

## REQUEST FOR APPLICATIONS

Growing and Retaining Our Workforce (GROW):

# Municipal Workforce Learning Lab

## OVERVIEW

Three cities dedicated to changing their approach to recruiting, training, and retaining their municipal workforce will be invited to join the **2026 Municipal Workforce Learning Lab**. Local government workforces are vital to the delivery of quality services to residents and the quality of life of communities. However, municipal leaders often struggle to develop and retain a strong workforce due to resource and capacity constraints, which can threaten their ability to provide services to their residents and limit overall economic growth in communities.

This **8-month intensive action planning process** will enable participating cities to develop a comprehensive, responsive approach to addressing their workforce challenges and opportunities through changes in policies, programs, and practices.

Participating cities will benefit from free coaching, technical assistance, and connections with peers tackling shared challenges. Additionally, participating cities will help inform NLC's future work, and possibly serve as national models for their peers.

|                                |                                                                                                                                    |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Proposal Due:</b>           | Friday, January 16th<br>by 11:59 PM EST                                                                                            |
| <b>Informational Webinar</b>   | December 9th, 2025 at 2:00 pm<br>ET. Register at <a href="https://nlc.org">NLC.org</a>                                             |
| <b>Selection Announcement:</b> | Thursday, January 29 <sup>th</sup> , 2026                                                                                          |
| <b>Project Dates:</b>          | February 2026 – September 2026                                                                                                     |
| <b>Submission Information:</b> | Please submit completed applications online at <a href="https://nlc.submittable.com/submit">https://nlc.submittable.com/submit</a> |
| <b>Questions?</b>              | Michael Bartlett at <a href="mailto:bartlett@nlc.org">bartlett@nlc.org</a> , (202) 626-3131                                        |

## CONTEXT AND THE GROW FRAMEWORK

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City governments employ more than 6.9 million workers and are struggling to fill critical positions, threatening their ability to provide residents with essential services and limiting overall economic growth. More than half of local government HR managers report [reopening positions](#) because of a lack of qualified candidates. Local government hiring is too lengthy, averaging [130 days to fill open positions](#) compared to 36 days in the private sector.

These challenges are creating real-world impacts for communities: [shortages of bus and rail operators](#) have forced transit systems to reduce service, [shortages of water operators](#) have led to water safety crises, and [unfilled finance positions](#) have contributed to credit downgrades for cities.

To respond to these challenges, NLC and its partner the American Institutes for Research (AIR) have designed the **Growing and Retaining Our Workforce (GROW) Initiative** designed to:

- Support city governments to overcome long-standing workforce challenges and transform their approaches to talent development.
- Help cities recruit, train and retain a skilled workforce and create talent pipelines for critical local government jobs.
- Engage city leaders, along with education, workforce, and community partners, to identify and adopt new policies, practices, and programs to meet their workforce needs and expand economic opportunity for all residents.
- Build on-ramps to high-quality local government jobs that provide stability, good benefits, positive workplace experiences and opportunities for advancement.

NLC and AIR have developed a preliminary framework – the GROW Framework – that outlines the power cities have to improve outcomes for their employees and for their residents. The Municipal Workforce Learning Lab will provide insights that will enable NLC and AIR to update and finalize this framework.

Each of the Framework's core areas includes an initial list of different ways cities can effect change in their

communities, though these examples are just a starting point. Cities would only focus on the core area(s) that they can feasibly pilot and scale, and it is not the expectation that cities would pursue all strategies at once.

**Core Area One: Community Awareness and Public Sector Engagement.** Raise awareness about the value of public sector careers and increase interest in local government jobs.

Example Tactics:

- Develop targeted messaging and outreach strategies to increase community awareness of public sector careers.
- Partner with K-12 schools and other organizations to build career awareness.
- Uplift the stories of municipal workers to promote how the work impacts the community.

**Core Area Two: Expanding Pathways Into Public Service.** Grow sustainable pathways and establish equitable and accessible entry points into high-quality municipal jobs.

Example Tactics:

- Identify gaps between workforce needs and education and training programs in the local area.
- Assess and remove barriers to education and training for prospective employees.
- Identify priority populations or geographies for talent development.
- Leverage earn-and-learn models like apprenticeships to meet talent needs.

**Core Area Three: Accelerating Recruiting and Hiring.** Develop policies and practices that result in qualified and diverse applicant pools and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of hiring and recruitment.

Example Tactics:

- Establish recruitment partnerships with workforce, education, and community-based organizations.
- Adopt skills-based hiring practices to make public sector employment more accessible.
- Implement new technology solutions to improve the applicant experience and hiring process.
- Review civil service policies and classifications and identify opportunities to improve time to hire.

#### Core Area Four: Improving Workers' Experience.

Transform the workplace experience of local government employees and enrich the quality of public service jobs.

