



A Renewed Promise

How Promise Zones Can Help Reshape
the Federal Place-Based Agenda

By Tracey Ross and Erik Stegman May 2014

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

“A child’s course in life should be determined not by the zip code she’s born in, but by the strength of her work ethic and the scope of her dreams.”¹

– President Barack Obama

January 9, 2014

In January 2014, a year after vowing in his 2013 State of the Union address to focus the nation’s attention on high-poverty communities, President Barack Obama made good on that pledge with the unveiling of his signature place-based effort to fight poverty: the Promise Zones initiative.

The Promise Zones initiative is designed to revitalize high-poverty communities through comprehensive, evidence-based strategies and help local leaders navigate federal funding. Promise Zones designees—five in the first round announced in January—receive priority access to federal resources to support job creation, increase economic security, expand educational opportunities, increase access to quality, affordable housing, and improve public safety. Equally important, the initiative pulls together lessons from the administration’s previous efforts to improve struggling communities and is serving as an opportunity to rethink how the federal government can be a more effective partner to communities facing barriers to upward mobility.

From urban centers to rural and tribal communities, decades of disinvestment and policies that isolated the poor have contributed to areas of concentrated poverty across the country. These practices included redlining, beginning in the 1930s—when the federal government allowed the Home Owner’s Loan Corporation and banks to exclude African American communities from receiving home loans.² Following World War II, in many metropolitan regions, highways were rammed through many low-income, mostly African American communities, displacing thousands of residents and small businesses and ripping apart the fabric of these long established neighborhoods.³ For rural America, agriculture policy has historically driven development programs, rather than the specific needs or economic

realities of these communities.⁴ Further, these programs have been slashed across the board, particularly during the 1980s.⁵ And although the federal government has a unique legal responsibility to provide a variety of basic services for tribal governments and their communities,⁶ tribes have faced severe and chronic underfunding for generations across education, health, public safety, and other critical programs.

Today, concentrated poverty persists, with many communities facing inferior housing, poor health outcomes, failing schools, inadequate public infrastructure, and few employment opportunities.⁷ A growing body of research shows that being raised in such high-poverty communities undermines the long-term life chances of children. For example, poverty has been shown to genetically age children,⁸ and living in communities exposed to violence impairs cognitive ability.⁹ This increases the likelihood that children will have poor health and educational outcomes and few employment opportunities in the future.¹⁰ In fact, even when income is held constant, families living in areas of concentrated poverty are more likely to struggle to meet basic needs, including food and housing, than their counterparts living in more affluent areas, where families face fewer stressors, such as less exposure to crime and improved air quality.¹¹ It is evident that the federal government has a role to play in undoing the effects of past policies that contributed to these outcomes.

Despite some of the failed policies of the past, the federal government has also been an important partner in place-based initiatives for more than 50 years. From the late Sen. Robert Kennedy (D-MA) laying the groundwork for community development corporations, or CDCs, in the 1960s, to President Obama's latest announcement for Promise Zones, federal leaders have crafted policy and provided resources to transform neighborhoods across the country. By providing funding, expanding capacity, and spreading best practices, the federal government has been an important catalyst for advancing work occurring at the local level. Further, as research shows that income inequality and social mobility place a downward drag on national prosperity, the federal government has a vested interest in ensuring that all communities connect people with the opportunities critical to helping them succeed.¹² Over the past several years, the Obama administration has incorporated many of the lessons from past place-based initiatives by moving away from a top-down relationship with local leaders that dictates how community and economic development must be done, to a bottom-up strategy that supports local innovation.

However, the challenges communities face have changed considerably over the past 50 years. Jobs have moved beyond city limits to the suburbs and abroad; affordable housing in cities is increasingly scarce; and poverty plagues rural, suburban, tribal, and urban communities alike. Increasingly, regional dynamics affect neighborhood outcomes. Place-based strategies are competing against an economy that is not meeting most Americans' basic needs. Furthermore, while the administration has greatly improved how the federal government works at the local level, local leaders are on the forefront of addressing some of our most complex social problems with limited resources and capacity.

