COVID-19 and the Hidden Urban System Supporting Vulnerable Communities

RESILIENT CITIES CATALYST

ABOUT RESILIENT CITIES CATALYST

Building on the pioneering legacy of 100 Resilient Cities (100RC), senior 100RC executives have now established Resilient Cities Catalyst (RCC). RCC is a new non-profit designed to help cities build the capacities and partnerships needed to understand, prioritize, and concretely address their risks and chronic stresses as they pursue their strategic goals or recover from crisis.

RCC partners with city governments, businesses, neighborhoods, and community stakeholders around the globe to:

1. Develop an enabling environment to build strong partnerships between cities and their communities allowing them to drive policy, planning, design, finance, and institutional resources for resilience-building efforts.
2. Ensure that ideas are turned into meaningful action by addressing gaps between project plans, project implementation and desired impacts.
3. Share and replicate learnings through a growing community of practice.

ABOUT PAUL NELSON

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> The multiple systemic stresses compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic underscore the importance of an oft overlooked piece of critical urban infrastructure - the complex ecosystem of non-profit organizations and government agencies working with cities' most vulnerable residents.
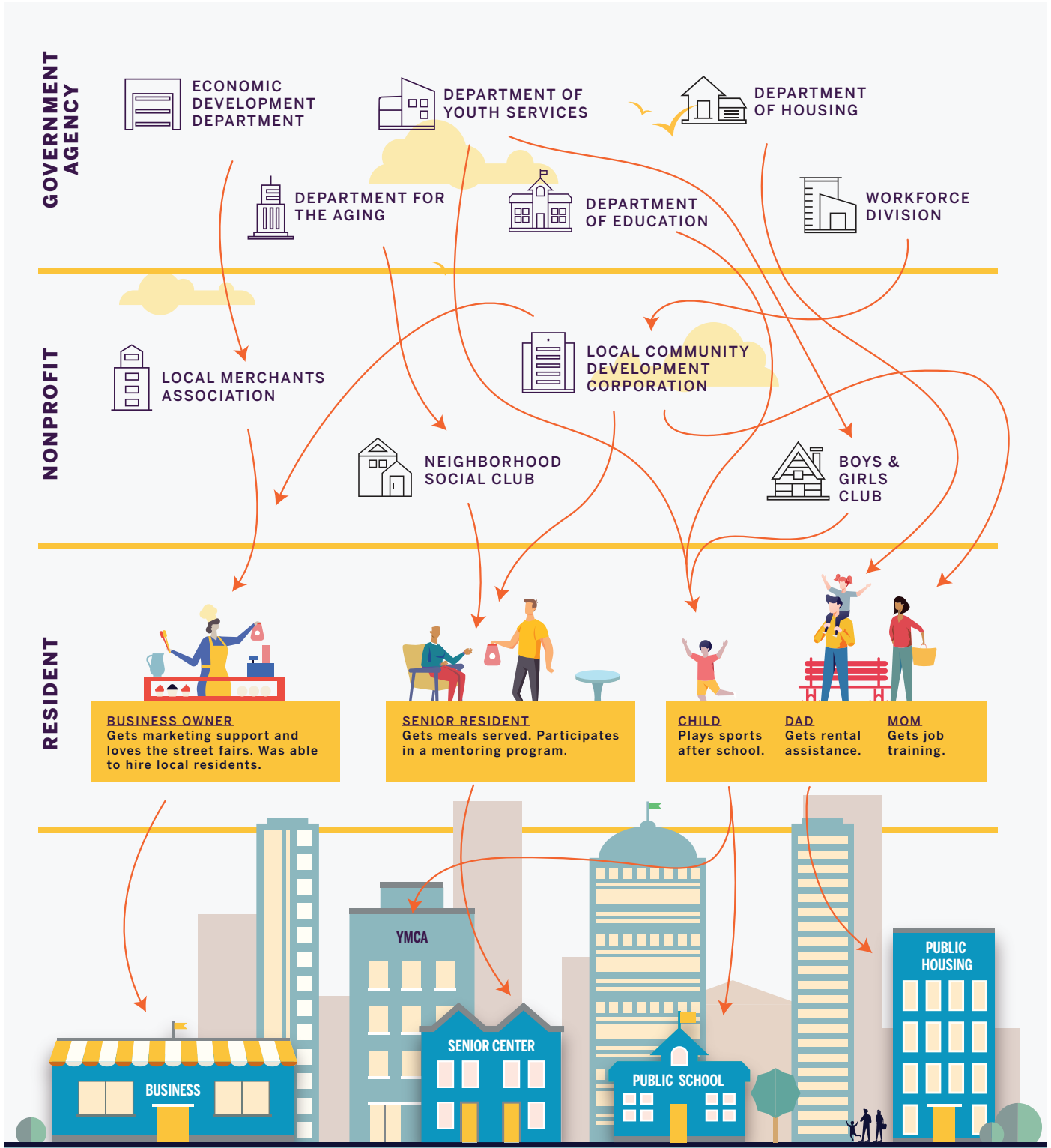
While we have much to learn about the full breadth and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is clear that the burden of the disease - like with so many disasters - is falling disproportionately on cities' most vulnerable residents. Seniors, low-wage workers, people of color, public housing residents, and immigrants are all at higher risk of both COVID-19 exposure and its cascading negative effects. The contributing factors for this increased risk are legion -- ranging from long-standing health disparities to the lack of a social safety net; from inadequate housing and access to food; to the spatial mismatch forcing low-wage workers to commute. And as the pandemic progresses, it is laying bare the full spectrum of structural inequities underpinning COVID-19's terrible toll on certain communities among us. Local governments here in the U.S. and around the world have struggled to stem the tide of COVID-19 among these at-risk groups. To mitigate further spread and suffering, adequately respond during the crisis, and set the stage for a more resilient and equitable recovery for these vulnerable residents, local governments will need to marshal the resources of a critical, distributed and unseen city system - the intricate web of government agencies and nonprofit organizations serving vulnerable communities.

