

THE OPPORTUNITY PROJECT

2023 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Building Social Infrastructure Resilience for Local Communities

National League of Cities (NLC)

THE CHALLENGE – Create tools that help local communities strengthen and leverage social infrastructure to recover from pandemic-induced social isolation and build resilience in the face of future crises.

EXECUTIVE CHAMPIONS –

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THE PROBLEM – In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, local governments around the country rushed to implement vital public health responses. The pandemic accelerated the ongoing decline in social connectivity in America. [National measures of social connection](#) show that the average time spent alone increased by 12 hours/month from 2003 to 2019, and then jumped another 12 hours/month from 2019 to 2020 as the pandemic forced further social isolation. Now, more than three years after the start of the pandemic, local leaders are seeking to transition from social distancing measures to prioritizing social connectivity to promote thriving, equitable and healthy communities.

In the face of these challenges, local leaders turned to each other to identify creative responses to build community, from converting parking lots into outdoor dining spaces to sponsoring community pop-ups. To date, however, there have been few data tools that help local leaders to better utilize physical assets to promote social connectivity. Building out these tools would involve exploring how physical spaces such as libraries, schools, community spaces and parks promote cultural, economic and social interactions and how local leaders can prioritize support for those in low-income or BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) communities. Developing tools that help communities fortify social infrastructure can both serve as peer learning opportunities for other communities as well as improve our understanding of how local leaders in a variety of contexts have leveraged their specific assets to develop innovative approaches to building social connectivity despite challenging circumstances.

THE OPPORTUNITY – Local leaders are implementing creative and innovative ideas to build back from the pandemic and explore different options for strengthening social connectivity. At the same time, communities are placing an increased emphasis on equity and inclusion as the pandemic exacerbated deeply entrenched structural inequalities. Robust data tools are needed now more than ever to empower local leaders to make strategic decisions on how to build and leverage social infrastructure in a way that promotes equity and supports groups of residents who were harmed by the pandemic. These data tools, combined with inclusive community engagement, will help transform the way local leaders tackle the complex challenge of social isolation and enhance local resilience.

VISION FOR SPRINT OUTCOMES – New tools will empower local leaders to better understand the impact of social infrastructure and how to better plan for future crises. For example, solutions might help to create digital resources for social connection, identify national best practices, consolidate inspiring local case studies, or map social infrastructure assets in a community, but may include many other types of solutions that achieve the sprint goals. Solutions should help local leaders to make informed and equitable decisions moving forward on how to leverage physical infrastructure assets and build new social infrastructure to address the needs of different groups of residents.

TARGET END USERS – Local government leaders, community organizations, and other non-governmental organizations that support local communities

RELATED DATA SETS

- ↳ ARPA Local Government Investment Tracker ([Link](#))
- ↳ U.S. Census Bureau National Experimental Wellbeing Statistics ([Link](#))
- ↳ Program of University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute's County Health Rankings & Roadmaps ([Link](#))
- ↳ Centers for Medicare & Medicaid's 2020 Medicare Beneficiaries Survey COVID supplement ([Link](#))
- ↳ The Brookings Institute's US Metropolitan Area Activity Centers ([Link](#))
- ↳ Social Capital Atlas ([Link](#))
- ↳ The Center for Disease Control's Social Vulnerability Index ([Link](#))
- ↳ AARP Geography of Social Isolation ([Link](#))

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