

# **CITIES** **ARE** **ESSENTIAL**

## Campaign Roundup





## About the National League of Cities

The National League of Cities (NLC) is the voice of America's cities, towns and villages, representing more than 200 million people. NLC works to strengthen local leadership, influence federal policy and drive innovative solutions.

# Foreword

When the National League of Cities launched our Cities Are Essential campaign, hand in hand with the crucial support of our State Municipal Leagues, the need for raising the voice of local leaders to the Administration and Congress was critical. COVID-19 was ravaging so many of our communities and we were sorely missing a partner from the federal government and in some cases even at the state level.

Cities Are Essential was a unified effort to uplift the fiscal reality for cities, towns and villages and the important work local leaders were doing on the frontlines to help their communities respond to the novel coronavirus. NLC launched Cities Are Essential so we could take our message directly to Members of Congress, the Administration, and to the public.

The devastating economic and social fallout from COVID-19 was key to our request that Congress provide direct aid to local government so we could continue our critical and life-saving work within our communities. From helping small businesses, supporting food banks and getting critical resources to residents, the persistence and bold leadership of municipal officials helped drive an important national conversation about the resources that municipalities require to meet the needs of their residents during an historic public health crisis.

Our message was heard widely. From media articles to letters to the editor, Hill briefings and press conferences, the Cities Are Essential campaign highlighted the critical role that municipal governments were playing in keeping their residents safe and fighting the coronavirus pandemic from the frontline.

The report that follows captures the summary of our advocacy for direct federal aid, including the new strategies we have adopted for our advocacy work and our success bringing local voices to Washington.

NLC is appreciative to all our partners, including the 172 organizations that joined our coalition, our state leagues, and our corporate partners who supported the Cities Are Essential campaign.

Thank you all for your leadership and partnership. We are proud of the work we have done together, and we look forward to continuing our advocacy on behalf of cities, towns and villages to get local leaders the vital resources needed to get America on the path to recovery, and bringing equity and prosperity to all American communities.

**CLARENCE E. ANTHONY**  
CEO AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
National League of Cities



# Cities are Essential by the Numbers



33

**Local and National**  
Op-Eds and Letters  
to the Editor



3,500+

**Actions** Taken by  
Local Leaders



42

**All Member Emails,**  
with an Average Open  
Rate Over 20%



2.26

**Million Impressions**  
on Twitter



8

**National and State**  
**Press Conferences**  
Hosted or  
Participated in



3

**Virtual Capitol Hill**  
**Briefings** and 2  
All-Member Calls  
hosted



218

**Members of Congress**  
Supporting Related  
Legislation



72

**Outreach Letters** to  
Congress and the  
Administration



10

**Research Reports** and  
Resources Produced  
with More Than **2,000**  
**Downloads**

# Executive Summary

Since April 2020, NLC has been working hand-in-hand with cities, towns and villages across the country to uplift the voices of local leaders calling for direct, flexible federal relief to municipalities that have been devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The *Cities are Essential* campaign provided local leaders with a powerful unified voice on the national stage, highlighting the critical role municipal governments play in keeping their residents safe and helping them recover from the pandemic's severe and unprecedented economic impact on communities throughout the nation. Unfortunately, political gamesmanship forced aid to local governments to be excluded from the relief package signed into law at the end of 2020. Nevertheless, we were able to build substantial bipartisan support for the aid our hometowns need as our local municipal officials continue to fight the spread of COVID-19.

While the Cities Are Essential campaign, by name, is coming to a close, the fight for aid to cities, towns and villages will continue as part of NLC's broader federal agenda. We are hopeful that, working with a new Congress and a new Administration that have both expressed support for providing additional aid to local governments, the momentum we have built over the past eight months will help us secure the relief that our cities, towns and villages need. We have outlined that strategy at the conclusion of this report.

**Throughout what was undoubtedly one of the most challenging years for local leaders in our nation's history, the persistence and bold leadership of municipal officials helped drive an important national conversation about the resources that municipalities require to meet the needs of their residents during an historic public health crisis.**

Following is an overview of the Cities Are Essential campaign that helped make aid to local governments a priority for lawmakers in Washington.