In order for the federal government to be a more effective partner in place-based work, administration officials must recognize how communities have changed and continue refining its role as a partner and leader. As the administration continues to shape the Promise Zones initiative, this presents an opportunity for the federal government to clearly define its role in place-based work going forward. In just the first few months of operation, the first five Promise Zone designees are providing some useful insights into how to strengthen the federal government's role in partnering with local communities.

Initial observations reveal that the federal government is an accelerator of local efforts, the initiative is helping streamline relationships with federal officials, and Promise Zone designees are in need of technical assistance to leverage private sector investments. Through our research and interviews on the initial rollout of the Promise Zone initiative, we offer a number of recommendations to strengthen the effort going forward:

- **Federal officials should utilize social mobility research to guide initiative goals.** As economists continue to study the key characteristics of communities that limit social mobility—such as family structure, segregation, and social capital—federal officials should encourage zones to focus on these issues, as well as incorporating them into the application assessment.
- **Congress should support Promise Zone tax incentives.** One of the tools the Obama administration hopes to offer each of the Promise Zones are tax incentives. Congress should enact legislation creating these tax credits in order to advance the important goals of this initiative.
- **Award planning grants.** Rather than a preference, new Promise Zones could be awarded funding from existing discretionary or competitive sources to help build capacity around the new effort.

- **Place greater emphasis on connections to regional opportunities.** Neighborhoods operate within a broader political and economic context that is regional in nature. The Promise Zones initiative should place a greater emphasis on the strength of these relationships through the goals of the initiative itself, as well as the weight given to the partnerships when assessing the applications.
- **Federal officials should identify ongoing ways to strengthen the nation-to-nation relationship with tribal government designees.** As federal officials work with future tribal designees, it is important that they consult with tribes to support the assessment of these unique needs and identify appropriate solutions to ensure their future success as designees in the program.
- **Place greater emphasis on leveraging private investment.** Federal officials should encourage Promise Zones facing challenges engaging private-sector actors to seek out technical assistance to better understand their local markets, assess the strengths and weaknesses of different private-sector partners, and build capacity to guide investment toward greater social outcomes.
- **Enhance the role of anchor institution partners.** Anchor institutions spend billions of dollars every year on goods and services, employ millions of people, and own land across the country. As a result, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, or HUD, and the U.S. Department of Education should identify existing resources to facilitate deeper partnerships between colleges and universities and their communities.
- **Promote the principles of collective impact more explicitly.** While individual programs are important for driving people-level outcomes, collective impact takes on the task of transforming an entire system. This requires explicitly asking Promise Zone applicants to indicate community-wide outcomes for success and that cross-sector partnerships demonstrate involvement from institutional leaders, as well as their staff.
- **Foster leadership potential of AmeriCorps VISTA members.** One value of national service is that people often enter into fields that they might not have joined. This makes the need for mentorship and support of VISTA corps members even more important.

- **Federal officials should partner with community-based affiliate organizations at the national and local level to support Promise Zone designees.** Organizations such as United Way and Big Brothers/Big Sisters play a critical role as community conveners. As federal officials work with new designees, they should identify opportunities where such organizations can align goals and resources with Promise Zone efforts.
- **Establish a “community of practice” for local partners.** In order to facilitate the exchange of ideas between local leaders, HUD should establish a community of practice for Promise Zones.
- **Guidance on how to leverage safety net program.** Often times, place-based initiatives and federal poverty programs operate on separate tracks. However, programs such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, or TANF, and other income supports can enhance the work of Promise Zones, as all of these efforts share the goal of lifting people out of poverty.

This report provides an overview of the core federal place-based initiatives; how the federal government has been most effective in this work; an overview of the nation’s first five Promise Zones and their emerging insights; and detailed recommendations for how the federal government can improve the initiative and its role as a partner in place-based work.

