver high value for participants through peer learning** and engagement with other cities; providing space for customized technical assistance; facilitation and coaching to consider issues and design solutions; connecting to field experts to expand knowledge, clarify options, and build confidence in operationalizing equity in specific domains; and providing a wide range of resources for planning and implementation that meet changing participant needs over time.
- ▶ **NLC’s reputation and credibility lends support to participating city team efforts** to bring other elected officials and partner organizations into systemic work to advance health and racial equity.

Figuring out how our CoO team was going to take what we had learned back to the city and activate around it was actually really transformative.

Meeting Cities Where They Are

Cities of Opportunity helps cities build capacity to reduce disparities and increase equitable opportunity for all residents through long-term policy and systems change. The initiative includes four components that use a common framework, and recognizes that cities are at different stages in their equity work, have different capacities, and are more likely to participate when the content is specific to their needs and goals. Providing multiple entry points through an intentional developmental pathway encourages long-term commitment and continued learning. Cities engage initially through a competitive application process to ascertain the work the city is best positioned to lead, through the following components:

Mayors’ Institute: Expert-informed discussion series with tailored technical assistance focused on a specific area at the intersection of health, e.g., housing, jobs, or economic opportunity, to help city leadership design multi-pronged strategies for meeting local needs through an equity lens.

Action Cohort: An intensive planning and engagement process with in-depth, tailored technical assistance designed for municipal leaders and cross-sector partners committed to driving comprehensive and equitable policy and systems change to address inequities.

Community of Practice: A learning community offering city teams, comprised of department heads, mid-level practitioners, and external partners, in-depth assistance in a specific tactical approach (e.g., use of data). Participants work with field experts to refine and implement equity strategies.

Learning Lab:ⁱⁱⁱ A peer-to-peer virtual forum of curated, peer-led discussions to ensure a broad entry point for cities seeking to engage in advancing equity. Cities share best practices and talk candidly about their respective journeys.

East Point, GA: Disrupting History

The participation in Cities of Opportunity was absolutely catalytic. —Mayor Deana Holiday Ingraham

East Point is a small community with a population of just over 38,000, whose residents have a voice and a vision. Mayor Deana Holiday Ingraham describes East Point as a ‘disrupter’ for challenging and dismantling systemic inequities that have existed for decades. In 1912, the city government forced African American residents to live only in the most undesirable part of the city, a plot of land adjacent to fertilizer, oil and steel plants that eventually was called “Stinktown” because of the awful smell emanating from the fertilizer plants. The Action Cohort experience catalyzed an energetic and ongoing commitment to create an inclusive community by incorporating equity into city systems and policies.

At an early team meeting Mayor Holiday Ingraham posed a question to the team: *“Do you believe we can all do this together?”* Cautious looks were exchanged and then came the answer, *“Yeh, we’re going to do this and we’re going do it through policy and resident engagement.”*

As a first step, and with help from NLC, the team presented a resolution to the City Council committing to an equity framework for the city and designating an Equity Committee. The resolution institutionalized the belief that the city would become more inclusive and equitable through policy and systems change. The Council adopted the resolution, and the committee expanded their commitment by further investing in support to ensure authentic resident voice from the community in the creation of an Equitable Growth and Inclusion Strategic Plan (EGISP).

Community engagement was the centerpiece of the process. Outdoor listening sessions, surveys, and a resident equity academy^{iv} each contributed to increasing community understanding of equity and helped to craft the plan which the Council adopted in June 2021.

East Point counts this community capacity building among its successes. “In order for this work to be sustainable and outlast elected officials and staff members who may go on to do different things, the community has to understand the importance of it, buy into it, and demand it,” says Mayor Holiday Ingraham. “Progress is possible and sustainable when the people demand it.”

Other accomplishments since 2019 include:

- ▶ Changes to industrial zoning ordinances to require approvals for specific uses that might cause environmental harm.
- ▶ Addition of two new industrial zoning districts (WH-I: Warehouse Industrial and MXCI: Mixed Use Commercial Industrial) with community benefit provisions.
- ▶ Adopted a City Agriculture Plan and a Small Box Discount Store Ordinance.
- ▶ Intensive training for city staff to learn how to use and align an equity lens and practices.
- ▶ Mayor Holiday Ingraham led Secretary Pete Buttigieg and a congressional delegation on a tour of downtown East Point’s equity and transit-oriented development sites.
- ▶ Partnering with the Morehouse School of Medicine and others (with funding from the Office of Minority Health) to measure the effect of housing, healthy food access and environmental/land use policies on health outcomes and health disparities.

