

How Cities Can Redefine Progress Toward Equity for Well-Being

**Making the Case for a Comprehensive,
Equity-Centered Systems Approach
and the Data to Support It**

A Message Guide for Cities of Opportunity

Contents

Introduction	3
The Messages	5
Topline messages	7
Topline messages expanded with supporting points	8
<i>The inspiration: Pursuing equity to ensure well-being for all people</i>	9
<i>The opportunity: Become a city defined by equity to advance city-wide well-being</i>	10
<i>The promise: What will be different and proof of concept</i>	12
<i>Join in the solution: What it will take and call to action</i>	13
Appendix	15
<i>Appendix A: Additional talking points on what kind of data are needed</i>	16
<i>Appendix B: Case studies</i>	18
<i>Appendix C: Additional resources</i>	20
<i>Appendix D: Partners in this work</i>	21

Introduction

Cities of Opportunity are putting equity at the core of their decision-making. They are crafting policies and budgets that advance equitable opportunities for long-term health improvement and well-being across multiple factors: physical, mental, social, emotional, financial, environmental and others identified with communities. They are moving away from tackling single issues within discrete departments and systems. Instead, they are looking at actions that will address multiple issues at once. They are creating new ways of operating more collaboratively to effectively address holistic measures of health and well-being—in ways that are meaningful to residents across their cities.



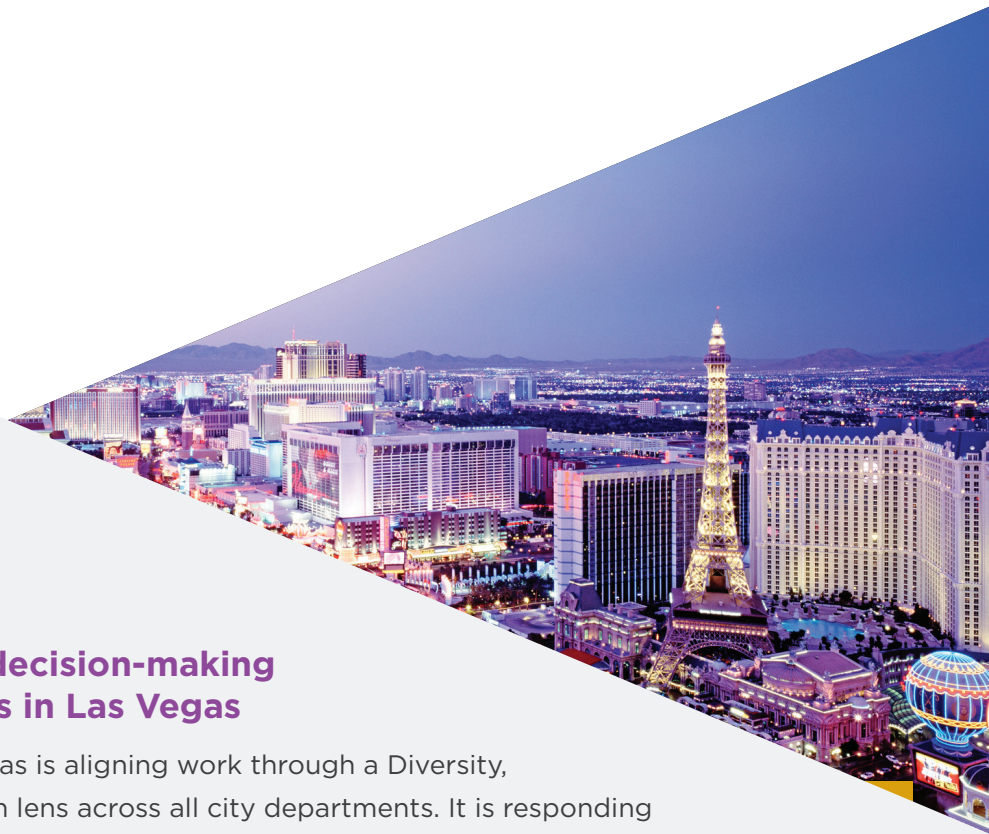
Equity work often begins with a definition of the desired end state for all city residents—whether that’s called equity, dignity, opportunity, well-being or something else depending on community priorities. **Cities of Opportunity and others committed to this vision need a holistic way to see how different groups of people are doing and to chart progress toward their end-state goals.** With responsive indicators informed by residents and multisector partners—along with a commitment to ensure participation and belonging among all residents—they can see and leverage strengths, close gaps, craft strategies and budgets, take action, measure success and build accountability. This approach helps ensure equitable access to resources that support systems change encompassing multiple dimensions of health and well-being. That is the foundation of the Cities of Opportunity initiative.