Social mobility in the United States: “Lands of opportunity”

In 2012, the official poverty rate in the United States was 15 percent, unchanged from the previous year. This translates into nearly one in six people experiencing poverty, or 46.5 million Americans living on annual incomes of less than \$18,287 for a family of three.¹³ Furthermore, growing income inequality and a lack of good jobs are forcing our safety net to work overtime to keep millions more out of poverty. Politicians from both sides of the aisle have expressed concern about poverty and the prospects for upward mobility in the United States.

A recent body of research from four Harvard University and the University of California, Berkeley, economists—Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, Patrick Kline, and Emmanuel Saez—is shedding light on the nation’s mobility challenges. Their research reveals that prospects for upward mobility have not changed much in the past 50 years, instead, according to the researchers, “some regions of the U.S. persistently offer less mobility than most other developed countries.”¹⁴ They go on to explain that “The U.S. is better described as a collection of societies, some of which are ‘lands of opportunity’ with high rates of mobility across generations, and others in which few children escape poverty.”¹⁵ In addition, their research shows not only that mobility varies substantially across geographic regions, but that areas with greater mobility tend to display certain characteristics: less segregation, less income inequality, better schools, greater social capital, and more stable families.¹⁶ In other words, the variation in economic mobility is not random but is impacted by key characteristics of a community. In addition, according to analysis by American Progress experts, areas with large middle classes enjoy far more economic mobility than areas with small middle classes.¹⁷

Furthermore, people living in poverty tend to be clustered in certain communities rather than spread out across the nation. According to the 2008-2012 American Community Survey, or ACS, more than 12.4 million Americans live in severely distressed neighborhoods where the poverty rate is 40 percent or higher.¹⁸ The ACS has also revealed that there were approximately 703 high-poverty counties in the United States, 571 of which were nonmetro—meaning rural—areas mostly

in the South and Southwest.¹⁹ Communities with the most severe poverty are found in historically poor areas of the Southeast, including the Mississippi Delta and Appalachia, as well as on tribal lands. Concentrated poverty is increasingly found in other regions, such as rural areas of the Southwest and the North Central Midwest. The incidence of poverty is relatively low elsewhere, but due to deindustrialization, higher rates of poverty are currently found in the Midwest, Southwest, Pacific, and Northeast than in the past and are disproportionately high in the urban core. In addition, the growth of the Latino population, which is disproportionately poor compared to the overall U.S. population, is factoring into increased rates of concentrated poverty in many of the border states.²⁰

More than 16.4 percent of low-income Latinos live in high-poverty neighborhoods, while low-income African Americans are most likely to live in high-poverty neighborhoods than other populations with 23.6 percent of the African American population living in poverty.²¹ However, according to research by Professor Patrick Sharkey of New York University, the average African American family making \$100,000 a year lives in a more disadvantaged neighborhood than the average white family making \$30,000 a year, revealing how past social policies continue to affect neighborhood choice.²² Sharkey explains that the same, mostly African American families have lived in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods over long periods of time and over multiple generations, limiting access to better opportunities. “Neighborhood poverty experienced a generation ago doesn’t disappear. It doesn’t become inconsequential. It lingers on to affect the next generation,” he explained.²³

The intersection of place with poverty comes with unique challenges that require place-based strategies to complement our national investments to cut poverty and create greater economic opportunity.²⁴ Place-based strategies involve policies and practices that take into account how a community--both the built environment and the social and economic opportunities available—affect its residents. Place-based strategies focus on the whole set of issues a community faces and tackles those issues simultaneously. Underperforming schools, rundown housing, neighborhood violence, and poor health are interconnected challenges that perpetuate one another. There is no single policy to address the myriad challenges that communities with low mobility face. These communities need a comprehensive set of strategies that work together to equip people with the skills they need to prosper and that ensure the communities where they live offer opportunities conducive to their success.

