



A City Platform for Children and Families - Full Text

Every day, mayors and city councilmembers throughout America are reminded that children, youth, and families are the lifeblood of their neighborhoods and communities.

Strong cities are built on a foundation of strong families and empowered neighborhoods that support every child. The steps we take to strengthen families and improve outcomes for children and youth are among the most important investments we make in the health and economic vitality of our communities. In a global economy, our future prosperity depends upon our investments in human capital and potential.

When families fail, children - our next generation of citizens, workers, and leaders - all too often fail as well. Mayors and city councilmembers witness every day the personal tragedies and strains stemming from child poverty, child abuse, school failure, and a host of related societal problems. And we know that it takes nearly Herculean efforts to reverse the damage to children when families cannot support and nurture them.

The costs of not investing in our children, youth, and families are enormous. Many of these costs land squarely on the doorsteps of our city halls, as spending for public safety, education, and human services rises and the strength of the local workforce and economy is undermined.

For this reason, we cannot afford to wait. The problems we face - from unacceptably high dropout, youth homicide, and foreclosure rates to rising financial instability and an epidemic of childhood obesity - will only grow if they are not addressed. Moreover, the increasingly disparate impact of these challenges on specific groups of young people (those who by virtue of their poverty status, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or immigration status may find themselves in particular jeopardy) betrays the American ideal that all children should have an equal opportunity to succeed, regardless of their background or circumstances.

The good news is that many cities are responding with innovative efforts to promote key goals such as school readiness, violence prevention, out-of-school learning, access to postsecondary education, community wellness, and family economic success. City leaders are in a unique position to make a difference in these and other areas. The time to act is now.

A Platform for City Action

The National League of Cities (NLC), through its Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (YEF Institute), has worked for more than a decade to stimulate and support municipal leadership on

behalf of children, youth, and families. Its efforts have been guided by the experience and advice of members of NLC's Council on Youth, Education, and Families and the YEF Institute's partnerships with countless other mayors and city councilmembers across the nation. The City Platform for Children and Families draws upon lessons that have emerged from these deep and lasting collaborations with municipal leaders from cities and towns of all sizes and from every corner of America.

We all know that local circumstances and needs vary greatly. At the same time, every city and town can take action to advance four key priorities that reflect the building blocks of what every child needs, at a minimum, to live a full, healthy, and productive life:

- Opportunities to learn and grow;
- A safe neighborhood to call home;
- A healthy lifestyle and environment; and
- A financially fit family in which to thrive.

In each of these areas, the City Platform calls upon mayors and city councilmembers to set bold, measurable goals or targets that focus attention on key opportunities for progress and address pressing challenges in their communities. The YEF Institute stands ready to assist municipal leaders in their efforts.

Opportunities to Learn and Grow

We know that opportunities to learn and grow must begin in the earliest years of life, with parent education and support as well as community-wide initiatives that emphasize early literacy. Home visiting programs, supports for informal caregivers (family, friends, and neighbors), family literacy programs and universal access to preschool for three- and four-year-olds all make it more likely that young children will enter school ready to learn and succeed. A key goal must be to ensure successful transitions into the early elementary grades and to promote reading proficiency among all children by the end of third grade.

Afterschool programs and other enrichment opportunities during out-of-school time (including weekends, holidays, and summer vacations) play critical roles in helping children and youth continue to learn, grow, and stay out of trouble. Quality standards for afterschool programs, expanded access to out-of-school time offerings in underserved neighborhoods, and city partnerships with libraries, museums, and other cultural institutions can all support academic achievement as well as broader youth development and public safety goals.

Finally, it is clear that high school completion and postsecondary training and education are essential to long-term success in today's rapidly changing labor market. Dropout prevention initiatives and reengagement strategies targeting young people who have already left school can extend a much-needed lifeline to those who might otherwise be left behind. Bold new scholarship programs and other postsecondary access and completion efforts can send powerful messages to all youth that two- and four-year colleges as well as vocational and technical institutions are within their reach and help ensure that less advantaged youth succeed in these settings.

Examples of local targets to consider:

- Number or proportion of children attending prekindergarten or afterschool programs;
- Proportion of students reading at grade level by the end of third grade and entering high school ready to take challenging college prep courses;
- High school graduation rates;
- Number of scholarships provided for postsecondary education and training; and

- Postsecondary enrollment and completion rates.