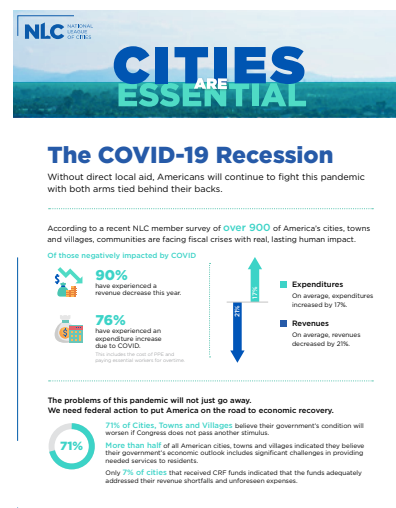


## Campaign Objectives:

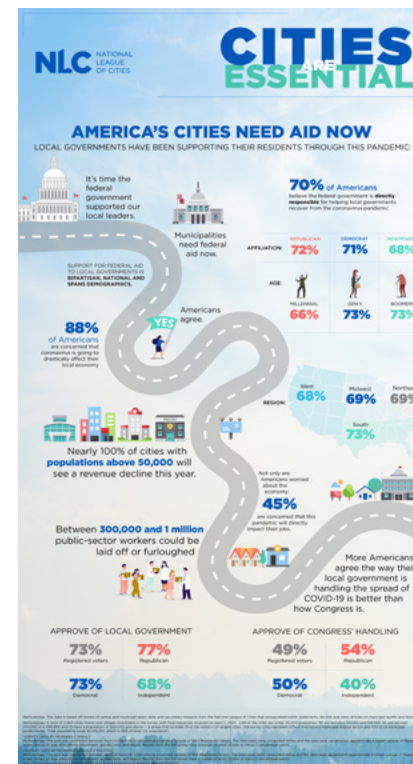
- To secure \$500 billion in direct federal funding to protect families, municipal workers and America's economic future.
- Quantify the financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on cities, towns and villages across the country in order to encourage federal action.
- Demonstrate how cities, towns and villages will use federal aid and support to facilitate the reopening of the national economy.



Cities are Essential Twitter conversation card



Cities are Essential one pager



Cities are Essential infographic

# Federal Advocacy Outcomes

While Congress did not fund additional direct local aid in 2020, NLC was successful in securing other resources for communities in the final COVID aid package of the year and permanently stretching and growing our federal advocacy practice in new ways. We also know that cities, towns and villages will continue to have serious short- and long-term needs to respond to and recover from the pandemic. NLC is committed to continuing the fight for direct local aid in 2021, as well as to maximizing the value for cities from the legislation passed in 2020.

## Policy Accomplishments

While the bill did not include direct local aid, we were successful at including a number of key local priorities in the bill, as well as an extension of the Coronavirus Relief Fund deadline to the end of 2021. In any normal appropriations year, the additional priority funds would have been major victories for cities. These included billions of dollars for nutrition, connectivity, unemployment, local transit, emergency rental assistance, early childhood programming, small businesses, and other matters.

Congress has passed appropriation bills for a number of years without increases to critical programs to match inflation, and the increases we also saw to existing federal programs were an important result of NLC's ongoing advocacy.

NLC's staff successfully negotiated with local government partners and developed the formula that was used in the HEROES Act, which passed the House twice and has been reintroduced in the 117th Congress.

NLC successfully advocated to Treasury for key changes in the disbursement of Coronavirus Relief Fund and in guidance for allowable uses of funds to make them more favorable for municipal governments and exerted substantial pressure through Congress to improve that guidance further.



# Inspiring Changes to How We Advocate

## ALIGNING DATA DEVELOPMENT MORE STRATEGICALLY WITH ADVOCACY

Beginning in April, NLC spearheaded economic modelling, original research reports, and multiple member surveys to provide original research and analysis to lawmakers, policy experts, and the media. In doing so, we were able to drive an important conversation about the dire long-term economic consequences of failing to provide additional aid to local governments.

NLC provided key education to Members of Congress on the amount of Coronavirus Relief Fund money that had actually been released to local governments by states, resulting in additional guidance from Treasury encouraging the distribution of up to 45% of state CRF funds to local governments and generating increased support from Republicans for local aid. This included educating President Trump and Members of Congress about the majority proportion of municipal governments that were small, and therefore had been left out of the Coronavirus Relief Fund directly.

NLC communicated at least every other week with all Capitol Hill offices to share media highlights, original legislative analysis, new survey results, reports, and other key information, resulting in increased outreach to NLC from Members of Congress and their staff, opportunities to answer questions in meetings with key staff, and help in the drafting of legislative text.

