

U.S. cities
are tackling
complex issues
and meeting
their equity
goals using this
10-step process

THE POLICY AND SYSTEMS CHANGE COMPASS

Overview

Local city leaders have significant power to advance health equity in their communities. But doing so requires policy and systems change, which can be much more challenging to achieve than changing practices.

To help city leaders navigate the course towards equitable health outcomes via policy and systems change, the Urban Institute (Urban) and the National League of Cities (NLC) developed the **Policy and Systems Change Compass** (the Compass). This 10-step approach helps cities design and advance policy and systems changes through a cohesive and repeatable process that is rooted in equity and wellbeing for all.

The following overview provides:

- ◆ A brief walk-through of the 10-step process
- ◆ Real-world examples of how city leaders are using the Compass to make significant progress toward advancing health equity in their communities
- ◆ Peer insights and information on how other cities can use the Compass process to tackle complex issues and meet equity goals



Rather than just trying to address the symptoms over and over again, and wondering why we're not making progress, this gave us the opportunity to slow down and take a very focused approach. To take an idea and really be able to think about it and take the time with it that's necessary. It was an incredible opportunity.”

—**Bucoda Warren,**
Chief Policy Analyst,
Tacoma, Wash.

Is it a System Change, Policy Change or Practice Change?

A system is a network of interacting, interrelated and interdependent things that come together to solve a problem or achieve a purpose. Together the components form a complex and unified whole. For example, a transportation system solves the problem of how to move people around and includes roads, railways, trains, drivers, policies, funding streams, etc.

A policy is a set of rules, goals, requirements or regulations that govern the operation of the system. They involve formal actions by governing bodies and public officials. For example, transportation policies might set speed limits or designate bus or bike lanes. In some cases, the policies provide resources and funding to address past, present or future community problems or needs.

A practice is an action or behavior—a process, forum or tactic; it's how things are done on the ground, a customary approach or activity that helps implement a policy, plan or program. For example, a transportation practice could include the way bus drivers adhere to their schedules, methods used for traffic enforcement or how commuters use public transit.

Systems change is change in the policies, practices and operations of a system—including decision-making authority, distribution of resources, power dynamics, networks, relationships, attitudes and cultural norms/values.

“

If you follow the steps that are given to you, it works. We came out of the process with a very clear vision of what we wanted to do, how we want to do it, how we were going to get across the finish line. But you can't rush the process.”

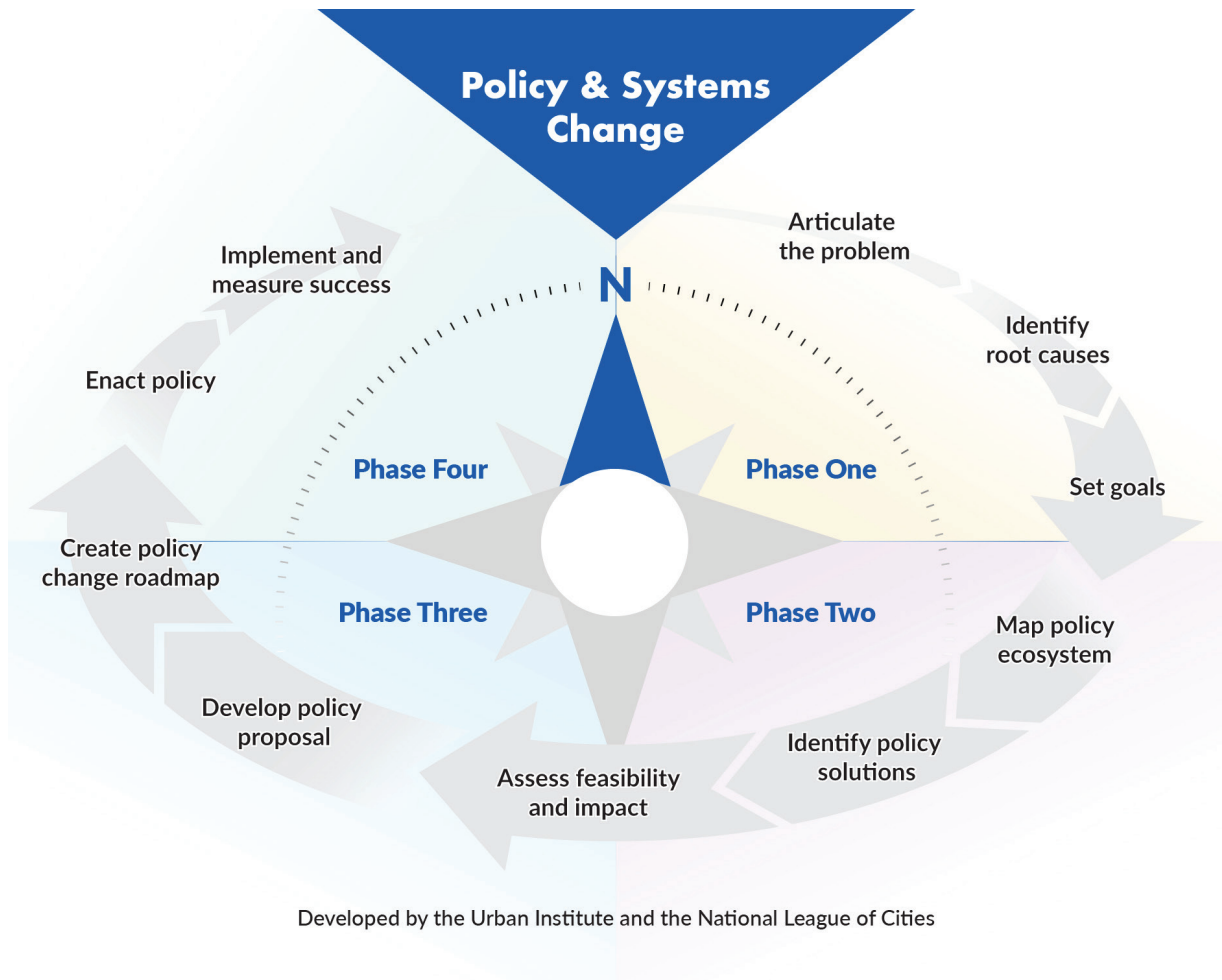
—Anderson Sainci,
Director of the Office of Shared
Prosperity and Community Support,
Dubuque, Iowa