EXAMPLE:

**Equity-based decision-making
across domains in Las Vegas**

The City of Las Vegas is aligning work through a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion lens across all city departments. It is responding to a unanimous mandate from its mayor and city council to promote the well-being of all residents by:

- ◆ Prioritizing equity and inclusion in city strategic priorities of economic diversification, health care and public safety
- ◆ Infusing equity into city-wide policies for authentic community engagement, inclusive communications, community benefits, talent development and procurement
- ◆ Centering equity as the driver for excellence across and among multiple services, including housing, neighborhood revitalization, community services, youth and workforce development



The Messages

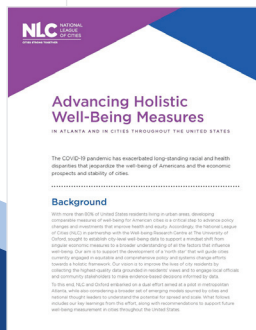
These messages—informed by work happening in cities across the country, shaped with input from city leaders—help cities make the case for a comprehensive, equity-centered systems approach and the data to support it. They are intended to provide a starting point and need to be customized based on input from residents and multisector partners, your city priorities, and your commitment to advance equity, dignity and opportunity.



As you use the messages, integrate the language you use to describe your desired end state. As a placeholder, we are using the term well-being, meaning **thriving in every aspect of life and having opportunities to create meaningful futures**. This encompasses physical, mental, emotional, financial, social, spiritual and economic health—for individuals through every stage of life and collectively. It is tightly linked with the well-being of the environment and our planet.* (See bottom of page for more detail.)

This section includes:

- ◆ **Topline messages**, the four key points cities and stakeholders typically use in all of their communications.
- ◆ **The topline messages built out with talking points and proof points**. Layer in your own local data, community priorities, stories and other details to make your case.
- ◆ **Quotes from city leaders** that informed these messages and show how the work is happening on the ground.



Additional resource

In addition to this message guide, National League of Cities (NLC) also offers **Advancing Holistic Well-Being Measures**, the findings from a collaborative partnership to explore how cities are advocating for, designing and pursuing equity (health and racial) approaches. This includes the types of data needed for community-driven decision-making—meaning authentically engaging residents and working with multisector partners—to ensure that policies and systems align with community needs and create meaningful outcomes for all people.

Well-being and other terms to describe the goal

The term well-being is used by some cities in the United States and globally to describe how they define progress, their “north star” or the goal of their equity work. But it can create confusion since there is not a shared definition. Some cities are instead using “dignity economy” or “equity index.” “Equal opportunity,” “fair chance” or “level playing field” may resonate in others. (Note that the term equity also does not carry a shared meaning and may be less effective or relevant in different cities.) Regardless of your terms, define them with community input and some testing among your key audiences, and be clear about what you mean.

* The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. <https://www.rwjf.org/en/library/research/2019/01/advancing-well-being-in-an-inequitable-world.html>

Topline messages

1

Cities across the country are shifting the way they think about progress, broadening from economic measures alone to a comprehensive idea of well-being for all people. Shaped with the community, this approach helps cities more effectively and equitably allocate resources where they are most needed and inform policy decisions that provide opportunities for well-being to all people.

2

We can use this approach in our city to improve equity, dignity and opportunity for every person. We can better prioritize our actions and resources—and hold leaders accountable—when we work with the community to define what well-being looks like, use data to help us see what we need and how we’re doing, and commit to working collaboratively.

3

This approach shows promise here and/or is working in similar cities.

