Expanding Workforce Opportunities for All Learning Lab

OVERVIEW

Up to eight cities dedicated to improving employment opportunities for residents with disabilities are invited to join the 2026 **Expanding Workforce Opportunities for All Learning Lab.**

Individuals with disabilities represent a robust, yet often underutilized talent pool ready to learn, earn and contribute to local economies. Too often, however, people with disabilities face barriers to gainful employment and experience higher unemployment and lower incomes than those without disabilities.

Alongside subject matter experts from the State Exchange on Employment & Disability, this **day-and-a-half learning lab** will help participating cities identify existing barriers to municipal employment and develop practical strategies to break down these barriers. Cities will also explore ways to strengthen workforce pipelines for people with disabilities by working with private sector employers and community-based organizations.

Proposal Due: Tuesday March 24, 2026 by 11:59 PM EST

Selection Announcement: April 3, 2026

Learning Lab dates: May 6-7, 2026

Submission Information: Please submit completed applications online at https://nlc.submittable.com/submit

Questions? Lindsay Rapkin, Senior Program Specialist, Education and Workforce Success, rapkin@nlc.org

References

Brief: Expanding Opportunity for All: How to Increase Employment for People with Disabilities

NLC Initiative: Municipal Strategies to Promote Workforce Success for People with Disabilities

CONTEXT

Too often, people with disabilities face barriers to gainful employment and experience higher unemployment and lower incomes than those without disabilities. In 2024, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities was 7.5 percent, compared with 3.8 percent for people without disabilities. In the same year, labor force participation rates for 16-64 year olds with disabilities was 40.7 percent compared to 77.9 percent for their nondisabled peers.

Municipal leaders are in a powerful position to act as changemakers and innovators promoting greater economic opportunities and labor participation rates for workers with disabilities.

To support city efforts, the National League of Cities Institute, in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Labor's State Exchange on Employment & Disability (SEED), conducted research and engaged with more than fifteen cities throughout 2024 and 2025. This work aimed to identify **strategies and actionable steps cities can take to strengthen support for workers with disabilities**, both within city hall and across the broader community. These strategies are informed by in-depth interviews and listening sessions with elected officials and city staff from cities nationwide.

The Expanding Workforce Opportunities for All Learning Lab will provide cities intentional time to start planning out how to pilot and/or scale a specific strategy for enhancing employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

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 should focus on the area(s) that they can feasibly pilot and scale. It is not the expectation that cities would pursue all strategies at once.

Core Area One: Leverage City Policymaking to Promote Success
Communicate commitment to expanding employment access and community engagement for people with disabilities through infrastructure, advisory councils, policy initiatives and community celebrations.

Example Tactics:
- Establish a Formal Infrastructure
- Create a City Commission or Council
- Launch an Advisory Council
- Pass Legislation
- Implement Collaborative Policies
- Celebrate Annually

Core Area Two: Leverage City Employment
Implement internal policies that improve recruitment, hiring and retention of employees with disabilities.

Example Tactics:

- Assess and Establish Hiring Capacity
- Inventory Current Disability Employment Policy
- Survey Government Employees
- Train Staff on Disability Awareness and Etiquette
- Coordinate Funding Between Agencies
- Offer Disability Hiring Initiatives
- Use Stay-at-Work/Return-to-Work Strategies
- Ensure Accessibility and Universal Design

Core Area Three: Build Citywide Private-Sector Impact
Support private sector employers in their efforts to hire and retain workers with disabilities, through technical assistance, tax credits, procurement practices and public-private partnerships.

Example Tactics:
- Provide Technical Assistance and Education
- Establish Tax Credits and Incentives
- Target Disability-Owned Businesses for Incentives
- Establish Public Private Partnerships

Core Area Four: Develop Programs with Community-Wide Impact
Coordinate service delivery, strengthen local partnerships and optimize funding streams to promote career readiness and reduce barriers to employment.

Example Tactics:
- Promote Education and Career Readiness
- Strengthen Local Partnerships
- Ensure Access to Transportation

ABOUT THE LEARNING LAB

NLC will engage up to eight cities through a day-and-a-half learning lab designed to help cities better understand their own workforce and develop strategies to improve outcomes for their community,

NLC hopes to engage cities who have engaged in some exploration and reflection on the current barriers to employment for people with disabilities and use this in-person time to develop an action plan that prioritizes specific strategies the city plans to implement.

The Learning Lab will include:

- **Orientation call** to introduce participants, explain purpose/agenda of the learning lab and discuss any prework.