This comprehensive approach to community change has taken many successful forms throughout the country. In Cincinnati, the Strive Partnership, a community of cross-sector leaders launched in 2006, worked across silos to engage partners around common goals, overcame turf issues, and aligned state, federal, and philanthropic funding streams with proven strategies to help children from cradle to career. During its first five years, the program has seen a 9 percent increase in reading scores in kindergarteners, an 11 percent increase in high school graduation rates, and a 10 percent increase in college enrollment.²⁵

In Atlanta, community and city leaders targeted the East Lake community--a high crime, underinvested neighborhood--through a comprehensive strategy of mixed-income housing, a cradle-to-college education program, job readiness, and health and wellness opportunities. Beginning in 1996, with city and federal government approval, the East Lake Foundation and Atlanta Housing Authority built new housing and reserved half the units for families receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, or TANF, while the rest of the units were market rate.²⁶ Furthermore, the foundation partnered with the city to create Atlanta's first charter school.²⁷ Today, violent crime is down 95 percent, the income of families receiving public assistance has more than quadrupled, and the East Lake charter school is the top-performing elementary school in the Atlanta school system, serving 90 percent of children in the neighborhood.²⁸

These efforts demonstrate how local leaders, utilizing federal resources and following best practices, can develop innovative place-based strategies that break down silos, work across sectors, and use shared goals and data to transform their communities. Such innovations have garnered great attention and have helped change how the federal government partners with local leaders.

Federal place-based initiatives

For more than 50 years, the federal government has helped keep millions of families out of poverty through the social safety net, including investments in programs and initiatives to help families meet their basic needs, as well as provide education and training to promote greater economic opportunity. The federal government has complemented these investments by supporting state and local leaders as they work to strengthen low-income communities. Since the 1960s, the community development sector has made a great impact by leveraging billions of dollars in private capital to build millions of affordable housing units and foster the growth of community-based organizations across the country.²⁹ However, in the ensuing half century, our country has changed drastically. According to Ben Hecht, president and chief executive office of Living Cities:

Community development must move from an industry viewed by many as focused on managing decline to one that is ushering change in new collaborative ways, disrupting obsolete and fragmented systems, keeping an eye on under-invested places, and connecting low-income people to economic opportunities wherever they exist.³⁰

Traditionally, the community-development sector focused solely on housing in urban areas as the key to improving the lives of low-income people, but it has become increasingly apparent that a more comprehensive approach, beyond a city's borders, is needed to help low-income people living in areas of concentrated poverty.

In 2009, the Obama administration set out to ensure that the policies targeting low-income communities addressed modern realities, rather than “placing new stresses on old programs,”³¹ as noted in administration guidance memorandum. The White House called for a systematic review of how federal policies affect the development of urban, suburban, and rural America.³² Today, one of the administration's mechanisms for change in such communities is the Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative, or NRI—a place-based approach to help distressed communities transform into neighborhoods of opportunity. NRI engages five key federal agencies—

including the U.S. Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Education, Justice, Health and Human Services, and Treasury – in support of local solutions to revitalize and transform neighborhoods.³³ Part of the NRI strategy is to integrate the Choice and Promise Neighborhood programs, which were already in motion, as well as the Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation Program, to ensure federal funds are aligned and that local efforts are truly comprehensive. For the first round of Promise Zone designations, proposed Promise Zones in urban areas were required to overlap with the existing boundaries of ongoing place-based efforts—Promise Neighborhood or Choice Neighborhoods Implementation grants—or a Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation grant. Applicants in rural and tribal areas were required to overlap with either a Promise Neighborhood or Stronger Economies Together, or SET, region. The following provides additional details on each program.

