

# BEYOND CIVILITY

FROM PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT TO PROBLEM SOLVING

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AN ACTION GUIDE FOR CITY LEADERS

# FOREWORD

Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords was out in the community asking people to come talk to her when she was shot, along with many others, in January 2011. Her “Congress on Your Corner” event was a tradition in which she and citizens sought to keep in touch with one another about priorities and day-to-day concerns.

The horrific events in Tucson initiated a national discussion about the ways in which public issues are debated in America today. Across the political spectrum, there is a sense that a lack of civility and respect has turned our public debates into shouting matches that only encourage more hard feelings and more division.

The members of the National League of Cities (NLC) agree that it’s time to remove the overheated rhetoric that has come to define our public debates. At all levels of government, we need dialogue that is worthy of our great democracy. The public square should be a place where people can disagree. But it should also be a place where people unite to find common ground in deriving solutions to the nation’s concerns.

Democracy is a messy process that rightfully engenders passion as people debate the direction of the nation. As local leaders, we must do what we can to listen to the public’s concerns, respond accordingly and play a lead role in setting the tone and culture for civic engagement. We must be open and inclusive to new ideas and new points of view and not shut out those that may disagree with us.

But this does not mean that we must tolerate all forms of discussion. We should not tolerate language and actions that shut others out of the system or prevent people from taking part in the democratic process. We must not allow ideas that will close off our community and refuse to respect the rights, thoughts and actions of others. This should be the goal of a civil society that acts civilly.

We hear it time and again that everyone wants a constructive dialogue that promotes a sense of shared responsibility and mutual accountability. This means going beyond just re-examining the nation’s rhetoric, but also looking towards processes and activities that can be utilized to build stronger, healthier communities and a better nation.

The following action guide draws on NLC’s continuing work on this topic to present cities and city leaders with ideas and a framework for action to promote democratic governance. As NLC defines it, democratic governance is “the art of governing a community in participatory, deliberative, inclusive and collaborative ways.” This isn’t easy work, but it is essential to the effective functioning of our cities and our society.

In the aftermath of the events in Tucson, we want to help cities and city leaders consider the full range of activities they can undertake to build a public life in their cities that encourages constructive participation, as a matter of course.

Engaging the public and promoting open and civil discourse are among the core responsibilities of elected leaders. NLC commends public officials at all levels of government who share Congresswoman Giffords’ dedication to this work, and we pledge to continue to support them in the months and years ahead.



Donald J. Borut  
Executive Director  
National League of Cities

# BEYOND CIVILITY

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*How can we bring more civility, more trust, and a greater sense of common cause to public discussions of the urgent problems we face?*

*How can we promote more shared responsibility and engage more people in the work of building stronger, better communities?*

# BEYOND CIVILITY

## FROM PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT TO PROBLEM SOLVING

In recent years, questions regarding civility have come up again and again in conversations among America's city leaders.

The National League of Cities (NLC) has responded by providing resources and training in how to engage local residents more effectively in the work of "democratic governance." As NLC defines it, democratic governance is "the art of governing a community in participatory, deliberative, inclusive, and collaborative ways."

In the course of its research and other work on this topic, NLC has identified a number of roles and responsibilities for city leaders in promoting democratic governance. NLC also has found numerous examples of cities and towns where local leaders have helped their communities find ways to engage people in constructive discussions and positive action to address community challenges.

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*The best examples of democratic governance are those that engage a diverse assortment of people and institutions in learning more about community issues and working together to arrive at solutions.*

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Obviously, government does not bear the sole responsibility for doing this work. The term "governance" itself is meant to affirm an active role for residents, community organizations, business, the media, and others. The best examples of democratic governance are those that engage a diverse assortment of people and institutions in learning more about community issues and working together to arrive at solutions.

## DOING DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE RIGHT: SEVEN PRINCIPLES

This action guide offers insights from NLC's work in this area. It presents seven principles to help city leaders build a culture of democratic governance in their communities.