Example Tactics:

- Review compensation, benefits, work arrangements, and other factors that create a healthy working environment.
- Create opportunities for peer engagement and mentoring support from experienced employees.
- Provide enhanced professional development and training opportunities.
- Embed job quality principles into municipal workforce planning.

## ABOUT THE MUNICIPAL WORKFORCE LEARNING LAB

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NLC and AIR will engage three cities in an 8-month, intensive Municipal Workforce Learning Lab designed to help cities better understand their own workforce, develop strategies to improve outcomes for their community, and build a stronger evidence base for policies and practices that best support the municipal workforce.

NLC and AIR will guide cities through a discovery process to explore their challenges and opportunities across the talent lifecycle and how those align with existing policies as well as administrative and community priorities. Based on the findings from this discovery effort, each city will develop an action plan that prioritizes specific strategies to implement and the outcomes expected.

The Learning Lab will include:

- **Orientation call** to identify each city's assets, opportunities, and challenge areas and establish key indicators of project success;
- **Regular coaching calls** for each participating city team with subject matter experts from NLC and AIR to provide technical assistance, facilitation support, and tools to use in the discovery and action planning process;

- **Cohort-wide calls** to facilitate peer sharing and learning;
- **Site visit with NLC and AIR staff** to accelerate city action plan development and address specific technical assistance needs identified by the city; and
- **Paid travel to an in-person convening in Washington, D.C.** in September 2026 (dates TBD), for up to four city team members to share lessons learned and receive input on challenges from peers, NLC and AIR, and other national experts.

In addition to receiving no-cost consulting and technical assistance and opportunities for peer engagement, participating cities will help inform NLC's future work, and possibly serve as national models for their peers.

#### BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION

Cities will conclude the initiative with a detailed action plan and will expand their core workforce development capacities, such as:

- Increased understanding of and ability to address challenges facing the municipal workforce;
- Strengthened alignment among city departments to streamline workforce planning and drive impact; and
- Workforce decision-making that is informed by evidence, data, and workers' experiences.

## PARTICIPATION REQUIREMENTS

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Cities participating in the Municipal Workforce Learning Lab must commit to engaging in the following activities over the eight-month initiative:

- a) **Identify a core, cross-sector team** to participate in all project activities, noted previously.
- b) Participate at the outset of the project in an **orientation call** to identify assets, opportunities, and challenge areas, as well as establish key indicators of project success.

- c) Drawing on the GROW Framework, commit to the **development of a city action plan** that identifies strategies and expected outcomes to address targeted workforce challenges identified by the city.
- d) City team participation in **regular coaching calls** with the designated NLC and AIR staff leads, as well as periodic cohort-wide calls.
- e) Up to four city team members attend a Summative **In-person Convening** (Sep 2026) to share lessons learned and receive input on challenges from peers, NLC and AIR, and other national experts, with costs covered by NLC.
- f) Commitment from the mayor to participate in **one in-person site visit** with NLC and AIR staff to accelerate progress on city action plan development and address specific technical assistance needs identified by the city.

## PREPARING YOUR APPLICATION

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NLC welcomes proposals from all cities willing to commit to taking action to support their workforce. Cities will be selected based on their responses to the application questions below, and their ability to demonstrate willingness and capacity to participate in all project activities, as outlined above.

Before you begin writing, gather leaders from city departments or functional areas you expect to involve in the project. Draft the application together so all stakeholders' views and assets are represented.

As this is a learning project that will help NLC and AIR figure out how to help cities in the future, we're keenly interested in cities who bring a thoughtful and inquisitive attitude to this initiative.

## PROJECT TIMELINE

The Municipal Workforce Learning Lab will run 8 months, from February 2026 through September 2026. During this time, city teams can expect to participate in one orientation call, regular individualized coaching calls focused on action plan development, up to three cohort calls, one strategic city visit, and one summative in-person convening in Washington, DC.

| ACTIVITY                                                         | DATE                                                                |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Informational Webinar                                            | December 9th, 2025 at 2:00 pm ET <a href="#">Register here.</a>     |
| Proposals Due                                                    | Friday, January 16 <sup>th</sup> <a href="#">Submit yours here.</a> |
| Selection Announcement                                           | Thursday, January 29 <sup>th</sup> , 2026                           |
| Orientation Call                                                 | February, 2026                                                      |
| 1-on-1 Coaching Calls; Periodic Cohort-Wide Calls                | February – September, 2026                                          |
| City Strategic Site Visit                                        | Spring or Summer, 2026                                              |
| Summative In-person Convening & Finalization of City Action Plan | September, 2026                                                     |
| Initiative Conclusion                                            | September 30 <sup>th</sup> , 2026                                   |

## APPLICATION PROCESS

Up to **three** cities will be selected for this project. Only one application per municipality will be considered and must be submitted with the full support of the mayor and/or city manager.

To be considered for this initiative, applicants must submit a fully completed online application [at this link](#) by 11:59 PM EST on **Friday, January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2026**.