Choice Neighborhoods

Launched in 2010, the Choice Neighborhoods program supports locally driven strategies to revitalize neighborhoods by replacing distressed public or HUD-assisted housing with mixed-income developments.³⁴ Unlike HOPE VI, its predecessor, Choice Neighborhoods emphasizes preserving affordable housing, as well as taking a more comprehensive approach to neighborhood change.³⁵ Under this approach stakeholders across sectors and residents come together to create and implement a plan that transforms distressed HUD housing while simultaneously addressing the challenges in the surrounding neighborhood including vacant property, lack of services, and underperforming schools. The program is generating great investment as grantees are leveraging \$8 worth of other public, private, and philanthropic funding for every \$1 the program brings.³⁶ The Choice Neighborhoods program is currently being implemented in 8 sites across the country, with an additional 56 sites in the planning phase.³⁷

Promise Neighborhoods

Promise Neighborhoods, the U.S. Department of Education's, or DOE's, signature place-based effort, moves beyond a singular focus on low-performing schools to recognize the role that an entire community plays in a child's education.³⁸ Modeled after the much-heralded Harlem Children's Zone in New York City, the Promise Neighborhoods program takes a cradle-to-career continuum of health, social, and educational services by partnering with community-based organizations and gauges

outcomes by utilizing common metrics of success. In 2010, DOE began awarding Promise Neighborhoods planning grants, followed by implementation grants of up to \$30 million over three- to five-year periods. There are currently 12 implementation grantees and 46 planning grantees.³⁹

Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation program

Initiated in 2012, the Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation, or BCJI, program was created to help local and tribal communities develop place-based, community-oriented strategies to address the drivers of crime in what are termed persistent “hot spot” locations that thwart progress toward neighborhood revitalization.⁴⁰ Modeled after the Chicago Violence Reduction Strategy, which is seeing significant drops in violence and arrests on Chicago streets, the BCJI program is a competitive grant program administered by the Department of Justice.⁴¹ The program’s goal is to make communities safer and address crime in areas where it is occurring most through the use of data-driven, preventative strategies, such as efforts to engage community members, social service providers, and law enforcement officers in meetings with individuals with extensive criminal histories. The idea is to explain the legal risks that they face and offer them help, while demanding an end to violence.

Stronger Economies Together

Beyond the core programs listed above, there are a number of efforts that focus specifically on helping rural communities and tribal areas. In addition to being a Promise Neighborhoods grantee, rural and tribal areas could also apply for the first round of Promise Zones if the proposed zone boundaries overlapped with a current Stronger Economies Together, or SET, region. Launched in 2010, SET is an initiative by U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development in collaboration with the four Regional Rural Development Centers, or RRDCs, and their land-grant university partners. The purpose of SET is to strengthen the capacity of communities or counties in rural America to work collaboratively in developing and implementing economic development plans that are evidence-based and build on the current and emerging economic strengths of a region. Through state and federal resources, SET State Partner Teams provide training and technical assistance to largely rural counties that are interested in working together regionally.⁴²

Key innovations

The Obama administration's core place-based efforts demonstrate a shift away from traditional community development approaches that focused solely on housing to more comprehensive strategies designed to catalyze local action and make existing programs more effective and efficient. There are a number of key takeaways from these efforts that are important to the success of future efforts, specifically:

- **Programs are community driven.** In the past, federal programs have prescribed a one-size-fits-all approach to using federal funds. These place-based initiatives, however, were designed to support communities in the work they are doing, so long as they can demonstrate the use of evidence-based practices and a commitment to working across sectors. As a result, the funding is flexible and can adapt with changes in the work.
- **Funding is staggered.** In addition, funding is structured in a way that helps communities based on how far along their work is. The Choice and Promise Neighborhoods initiatives offer both planning and implementation grants, and Byrne offers implementation and enhancement grants. For example, when Philadelphia was awarded a Choice Neighborhood Planning grant, the funding helped bring stakeholders together to start developing a plan. This is work that San Francisco had already been engaged in through their HOPE SF program, which aims to transform public housing and the surrounding communities, making them ready to work with a larger Choice Neighborhood Implementation grant.
- **Strategies are interdisciplinary.** The Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative, discussed above, is an interagency strategy to address the interconnected problems in distressed neighborhoods. Rather than working separately, staff from across these agencies have started working together to advance shared goals by better supporting local leaders.
- **Work is coordinated.** In addition to recognizing the interdisciplinary nature of place-based work, agencies are working to align the goals and requirements of federal programs so that local communities can more readily leverage funding streams. In addition, agencies are working on aligning technical assistance and conducting joint site-visits. Such coordination is already occurring. In another Atlanta neighborhood, the city's Choice planning grant is helping

revitalize its University Homes public housing development, while its Promise Neighborhoods grant will harness the talents of Atlanta’s historically black colleges and universities to provide educational opportunities to children living in the neighborhood.

