CITIES OF OPPORTUNITIES:

Turning Crisis into Pathways for Equity and Resilience

The National League of Cities' (NLC) Cities of Opportunity (CoO) initiative takes a holistic approach towards transforming systems that have historically and disproportionately burdened certain communities, while disproportionately advantaging others. This summary highlights the accomplishments, learnings and next steps of the 2021 CoO Action Cohort.

> **"** What we're trying to do to get to the root here is eliminating causes of suffering and being agnostic about issues to address it. Wellbeing as a right we all deserve rather than the luck of the draw. We need bravery to do this work."
>
> **Mayor John Engen**, City of Missoula

Overview

Over the course of three cohorts, a 12-city Pilot (2018-2019), a five-city Action Cohort (2019-2020), and the most recent seven-city 2021 Action Cohort, CoO has built on learnings over time and deepened its support to participating cities (learnings captured in a recent brief, [Cities of Opportunity: Pathway to Equity](#).) This approach has particular resonance now as cities continue to navigate the dual challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and chronic systemic and structural racism. 2021 delivered an unprecedented infusion of federal funding to the local level, further supporting cities in "building back better" to improve the systemic drivers of equity and wellbeing.

The work of CoO is guided by the [CoO Theory of Change,](#) committed to a vision of equitable opportunities for health and wellbeing for all city residents, with a focus on racial equity. Agnostic of any particular issue area, the work of CoO is grounded in strengthening local capacity for policy and systems change.

CITIES OF OPPORTUNITY:
Accomplishments and Learnings from 2021 Action Cohort

With cities spanning four time zones and representing a mix of small, medium and large municipalities, the 2021 CoO Action Cohort included a broad and diverse set of cities and focus areas. Regardless of their focus, all cities addressed multiple dimensions of policy and systems improvement to advance equity related to their chosen issue areas. The work of this cohort embodies the collective work of local leaders and external partner organizations from the cities of **Fremont, California; Houston, Texas; Kansas City, Missouri; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Missoula, Montana; Plainfield, New Jersey; and South Fulton, Georgia.**

2021 CITY TEAM VISIONS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

CITY	TEAM VISION	ACCOMPLISHMENTS
FREMONT, California **Focus:** Equitable Behavioral Health and Support Services	All City residents have equitable access to appropriate and coordinated health, housing, and social services that promote positive outcomes.	▪ Developed multi-sector partnership with city, county and hospital for strategic shared data capacity on behavioral and mental health crises: defined target population for pilot with intent to expand to more high utilizers of services ▪ Increased coordination in response to behavioral health crises ▪ Reengaged the South County Partnership as a platform to advocate for policy and systems changes related to behavioral health in the County/region
HOUSTON, Texas **Focus:** Equitable Infrastructure	A risk-based, equitable decision-making process for planning, design, implementation, and maintenance of infrastructure that prioritizes people and communities. An equitable infrastructure that meets the needs of each neighborhood, city-wide.	▪ Developed cohesive and aligned vision on risk-based equitable decision-making ▪ Conducted peer-review to obtain best practices ▪ Developed definition of compounded risk for inequities: infrastructure vulnerability + people's equity vulnerability ▪ Created new structure for equitable prioritization of Green Storm Water investments (GSI) in particular locations with greatest needs and the most impact to advance equity ▪ Initiated beta testing and integration into policy & decision-making, with the goal of learning from process to influence future Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) resource allocations for equity
KANSAS CITY, Missouri **Focus:** Equitable Community & Economic Development	Kansas City, MO acknowledges and addresses past and current inequities by fostering equitable community and economic development that supports all residents with opportunities for a high quality of life.	▪ Deepened shared understanding of city's role in equitably advancing health: e.g., LifeX (place-based approach in 5 zip codes, 94% below FPL) ▪ Strengthened multi-sector partnerships with a shared focus on equity ▪ Built foundation for equity dashboard: data collection, track/share ▪ Aligned work and data with partners, e.g., KC Rising ▪ Launched planning to align City Programs/Policies to support greater equity across issues ▪ Conducted Regional Equity Summit with partners in architecture and planning fields, developed collaborative equity lens for built environment