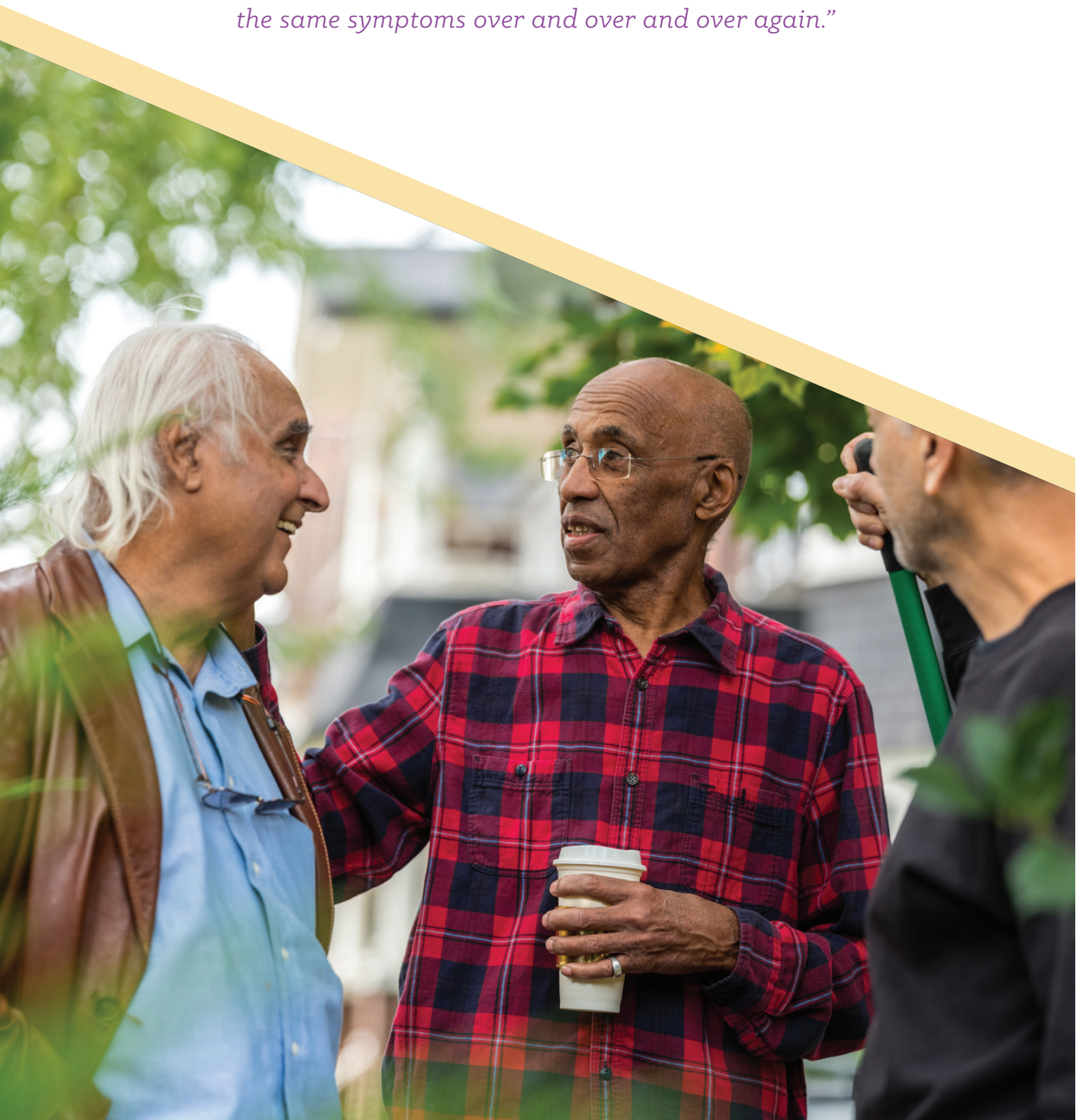
4

We have an opportunity to work together, with communities and across organizations and sectors, to redefine progress as well-being for all people, and to design investments, policies and practices that get us there.

Topline messages expanded with supporting points

Throughout this section we've included quotes from city leaders and others who helped explore and create these messages.

"... if we don't get to the underlying problem, which is a lack of well-being, then we'll be faced with the same symptoms over and over and over again."