This was really stepping outside of the box for us.

—Kimberly Smith, Director, Department of Planning and Community Development

Amplifying Commitment to Equity

Cities of Opportunity launched with a focus on both equity and social determinants of health to ultimately improve individual and community health and reduce disparities. Glaring disparities for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) during the pandemic, and the intensifying racial justice movement in 2020, underscored the urgency for intentional action. Many cities responded by looking to do more to address structural racism.

During the interviews, most cities spoke about their equity work within the frame of ‘health equity’ or ‘equity’; several also described how they are broadening the conversation in city government and their community from health equity to equity and social justice or racial equity. The CoO initiative’s intention to meet cities where they are and help them move forward supports this progression.

Following are examples of what cities are doing to address racial equity:

- ▶ **Roanoke, VA** adopted a two-pronged approach: one on how economic development systems, processes, and strategies can improve health outcomes with an equity lens; the other, a community-wide effort to increase awareness of the impact of systemic racism and racial disparities and address racial equity.
- ▶ **Tacoma, WA**’s City Council directed the city to move toward becoming an anti-racist organization. “We are charged to not only ensure existing services are implanted equitably, but [to] actively dismantle and reimagine services that contribute to the systemic oppression of our communities of color,” said Bucoda Warren, Strategic Initiatives Coordinator with the City of Tacoma. “An anti-racist approach has been a much larger leap than just framing everything within an equity lens.” As a first step, the city created ‘transformation teams’ in the areas of public safety and housing.

We are closest to understanding health equity right now compared to other kinds of equity.

- ▶ **Duluth, MN** formed a cross-departmental equity team to recommend actions to address systemic racism.
- ▶ **Napa, CA** created a committee to develop a plan for working with community groups to identify racist barriers that can be removed from city regulations and operations.

Cities Driving Progress on Equity

NLC’s approach supports cities in developing six critical capacities to successfully move forward more effective policy and systems change and to strengthen resiliency. Participating cities have expanded and leveraged these capacities to make significant advances toward achieving equitable outcomes:

- ▶ Aligning city policies, practices and programs across departments
- ▶ Strengthening multi-sector partnerships
- ▶ Developing community voice through authentic civic engagement
- ▶ Engaging in the strategic use and analysis of data
- ▶ Exploring diversification of financing approaches
- ▶ Ensuring sustainability of efforts

Examples of this progress are described on the following pages.

City policies to advance equity

Equitable policy and programming are not just something that one department can do or that the central administration can do alone - it requires collaboration and communications.

Most Action Cohort cities have created and implemented a formal structure or framework to operationalize equity across city departments. This secures commitment from city leadership; aids sustainability; and encourages communication and uniform policies and procedures across departments. A common approach is for the city council to adopt a resolution charging an existing city office or agency, or creating a new office or commission, to engage diverse stakeholders and ‘quarterback’ a comprehensive, cross-city equity approach.

Three cities (Birmingham, AL, East Point, GA, Las Vegas, NV) are building upon the equity structures and practices catalyzed during CoO by investing in additional technical support to complete their plan. Cities that are further along in implementing equity strategies have integrated equity assessments or an equity index into their budgeting process. (See “Use of data” on page 7 for examples.)

Building strong, active, and enduring champions throughout city government sustains CoO work and progress to advance equity. Mayoral terms end and political winds change. Interviewees recognize the importance of having a wider bench of committed individuals at all levels of city government to ensure that efforts are carried forward. To some extent, this is already occurring; moving forward, cities will need to seed equity values more deeply into their culture and policies.

It gives me goosebumps thinking about firefighters sitting down to talk with a researcher about work that impacts public health. If you had said that to me 15 years ago, I'd have said, ‘Sure, that's gonna happen...’ But now we're at that place.

The greatest gift for me is when I hear our city manager or assistant city manager talk about the social determinants of health because in the past nobody has ever done that. The cohorts with the National League of Cities and others are still going to need to take place for this to become part of our foundation.

