

A City Platform for Strengthening Families And Improving Outcomes for Children and Youth

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. For this reason, the actions that municipal leaders take to strengthen families and improve outcomes for children and youth play a key role in boosting the health and vitality of their cities and towns.

A Platform for City Action

The National League of Cities (NLC) Council on Youth, Education, and Families, under the leadership of former San José Mayor Ron Gonzales, worked throughout 2005 to develop a platform or agenda for municipal action and leadership on behalf of children, youth, and their families.

More recently, America's Promise – The Alliance for Youth, the nation's largest cross-sectoral alliance of government, nonprofit, corporate, and community organizations focused on positive youth development, joined with NLC to challenge every city and town across the nation to take concrete steps toward positive, significant results for children and their families.

Research shows that if children receive five essential resources – caring adults, safe places, a healthy start, effective education, and opportunities to help others – they are five to ten times more likely to stay in school, avoid drugs, alcohol, and trouble with the law, and grow up to be engaged citizens. By adopting this platform, cities and towns have a roadmap to connect children and youth with these Five Promises, helping to greatly increase the odds of children thriving in their communities.

We all know that local circumstances and needs vary greatly. The two-part platform for city action encourages municipal leaders to move forward by building upon their own unique mix of assets and opportunities:

- The platform's first part highlights an essential "infrastructure," key functions and processes that play a crucial role in effective or sustained investments in children and families.
- The second part of the platform calls upon municipal leaders to take a series of more specific action steps in each of seven issue areas: early childhood

development; youth development; education and afterschool; health and safety; youth in transition; family economic success; and neighborhoods and community.

Some may view this platform as quite ambitious. Without question, it asks mayors and other city leaders to place the needs of children, youth, and families high on their city's agenda . . . and then to keep them there.

The Costs of Inaction

At the same time, the costs of failing to act are enormous. They are reflected in individual lives, municipal budgets, and prospects for city growth and revitalization.

When families fail, children – our next generation of citizens, workers, and leaders – all too often fail as well. We see the toll of family failure in higher rates of 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.

Many of the highest costs of family failure land squarely on the doorsteps of our city halls, as spending for public safety, education, and human services rise and the strength of the local workforce and economy is undermined.

This platform does not represent a catalog of everything that city leaders can or should do to strengthen families and prevent these failures. Rather, it provides starting points for city action – practical steps that every city and town can take to build stronger families and improve outcomes for its children and youth.

For a fuller statement from NLC's Council on Youth, Education, and Families that presents the case for municipal leadership to strengthen families and highlights the costs of inaction, see *Strengthening America's Families: What Municipal Leaders Must Do* in the Publications section at www.nlc.org/iyef.

I. Essential "Infrastructure" for Sustained Progress

Every community must have a structure, mechanism, or process for carrying out each of four essential tasks that strengthen families, improve outcomes for children and youth, and sustain the community's efforts over time:

- 1) *Identify needs, opportunities, and priorities for future action* through a city commission, mayor's task force, or other group 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 youth voice, engagement, and leadership* through a mayor's youth council, appointment of youth to municipal boards and committees, and/or community-wide youth summits.
- 4) *Measure progress over time* through the use of a community "scorecard" or set of benchmarks that tracks key outcomes and places them within the context of a broader report on the status of children, youth, and families.

II. Key Action Steps to Consider

Mayors, city councilmembers, and senior city administrators have many opportunities to act on behalf of children, youth, and families in their communities. Initial steps to consider include:

Early Childhood Development

- 1) Work with local United Ways and other community groups to prepare educational kits offering tips for new parents in the most commonly spoken languages, and distribute them through local hospitals and physicians.
- 2) Provide information for parents that helps them find and assess the quality of available child care and preschool options, utilizing

both print and web-based materials developed in partnership with community agencies.

- 3) Offer family literacy activities appropriate for families from diverse cultures and backgrounds in community-based settings such as public libraries.

Youth Development

- 4) Enlist youth to map local resources and needs, and support other youth-led service activities that tap the potential of young people as community assets.
- 5) Identify and improve safe places for children to play and youth to get together in every neighborhood in order to promote physical activity, healthy development, and positive interactions with peers.
- 6) Expand opportunities for youth participation and leadership through programs offered by city recreation departments, libraries, museums, and other youth-serving organizations.

Education and Afterschool

- 7) Encourage family involvement in schools by sponsoring "First Day" celebrations and providing release time for city employees when they attend parent-teacher conferences or other school events.
- 8) Develop a blueprint for how the city, schools, business leaders, community groups, and parents will work together to support and improve student achievement, high school completion, and postsecondary access.
- 9) Establish a local afterschool coalition or task force, including both city agencies and community-based providers, that works to identify new funding sources and create quality standards for afterschool programs.

Health and Safety

- 10) Partner with local health care providers, pharmacies, and other interested groups to highlight the availability of federal and state-funded health insurance for children and their families.

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- 11) Publicize local efforts to recruit foster and adoptive families for children who have lost their parents or cannot safely live at home.
- 12) Work with school and law enforcement officials, social service agencies, and community or faith-based groups to reduce truancy and keep children safe and on track in school.

Youth in Transition

- 13) Establish or support a mentoring initiative that connects young people to caring adults, recruiting volunteers from municipal agencies, local businesses, faith communities, fraternal organizations, and civic groups.
- 14) Support the development of alternative high schools and other options for struggling students that emphasize rigor, relevance, and relationships while responding to their diverse needs.
- 15) Build stronger linkages among key institutions (e.g., police departments, city human service agencies, juvenile courts, and foster care agencies) to help vulnerable youth, including those leaving systems of public care, children of immigrants, homeless youth, and pregnant or parenting teens.

Family Economic Success

- 16) Launch or support a citywide campaign to help ensure that low-income working families receive the federal Earned Income Tax Credit and other key benefits for which they may be eligible.
- 17) Support or sponsor financial literacy courses or personal financial counseling to help families develop savings plans, repair credit, avoid predatory lenders, and plan for homeownership.
- 18) Provide transitional jobs for disadvantaged youth and adults who need temporary, wage-based employment as a stepping stone to develop work skills and enter the regular labor market.

Neighborhoods and Community

- 19) Sponsor street fairs, neighborhood celebrations, and multi-cultural community events to bring families together and build stronger ties among neighbors.
- 20) Create joint-use agreements with school districts and forge partnerships between school leaders and community-based groups to turn schools into centers of community life.
- 21) Hold media events, community forums, and site visits to local programs serving children, youth, and families as a way of keeping their needs in the spotlight.



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National League of Cities is a proud partner of America's Promise – The Alliance for Youth, working to positively impact the lives of 15 million young people over the next five years through the power of the Five Promises. Find out more at www.americaspromise.org.