- **Strategies are evidence-based.** The core programs in the Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative are modeled after local initiatives that have demonstrated successes. This shows a commitment from the federal government to learn from local leaders and direct funding toward effective strategies.
- **Data drive results.** Similarly, the federal government has established a clear focus on results in order to ensure that grantees are on the path to achieving their goals. A results framework presents a strategy for achieving specific objectives, helps to focus multiple stakeholders on a common goal, and creates a dataset for stakeholders to measure progress over time.⁴³

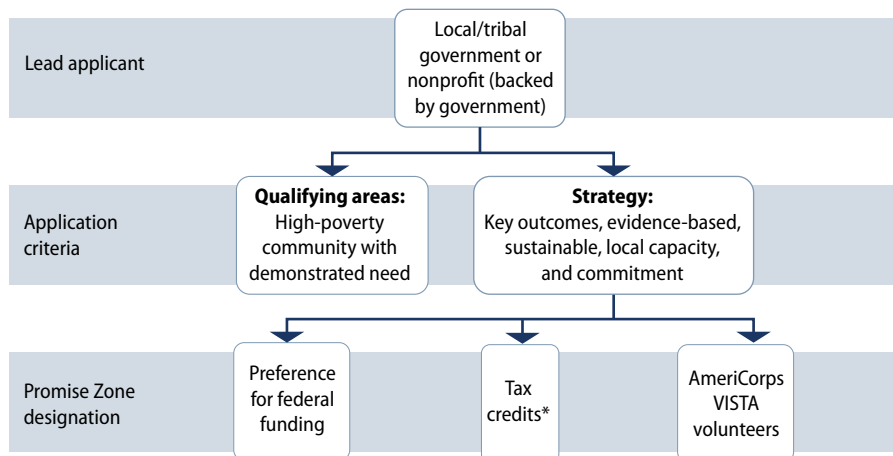
The road ahead: Promise Zones

The first five Promise Zones, located in San Antonio, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Southeastern Kentucky, and the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, have each put forward a plan on how they will partner with local business and community leaders to make investments to improve high-poverty communities. In exchange, these designees will receive priority access to federal resources to support job creation, increased economic activity, improved educational opportunity, and reduction in violent crime.⁴⁴ In addition to federal funding preference, a number of federal agencies are working to place staff in each designated community to help navigate the array of federal assistance and programs available to Promise Zones. The initiative will also provide five full-time AmeriCorps VISTA members to support each Promise Zones designee's strategic plan. These VISTA staffers will recruit and manage volunteers and strengthen the capacity of the Promise Zones initiatives.⁴⁵

Lastly, President Obama has proposed—and called on Congress to act—to cut taxes on hiring and investment in areas designated as Promise Zones to attract businesses and create jobs.⁴⁶ The administration plans to select a total of 20 Promise Zones by 2016. The goal of the initiative is to not only transform the selected sites but also to change how the federal government works with local communities by ensuring the alignment of federal-funding streams for comprehensive neighborhood revitalization.

As the federal government continues to invest in strategies that keep families out of poverty, it is important that complementary investments are made to ensure that communities can create greater economic opportunity. Fortunately, members of Congress from both sides of the aisle recognize the need for local leaders to play key roles in fighting poverty. As a result, the Promise Zones initiative is designed to help create a more efficient and effective partnership between all levels of government in order to facilitate better outcomes.

FIGURE 1
Promise Zones Initiative



*Tax credits are subject to congressional action.