The inspiration: Pursuing equity to ensure well-being for all people

KEY MESSAGE:

Cities across the country are shifting the way they think about progress, broadening from economic measures alone to a comprehensive idea of well-being for all people. Shaped with the community, this approach helps cities more effectively and equitably allocate resources where they are most needed and inform policy decisions that provide opportunities for well-being to all people.

PROOF POINTS:

- ◆ **Well-being is sometimes defined as the set of conditions that allow people to thrive in every aspect of life and have opportunities to create the futures they want.**
- ◆ **Individual and collective well-being, opportunity and dignity are largely determined by where people live and the power they feel to create change. Not everyone has a fair chance because current and historical community conditions are so different.**
 - ◇ Up to 80% of the factors that define well-being, opportunity and dignity are determined in our neighborhoods, schools, places of worship and jobs, and by our policies and community structures.*
 - ◇ There are wide variations in how long and how well people live from ZIP code to ZIP code. Differences in neighborhood conditions—from exposure to air pollution and toxins, to accessibility of healthy food, green space and medical care—tie directly to structural racism and economic disinvestment. (**Robert Wood Johnson Foundation** offers a tool to see life expectancy in specific ZIP codes.)
 - ◇ It's vital for cities and their people to have the right set of data to clearly see and solve for these multiple factors—otherwise we'll be faced with the same symptoms over and over again.
- ◆ **COVID-19 showed how vital real-time, robust data are to inform where and how we need to take action. The pandemic (and related relief funding) has also presented cities with an opportunity to put innovative measures, policies and other actions in place to improve well-being, opportunity and dignity, and to build resilience for the future.**

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

* Magnan, Sanne. “Social Determinants of Health 101 for Health Care: Five Plus Five,” National Academy of Medicine. 2017. <https://nam.edu/social-determinants-of-health-101-for-health-care-five-plus-five/>.

The opportunity: Become a city defined by equity to advance city-wide well-being

KEY MESSAGE:

We can use this approach in our city to improve equity, dignity and opportunity for every person. We can better prioritize our actions and resources—and hold leaders accountable—when we work with the community to define what well-being looks like, use data to help us see what we need and how we’re doing, and commit to working collaboratively.

“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.”

PROOF POINTS:

- ◆ **The first step is to engage community members most impacted by historical disinvestment so we can follow their lead to define what well-being means. What do our people need to flourish, individually and collectively? How does that change from community to community?**
- ◇ The yardstick of growth alone—economic, business, housing, other—has been used to measure progress in cities for a long time. But growth alone doesn’t always correlate to good health and well-being.
 - COVID-19 illustrated this. The economy bounced back quickly overall and some people benefited greatly. At the same time, many people lost their jobs and financial security, social isolation and mental health challenges soared, and there were stark disparities in infections and deaths as well as access to vaccines.
 - This form of measurement can also mask inequity and other damaging impacts. You can have both strong economic growth and increased economic inequity.
- ◇ A growth-focused definition of progress persists, though, because we lack common language to set goals and track progress in a different way.

“When you look at blight, crime and poor educational outcomes, they are essentially economic models of humiliation. ... How do we create a new economic model that is focused on the inherent dignity of every single citizen?”

- ◆ **We need data that let us see community strengths and what's working, not just disparities and needs. It takes a mix of data to see interconnected issues and systemic solutions.**

“Data isn’t everything. People are needed on the ground to talk to the community and understand the different needs. No matter what the data shows, when you talk to people it puts a completely different take on the numbers.”

- ◇ Without a shared, comprehensive definition of well-being and a way to measure it, we’re often looking at isolated data like economic growth or health outcomes. Those further define problems without showing solutions.
- ◇ Some data fail to see all people and their unique circumstances, making it difficult to understand who is thriving and who is not, and why. And the data don’t usually show us the factors that influence the outcomes.
- ◇ We need to see all of the dimensions (physical, emotional, social, spiritual, ecological and other factors defined by the community) that unlock the power of human potential across the lifespan.
- ◇ Subjective data, gleaned by asking people how they are doing, help us hear people’s own words and allow us to see beyond raw outcome data to root causes. They can help us see solutions that can have a broad impact.
 - For example, one city heard from its residents that bus schedules were a major barrier. A small adjustment there could have an impact on employment, civic engagement and many other related issues.
- ◇ The history of our city can help us understand why things are the way they are and the barriers that were in place from the start.