- **Paid travel to an in-person convening in Washington, D.C. in May 2026** for up to three city team members to develop action plans, receive input on challenges from peers, NLC and other national experts. *Costs covered by NLC.*

- **Ongoing technical assistance from NLC, with support provided by SEED, as appropriate.**

In addition to receiving no-cost consulting, 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.

PARTICIPATION REQUIREMENTS

Cities participating in the 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 orientation call and in-person convening in Washington D.C.

a) Commit to the **development of a city action plan** that identifies strategies and expected outcomes to address targeted workforce challenges for residents with disabilities.

b) **Commitment from the Mayor or city manager** to accelerate progress on city action plan development and implementation.

PREPARING YOUR APPLICATION

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 better assist cities in the future, we're keenly interested in cities who bring a thoughtful and inquisitive attitude to this initiative.

PROJECT TIMELINE

RFP Due	Tuesday March 24, 2026 by 11:59 PM EST
Selection Announcement	April 3, 2026
Orientation Call	April 2026
Learning Lab (Washington D.C.)	May 6-7, 2026
Follow-Up Technical Assistance Calls (As needed)	May – June, 2026

APPLICATION PROCESS

Up to eight 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 Tuesday March 24, 2026.**

The application consists of the following components:

    A. Contact Information

    B. City Profile

    C. Application Questionnaire

    D. City Team Composition

    E. Attachments

If you have questions or would like more information, please contact Lindsay Rapkin at rapkin@nlc.org.

Application

A. Contact Information

City:	Population Size:
Mayor:	Term Dates:
Designated City Initiative Lead:	Secondary Contact:
(Name/Title):	Secondary Contact Phone:
Team Lead Phone:	Secondary Contact Email:
Team Lead Email:	Secondary Contact Address:
Team Lead Address:	

B. City Profile [Short Answer]
Please respond to the following short-answer questions to provide contextual information on your city's workforce and disability employment efforts.

1. Approximately how many individuals does your city employ? If possible, please differentiate between full-time and part-time employees.

2. Does your city have an ADA coordinator (Yes/No)? How many other staff work on topics related to disabilities? Please list their job titles and duties as assigned (if applicable).

3. Does your city have a city commission or council focused on disabilities who can provide feedback and policy proposals to city legislators (Yes/No)? If so, how many people are on the council/commission? Who makes up the commission (municipal employees, residents, people with disabilities, etc.)?

4. When was the last time your city underwent an ADA evaluation?

5. What is your form of government? (Mayor-Council, Council-Manager, or otherwise)

C. Application Questionnaire

NLC intends to select cities to join the Opportunities for All 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 Framework as you think about your challenges and prospective strategies.

As you prepare your responses, please keep in mind that the focus for cities participating in the Learning Lab is to explore the city's current barriers to successfully recruiting and retaining people with disabilities and developing an action plan that will begin to break down those barriers and increase employment amongst residents with disabilities.

1. **What efforts (if any) has your city made to understand and/or improve hiring outcomes and retention of municipal workers with disabilities?** (Your response should be no more than 400 words.) Consider the following as you respond to this question:

   a. Does your city have any partnerships with external partners for recruitment or employee support of people with disabilities?

   b. Does your city have any active internship, apprenticeship, or experiential learning programs geared towards people with disabilities?

   c. To what extent has your city engaged employees to understand the current barriers that prohibit full accessibility to the workplace?

2. **What efforts (if any) has your city made to understand and/or improve hiring outcomes and economic opportunities for residents with disabilities including those in the private sector?** (Your response should be no more than 400 words.)

3. **Why is your city a strong candidate for the 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 Lab?

   b. How will your city's leadership ensure the success of your project?

D. City Team Composition

To effectively engage in the 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 can only accommodate up to three people to attend the Lab. Through the course of action planning, NLC will help city teams identify other needed partners, including those external to city governments such as workforce development partners, postsecondary education parters, and so forth who would be helpful in achieving and implementing chosen strategies.

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 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)

3. ADA coordinator, staff from a Mayor's Office of Disability and/or other staff focused on disability employment

4. Staff focused on building community and private sector partnerships (e.g., community or economic development)

E. Attachments

1. *(Required)* **Letter of Commitment**: The letter should affirm support from the Mayor or City Manager to act in support of their workforce, and affirm commitment from named city officials and staff capacity to participate in all activities of the Learning Lab.

2. (Optional) **Other Supporting Documents**: Please attach any other documents that will support your city's application such as press coverage, current relevant program pages/websites, ADA evaluation etc.