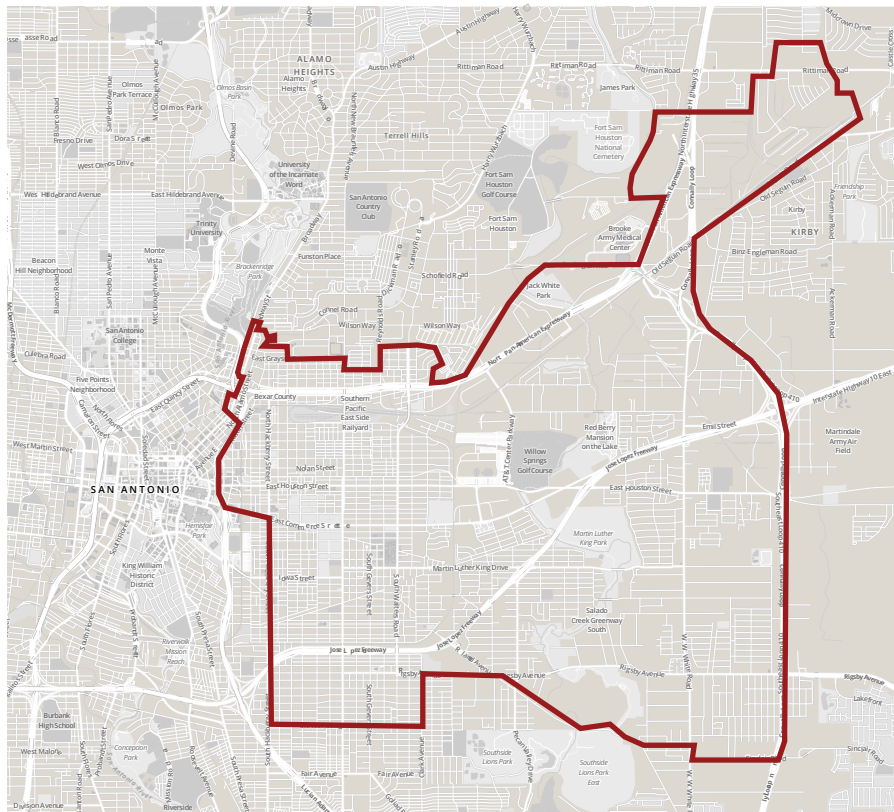
Case studies: First five designated Promise Zones

Through CAP-conducted research and interviews with leaders from the first five Promise Zones, the following case studies illustrate how each zone was able to get their work off the ground and track the direction each Promise Zones designee is heading with the aim of informing recommendations to strengthen the initiative moving forward.

San Antonio, Texas

San Antonio’s Eastside neighborhood is a predominately Latino and African American community, where nearly 4 in 10 adults do not have high school diplomas and the violent-crime rate is 50 percent higher than the rest of the city.⁴⁷ The neighborhood’s challenges, however, are balanced by rich potential, including its human capital, central location, and strong community organizations. In 2010, the City of San Antonio hosted a three meeting summit of residents, civic and neighborhood leaders, stakeholders, developers, property and business owners, and public-sector entities to discuss how to launch the redevelopment of Eastside.⁴⁸ Hundreds of participants joined the effort, and within two years, the city developed a number of new programs that addressed issues such as code enforcement, increased communication between law enforcement and citizens, and support for new businesses.⁴⁹

FIGURE 2
San Antonio, Texas: Eastside Neighborhood



Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Community Planning and Development.

The revitalization initiative was first bolstered in 2011, when the local United Way organization was awarded a \$24.6 million Promise Neighborhood grant to expand pre-K programs and community development efforts in Eastside. The very next year, the San Antonio Housing Authority won a \$29.7 million Choice Neighborhood grant to revitalize the nearby Wheatley Courts area, making San Antonio one of only two cities in the nation to receive both grants.⁵⁰ Both federal grants helped to bring more stakeholders to the table and lay the foundation for the Promise Zones designation.