1. MODEL CIVILITY
2. SHARPEN SKILLS
3. CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR INFORMED ENGAGEMENT
4. SUPPORT A CULTURE OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT
5. MAKE THE MOST OF TECHNOLOGY
6. INCLUDE EVERYBODY
7. MAKE IT LAST

In the following pages, we briefly explore these seven principles and how city leaders and their constituents can use them to help guide local efforts. We also offer brief examples of cities that are already following some of these principles in their democratic governance work.

None of these principles stands on its own. For example, a city's efforts to promote informed engagement (#3) will surely involve outreach to diverse audiences (#6) and the effective use of technology (#5). NLC hopes that city leaders will consider the full range of activities covered in the following pages and how they support each other, and then weigh the best approaches for their communities.

Readers are encouraged to visit NLC's website, [www.nlc.org](http://www.nlc.org), for additional materials and information on this topic; currently available NLC resources are highlighted at the end of this guide.

## 1. MODEL CIVILITY

All too often, Americans sense that real progress on critical public issues is impossible because they see policy debates among elected leaders degenerate into electioneering, posturing, name calling and worse.

While city leaders have little control over the conduct and the civility of the national debates that are often the ripest targets for voter anger, they can work to ensure that local and regional decision making is conducted in a civil and responsible manner. Not only will this help build residents' confidence in government's ability to address problems effectively, but it also will set the tone for civil discourse throughout the community and provide a model for other levels of government.

**EXAMPLE:** Many city councils around the country hold retreats so they can spend time discussing important issues in a more casual setting than the council chambers. These work sessions often are led by a professional facilitator, who can help city leaders establish ground rules and explore areas of consensus while learning more about their colleagues' interests and priorities.

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*“Public engagement means to me more than just me speaking to the citizens from our regular council meetings. ... It means having roundtable discussions, small and large group forums for us to hear both sides of the [problems] and the solution. ... Engagement is just another form of communication. ... We need to effectively communicate with one another.”*

*– Cynthia Stamps-Jones, Councilmember,  
Riverdale, Georgia*

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## 2. SHARPEN SKILLS

City leaders bring a variety of qualifications and skills to their work. They come to office based on their leadership experience in the community, their political abilities, their

issue expertise, or their business background – or some combination of all of the above. The work of promoting effective public engagement and problem solving may require city leaders to develop and refine new skills in areas from convening and facilitation to conflict resolution, mediation, and cultural competence (i.e., reaching out to diverse populations).

In a recent NLC survey, about half of all city officials and top staff said that neither they nor their constituents have the skills and experience needed to carry out effective public engagement (for more on the survey, see page 7). Training can help even the most “natural” politicians develop and hone the core competencies they need.

Of course, city leaders are not expected to possess all of the necessary skills themselves. Wherever possible, they can work with professional facilitators, mediators, communications consultants, academics, and others with experience structuring effective programs to convene people and promote meaningful engagement on issues.

City leaders also can take steps to help ensure that training and resources are available for local government staff members, residents, and leaders of other local organizations so they can develop key skills that will contribute to community problem solving. Many cities work with universities and other partners in their communities to organize training programs for residents and neighborhood leaders.

### SKILL-BUILDING RESOURCES AVAILABLE FROM NLC

NLC offers an array of training programs for city leaders who are interested in sharpening their democratic governance skills. Every year, for example, nearly 3,000 city leaders participate in seminars and programs sponsored by NLC's Leadership Training Institute. NLC also sponsors a variety of seminars and workshops at its annual Congress of Cities and Congressional City Conference. Other learning opportunities on these issues are organized by NLC's CityFutures Panel on Democratic Governance and NLC's Institute for Youth, Education and Families.

NLC also offers a variety of guidebooks and other resources to help city leaders in their work on democratic governance topics (see page 8 for more).

**EXAMPLE:** The City of Scottsdale, Arizona developed the Neighborhood College to provide residents, neighborhood groups and homeowner associations with information, resources and tools for engaging more effectively with government and solving local problems.