Background

Between 2022-2024, NLC and Urban worked with teams from seven U.S. cities to apply the Compass process to their most pressing issues related to wealth inequities and equitable climate resilience. Working together with facilitators and subject matter experts from both NLC and Urban, the city teams received guidance on applying the first three phases of the Compass process through a series of hands-on virtual workshops, office hours, peer-to-peer connections and personalized support. This culminated with the city teams presenting their final policy strategies and their tactical work plans to reach the final phase of the Compass process, Implementation and Measurement.



THE POLICY AND SYSTEMS CHANGE COMPASS



The Compass Design

The 10-step Compass process is divided into **four interconnected phases**. The phases move cities through the process, from identifying the root causes of an issue to developing an actionable policy solution that addresses a health equity challenge.

Phase 1: Getting Specific about the Problem and Setting Goals

Phase 2: Identifying Solutions to Address Root Causes

Phase 3: Writing the Policy Change Proposal and Roadmap

Phase 4: Enacting the Policy and Measuring Progress toward Goals

These four phases and the 10 steps within them help cities focus time, energy and attention in order to benefit from the process and drive true policy and systems change.

“

You may come in with an overarching issue that is pretty high-level. But this framework brings you down to something that is tangible and actionable.”

—**Samir Deshpande**,
Environmental Health Manager,
Dearborn, Mich.

“

We'd ask 'why' and come up with an answer...but then we had to ask 'why' again. It really pushed us to get to the root causes. And once we were able to wrap our minds around that, it was a smooth journey for us.”

—**Anderson Sainci**,
Director of the Office of Shared
Prosperity and Community Support,
Dubuque, Iowa

PHASE ONE: GET SPECIFIC ABOUT THE PROBLEM AND SET GOALS



STEP 1: Articulate the Problem

The first step asks city teams to look at existing data and evidence, then select one specific community problem to address during the Compass process. They then craft an initial Problem Statement.



STEP 2: Identify Root Causes

The next step is to unearth the reasons the problem exists and ask *why* those reasons exist. City teams take considerable time in this phase to ask “why?” repeatedly—delving deeper and deeper to get a firm understanding of the root causes holding the community problem in place—then choose one root cause to focus on during the Compass process.



STEP 3: Determine Impact and Set Goals

The focus of the third step in Phase One is on desired results and what the policy or systems change should create for both residents and for a better functioning system. This requires city teams to craft an Impact Statement and then to ask: What needs to change within the system in order to create that impact for residents?



Examples of Phase 1 Progress

DEARBORN, MICHIGAN

ARTICULATE THE PROBLEM

Residents in Dearborn's South and East ends have significantly worse environmental outcomes due to systemic and historic disinvestment in public infrastructure.

