

# Cities of Opportunity

## LEARNING LABS

**On June 11, 2024, the National League of Cities (NLC)'s Cities of Opportunity initiative held the fifth and final session in their Learning Lab series.**

**The Cities of Opportunity Initiative has seven capacities for action.** Each Learning Lab focuses on one of these seven capacities. This Learning Lab focused on **Race and Equity**.

## Race and Equity

Cities intentionally apply an equity and race lens to city actions affecting health through structural changes and approaches. Cities establish and promote shared definitions and frameworks for health equity.

*This special discussion session in the Learning Lab series prioritized peer-to-peer connection and perspective exchange. The session provided a level-set around race and equity in cities, followed by facilitated discussion among all attendees. This handout reflects the key themes, lessons learned, and city-driven discussion from this conversation.*

**LaDonna McCullough**, Chief Equity Officer for the City of Kansas City, Missouri, opened the discussion. She shared an overview of the critical nature of centering equity in municipal work. She mentioned three key themes:

- *Know Your City's Capacity*
- *Embrace Community Partnership*
- *Equity is a Verb*



**LaDonna McCullough**, Chief Equity Officer for the City of Kansas City, Missouri





## Equity Change Vision for City Government

### Know Your City's Capacity

The work of centering equity in city government requires an investment of time and energy to grow relationships and advance strategies. To do this, cities must know their starting point, and take stock of their strengths and weaknesses.

*"When we talk about equity, what willingness is present to actually do the work? What motivates us to do that work, and what is our capacity in order to operationalize equity in ways that will bring about true change?"*

### Embrace Community Partnership

Centering equity is ongoing work which requires partnership. A city government must rely on its relationships with the community and local partners to identify what needs, improve equity and moreover; maintain a commitment to equity across city functions.

*"It can seem overwhelming, but it's exciting at the same time, and you just have to be willing to find your champions your partners in the work and be willing to roll up your sleeves and know that you're going to make mistakes sometimes. But you also learn from those, and it's so rewarding."*

### Equity is a Verb

Equity must be positioned as an action and goal toward which the city constantly strives. When equity is framed as abstract value, rather than set commitments to action, very little actual progress is made. Instead, this can result in posturing, wherein the focus ins on a view of equity as a priority, rather than the day-to-day work of continuing to engage and prioritize the interests and experiences of marginalized groups.

*"Instead of us actually thinking about what the work looks like, how it needs to be done, we just want to impress. We don't want to be seen as not doing the work, and so oftentimes posturing can be misleading, because we'll throw out the terminology, but we won't actually be doing what we what we're saying in the true sense of our residents being able to see that change and or our employees understanding what it means by us embarking upon an equity initiative."*



## Pathways to Equity: CoO Successes in Centering Equity

The CoO initiative embraces the different experiences and perspectives represented in city. Every city's path to centering equity is unique and reflects the circumstances which result from the individual histories which make up every community.

The following examples are success stories from CoO participants representing the variety of ways it is possible for cities to do this work. These stories are only a few examples of what it might look like to center equity in municipal government.

These centered on themes of:

- *Embedding Equity in City Operations*
- *Bi-Directional Community Engagement*
- *Building Equity Out from a Single Focus*



### Embedding Equity in City Operations

These cities took their equity focus head-on and established it as a central element in their operations and management plans.

- **Austin, TX**, led by the Office of Equity, harnessed the upcoming revision of the city comprehensive plan, Imagine Austin, to strengthen relationships between the staff in the Planning, Resilience, Sustainability and Equity offices. This culminated in an equity assessment helping to guide public participation in the planning process moving forward and ensuring equity, community, sustainability and resilience are woven throughout the plan and centered in the city's work for years to come.
- **Missoula, MT** publicly adopted a Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI) resolution, alongside a parallel resolution at the county level. Through this resolution, the city implemented trainings and processes to institutionalize JEDI as a priority for elected leaders and staff alike. Missoula addressed challenges head-on and navigated tough conversations with the community about why this was important and how it would benefit the Missoula community at large.
- **Napa, CA's** story is another example of a direct approach to driving focus towards equity. As part of their work in Cities of Opportunity, the city updated their General Plan to incorporate an Equity in All Policies approach.



## Bi-Directional Community Engagement

These cities brought equity to the forefront through strengthening their relationship to residents and prioritizing lived experience and resident perspectives in decision-making.

- **Gresham, OR's** work took shape through their work on the Wy-East Trail, a new trail serving as a means of connection across three distinct city neighborhoods. In developing this trail, Gresham committed to equity and community engagement which led to improved decision-making for the trail and a stronger city-community relationship, which is now expanding across city government.
- **Rancho Cucamonga, CA** first built internal readiness and commitment for community engagement through staff training on health equity and community engagement. They then moved this effort into the community, with internal efforts leading to a re-centering of community engagement as an outward strategy. All of this was institutionalized through the development of their Community Engagement Policy.



## Building Equity Out from a Single Focus

These cities developed a culture of equity in their city government through working with a centralized project focus and building outward upon that initial success.

- **Las Vegas, NV's** journey to centering equity began through a concentrated effort to revitalize one specific neighborhood, the Historic West Side, the city's only African American residential area before desegregation. This neighborhood-centric work in the Historic West Side served as a model for the city's work in other departments and areas, and it ultimately informed the city's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion framework.
- **Birmingham, AL's** journey began with an issue-based focus, declaring gun violence a public health crisis in 2018. This led to a framework for community engagement which transformed the way residents interacted with the city to receive resources and information and continues to inform city decision-making today

## Group Discussion Take-Aways

This Learning Lab concentrated heavily on encouraging discussion and peer exchange. Participants spent time discussing their experiences and perspectives related to race and equity's impact on health and wellbeing. These are some broad takeaways from that discussion:

### Community Engagement Leading to Integration

In building out programs which are designed to bridge the gap between city government and a given community, cities should consider hiring members of that community as part of their efforts. In integrating marginalized community members into the makeup of the municipal government, there is greater opportunity for diverse perspectives and community interests to influence the direction of planning and development from the very beginning. When community members see themselves represented in the teams implementing local government programs, they are more likely to trust those programs and want to engage.

### Language as a Tool, not a Barrier

Establishing common language is critical in engaging in discussions about race and equity. It is important that populations in need of support and focus from city government are referred to in a way that is recognizable throughout their community. If the city wishes to partner with specific demographics or communities, it is important that there is a shared understanding of specific issues and relationship dynamics.

### Assuming Positive Intent

When coming to the table to work together with local partners on equity, it is important to assume positive intent. To make progress, it is critical to acknowledge that everyone is starting from different places, but they are there for the same reasons. Working together to acknowledge shortcomings and leave room for improvement is a key part of the process.