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*“We want people to see that we’re all part of this together and that there’s ownership and there’s some obligation. We’re trying to move beyond simply entitlements into obligation to contribute to your city and its health and to be a part of the conversation and to make it part of the culture that we work on issues through conversations.”*

*– Mark Linder, Director, Parks and Recreation, Cupertino, California*

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### 3. CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR INFORMED ENGAGEMENT

City leaders across the nation are implementing public engagement processes to mobilize residents to provide input and make decisions about important issues facing their communities.

Engaging the public in this way gives residents a firsthand look at how government – and governance – works. People can learn the importance of comity and compromise, and they can see how conflicting priorities and values often influence solutions.

In recent decades, a growing number of cities have created neighborhood councils (also known as “planning districts” and “priority boards”) that engage residents to provide input on policy decisions. Other cities have convened residents in other ways to debate issues, develop priorities, and propose policies and strategies for addressing community needs. A key consideration in this work: reaching beyond the “usual suspects” to engage and involve diverse groups of residents – adults as well as young people – in local problem-solving efforts.

Effective public engagement relies on people having good information about how government works, what the issues are, and the various options for addressing pressing community needs. City leaders can play an important part in helping residents gain the knowledge and understanding to debate problems and solutions in a constructive way.

**EXAMPLE:** In Lancaster, Pennsylvania, the Lancaster 2020 21<sup>st</sup> Century Leadership Summit brought together more than 300 diverse residents and community leaders to develop a vision and priorities for the city’s future.

**EXAMPLE:** In Fort Worth, Texas, the local Youth Advisory Board organizes an annual Youth Town Hall in which young people discuss important issues with the Fort Worth City Council.

**EXAMPLE:** Residents of Burlington, Vermont, are involved in the allocation of funds and other decision-making processes of city government through Neighborhood Planning Assemblies.

#### PUBLIC MEETINGS: WE CAN DO BETTER

In many communities, town hall meetings and “resident comment” periods during city council meetings are important opportunities for residents to engage with their local government and its leaders. However, many city leaders and their constituents have expressed frustration with the typical formats of public meetings. All too often, they say, these meetings provide little opportunity for real, two-way dialogue on the issues.

In response, many cities are experimenting with more productive ways of interacting with residents. In Brea, California, for example, city leaders hired a local facilitator to help organize and run a series of community dialogues and surveys to solicit resident input as the city faced the task of eliminating services to balance the city budget.

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*“As cities right now, we have to be really careful about the decisions we make because we do not have either the time or the money to misstep. ... So if the public can own that issue and the problem in the beginning and the solution at the end, it makes the decision much more sustainable.”*

*– Robin Beltramini, Councilmember,  
Troy, Michigan*

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#### 4. SUPPORT A CULTURE OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Citizenship is about more than voting and engaging with government. It is about fulfilling one’s responsibilities as a neighbor and connecting with others in the community in a host of ways – everything from picking up litter and watching the neighbor’s house while they are away to volunteering and much more.

In order to avoid unrealistic expectations and tap the full problem-solving potential of their communities, it is important that residents see that government can’t solve community problems on its own. Residents can contribute their own time, energy, and resources to solving problems large and small.

As municipal budgets continue to tighten, in fact, city leaders increasingly are turning to residents and community organizations to work with them to respond to critical community needs, strengthen and expand services, and build stronger communities. Cities of all sizes are finding ways to foster a strong culture of civic responsibility through volunteerism.

Roles for cities and city leaders in this work range from simply showing people the wealth of opportunities for them to get involved to actively recruiting residents to volunteer with city agencies and community organizations.

**EXAMPLE:** In Dublin, Ohio, the city’s Department of Volunteer Resources oversees a range of programs to engage adults, teens and families in volunteer work with city government and community agencies.

**EXAMPLE:** In Jacksonville, Florida, the Office of Volunteer Services recruited more than 500 residents to serve as JaxCorps volunteers in nearly all city agencies in 2009.

#### WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT THE MEDIA?

Elected officials at all levels regularly voice their interest in seeing the news media become a more constructive partner in educating residents about issues and framing public choices in a constructive way. The media’s emphasis on conflict and “gotcha journalism” often is cited by government leaders (and, indeed, by many media representatives themselves) as a barrier to building public trust and engaging residents in community problem solving. Members of the media, on the other hand, often assert that city officials are too secretive and not forthcoming in their deliberations.

It doesn’t have to be this way. Across the country, city leaders are taking steps to engage the media as a partner in promoting civil discourse on the issues and in helping residents understand what is at stake and how they can get involved.

As they build new and more constructive relationships with media representatives, city leaders can explore new opportunities for government-media collaborations and, if needed, point out shortcomings in current media coverage. City leaders also may want to consider enlisting media organizations as cosponsors of local efforts to bring residents together to address urgent community issues.

#### 5. MAKE THE MOST OF TECHNOLOGY

As in other sectors of the economy, the Internet can be a powerful communications and engagement tool for city governments. The interactive, participatory nature of social media and web 2.0 technologies makes them natural platforms for engaging the public in discussing and solving community problems.

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*“We’re elected to try to enact what the community values represent. The only way to really know that is to have them involved, engaged in articulating those values whether it be very broad thinking like visioning or whether it be complaining about a noise issue in their neighborhood. In either event, people need to understand that they’re in control of their government and that’s what public engagement’s all about in my mind.”*

*– Lou Ogden, Mayor, Tualatin, Oregon*

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Cities and city leaders can use web-based technologies in a variety of ways to inform and educate residents, solicit feedback, and lead community conversations. The use of social media in particular can be an effective way to engage technologically savvy young people in the work of community problem solving.

Interactive technologies also hold out the potential for broadening and deepening engagement by other groups, such as busy parents or elderly residents who might not be able to attend community meetings in person but who might welcome the chance to engage in online dialogues on issues of concern to them.

Local governments have not been as fast as other sectors to embrace the potential of new technologies due to questions about costs, privacy, information integrity, record keeping, and other issues. While city leaders should indeed move cautiously before using these platforms on a broad scale, they should know that residents are becoming increasingly comfortable with online forms of communications and networking.

In many respects, the internet is the new town hall, and city leaders can work with residents and others to make sure it delivers a form of dialogue and public engagement that can help solve real problems.

**EXAMPLE:** The City of Minneapolis, Minnesota, created the Minneapolis Issues Forum, an online space where more than 1,350 registered participants engage with elected officials and community leaders on civic issues.

**EXAMPLE:** In October 2009, the City of Manor, Texas, launched “Manor Labs,” a dedicated website that allows residents to submit technology ideas to the city and rate the ideas submitted by others.

**EXAMPLE:** In June 2010, the Public Technology Institute designated Greensboro, North Carolina, as one of eight “Citizen-Engaged Communities” for its efforts to provide the public with a variety of ways to access services and information via the city’s website and other communications channels.

## 6. INCLUDE EVERYBODY

Many cities are taking steps to expand the circle of public engagement to audiences that traditionally have not been involved. One action city leaders can consider is inviting young people to play a more meaningful role in local problem solving. By reaching out to these future voters and rising local leaders, government can gain added insight into their interests and priorities, develop more effective and creative strategies for addressing local needs and lay the groundwork for long-term community success.

NLC’s Institute for Youth, Education, and Families offers an array of resources for cities and city leaders as they seek to get young people more involved in community decision making (see <http://www.nlc.org/iyef> for more).

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*“Public engagement means that the public, just regular people, are involved in the city ... they’re intrigued, they ask questions. They come to city council meetings and get up at the podium and say stuff. They show an interest in current City Council agenda items. And mostly they show an interest in the community as a whole. ... They e-mail us. They meet with neighbors, affect power.”*

*– Kerry Kincaid, City Council President,  
Eau Claire, Wisconsin*

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In addition, many cities are launching targeted efforts to engage people of color, including recent immigrants, in the work of democratic governance (see page 8 for information on the NLC guidebook, Civic Engagement and Recent Immigrant Communities). Whether the focus is young people or people of color (or both), city leaders increasingly view these populations as an untapped resource that can bring new talent, knowledge, and insights to inform community efforts to solve problems.