IDENTIFY ROOT CAUSES

- ◆ Policies supporting industrial manufacturing interests and racial hierarchies
- ◆ Lack of political power in working class and immigrant communities in hardest hit neighborhoods

DETERMINE IMPACT AND SET GOALS

Impact: In the future, we hope that policy prioritizes people closest to the pain. We strive to live up to Michigan's reputation as a climate haven and to see reconciliation between the city and communities that have been harmed by policies.

System Goals

- ◆ Capital investments incorporate climate equity considerations, including mitigating future extreme weather events.
- ◆ City staff understand how climate change impacts (hinders) their work and what they can do about it
- ◆ Negative effects of extreme weather are no longer felt disproportionately by South and East Ends
- ◆ A new framework is created for the city to guide and streamlines new public and private investments in environmental infrastructure

DUBUQUE, IOWA

ARTICULATE THE PROBLEM

There is no set city policy or guidance that outlines how data should be managed, collected, protected, shared and/or used equitably to address community needs.

IDENTIFY ROOT CAUSES

- ◆ Data usage in the city was happening primarily in silos
- ◆ Silos were created by lack of unified data policies
- ◆ lack of communication and collaboration across departments

DETERMINE IMPACT AND SET GOALS

Impact: If we address this problem, we would expect to see decisionmakers, city staff and community partners allocating resources where there is the most need. If we had better data at the local level, we would be able to evaluate how existing policies and programs address community needs.

System Goals

- ◆ A data system that integrates data from partner organizations and can help city decision makers identify trends and disparities so that they can understand where to allocate resources in order to better advance shared prosperity among their residents
- ◆ Data-use by partners to make Dubuque an equitable community of choice

Examples of Phase 1 Progress *continued*

TACOMA, WASHINGTON

ARTICULATE THE PROBLEM

Not all Tacomans are able to access the training and education pathways that meet their needs, which limits their ability to achieve economic stability and generate wealth.

IDENTIFY ROOT CAUSES

- ◆ Lack of accessible, good quality childcare options—one of the largest barriers to job attainment in the city

Impact: All Tacoma residents at all stages of life will have access to a pathway that meets their needs to enter the workforce and advance in their careers.

System Goals

- ◆ Collaborative partnerships between organizations, agencies and businesses to provide childcare
- ◆ Short-term certifications, internships and apprenticeships for childcare providers
- ◆ Businesses offering livable wage jobs with benefits such as childcare



This is the power of mapping: it places everything in context so you can see what's happening, for example, on the State level—which we may not be able to influence—and on the city level, where we can have influence.”

—**Samir Deshpande**,
Dearborn's Environmental
Health Manager

PHASE TWO: IDENTIFY SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESS ROOT CAUSES



STEP 4: Map the Policy Ecosystem

The first step in Phase Two is to create a *Policy Ecosystem Map*. The Policy Ecosystem Map is used to understand the local policy environment and to narrow down options to the most feasible policy proposal with the most impact.

Elements of the Policy Ecosystem Map include:

- ◆ **Broad policy categories and specific policies** that influence, or could influence, the identified root cause
- ◆ **Stakeholders** who either control, influence, support or oppose policy options
- ◆ **Forces impacting policies**, past and present, within and outside local government
- ◆ **Community roles and perspectives** that impact or respond to policies

As the Policy Ecosystem Map is drawn, city teams view it through an **equity lens** to ask,

“Where does equity come into play with this policy option?”

How can this policy option ensure equity/equitable benefits?”



STEP 5: Identify Policy Solutions

With the ecosystem mapped out, the next step is to gather more intelligence about potential policies to consider. Identifying specific policy options may require: 1) talking with public officials, staff and others in local government or from cities and counties that have adopted similar policies; 2) performing an internet scan for recent reports or articles about promising policies by national, regional or local organizations; and/or 3) engaging a consultant or partner with a local university to undertake a more in-depth scan of academic and policy research to identify evidence-based interventions.



STEP 6: Assess Feasibility and Impact

With some potential policies identified, city teams next assess the most promising options based on 1) the feasibility that they can be enacted and implemented given the current policy ecosystem and 2) the potential they have for achieving the goals and the desired impacts identified in Step 3.

This assessment is performed using a Feasibility and Impact Workbook that asks city teams to rate their policy options against a set of sub-factors: **internal dynamics** (such as budget, staff capacity, political environment), **external dynamics** (such as partner-organization capacity, state/federal spending), **community roles and perspectives** (such as public perceptions, awareness, level of support) and **windows of opportunity** (timing that could be leveraged to advance the policy).