→ Please see **Appendix A** for a more detailed list of the type of data needed to inform this work.

- ◆ **Cities taking a well-being approach commit to looking beyond singular issues and outcomes to understand what’s causing those outcomes. From that perspective they can tackle the structures and systems that must work together to support whole people and whole community progress.**
 - ◇ When we focus on singular issues our funding options are more limited and restrictive. We may be leaving money on the table.
- ◆ **Baked into this approach is a commitment to equity and actions to advance it, ensuring all people have access to opportunities for well-being, especially those who have been marginalized or excluded from opportunity.**

The promise: What will be different and proof of concept

KEY MESSAGE:

This approach shows promise here and/or is working in similar cities.

“[The] Well-Being Index framework is being used by all city departments to form the next city budget and work plan priorities. It is also being used to engage with community partners and residents in new ways to work together on key issues.”

PROOF POINTS:

- ◆ **Cities taking a multidimensional well-being approach are creating more effective, connected, responsive systems to take on complex needs.**
 - ◇ Communities have a say in what is prioritized, valued and measured. People’s needs are centered. We define progress together.
 - ◇ Cities have data to guide innovation, investments and infrastructure to support all the factors that influence quality of life and human dignity. They are better able to ensure that communities get what they need, see change and progress over time, and hold leaders accountable.
 - ◇ Stakeholders can look across issues, rather than at siloed problems, to understand broad needs and opportunities and create collaborative solutions.
- ◆ **Approaches are as unique as cities. There are many ways to measure well-being and to incorporate well-being indices into the policymaking process.**
 - ◇ In some cities, well-being becomes the guidepost for decisions. For example, a data index may accompany any policy proposal, clearly showing how the policy will address the priorities defined with the community.

→ *Examples are powerful! Please see **Appendix B** for case studies you can share.*

“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 brings.”

Join in the solution: What it will take and call to action

KEY MESSAGE:

City leaders are in a position to enact real change with their community, with both immediate and long-term direct impacts. Our opportunity is to redefine progress as well-being for all people, and to design equity-centered investments, policies and practices that get us there.

PROOF POINTS:

- ◆ **Fund local work to listen to the community and define what well-being means, how we'll measure progress, and how we'll ensure ongoing participation and feedback. Bring community members into leadership roles to ensure the voice of the community is present.**
- ◆ **Commit to gathering real-time, locally-specific, relevant data that show the full picture of how people are doing across the continuum of life, illuminate assets and opportunities as well as needs, and help evaluate what's working.**
 - ◇ This doesn't have to mean completely reinventing what we have.
 - It means looking at how existing measures affect and are affected by each other, so solutions can be interrelated, not one-dimensional and isolated.
 - A well-being approach uses data to drive meaningful outcomes and benchmark progress. It's a different way to integrate and synthesize data so cities can see the big picture and consider more holistic solutions.
 - It requires looking at the factors the community tells us shape well-being, along with an understanding of the underlying structural and systemic causes.
 - ◇ If new data are needed, multiple tools exist for U.S. cities to track a range of indicators. These can be good starting points and offer flexibility to tailor the model to our community.
 - One challenge: Some of our existing data sets come with significant lag times, making it difficult to get "real-time" assessments of well-being. We need to augment them with real-time, community-informed data.

→ Please see **Appendix A** for a more detailed list of the type of data needed to inform this work.

◆ **Use that data effectively to inform decision-making.**

- ◇ Work with the community to build on strengths and address critical needs, guided by the data.
- ◇ Use data—with community input—to track progress and create accountability.
- ◇ Build internal city and institutional capacity to understand root causes driving data trends.

◆ **Ensure cross-sector collaboration and use of data to shape more holistic, efficient and effective practices that respond to root causes.**

◆ **Recognize that this approach requires innovation, experimentation and adjustments—and a commitment to staying the course.**

- ◇ Provide technical assistance and funding to city and community teams to gather and use the data to drive decision-making. (Note that National Leagues of Cities' Cities of Opportunity program is a resource for cities seeking to apply cross-issue data to work that will have an impact on well-being.)
- ◇ Train and support community members to be experts on data that speak to their lived experience, and place them in positions to effectively use the metric to advocate to their local leaders.
- ◇ Set realistic and shared expectations for the pace of change.
- ◇ Stay the course to give the data time to build, inform action and track progress.