CITY	TEAM VISION	ACCOMPLISHMENTS
MILWAUKEE, Wisconsin **Focus:** Equitable Housing	A City where all residents have fair access to stable, quality housing and other opportunities that promote health, social and economic well-being.	▪ Evolved from narrowly focused plan on addressing affordable housing to more global systems approach across city-wide ARPA plan; invested $25.8 million of ARPA funding for housing, home ownership and other quality of life issues ▪ Supported all levels of city government to infuse racial equity through ARPA allocation process; nearly $100 million allocated to address urgent needs of residents disproportionately affected by poverty and COVID-19 ▪ Identified opportunity for more intentional community engagement for next tranche of ARPA funds; leveraged CoO consulting pool support to develop collective city-partner guiding principles in partnership with community stakeholders
MISSOULA, Montana **Focus:** Advancing JEDI	A just, equitable, diverse, and inclusive Missoula--free of systemic and structural inequalities--where our community is connected and honors our individualities. A healthy and vibrant community where we are welcomed and valued, and our physical, mental, social, and spiritual needs are met.	▪ Developed community-wide cohort team and network of partners ▪ Adopted both City and County JEDI (Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion) Resolutions with city budget and staffing to support work ▪ Institutionalized JEDI initiative as a priority for elected and staff leadership ▪ Trained City Senior Leadership in the foundation of JEDI to equip them to support JEDI departmental accountability and operationalize key strategic goals ▪ Supported the County-led process of assembling JEDI Advisory Board development team, began Fall 2021
PLAINFIELD, New Jersey **Focus:** Equitable Community & Economic Development	Plainfield is a city where all residents have equitable and fair access to healthy neighborhoods, economic opportunities, businesses that serve them, and universal resources that meet their needs.	▪ Strengthened relationship between city and non-profit community partners on CoO team – all better understand Plainfield's historic and systemic equity barriers ▪ Identified priorities improve city policies and practices to ensure sustained action and impactful structural changes: better community engagement and align resources across city departments ▪ Designed cross-sector community-based Equity Advisory Committee ▪ Develop realistic multi-stage plan of action for equity

SOUTH FULTON, Georgia **Focus:** Equitable Community & Economic Development	A safe, resilient and prosperous community where all residents have a sense of belonging and equitable access to a full range of opportunities, resources and amenities for a high quality of life.	▪ Applied an equity lens to City's first Comprehensive Plan ▪ Developed ordinances to create opportunities for wealth and equity: Economic Development Incentive Ordinance connects incentives offered to developers with community benefits such as the allocation of specific percentage of commercial development space to house locally owned business; Small Business Resource Center train entrepreneurs for set-aside spaces; Local Business Preference Program for city services/contracts ▪ Partnered with community organizations and stakeholders to improve access to healthy food options, including data partners to measure food insecurities and program partnership with local farmers ▪ Aligned internal policies for wealth building for residents

Key, Shared Themes

While this was the most diverse CoO cohort thus far, common themes emerged across all seven cities' work, highlighting how the CoO approach can be applied flexibly across city contexts to yield great success and impact.

CENTER SOCIAL DETERMINANTS, THE FACTORS THAT AFFECT HEALTH AND EQUITY

Centering CoO's vision to advance health and racial equity, the teams deepened their appreciation and developed processes for the role of multiple, intersecting social, physical and structural determinants on individual and community wellbeing. **Kansas City, MO** established reducing disparities in life expectancy as the shared result to guide decisions for economic and physical development across city departments. **South Fulton, GA** is building wealth in their majority African-American city by dedicating investments in local businesses through incentives for developers and trainings for local entrepreneurs. **Houston, TX** is prototyping a framework for risk-based, equitable decision-making to identify the highest impact projects based on both equity and infrastructure needs for capital investments in Green Stormwater Infrastructure (GSI).

> " We can't have climate mitigation without resilience, and we can't have resilience without Equity."
>
> **Mayor Sylvester Tuner**, City of Houston

LEVERAGE EXISTING CITY AUTHORITY AND ASSETS TO INFUSE EQUITY

City leaders across teams recognized that they could leverage existing programs and processes that **do not require additional funding to advance racial and health equity.** Approaches included incentivizing developers to devote substantial physical space to local businesses, utilizing city contracts and processes to support local entrepreneurs, and building the capacity of neighborhood and community groups to organize, collaborate and identify mutual goals.

> Now we're working on guiding principles for authentic community engagement, in tandem with community partners who are part of our team as well as other grassroots organizations and individuals.**"**
>
> **Nikki Purvis**, City of Milwaukee

DEPLOY THE POWER OF DATA AND DIVERSE STORIES TO ADDRESS ROOT CAUSES

Teams recognized data as vital to identifying and addressing the root causes of inequities within their communities. With the support of NLC data partner mySidewalk, **cities better understood appropriate use of data, data availability, and the benefits and shortfalls of data use.** Moreover, cities established steps to track progress, measure outcomes, capture and deploy data for advocacy. As well as, to pair quantitative data with people intelligence from community residents and partners to illuminate the root causes of inequities and guide solutions.