Las Vegas, NV: Reducing disparities in neighborhoods

Las Vegas joined the Action Cohort in 2019 to focus on reducing health disparities in the city’s historically African American, and now disinvested, neighborhood. At the urging of NLC staff, the team expanded its work to be much more encompassing and impactful by envisioning a sustainable structure for systems change. This work was ignited after the Mayor and city council passed a resolution mandating the city to develop a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiative to focus on the needs of all marginalized groups and reduce disparities to ensure well-being for all residents. After a very robust resident engagement process with additional support after the CoO cohort ended, the city developed and adopted a comprehensive *DEI for Excellence Roadmap* in 2021. The Roadmap embeds equity into the city council’s overall strategic priorities for the city, embeds DEI accountabilities in staff competencies and training, and supports departments in creating action plans and performance indicators that align with the city priorities, including purchasing, community benefits, communications, and direct service delivery. The city’s continued work in the original neighborhood serves as a “living case study and catalyst for the work at the city level.”

Multi-sector partnerships

Most cities interviewed have created or deepened multi-sector partnerships, progressing toward strong, lasting relationships, aligned policies, and investments to reduce disparities. Charlotte, NC's relationship with Atrium Health brings access to important health data which the city will use to assess outcomes for a pilot housing program. For Napa partner Workforce Alliance of the North Bay, the 2019-2020 Action Cohort experience was transformative and has led to significant changes in approach. "Now we are asking 'What does an equitable economic recovery look like?' and 'What is a quality job?'"

Roanoke and its partner Carilion Clinic are developing a resident-led process to identify interventions for improving health outcomes with a request to anchor institutions for ongoing investment. In addition, Carilion, deepening its commitment to addressing health, disparities, and equity issues with other partner organizations, recently joined forces with the city on a phone campaign to connect underserved populations with COVID-19 vaccination clinics.

Community voice

I would encourage folks going through a program like this one to put the role of the people you're attempting to serve at the center of what you're doing and then drive the entire plan around that perspective.

CoO cities have created meaningful structures for engaging new and diverse resident voices in shaping communities. Las Vegas described an 'aha' moment around differences in resident and city perceptions of city requests for 'input'. For the city it was a sincere ask, but residents "felt that we [the city] had already made up our minds about what was going to happen. So 'input' wasn't really what was being asked for." Las Vegas changed its approach to working with residents, hiring community outreach staff with the sole responsibility of cultivating and maintaining relationships with residents and neighborhood leaders as partners in city planning and investment decisions.

Several cities—East Point, Birmingham, and Roanoke (in process)—have created structured resident engagement and leadership programs. Napa implemented new strategies for engaging Latinx residents, holding meetings in Spanish and developing communications specifically targeted to a Spanish-speaking audience. Lawrence, MA describes inviting an investor to lead a group of residents at a community forum around housing needs and challenges. After the conversation, the investor finally understood the need for affordable housing from the residents' perspective, an example of shifting mindset through personal experience.

Roanoke, VA: Residents recommend priority neighborhood

For Roanoke, the typical process for choosing a new target neighborhood for concentrated HUD community development block grant funding was for the city planning department to identify and evaluate possible neighborhoods and select one. In 2020, Roanoke tried something new^v. Building on a legacy of strong partnering in Roanoke Valley around the Community Health Needs Assessment and supported by their CoO work, the city was at an improved level of readiness to better address equity. With facilitation assistance from outside experts, the planning department convened a group of residents specifically selected for their individual expertise, to consider the options and recommend the next target neighborhood. The process is designed to reflect resident values and priorities and is a good example of placing residents at the center of a decision that will connect to multiple projects around social determinants of health.

To think about change being driven internally in these communities and communities finding their own solutions is so powerful.

Tacoma, WA: Resident-guided job pathways pilot

Tacoma is one of the most racially diverse cities in Washington State with 40% of residents identifying as Latino, African American, Asian and Pacific Islander, Multiracial or Native American.^{vi} Tacoma's Mayors' Institute team has developed a pilot job pathway program for BIPOC residents of public housing who emerged from the pandemic facing job displacement and high barriers to employment. The pilot incorporates substantial involvement from residents to co-design a program that addresses the challenges that individuals face in accessing employment opportunities and includes the types of support residents identified that they need to be successful. Recognizing it has a trust gap with the community, the city contracted with a local organization with deep relationships in the geographic area to engage residents as co-designers. Through partnerships with healthcare anchors, participants will learn directly from the hospitals who aim to provide them living wage work after successfully completing the program. Tacoma hopes to scale the concept to other employment pathways across the city.