Appendix



Appendix A: Additional talking points on what kind of data are needed

Once you have drawn decision-makers into a conversation about well-being or health equity-centered approaches, use these points for a deeper conversation about specific data.

We need data that:

- ◆ Reflect community priorities and needs as informed by the community, painting a comprehensive picture of the community, including elevating assets and what's working as well as helping us understand disparities and gaps.
- ◆ Highlight the impact of systemic racism on community well-being. Unless well-being measurement gets at the underlying structural and systemic determinants of health and well-being, it will not meaningfully address equity.
- ◆ Are gathered consistently across the city; are able to be disaggregated at the community level to show unique assets and needs within communities; and inform where action should be taken first to have the greatest impact.
- ◆ Move away from ranking, comparing and labeling some places “worse.” Instead of pitting communities against each other, use data to help communities be their own competition, looking at their own data over time to show their growth.
- ◆ Include a range of measures, both objective and subjective. Most metrics are built on objective data, observations made about people and conditions. We also need subjective data that show how people say they're doing, including feelings of connection, engagement and purpose that can greatly impact well-being.
 - ◇ Subjective data methods can include surveys, listening sessions, feedback loops, community members in leadership roles and other tools.
 - ◇ Research shows that early indicators that people are struggling, for example feeling isolated or in despair, can be powerful predictors of future crises, such as opioid overdose and suicide.

- ◆ Are comprehensive and can inform systemic solutions.
 - ◇ Some existing data sets look only at health (or even a specific disease), or educational outcomes, or economic growth or other isolated issues. That makes it hard to see interconnected issues and collaborative solutions.
 - ◇ Some fail to see all people and their unique circumstances, making it difficult to understand who is thriving and who is not, and why.
- ◆ Are current. We're often at the mercy of outdated national data sets that are updated only every three years or more. We're making decisions based on the past.
- ◆ Are evaluated with community input, respecting cultural context, to understand the "why" behind the data.
- ◆ Are shared and accessible to all stakeholders, providing a common foundation of facts to guide policy conversations.

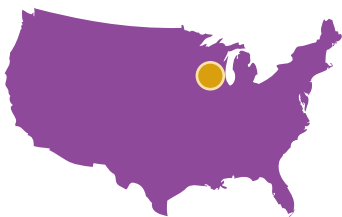


Appendix B: Case studies

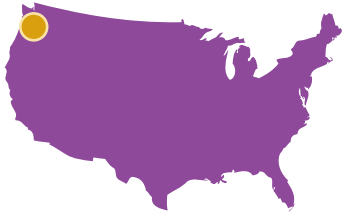
More than any other request, we're hearing from cities that they need case studies and proof that a well-being approach—and related data—have an impact on policy and, ultimately, equitable well-being.

National League of Cities research shows that a number of cities across the country are using well-being and equity data to prioritize placement of streetlights, parks, grocery stores, broadband and more. They're using it to focus tobacco prevention activities, create paid parental leave policies, make zoning decisions, leverage federal nutrition assistance funds, foster social connections, define opportunity zones and inform other decisions.

This work is still new, so longitudinal data are just starting to emerge; NLC will continue tracking and sharing results. Here is a starting point that can support your conversations.

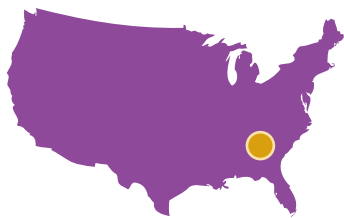


In **Green Bay, Wisconsin**, and many other cities, community members provide input through regular surveys. Results go back to the community and partners to identify innovative solutions to improve health and well-being.



In **Tacoma, Washington**, the Equity Index is one of the primary tools that city staff, community members, partners and other decision-makers can use to help ensure that they are making data-informed decisions that address these indicators and improve access to opportunity for all Tacoma residents.