## LEVERAGING EXTERNAL RESOURCES

We brought on additional strategic minds, hands, and legs to help with our communications activation was crucial. With the support of our State Municipal Leagues, we were able to hire Washington, D.C. based political communications firm CLS Strategies who brought invaluable experience and resources to our marketing and communications team.

Our State Municipal Leagues also supported the hiring of major lobbying firm Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck, which augmented our internal lobbying capacity and provided critical strategic insight and relationships from a team that included former members of Congress.

We also strengthened our partnership with existing allies, including state and local organizations, and built new ones with a wide variety of groups, including trade associations, labor unions, individual corporations, and think tanks across the political spectrum. This work necessitated holding together disparate groups in alignment through tense political work and leading on united legislative strategy and messaging.

## BRINGING LOCAL VOICES TO WASHINGTON

NLC deepened our relationships across Capitol Hill by cementing our reputation as a reliable, trustworthy source of information about cities. We provided ongoing, timely high-quality education and resources to Members of Congress throughout the year through our regular releases of data, reported media from a wide variety of sources, and direct contact with city officials through virtual briefings and private conversations. By being conscientious about the best messengers for specific federal offices, we were able to empower those city and state municipal league leaders carry water for the campaign and build support for local governments on both sides of the aisle.

Throughout the presidential election, NLC built on advocacy by communicating frequently with key members of the Biden-Harris transition team to educate them on how cities, towns and villages have been impacted by the pandemic. NLC has communicated the need for pandemic relief to key White House appointees, transition leadership, and in every meeting with agency landing teams as the top priority for local governments in the coming year. NLC has leveraged its data to underscore the importance of that relief.



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6

grassroots advocacy campaigns

1,400

members mobilized to take action

GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY

Action Campaigns

Since April, NLC launched six grassroots advocacy campaigns that mobilized over 1400 members to take action. The campaigns incorporated a mixed portfolio of outreach efforts which included three letter writing campaigns, two social media campaigns, and one call campaign. The mix of tactics helped us identify which methods garnered the strongest engagement metrics and which ones supported State Municipal League outreach. This intel positions NLC for strategic engagement in forthcoming campaigns.

Congressional Feedback

Through segmented outreach, NLC was able to collect feedback on Congressional sentiment from our network of city contract lobbyists, Intergovernmental staff from member cities and State Municipal Leagues’ strong relationships. Logging this feedback and maintaining transparency around our communications has been essential to building our lobbying strategy for the next phase in recovery efforts.



#CitiesareEssential on Facebook

TAKING OUR STATE LEAGUE PARTNERSHIP TO NEW HEIGHTS

The work NLC and the 49 state municipal leagues do with one another to advocate on behalf of member municipalities and the constituents they serve is a hallmark of the special relationship we have together. From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, NLC and the state municipal leagues have worked closely together sharing best practices and resources through regular meetings among executive directors and staff, as well as online list-servs and convenings.

Throughout deliberations on the CARES Act, the NLC Federal Advocacy team worked with state municipal league executive directors and staff utilizing relationships in key states, soliciting stories and data of the situation on the ground in America's communities, and keeping state municipal leagues abreast of key happenings on Capitol Hill with the goal of securing direct aid to municipalities of all sizes.

NLC and the state municipal leagues coordinated efforts through regular calls among executive directors, communications and membership teams, and legislative staff. These calls were pivotal to developing and distributing legislative strategy, toolkits and messaging, unified data gathering efforts, as well as member action alerts. In addition, the Cities Are Essential team utilized existing communications channels to ensure that collateral, updates, action alerts, and surveys were distributed not only to state league staff, but also within the considerable state league member networks.

As a result of this intense collaboration and the all-hands-on-deck approach within NLC, throughout the Cities Are Essential campaign, we were able to provide an unprecedented amount of collateral, public attention, and influence on Capitol Hill in pursuit of our collective Federal Advocacy goals on behalf of municipalities across the country. In turn, that effort was burgeoned by the extraordinary dissemination of information to municipalities accomplished through our collective channels and just as importantly the accumulation of stories, data, and legislative intelligence, which would not have been possible without close coordination with state municipal league partners.

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When it became clear that an additional push would be required, the state municipal leagues immediately and collectively answered the call dedicating resources and support for the Cities Are Essential campaign.