Examples of Policy Solutions Considered

DEARBORN, MICHIGAN

- ◆ Codify requirements for Health Impact Assessments for infrastructure investment
- ◆ Establish a framework that defines climate resilience and equity principles for infrastructure investment
- ◆ Codify minimum standards for community engagement in climate and infrastructure projects

DUBUQUE, IOWA

- ◆ Develop a data governance policy

TACOMA, WASHINGTON

- ◆ Rezoning to allow for more child care centers
- ◆ Subsidizing childcare costs

PHASE THREE: WRITE THE POLICY CHANGE PROPOSAL AND ROADMAP



STEP 7: Develop the Policy Change Proposal

The Policy Change Proposal is an action plan that positions the policy for formal enactment by the local government's legislative body. This requires city teams to craft a compelling story that conveys the urgency of the issue and explains the practicality and promise of the solution so cities can build community support and political momentum.

The components of a clear policy change proposal are: 1) an explicit statement of the proposed policy change; 2) who is responsible for making the policy change; 3) the best timing to introduce and initiate policy change; and 4) the rationale for why the city needs to make this policy change.



STEP 8: Create the Policy Change Roadmap

The Policy Change Roadmap outlines the strategies and tactics for moving the proposal through the local government policy process. A strong roadmap identifies:

- ◆ **Barriers** identified in past steps and how the team will attempt to overcome them
- ◆ **Campaign activities** the team will undertake, such as conducting opposition research, building coalitions or activating grassroots support
- ◆ **Key steps and actions** needed to make the case for support—such as internal meetings, external outreach and engagement with core partners and stakeholders
- ◆ **Milestones** for policy adoption—such as securing champion support, identifying funding and boosting media coverage—and outlines a system to track these benchmarks
- ◆ **Measures of success** including the data points and indicators used to document progress toward enactment, track implementation and measure the policy's success.

Examples of Policy Change Proposals

DEARBORN, MICHIGAN

The city team plans to propose a framework defining climate resilience and equity principles for infrastructure investment. The Public Health and Strategy departments will be responsible for making this policy change. We will leverage our window of opportunity to advance our policy change agenda within the year.

DUBUQUE, IOWA

The city team plans to propose a new data governance policy (including rules regarding data utilization, sharing and standardization). The Mayor and City Council will be responsible for making this policy change and city partners will commit to abiding by the new policy. We will leverage the Council's current focus on becoming more data-driven and outcomes-focused to advance our policy change agenda.

TACOMA, WASHINGTON

The city team plans to propose legislation that sets a standard for training pathways in support of childcare providers. The Tacoma City Council would consider the legislation and will be responsible for making this policy change. We will leverage robust partnerships and community engagement to build on existing momentum to capitalize on the window of opportunity to advance our policy change agenda.

PHASE FOUR: ENACT THE POLICY AND MEASURE PROGRESS TOWARD GOALS

The speed at which cities move toward and ultimately enact new policies can, of course, vary greatly depending on multiple factors such as internal and external capacity, political environments, budget cycles and more.



STEP 9: Enact the Policy

This step is fulfilled by the local government adopting the policy change, either as originally envisioned or as amended/revised during the adoption process. This usually takes the form of a new local legislation or revisions to existing laws.



STEP 10: Implement and Measure Success

Cities complete this final step by using measures identified in Step 8 to track their progress and outcomes, and by developing a policy change measurement plan to keep on track.



Examples of Progress Toward Phase 4 (as of October 2024)

DEARBORN, MICHIGAN

- ◆ Conducting community engagement and feedback period for updated city master plan
- ◆ Building understanding internally to how various departments can impact resident health
- ◆ Identified a framework to guide decision-making process for infrastructure investment rooted in climate resistance and equity principles
- ◆ Creating the city's first environmental commission made up of residents and exploring new venues for having community conversations about issues

DUBUQUE, IOWA

- ◆ Surveyed departments on data usage and storage, and brought in a contractor to develop a data inventory
- ◆ Established a data governance committee
- ◆ Drafted a data governance policy that is under review

TACOMA, WASHINGTON

- ◆ Identified the city's role in the broader childcare network (such as permitting, planning and siting facilities)
- ◆ Built on existing network by bringing more entities to the table, including community organizations, nonprofits, state programs, the school district, the park district and more
- ◆ Explored funding sources to increase staff and build capacity
- ◆ Based on the Compass process, developed a city-specific Policy Development Guide for use across city departments for more intentional, focused conversations about policy development

If you are a city interested in using the Compass, please reach out to NLC at CoO@nlc.org.

For information on how the Compass was developed, please reach out to Joe Schilling of the Urban Institute at jschilling@urban.org.