Use of data

Participating cities recognize the importance of using data to pinpoint disparities, inform strategies and assess outcomes—but vary in capacity. Examples below illustrate how cities and their partners are expanding their use of data:

- ▶ **Birmingham** expanded the capabilities of its existing SHAPE BHAM health dashboard for all 99 neighborhoods and developed new strategies for using the data to drive equitable decisions. Its Complete Neighborhoods' approach is to ask: *'What is missing in this neighborhood from an equity perspective?'*
- ▶ In the 2021 Community of Practice, **Lawrence** is disaggregating its data into smaller geographic segments to expand its application.
- ▶ Several cities have initiated data partnerships with healthcare providers to track outcomes.
- ▶ Looking ahead to 2023, **Roanoke** plans to initiate budgeting for equitable outcomes which requires developing an entirely new array of performance measures and anticipated outcomes.^{vii}
- ▶ As part of its own community health assessment, Roanoke's healthcare partner is now identifying community-level and project-level outcomes for its priority areas.

The cohort helped us realize that we had no metrics in place to measure where we are and where we want to be."

Conclusion

Through Cities of Opportunity, NLC has expanded the capacity and commitment from small and mid-sized cities to eliminate inequities and ensure that all residents have the same opportunities for well-being. Through bold and transformational actions, participating cities have forged unique pathways to expand and achieve equity for their communities. A significant part of these efforts are the partnerships and ‘community problem-solving ecosystem’^{viii} that have emerged and are helping cities address issues that have been buried for decades.

Learn more about NLC’s Cities of Opportunity initiative by contacting CoO@nlc.org

Cities of Opportunity Participants Interviewed (By Population)	500,000 - 1M	Region
	City/State Charlotte, NC Las Vegas, NV	Southeast West
	100,000 – 500,000	
	Birmingham, AL Grand Rapids, MI Roanoke, VA Tacoma, WA	Southeast Midwest Southeast West
	Less than 100,000	
Duluth, MN East Point, GA Huntington, WV Lawrence, MA Napa, CA	Midwest Southeast Southeast Northeast West	

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Special thanks to Cities of Opportunity partners:

- ▶ Consilience Group, LLC - Cities of Opportunity strategic partner

Other national partners:

- ▶ CoO data partner - mySidewalk
- ▶ Community of Practice partners - Center for Community Advancement of Community Health and Equity (CACHE) and City Health Dashboard
- ▶ Mayors’ Institute partners - NeighborWorks America, Democracy Collaborative-Healthcare Anchor Network, Bloomberg American Health Initiative, and the Coalition for Community Schools
- ▶ CoO evaluation partner - Success Measures at NeighborWorks America

And all of this is only possible because of the dedicated hard work of the teams from all cities who participated in Cities of Opportunity programs. As always, we learn as much from them as we hope they gained from NLC’s support.

Endnotes

ⁱ 2020 Census Updates: Survey Shows Which Cities Gained and Lost Population, NY Times, Updated August 19, 2021. Accessed September 20, 2021.

ⁱⁱ Cities chosen for the interviews reflect a mix of geography, city size, program and cohorts. Two or more individuals from each city team participated in the interviews. Success Measures, an outcome evaluation group at NeighborWorks America, conducted the survey and the interviews.

ⁱⁱⁱ Learning Lab was added in late 2020 and, therefore, was not included in the interviews.

^{iv} An 8-week resident leadership and capacity building program (East Point Equity Leaders Academy) centered around equity and what it means for community residents

^v Kamler, A., Weiss, L. Chittum, C, Owusu, S. and Gold, R, National Academy of Medicine, *Public Deliberation in Service to Health Equity: Investing Resources in Roanoke, Virginia*, August 17, 2020, <https://nam.edu/public-deliberation-in-service-to-health-equity-investing-resources-in-roanoke-virginia/> Accessed September 16, 2021.

^{vi} City of Tacoma, *Why Equity?* <https://www.cityoftacoma.org/cms/One.aspx?portalId=169&pageId=115423> Accessed September 20, 2021.

^{vii} Roanoke already uses budgeting for outcomes, so incorporating equitable outcomes is not as large a leap as it would be for cities that are not already using an outcome-based approach.

^{viii} Cowell Jr., Bob, *How Roanoke, Virginia is Addressing Income Disparities and the Impact on Health Outcomes Over Time*, Health Affairs Blog, May 15, 2019, <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hblog20190513.588162/full/> Accessed September 24, 2021.