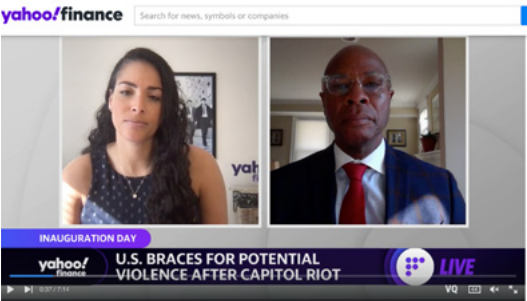
# Telling Our Story

In order to achieve mass awareness of the need for direct funding to cities, we had to think critically about intentional marketing and communications strategies for both local and national amplification. We made the strategic decision to create a targeted media strategy that stretched the gambit of both local and national outreach. We prioritized both hometown and national publications – if congressional staffers or members were reading it, we wanted to be in it.

Additionally, member communications was at the forefront of all we did. Creating resources you could use to inform your Member of Congress what you were experiencing on the ground, and uplift the message that Cities Are Essential.

Between curated media outreach, press conferences and incorporating new thinking into the research we created, our bespoke communications and marketing strategy ensured that local leaders voices were front and center.

By leveraging local champions in cities, towns and villages across the nation, we were able to uplift the voices of municipal officials across the country and amplify our calls for direct federal to local, state and national audiences.



Clarence Anthony on a Yahoo Finance interview



#CitiesareEssential on Facebook

# Amplifying our Local Champions

## VIRTUAL PRESS CONFERENCES AND BRIEFINGS

NLC worked closely with our state municipal league partners and NLC members to uplift the voices of local leaders from cities across the country who spoke out on the importance of direct federal aid to their municipalities through eight virtual press events. These events were critical to generating local, statewide, and national media coverage of the challenges cities, towns and villages everywhere faced and spotlighted the unique challenges that different regions faced throughout the year, including in responding to natural disasters. Additionally, these virtual events served as important briefing opportunities to educate lawmakers and their staff on Capitol Hill about the importance of providing direct aid to local governments everywhere.

## MEDIA STORIES UPLIFTING LOCAL CHAMPIONS

NLC worked closely with its members throughout the country to secure interview and media appearance opportunities for mayors, municipal league leaders and other municipal officials in local and national media outlets, helping to further uplift the voices of our local champions and make the case for aid to U.S. municipalities as they worked to protect their residents and slow the spread of COVID-19.

## GROWING OUR PRESENCE IN NATIONAL MEDIA

NLC's data, storytelling and advocacy frequently broke into the national media sphere, both through direct pitching, offering local stories and leaders to speak with journalists, and high-level message and data pull through in various national media outlets. We had over 27,000 media hits, including top tier outlets *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *NPR*, *CNN*, *60 Minutes*, *Politico*, *Bloomberg*, *Associated Press*.

27,000  
media hits





Our local champions wrote and published over 30 pieces of editorial content in top-tier news outlets to ensure our leaders in Washington heard our voices loud and clear - whether they were in our nation’s capital or in their home states and districts.

**BUILDING ACTIONABLE EDITORIAL CONTENT**

By placing strategic editorial content in local and national news outlets, NLC and its members were able to build a constant drumbeat of messages aimed at federal lawmakers showing that the local budgetary strains caused by COVID-19 are not a partisan issue, but an American issue that impacted all communities, regardless of size or political composition.

**AMPLIFYING OUR VOICE THROUGH PRESS RELEASES AND STATEMENTS**

NLC made its position on various relief proposals clear as the Administration and Congress negotiated the parameters of a second stimulus package, uplifting the voices of economists, experts and partners from both sides of the aisle about the urgent need for direct aid and pushing back on false claims. NLC also amplified the results of NLC member surveys quantifying the impact of COVID-19 on local budgets, highlighting the financial strains that local leaders are managing due to unprecedented revenue shortfalls and increased expenditures.

**CREATING USEFUL RESOURCES FOR LOCAL OFFICIALS**

NLC developed and made available a number of resources with helpful information to assist local officials in making the case for direct municipal aid to their respective states’ congressional delegations. The resources also provided guidelines and recommendations for municipal officials as they navigated the complicated COVID-19 environment and worked to keep their residents safe and their local businesses operating during this challenging public health crisis.