In **Atlanta**, data from the Gallup Well-Being Index offers insights that were previously hidden. Stakeholders are considering how they might incorporate this new perspective in policy work.

- ◆ The index significantly increases a city's ability to predict business, health, and community strengths and needs beyond typical economic or physical health metrics alone.
- ◆ For example, Atlanta—and other cities—can see information about how hopeful people feel, whether their job is connected with their natural talents, whether they feel pride in their community and other details. These can be valuable indicators of both strength and needs, and can inform decisions about economic development, community revitalization, services design and other critical actions.
- ◆ People's response to whether they are “proud of their community or the area where they live” can predict how likely they are to advocate for positive changes, as well as whether they are likely to stay and grow in the community versus moving away.
- ◆ People said that a key part of their well-being is how much they feel they can be part of something and create change in their own lives and their communities.
- ◆ People's response to whether they “... learn or do something interesting every day” can indicate whether their city has a lively culture that helps connect and inspire people.



Appendix C: Additional resources

Well-being measurement and indicators

- ◆ **Advancing Holistic Well-Being Measures** contains the findings from an NLC collaborative partnership to explore how cities are advocating for, designing and pursuing equity (health and racial) approaches. This includes the types of data needed for community-driven decision-making, meaning authentically engaging residents and working with multisector partners, to ensure that policies and systems align with community needs and create meaningful outcomes for all people.
- ◆ **City Health Dashboard** shows where cities across the U.S. stand on over 35 measures of health and factors affecting health across five areas: Health Behaviors, Social and Economic Factors, Physical Environment, Health Outcomes and Clinical Care.
- ◆ **Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Better Life Index** offers suggested well-being indicators that cities have customized and used.
- ◆ **WIN Network (Well Being in the Nation)** is a growing U.S. strategic network working together to advance intergenerational well-being and equity. Its **Vital Conditions** are informing well-being indicators and data in several cities.

Well-being approaches

- ◆ **Robert Wood Johnson Foundation** has gathered insights on well-being approaches around the world and how they can be applied in the U.S.
- ◆ **Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEAll)** is a global collaboration of organizations, alliances, movements and individuals working toward a well-being economy, delivering human and ecological well-being. Its **Policy Design Guide** offers starting points for consideration.

Well-being narratives

- ◆ **What If Progress Meant Well-Being for All?** National League of Cities took part in a project with **RAND Corporation** and **Metropolitan Group** to explore how narratives about progress can hinder or advance equity-focused approaches. For example, the persistent narrative in the U.S. is that progress is all about economic growth. What if that narrative shifted to redefine progress as well-being for all people? Very different priorities and decisions would likely result. Learn more about how this is playing out globally and how to apply it in your work.

Appendix D: Partners in this work

Georgia Health Policy Center
(GHPC)/Georgia State University
Research Foundation

- ◆ Karen Minyard, CEO, GHPC
 - ◆ Bill Rencher, Senior Research Associate, GHPC and Georgia State University
 - ◆ Robyn Nichole Bussey, Research Associate II, GHPC and Georgia State University
 - ◆ Carrie Oliver, Research Associate II, GHPC and Georgia State University
-

**Atlanta Regional Collaborative
for Health Improvement (ARCHI)**

- ◆ Katie Horton, Research Professor
 - ◆ Naomi Seiler, Associate Professor
-

Georgia Municipal Association
(GMA)

- ◆ Brian Wallace, Director, Strategic Initiatives
 - ◆ Holger Loewendorf, Research Manager
-

Metropolitan Group

- ◆ Kirsten Gunst, Senior Director
 - ◆ Jennifer Messenger, Senior Executive Vice President
-

**Wellbeing Research Centre,
Oxford University**

- ◆ Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, Director
 - ◆ Laura Taylor, Centre Manager
-

The Gallup Organization

- ◆ Joe Daly, Senior Partner
 - ◆ Ilana Ron Levey, Senior Director, Public Sector Consulting
-

National League of Cities

- ◆ Sue Polis, Director, Health & Wellness
 - ◆ Kitty Hsu Dana, Senior Health Policy Advisor
 - ◆ Arianna Miskin, Fellow
-

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