Of course, the circle of public engagement includes numerous other groups, from business leaders and members of faith communities to the elderly and more. City leaders can work with partner organizations in the community to ensure that all residents have opportunities to contribute to local problem-solving efforts.

**EXAMPLE:** The Youth Engagement Initiative of the City of Hampton, Virginia, is widely recognized for providing a wealth of opportunities for young people to serve others, influence decisions, and gain leadership experience in the community.

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*“We seem to be moving toward a different kind of system, in which working directly with citizens may be just as important as representing their interests.”*

*– Steve Burkholder, former Mayor,  
Lakewood, Colorado*

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**EXAMPLE:** The City of Fremont, Indiana, appointed a Hispanic and Immigrant Liaison to establish and maintain communications between the city government and local immigrant populations.

## 7. MAKE IT LAST

A one-time convening or volunteer drive can deliver short-term results, but it is not enough to fully engage the public in solving a community’s long-term problems. City leaders should work with their partners inside and outside of government to make public engagement an ongoing community priority. The idea is to embed communitywide input and involvement into the process by which government and local residents address problems and opportunities and adopt priorities for the years ahead.

Creating the conditions for long-lasting public engagement does not have to be the responsibility of city leaders alone. To ensure broad involvement in and ownership of a city’s democratic governance work, cities may want to consider organizing a diverse, cross-sector committee of residents and leaders from various segments of the community. Their charge: to develop ideas and plans for fostering a higher level of public engagement among local residents around key issues facing the community.

**EXAMPLE:** In Portsmouth, New Hampshire, the mayor and city council decided to convene small groups of residents in “study circle” discussions to help develop the city’s strategic master plan. More than 450 people participated in a process that grew into Portsmouth Listens, an all-volunteer group that now partners with the city and schools to discuss critical local issues on a continuing basis.

# APPENDIX 1

## MUNICIPAL OFFICIALS' VIEWS ON PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

In June 2009, NLC surveyed city leaders about public engagement policies and practices in their cities. The findings are summarized in the NLC report, *Making Local Democracy Work: Municipal Officials' Views About Public Engagement*. Key findings include:

### THERE ARE REGULAR AND VARIOUS PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT PROCESSES OCCURRING IN CITIES.

- City leaders reported that their cities use public engagement processes often (60 percent) or sometimes (21 percent).
- They reported use of a range and variety of local practices, including town hall meetings, neighborhood councils, online forums and community surveys.

### CITY LEADERS VALUE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT FROM ALL MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY.

- Virtually all respondents (95 percent) reported that city leaders in their communities value public engagement processes. Respondents said they see important benefits from this work, such as developing a stronger sense of community, building trust between the public and city hall, and finding better solutions to local problems.
- The report observes that it takes the efforts of the whole community to create and sustain effective democratic governance. Many city leaders say that important players (including residents, the media, community and special interest groups, and their own city halls) are not stepping up to their proper roles.

### CITY LEADERS SAY THAT BOTH THEY AND THE PUBLIC NEED MORE TRAINING FOR ENGAGEMENT PROCESSES.

- City leaders and residents need skills to engage more effectively. Nearly half of respondents said that neither city leaders nor residents have the skills, training, and experience to carry out and participate in effective public engagement.
- The report suggests that improving skills may therefore be at least as important as providing technology and/or varied processes for engagement.

*For the full report, go to <http://www.nlc.org/ASSETS/E3CB482F3957414FBA01C1571D64770B/Research%20Report-%20Making%20Local%20Democracy%20Work.pdf>*

## NLC RESOURCES ON PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

### THE CITYFUTURES PANEL ON DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

The purpose of the CityFutures Panel on Democratic Governance is to support NLC members seeking to more effectively engage local residents in responding to their cities' most daunting challenges and promising opportunities.