From after-school programming to neighborhood senior center meal provision, city residents often interface with and experience government not simply through municipal agencies and departments, but through trusted nonprofit intermediaries. These are the human service providers, the local community development organizations, faith-based service and social support groups, and others that advocate for the needs of community residents, provide them with a suite of human and social services, and help contribute to a sense of place among neighbors.

The Complex and Critical Urban Infrastructure System Supporting Vulnerable Communities.

To better respond in crisis and build resilience to future shocks, local
governments need a unified view of the entire web of social service agencies
and myriad non-profit organizations at work in their neighborhoods.

GOVERNMENT AGENCY

- ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT
- DEPARTMENT OF YOUTH SERVICES
- DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING
- DEPARTMENT FOR THE AGING
- DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
- WORKFORCE DIVISION

NONPROFIT

- LOCAL MERCHANTS ASSOCIATION
- LOCAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION
- NEIGHBORHOOD SOCIAL CLUB
- BOYS & GIRLS CLUB

RESIDENT

BUSINESS OWNER
Gets marketing support and loves the street fairs. Was able to hire local residents.

SENIOR RESIDENT
Gets meals served. Participates in a mentoring program.

CHILD
Plays sports after school.

DAD
Gets rental assistance.

MOM
Gets job training.

YMCA

BUSINESS

SENIOR CENTER

PUBLIC SCHOOL

PUBLIC HOUSING

This is especially true in U.S. cities where federal and local governments have come to rely on nonprofits to deliver services to vulnerable communities over the past four decades and where there is a high concentration of local community-based organizations (CBOs) fulfilling such roles. In good times, the relationships between these organizations and residents engender community trust as they foster the overall health and well-being of individual community members. During crises such as COVID-19, they become the lifelines that provide residents with access to essential information, help meet their basic needs, and serve as the trusted pathway to city-led response and recovery efforts.