A Safe Neighborhood to Call Home

We all know that our young people cannot learn and grow unless they feel safe and are protected from violence in their homes, schools, and neighborhoods. Cities can combat youth violence effectively by treating it as a public health problem and ensuring a focus on four key steps: connecting every young person with a trusted and caring adult; intervening at the first sign that youth are at risk of violence; restoring young people who have gone down the wrong path; and involving youth and community leaders in public education campaigns to unlearn the culture of violence.

Comprehensive approaches within cities that combine prevention, intervention, and enforcement strategies can dramatically reduce youth violence and offer positive alternatives to crime or gang affiliation. For example, municipal leaders can work with school and community partners to establish truancy and curfew centers that engage parents and link young people to services they need to stay in or return to school. Intensive, community-based services can help youth already caught up in the juvenile justice system. Mayors and law enforcement officials can work together to restrict access to illegal guns and other weapons, and city leaders can also involve young people as partners in helping to reduce youth violence and improve their communities.

Examples of local targets to consider:

- Number of children and youth with lasting connections to adult mentors;
- Number of successful truancy interventions;
- School expulsion rates;
- Youth homicide rates;
- Juvenile and neighborhood crime rates; and
- Number of juvenile offenders participating in rehabilitation or reentry programs.

A Healthy Lifestyle and Environment

We recognize our responsibility to promote health and wellness so that our children can reach their full potential. Transportation and land use policies that promote walking and biking as well as neighborhood park and playground development can encourage physical activity. City parks and recreation departments can also play a major role in encouraging physical fitness and active lifestyles. Mayors and other city leaders can also enhance families' access to healthy foods by working with community groups to enroll eligible families in the federal food stamp and child nutrition programs, attract super-markets to underserved neighborhoods, and promote farmers' markets and community gardens.

City-school partnerships offer particularly promising ways to promote healthy lifestyles and environments, including through the development of community wellness plans. By collaborating with school districts, municipal leaders can help educate young people about healthy food choices and improve their eating habits. Removing snack foods and soft drinks from schools, offering more nutritious food choices in school cafeterias, and ensuring that young people have an opportunity to be physically active during the school day are some of the steps that city and school leaders can take when working together.

Finally, the health of local residents depends greatly upon their access to health care and

information that enables young people to avoid too-early pregnancy and risky behaviors. Municipal leaders can play key roles in connecting families to public health insurance programs and supporting health education efforts targeting children and youth.

Examples of local targets to consider:

- Miles of bike routes and walking paths;
- Number of neighborhood parks and playgrounds;
- Proportion of eligible families enrolled in public health insurance programs and federal food stamp (SNAP) and child nutrition programs;
- Number of supermarkets or farmers' markets in low-income neighborhoods;
- Childhood obesity rates;
- Levels of physical activity among children and youth; and
- Teen pregnancy and substance abuse rates.

A Financially Fit Family in Which to Thrive

We know that our children and youth are far less likely to learn and grow up to be healthy and productive citizens if their families lack the financial means to meet their basic needs (e.g., safe and stable housing, access to health care, and adequate nutrition). Municipal leaders are uniquely positioned to mount community-wide efforts that empower families and bolster their chances of achieving long-term economic success. Asset-building strategies, outreach and public education campaigns, and workforce development programs all represent valuable approaches to assist struggling parents and their families.

City-led initiatives to ensure that low-income families receive the federal Earned Income Tax Credit and other key public benefits can boost their incomes while bringing more federal and state funds into local economies. Mayors and other city leaders can also help families avoid foreclosure and predatory lenders, become more savvy consumers of financial services, and gain access to low-cost bank accounts and mainstream financial services. Finally, cities can develop and support transitional jobs, housing, and shelter programs and other creative strategies to help hard-to-employ residents enter or regain their footing in the labor market.

Examples of local targets to consider:

- Number of eligible families claiming the EITC and other federal or state benefits;
- Proportion or number of families with access to mainstream financial services;
- Poverty rates;
- Foreclosure rates;
- Number of check-cashing operations and predatory lenders in low-income neighborhoods; and
- Number of transitional jobs available to hard-to-employ residents.\

Strategies for Moving Forward

Developing a comprehensive municipal agenda for strengthening families and improving outcomes for children and youth requires sustained effort. Local leaders have moved forward on these issues from different starting points, reflecting the diverse strengths and needs of their communities. However, the following strategies are frequently associated with successful city initiatives that foster effective and enduring change on behalf of children and their families:

