



A Framework for State-Level Promise Zones

By Tracey Ross and Melissa Boteach December 2014

Introduction and summary

As a former mayor of an urban Promise Zone community, I have a unique appreciation for the talent, passion, and the vision that local leaders offer when working to turn their communities around. Promise Zones are about giving folks who have been underserved for far too long the opportunity to build stronger neighborhoods and more prosperous lives.¹—Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Julian Castro, September 19, 2014

Earlier this year, President Barack Obama announced the launch of the Promise Zones initiative, an effort to strengthen the federal government’s relationship with local leaders and to increase access to the resources and expertise necessary to improve mobility and economic opportunity for high-poverty communities.² The Promise Zones model supports innovative localities as they implement comprehensive, evidence-based strategies to revitalize high-poverty communities. But there is no need for the model to be restricted to the federal level, particularly since many states are pursuing strategies to address these same goals. Rather than waiting for a federal Promise Zones designation, state leaders can take the initiative to adopt this model to increase opportunity for their residents who live in high-poverty areas. Action of this type would be an unprecedented step by state officials to join local and federal leaders to drive cross-sector, evidence-based solutions to fight poverty.

States have a direct stake in tackling poverty wherever it exists within their borders, as the effects of income inequality and child poverty create a drag on state economies.³ But states also have a strong self-interest in pursuing a complementary set of policies that target resources to high-poverty communities within their borders. Holding constant for income, it has been well documented that people who live in high-poverty communities are more likely to struggle to meet basic needs than their counterparts in more affluent areas.⁴ Furthermore, the effects of concentrated poverty on children increase the need for social services.⁵ For example, living in concentrated poverty has been shown to genetically age children,⁶ and living in communities exposed to violence impairs their cognitive ability.⁷ These factors

increase the likelihood that children will have poor health and educational outcomes and few employment opportunities in the future, which limits their ability to contribute to their states' economic growth and tax bases.⁸

Fortunately, states have the tools at their disposal to invest in high-poverty communities and create their own Promise Zones efforts. By pairing communities committed to thoughtful planning and evidence-based models with the resources needed to generate greater economic opportunity, states can ensure that available resources are leveraged to have a greater impact.

Overall, states and localities undertake most direct spending on public goods and services—including expenditures from federal funds—and bear primary responsibility for investments in education, social services, and infrastructure.⁹ In addition, states administer a significant amount of federal discretionary funding, giving state leaders broad authority over many pertinent federal funding streams. Furthermore, state leaders are increasingly looking at how they can help families increase their economic self-sufficiency and provide opportunities to children who live in poverty by investing in everything from early education to energy efficiency in affordable housing.¹⁰

This report serves as a framework for state leaders interested in establishing state Promise Zones programs. The framework outlines how states can incentivize cross-sector teams of leaders in high-poverty communities to undertake a comprehensive planning process, identify key challenges on which to focus, develop concrete outcomes to address those challenges, and create a shared plan to meet those goals. In addition, this report identifies flexible state and federal funding streams that states can give Promise Zones, with priority access available through the use of bonus points in existing grants. In short, state Promise Zones are a recognition of the important role that state leaders play in fighting poverty and creating greater economic opportunity for high-poverty communities. By adopting the Promise Zones model, state leaders can complement federal efforts to keep families out of poverty by revitalizing high-poverty communities and strengthening states.

The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just, and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

Center for American Progress