**ENGAGING THROUGH DIGITAL**

Using the #CitiesAreEssential hashtag on social media accounts, we were able to engage local leaders, state municipal leagues, and coalition members online to spread awareness of the critical need for direct aid to America’s cities, towns and villages. The #CitiesAreEssential content also drove stakeholders to take action using [NLC’s federal advocacy and outreach resources](#).

# COALITION BUILDING

To increase the impact of our advocacy efforts, we worked hard to strengthen our advocates outside of NLC members and State Leagues. The goal was to broaden the voices that could speak to the impact of direct aid to municipalities and the broader economy.

Building Coalition Partners outside of local government was essential to our targeted message. Working with non-profits, business partners and community organizations with direct relationships with our congressional targets helped to ensure that our message was supported by a broader community.

## Building our Coalition

NLC built a strong coalition of 177 business and community organizations to support our campaign ask. These organizations signed a joint letter to Congressional leaders asking for direct funds to cities, towns and villages. Our coalition partners also amplified our campaign message on social media and tailored their own messages to complement the overall ask for local funding.

**Current Coalition Partners**

- 10 Minute Walk Campaign  
2C Mississippi  
Accela  
Achieving the Dream  
Adaptation International  
Addiction Recovery Care Association, Inc.  
Afterschool Alliance  
After-School All-Stars  
Alliance for Community Media
- Alliance for Strong Families and Communities  
American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 25  
American Library Association  
American Planning Association  
APA Colorado
- + Hundreds more!  
[View full list here.](#)



## Investing in Strategic Partnerships

NLC was a founding steering committee member of this new coalition of over 300 public and private sector groups, which included an important range of private sector partners such as hotels and hospitality. The coalition launched a public awareness and advocacy campaign that called for “No Recess without Relief”, imploring Congress to not leave town for the 2020 elections without passing additional COVID economic relief. The key to this coalition is the messaging that millions of jobs, businesses and vital government services are tightly intertwined and at risk without action from Congress.



## Leveraging Corporate Partners

NLC engaged all levels of our formal corporate partners structure to ensure that they were briefed on the campaign and engaged in our coalition strategy. Partners were encouraged to send individual, tailored letters to key senate targets in which their business has a physical presence.

## The Next Chapter: Strategy for 2021

As we shift gears in 2021 with the start of the 117th Congress and the new Biden-Harris Administration, it is time for NLC to reevaluate and pivot its legislative strategy.

With more alignment between White House, House, and Senate leadership, we anticipate having more potential legislative vehicles to leverage for passage of local aid.

The first opportunity is through the reconciliation process, which is already being eyed by Democratic leadership as a vehicle for major priorities. Reconciliation is a special legislative process that can only be used for legislation that impacts spending or revenues and expedites passage. Critically, it only requires a simple majority for passage in the Senate, making it a valuable tool for Democrats with a slim majority. Leveraging this process will require constant, deep engagement with White House and congressional Democratic leadership in both chambers, as well as in key committees. Under this plan, engagement with minority rank and file members will be less critical than in 2020, although grassroots engagement with members is still important to develop larger caucus sentiment for leadership to react to.

President-elect Biden’s economic plan will also be a key opportunity to ensure that cities’ short- and long-term needs for recovery are prioritized within federal economic recovery plans. While that plan has not yet been released, NLC has worked closely with his transition team to provide information on both the impact of the pandemic and what cities need from the federal government. The short-term needs of cities will be focused on stabilization funding, and the long-term needs of cities will be focused on economic recovery.



One of the greatest obstacles to success in 2020 was the divided government – both the partisan division between the Administration and Congress, and the division between House and Senate.”



Cities will continue to experience unprecedented challenges and ongoing need in the short- and long-term. NLC will continue to advocate around these needs and provide education to policymakers on how cities are faring throughout the pandemic – including surges in infections, hospital use, and vaccination, use of federal and state support, as well as the needs of residents, businesses, capital infrastructure investment, and the workforce capacity of local government to meet community needs. Restoring local government budgets and service levels to pre-pandemic condition will be a years-long process and federal policy must reflect that.

NLC will also continue to work for technical improvements to and optimization of already-passed COVID relief legislation. While the omnibus bill at the close of 2020 did not include direct relief for local governments, it contained billions of dollars in other accounts that will impact local economies and our cities' residents, businesses, and schools, and NLC is committed to ensuring that those programs benefit cities, towns and villages as much as possible.

## Appendix

[Click here for the full appendix.](#)