### NLC PUBLICATIONS

#### **Local Practices in Public Engagement (2010)**

This brief presents local practices that public officials and their staffs are incorporating in their communities to govern in more participatory, deliberative, inclusive, and collaborative ways.

#### **City Government Promoting Civic Responsibility through Volunteerism (2010)**

This brief illustrates the diversity of volunteer programs and strategies that city officials are implementing to achieve city priorities and to strengthen and expand services.

#### **Research Report: Making Local Democracy Work (2010)**

This report compiles information from a survey of city leaders conducted in the summer of 2009 to find out more about their views, attitudes, and local practices in public engagement.

#### **Civic Engagement and Recent Immigrant Communities (2010)**

This guide presents local officials with the first steps and directions for developing or re-establishing efforts toward integrating immigrants into the civic life of their cities.

#### **Authentic Youth Civic Engagement: A Guide for Municipal Leaders (2010)**

This guide offers a framework to support cities as they work to promote youth civic engagement in their communities.

#### **Research Brief on America's Cities: Municipal Officials' Views on Public Engagement: City Hall, the Public, the Media and Community Groups (2010)**

This Research Brief, based on the results of NLC's State of America's Cities survey, reports on city leaders' views related to participation in democratic decision making on the part of the public, the media, and community groups.

#### **Research Brief on America's Cities: Municipal Officials' Views on Public Engagement (2009)**

This research brief, based on the results of NLC's State of America's Cities survey, reports on city leaders' views about public engagement and their efforts to involve residents in deliberating issues and helping to solve problems.

### Legislating for Results (2009)

NLC and the Urban Institute, under the guidance of an advisory committee of city leaders, produced a set of municipal action guides on results-based legislating for local government. The 11 action guides cover key concepts related to gathering, analyzing, using, and communicating information in order to “legislate for results.”

### The Promise and Challenge of Neighborhood Democracy: Lessons from the Intersection of Government and Community (2008)

This report focuses on the neighborhood structures of Portland, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, and other cities that have experimented with creative ways to engage residents in public decision making and problem solving.

### Working Productively With 21st Century Citizens (2007)

This municipal action guide summarizes action steps and provides examples of local practice among cities that are exploring new ways to strengthen the relationship between government and local residents.

### Four City Practices Briefs on Governance (2007)

This series of city practice briefs covers how municipal officials can work with others to get things done.

### The Rise of Democratic Governance: How Local Leaders Are Reshaping Politics for the 21st Century (2006)

This resource offers a framework for understanding how local leaders view the issues and challenges they face in governing the nation’s cities and towns.

### Changing the Way We Govern: Building Democratic Governance in Your Community (2006)

This detailed guidebook includes narratives and case studies intended to offer ideas and models for city leaders involved in engaging residents in governance.

## ALSO AVAILABLE FROM NLC

City leaders are encouraged to visit NLC’s website in the weeks and months ahead, [www.nlc.org](http://www.nlc.org), for additional resources and learning opportunities on these topics.

NLC invites all cities and city leaders to share their stories about how they are working to promote civility and meaningful public engagement as they seek to solve local problems. Staff Contact: Bonnie Mann, [mann@nlc.org](mailto:mann@nlc.org), or 202-626-3125

## NEW! NATIONAL CITIZEN SURVEY™

The National Citizen Survey™ is a low-cost survey tool that helps city leaders determine what a statistically valid sample of residents thinks about the quality and breadth of local government services. The survey results may be used by staff, elected officials, and other stakeholders for community planning and resource allocation, program improvement, policy making, and tracking changes in residents’ opinions about government performance. It offers cities the ability to compare their results to benchmarks based on the survey results of more than 500 jurisdictions throughout the country. The tool is offered to cities through a partnership between NLC, the International City Council Management Association and the NRC. For more information, go to [www.nlc.org](http://www.nlc.org).