Of course, municipal and county agencies interface day in and day out with residents as well through local public schools, public housing authorities, and public benefits distribution. All too often, however, cities lack a unified view of the entire complex web of social service agencies and myriad non-profit organizations at work in their most vulnerable communities. As a result, it can often be difficult to effectively and efficiently partner with and mobilize this critical system in times of crisis to meet the needs of at-risk residents. This is due in part to the siloed nature of government agency mandates and contracting. City (and county) departments are organized around discrete systems - health, mobility, education, etc. - rather than the places they serve. And the relationships they build with community-based organizations are often a function of the funding streams and contracts or individual city and county programs that address

The Complicated Web of Relationships Among
Government Agencies and Nonprofits
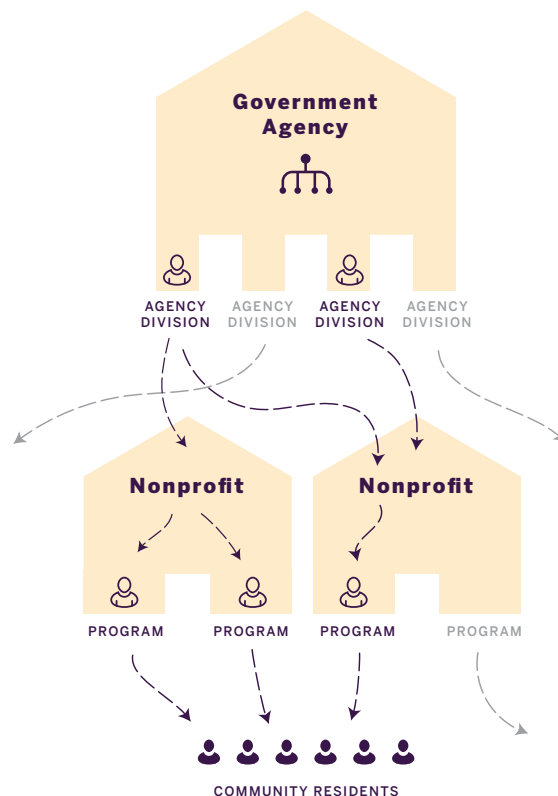
stresses to that particular system. For instance, a Housing Department will partner with non-profit affordable housing developers through low-income housing tax credit and financing programs; the Economic Development Department will work with local business groups on the roll-out of new regulations; the Youth Development Division will fund local YMCAs and Boys and Girls Clubs to deliver after school programming.

Further complicating these relationships is the reality that different divisions within even a single government agency often partner with different sub-networks of community-based organizations to advance their different initiatives. And from the CBO perspective, especially in larger organizations, different program leads and managers within the organization will be working with multiple city and county agency contacts.

The result is a fragmented system in which the critical connective tissue running from residents to CBOs to city or county government agencies is too diffuse to be easily activated in times of crisis. Without a unified understanding of the entire system, governments lose valuable time when disaster hits, resulting in a missed opportunity to quickly mobilize the local ecosystem of CBOs and agencies to provide critical support to at-risk residents and establish vital feedback loops to inform design and delivery of emergency response services.

Local governments must find ways to support, activate and partner with this critical community-based infrastructure in order to better respond and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. And beyond the shock of COVID-19, this same infrastructure needs to be strengthened to foster closer collaboration and communication with residents in the 'new normal' once the pandemic subsides.