> Data is vital, but data itself doesn't do the work. It takes collaboration and aligning with partners and the community."
>
> **Jeff Williams**, City of Kansas City

ALIGN CITY LEADERSHIP ACROSS DEPARTMENTS AND WITH PARTNERS

Teams recognized the **essential role of collaboration, alignment and mutual accountability** for shared outcomes across both city departments and external partners.

> "
> Expand partnerships to have proper stakeholders at the table, and together, define a clarity of vision all can buy into."
>
> **City Manager Karena Shackelford**, City of Fremont

ADDRESS SKEPTICS OF EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Transformative, collaborative work is hard on a multitude of levels, especially when experiencing resistance, particularly to advancing racial equity. This resistance was experienced by multiple cities and required tailored approaches based on city context. For example, as a predominantly white city, **Missoula, MN** took an educational approach to highlight work on racial equity benefits everyone.

> "
> We're often challenged with WHY spend tax money on the 5% of people of color in our population?! Our stance is that we all do better when we all do better! We try to speak to things that matter to all people: care of children, access to public infrastructure, access to education – everyone values t hose things."
>
> **Donna Gaukler**, City of Missoula

DRIVE SYSTEMIC CHANGE:
FOCUS IN NOW AND GO BIG LATER

For some cities **a focused approach allowed them to apply the CoO approach, with the intent of scaling the approach to other areas over time.** **Fremont, CA** and **Houston, TX** made the intentional decision to operationalize equity into practice in more narrow areas, with the intention to apply what they learned to other issues and populations across the city.

> " This year we've' done a lot of planning so we can focus on implementing and scaling initiatives to advance racial and health equity years into the future. The findings of our pilot cohort will expand to include more clients from a wider variety of backgrounds."
>
> **Mayor Lily Mei**, City of Fremon

INVEST TIME TO LEAD TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

Partnership and trust building are necessary to create sustainable approaches to advancing equity, engaging those who have been historically excluded and build community power. Cities recognized the high return-on-investment on time spent to build relationships at the front end, and continuously nurture them moving forward.

> " From lived experience, we know that social change is incremental and sometimes you have to go slow to go fast, "perseverance" is important!"
>
> **Suzanne Shenfil**, City of Fremont

ALIGN AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN ACT (ARPA) RESOURCES

Participating cities leveraged the first infusion of ARPA funding in different ways. **Milwaukee, WI** developed a comprehensive ARPA plan and has invested $25.8 million for housing, home ownership and other quality of life issues to improve equity, and nearly $100 million has been allocated to address the urgent needs of residents and neighborhoods disproportionately impacted by poverty and COVID-19. **Plainfield, NJ** and **Missoula, MN** are investing in building the infrastructure for advancing and sustaining equity across city government and in collaboration with partners.

> We want to do good but we also want to be impactful and transformational. People can't see what's done for them if we try to meet everyone's needs at the same time. Hence we selected 10 neighborhoods that have been underserved for decades in our Complete Communities initiative and partnered across the city and with external partners to align support...And we will use the Resilient Infrastructure scorecard and Diversity & Equity Indicators to track our impact."
>
> **Shep Brown**, City of Plainfield

LEVERAGE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND DEEPEN CAPACITY

Teams were able to leverage expert assistance through CoO to make informed decisions, allocate resources and improve service delivery to improve residents' lives. **This support helped to build critical capacities, that maintain momentum beyond the program year.**

> Key elements of the CoO planning framework and process to operationalize equity and racial equity can be applied to other city initiatives and replicated in partner organizations. I can use it in my own organization."
>
> **Dr. Kerri Powell**, Plainfield Health Services Corporation

ROOTED IN ACCOUNTABILITY

Building accountability across partners was of central importance across teams. The CoO approach applies a Results Framework to support cohort teams in building accountability. This included action roadmaps to unify teams around their vision, community outcomes, indicators and strategies, as well as workplans to aide in planning out action steps, milestones and to track progress. Accountability was further supported by the CoO Theory of Change, which allowed teams to clearly articulate across partners how their strategies yield outcomes. Through these tools, team members were able to see where progress was made; and if not, ascertain the reasons and adjust their plans as needed.

> "I really appreciate this group, all of you are eager to hold yourselves accountable. Not only are you not afraid of it, you run to it!"
>
> **Traci Sampson**, Consilience Group LLC

What's Ahead:

NLC will build on participants' advice in designing the next CoO Action Cohort while strengthening features that have worked so well in the past.

 NLC will inform and guide CoO into 2022 and beyond with a focus on further advancing racial equity, spreading and scaling of model city policies and practices, as well as deepening cities' readiness for policy action.