The application consists of the following components:

- A. Contact Information
- B. Application Questionnaire
- C. City Team Composition
- D. Attachments

If you have questions or would like more information, please contact Michael Bartlett at [bartlett@nlc.org](mailto:bartlett@nlc.org).

## Proposal

### A. Contact Information

City:

Population Size:

Mayor:

Term Dates:

Designated City Initiative Lead  
(Name/Title):

Team Lead Phone:

Team Lead Email:

Team Lead Address:

Secondary Contact  
(E.G., Assistant To Staff Lead; Name/Title):

Secondary Contact Phone:

Secondary Contact Email:

Secondary Contact Address:

### B. City Profile [Short Answer]

Please respond to the following short-answer questions to provide contextual information on your city's workforce.

- g) Approximately how many individuals does your city employ? If possible, please differentiate between full-time and part-time employees.
  - a. To what extent is the Human Resources function in your city centralized (as opposed to distributed across agencies or departments)?
  - b. What is your form of government? (Mayor-Council, Council-Manager, or otherwise)
  - c. Are city employees subject to a civil service code, public service commission, or similar governance model?
  - d. To what extent are city employees represented by a union?

### C. Application Questionnaire

NLC intends to select cities to join the Municipal Workforce Learning Lab that are ready to take on the challenge of stepping into this complex but crucial work, regardless of where they currently are in their progress. Please respond to the following four questions with information that tells your city's story. Your responses will help NLC understand your city's current environment, its history, and its readiness to learn

alongside us. Be sure to work with your proposal team to frame your responses carefully and candidly. Provide any supporting information (such as documents, reports, press releases, etc.) that clearly provides evidence related to your response. As helpful, please refer to the GROW Framework as you think about your challenges and prospective strategies.

As you prepare your responses, please keep in mind that the main focus for cities participating in the Municipal Workforce Learning Lab is to, over 8 months, explore the city's workforce challenges and opportunities and develop a city action plan to address prioritized challenges.

1. **What key municipal workforce-related challenges are you hoping to address through participation in this initiative?** (Your response should be no more than 250 words.) Consider the following as you respond to this question:
  - a. For the challenge(s) you've identified, are they specific to a department or job classification(s)?
  - b. To what extent are you aware of any common barriers current or prospective municipal workers are facing (such as, access to childcare, transportation, healthcare, housing, etc)?
  - c. If you solve the challenge(s) you identified, what positive impact will your community see?
- h) **What efforts (if any) has your city made to understand improve hiring outcomes, improve the experiences of municipal workers, and/or address other workforce challenges?** (Your response should be no more than 350 words.) Consider the following as you respond to this question:
  - d. To what extent has the city engaged current and/or past employees to understand their perspectives?
  - e. Does your city have any partnerships with external partners for recruitment, employee support, or other workforce purposes?
  - f. Does your city have any active internship, apprenticeship, or experiential learning programs?
2. **Why is your city a strong candidate for the Municipal Workforce Learning Lab?** (Your response should be no more than 400 words.) Consider the following as you respond to this question:
  - a. What is your city's vision for what it will achieve by participating in the initiative?
  - b. How will your city's leadership ensure the success of your project?
3. **What preliminary strategies are you considering, and what stakeholders will you need to ultimately make progress?** (Your response should be no more than 400 words.) Consider the following as you respond to this question:
  - a. Are you engaging in new efforts, or building on existing efforts?
  - b. What are your learning objectives for participating in the cohort?
  - c. What new data might you need to capture?
  - d. What assets (staff time, data, financial) are you leveraging, or might you leverage?

#### D. City Team Composition

To effectively engage in the Municipal Workforce Learning Lab, your city must establish a cross-city partnership team to engage in project activities and ultimately shape and draft the final city action plan. Your partnership team may have as many members as your city believes will be necessary to effectively achieve its desired results, though we recommend at least four and no more than eight individuals. Through the course of the initiative, NLC and AIR will help city teams identify other needed partners, including those external to city governments such as workforce development partners, postsecondary education partners, and so forth.

Cross-sector partnerships must be led by senior staff in the mayor's or city manager's office and include representatives with perspectives and expertise relevant to the Municipal Workforce Learning Lab, such as:

1. A team lead from the Mayor's or city manager's office (or equivalent);
2. Senior Human Resources leader(s) (which, depending on your focus might involve those engaged with recruitment, benefits, data analysis, public service commissions, etc);
3. Key department/agency leadership (if you have identified one or more target departments/agencies);
4. Hiring managers (if you have identified a target department/agency); and
5. Representatives of city employees, such as an organized labor organization or employee resource group.

#### E. Attachments

1. **(Required) Letter of Commitment:** The letter should affirm support from the Mayor or City Manager to take action in support of their workforce, and affirm commitment from named city officials and staff capacity to participate in all activities of the Municipal Workforce Learning Lab.
2. (Optional) **Other Supporting Documents:** Please attach any other documents that will support your city's application.