To build their resilience to future shocks and strengthen the social fabric of their neighborhoods, cities must foster and manage this ecosystem of government agencies and nonprofit organizations with the same focus and intentionality that they bring to any other critical urban infrastructure system. Starting today, when many local governments are still in COVID-19 response mode and looking ahead to recovery, there are critical actions they can take toward building a more integrated system of agencies and nonprofit partners at work in vulnerable communities:

short term

AGENCY

CBO

Designate Agency 'Network Stewards' and Activate Feedback Loops with Existing City-CBO Sub-Networks:

Reexamine Local Government's Funding and Contracting Responsibilities to Partner Organizations

Leverage Local Government Leadership's Convening Power

Co-Design Response and Recovery Programming with Agencies, Nonprofit Partners and Residents:

long term

Designate a City-Wide Ecosystem Leader

Designate Agency 'Network Stewards' and Activate Feedback Loops with Existing City-CBO Sub-Networks

Cities need clearer line of sight on the entire ecosystem of organizations working with vulnerable residents across government agencies in order to effectively manage response and recovery efforts. To do this, local governments should identify the 'network stewards' of the various sub-networks of nonprofit organizations within each Agency. These network stewards are often the Program Directors or Division Heads who manage a portfolio of contractual or funding relationships with community-facing organizations to collectively deliver discrete programs and services. In many cases, they have long-standing relationships with local CBO staff and understand the neighborhood landscapes in which their sub-networks are operating. Quickly aggregating this information at both the Agency and the city level will begin to paint a picture of the existing critical connective tissue linking at-risk communities to local government. Most likely, these network stewards are already being tapped to push out messaging from the Agency and City levels, but they should also be leveraged to open up critical feedback loops to learn directly from organizations and communities: How are their needs evolving? How effective (or not) are response efforts, and what needs to be tweaked? How should recovery programming be designed to best respond to the communities' priorities?

Reexamine Local Government's Funding and Contracting Responsibilities to Partner Organizations

Among COVID-19's compounding ripple effects is the potential for vital nonprofit service providers to be forced to operate at critically reduced capacity or even shutter completely. In its outsized role as funder and contracting entity to many CBOs, local government needs to ensure that its nonprofit partners are able to continue delivering critical services for communities in the short- and long-term. At the individual Agency level, network stewards should be in dialogue with their portfolios of partner organizations to understand current critical pain points in ongoing operations and service delivery. And at the city level, local governments should consider steps they can take to ease administrative burdens on their contractors and grantees as a whole across agencies. Leaders in the philanthropic sector have committed to working with their portfolios of grantees and nonprofit partners to eliminate inefficiencies and reduce red tape to ensure that they are able to serve communities most in need. While the constraints of government contracting are tighter than those of private foundations, cities should consider the steps they can take to ensure their nonprofit partners can focus on delivering services to vulnerable residents.
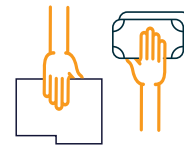
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Whether that's expediting contracting or payment processing, ensuring nonprofits have documentation they need to secure financing or connecting nonprofit partners to local COVID-19 emergency loan or grant funds, local government plays a vital role in ensuring the survival of the ecosystem of nonprofits working with at-risk residents. And in the long-term, local governments should consider investing in efforts to build up the capacity of these organizations so that collectively the ecosystem is better able to meet the challenges of future shocks.

Leverage Local Government Leadership's Convening Power

If there were ever a time for government leaders to use the power of the bully pulpit to elevate this overlooked, but critical urban system, it is during the COVID-19 crisis. City leaders should deploy their convening power to bring together the diffuse network of agencies and nonprofit organizations working with vulnerable populations to thank them for their efforts, to listen to their needs and ideas, and to articulate a strong vision for joint partnership in COVID-19 response and recovery. A virtual convening demands much less in the way of planning and logistics than a typical Mayoral and Chief Executive gathering would, and it would send a powerful signal of support and care to these critical partners and the communities they serve. Local governments could also leverage these moments to bring in emerging and new volunteer-led efforts sprouting up across communities in response to COVID-19 that may not have existing relationships with Agencies or entry points into the extant ecosystem. Fostering community among this city-wide network of partners from City Hall is a critical first step in building the good will and stamina needed for the long road to recovery and in creating the foundation for stronger working relationships moving forward.