1. **Build or strengthen the city's "local infrastructure"** through a municipal commission, mayor's task force, or community partnership or coalition that brings together leaders from the public, private, and non-profit sectors as well as parents and other community residents.
2. **Promote effective city-school collaboration** through regular meetings between the mayor and/or city council, school board, and school superintendent that focus on shared priorities and the development of joint plans of action.
3. **Encourage and support authentic youth voice, engagement, and leadership** through multiple mechanisms, including a mayor's youth council, appointment of youth to municipal boards and committees, and community-wide youth summits.
4. **Identify and implement policies or programs that reflect best practices** and can serve as the central pillars of city efforts to strengthen families and improve outcomes for children and youth.
5. **Set local goals or targets and then measure progress over time** through use of a community "scorecard" or the development of a youth master plan that promotes collaboration among city agencies and provides a blueprint for future action.
6. **Designate a lead staff person and/or a "point person" in the community** to help ensure that implementation efforts stay on track and key stakeholders are following through on their commitments.
7. **Learn from the experience of other cities and towns** by reaching out to other municipal leaders in your state or region and taking advantage of the many educational offerings and peer learning opportunities sponsored by the YEF Institute.
8. **Challenge the entire community to do more**, creating a culture of shared responsibility and accountability that encourages all residents to play a role in building a better future for its children and families.

Resources to Support Your Local Efforts

The National League of Cities (NLC), through its Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (YEF), offers a broad array of tools and resources to help mayors, city councilmembers, and other municipal leaders take action in each of the City Platform's four key areas:

- Opportunities to Learn and Grow
- A Safe Neighborhood to Call Home
- A Healthy Lifestyle and Environment
- A Financially Fit Family in Which to Thrive

The Institute provides city officials with direct access to effective strategies and innovative local approaches for strengthening families and improving outcomes for children and youth, as well as networking opportunities that promote cross-city peer learning and exchange. The following resources are available to municipal officials, and more information can be found on the YEF Institute page of the NLC website at www.nlc.org/iyef.

The State of City Leadership for Children and Families Report

This YEF Institute report highlights innovations and emerging and established trends in municipal leadership to help children and families thrive. Local officials can learn about cutting-edge strategies and widespread practices in the areas of early childhood, education, afterschool, youth in transition, violence prevention, family economic success, community wellness, youth civic engagement, and local "infrastructure" for children, youth and families. The first volume of this report was published in October 2009. Future volumes will be available on the NLC website.

Action Kits for Municipal Leaders

Not sure how to get started on a specific issue? The Institute's signature series of action kits offers a menu of action steps that municipal leaders can consider, and provides city examples and other informational resources to guide local efforts. Additional reports, strategy guides, toolkits, and other publications draw upon lessons and experiences from cities across the nation that have made strong efforts to improve the lives of children, youth, and families.

Peer Networks

Municipal officials can join one of the YEF Institute's issue networks that help them stay connected to their peers in other communities and share information on progress, pitfalls, and lessons learned. Peer networks and learning communities focus on education, afterschool, disconnected youth, early childhood success, youth participation, family economic success, community wellness, and other topics. Network members interact and exchange ideas through online communities, regular conference calls, periodic e-newsletters, and face-to-face convenings at NLC conferences.

Technical Assistance

NLC staff are standing by at any time to assist city officials in developing and implementing strategies and to answer questions on specific topics. In addition, the YEF Institute periodically sponsors technical assistance projects that enable municipal leaders in selected communities to receive in-depth help and support over a longer period of time.

Leadership Academies and Training Sessions

These intensive learning opportunities enable local elected officials and staff from cities and towns of all sizes to acquire a deeper understanding of key issues in a specific program area, offering exposure to new research and the most innovative developments in the field. Invitations to apply for these events are typically extended to all NLC member cities and participants are selected on a competitive basis.

Mayors' Institute on Children and Families

The YEF Institute's newest form of assistance to city leaders brings together mayors from larger cities for intensive problem-solving sessions with a carefully chosen faculty composed of local practitioners and academic experts. Peer learning and cross-city support within the Mayors' Institute model ensures a strong focus on practical solutions that can be developed and implemented immediately with continuing assistance from NLC staff.

National Summit on Your City's Families

The biennial National Summit on Your City's Families is the nation's largest gathering of municipal leaders and their school and community partners working to improve the lives of children, youth and families. Now held in conjunction with NLC's annual Congress of Cities, each summit focuses on best practices and cutting-edge city innovations that can guide and inspire local officials throughout the country.

Webinars

The YEF Institute's monthly series of free, hour-long webinars allows participants to listen to lively

discussions between Institute staff, national policy experts, and city officials on best practices and key opportunities for municipal leadership on behalf of children, youth, and families.

SPOTLIGHT

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