Co-Design Response and Recovery Programming with Agencies, Nonprofit Partners and Residents

As local governments make the transition from response to recovery and manage the infusion of federal stimulus funds, they should take the opportunity to rethink their service design and delivery models in partnership with vulnerable populations and the nonprofits that serve them. The same siloed funding streams and governance structures that foster this diffuse system in the first place create a fragmented user experience for the community resident who accesses government-funded services. And while many local governments have already taken the lead in leveraging human-centered design as a tool to chart out new pilot programs or services, too often these practices are viewed as nice-to-haves or inefficient in moments of crisis. Local governments should leverage the full power of the ecosystem of agencies and nonprofits working with residents when mapping out cities' suites of COVID-19 recovery programming.

Leveraging recovery outcome goals as the entry point for this co-design could be a particularly effective means to build this collaboration. In the current pandemic context, for instance, consider the power in bringing together all of the relevant agencies and nonprofits working in a given community along with residents to design new ways to achieve testing and contact tracing goals for a neighborhood. The urgency brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic recovery will be a powerful catalyst for experimenting with new ways of government service design now and into the future. By co-creating these programs with the agencies and nonprofits who will deliver them together with the residents who will leverage them, cities can source innovations and new ways of delivering programs that more directly respond to the needs of the communities, while strengthening the muscle they need to more effectively manage through this crisis and the next to come - and paving the way for more innovative service delivery design moving forward.

Designate a City-Wide Ecosystem Leader

When local governments emerge from crisis mode and have settled into a more stable recovery phase, they should consider institutionalizing the role of ecosystem leader at the city-wide scale. Just as a local government would never leave a critical piece of infrastructure like its transit system without a formal lead, it should not neglect the critical infrastructure connecting government to its most vulnerable communities. This lack of a stronger coordinating function at the city-wide level hinders local governments' ability to respond to the needs of its most vulnerable residents during emergencies and leaves them ill-equipped to deliver responsive and resilient services to its communities in good times. This role should go beyond tackling the byzantine city contracting hurdles and regulations that nonprofits face (a function that in some cities is already in place) and focus on critical relationship-building and network weaving efforts that could strengthen the ecosystem as a whole. In many cities, the role would require not just coordination with network stewards across multiple municipal agencies, but a cross-jurisdictional view as well, as county agencies focused on health or workforce development have their own sub-networks of partners at work in the same communities served by the municipality.
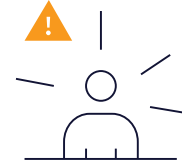
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Strategically cultivating and curating this diffuse network of agency network stewards and nonprofit organizations with intentionality has the potential to reap benefits for vulnerable communities and cities as a whole. By fostering a cross-sectoral community of practice focused on vulnerable communities at the city-wide scale, innovation from different pockets of the ecosystem could be sourced and shared across sectors, system silos, and communities - and new partnerships, funding collaborations and service models could bring better outcomes for vulnerable residents. What's more, this ecosystem leader would not need to be a new municipal position - other extant transversal government roles, such as Chief Resilience Officers, Chief Innovation Officers, or other similar silo-busting functions such as Heads of Intergovernmental or Community Affairs could take on this critical responsibility as part of their portfolios. Regardless of where the role or function lands, it is simply important that local governments begin to consider this complex system of agencies and nonprofit organizations at work in all of their neighborhoods as a whole - not just as component parts functioning within government silos.

While the COVID-19 pandemic may be the catalyst for change, bringing sharper local government focus on the critical infrastructure that links the public sector to its vulnerable communities is long overdue. Cities should seize this opportunity to build stronger bridges to their residents and foster a more responsive government that boosts much needed trust in the public sector among residents. Resilient and equitable cities are places where that connective tissue linking residents, community-based organizations, and agencies is continuously being strengthened, tested, and repurposed to meet the known and unanticipated challenges of the 21st century. And managing this complex and often unseen city system as a whole has the potential to transform how municipalities serve their communities and create better places for all of their residents, especially the most vulnerable among us, today and moving forward. ●