In January 2014, the Eastside neighborhood was selected as a Promise Zone to continue its work focusing on job creation and training in key growth areas; attracting new businesses; increasing enrollment in high-quality pre-K programs; infusing a STEM focus in all Eastside schools; increasing enrollment in early college high schools; and expanding public safety activities to facilitate neighborhood revitalization.⁵¹ Most recently, San Antonio's Mayor Julian Castro announced a new pre-K education center that will open in the community in August, leveraging resources from a citywide initiative he championed.⁵²

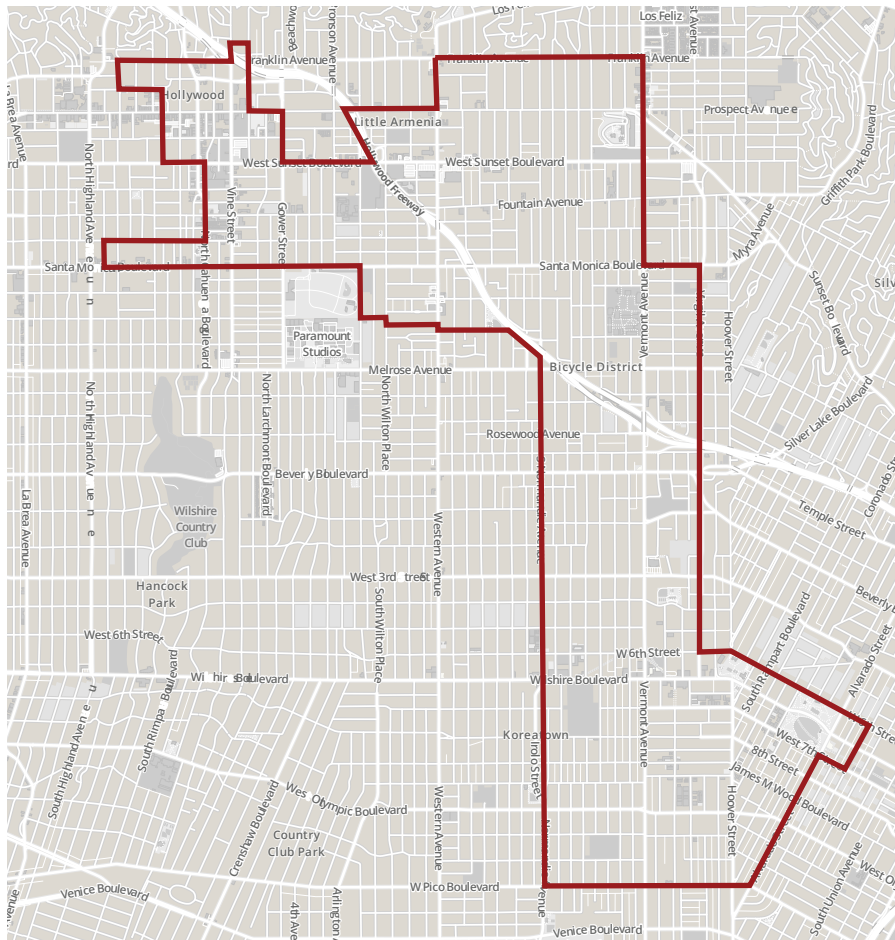
Since the Promise Zones announcement, the Eastside effort is receiving significant attention, which has already realigned priorities for the city. For example, city council members previously focused on efforts in their particular districts. However, the potential of applying the Promise Zone model to other parts of the city has sparked great interest throughout the city government. As a result, the council has been united in appropriating funds to the Eastside effort. In addition, the county has provided funding and a number of private-sector leaders have expressed interest in participating in the Eastside Promise Zone. To better coordinate this cross-sector effort, the Eastside Promise Zone has held a number of meetings and established review groups engaging people at the leadership level and people on the ground. Mayor Castro's leadership in revitalizing San Antonio is among the many reasons he was recently tapped to become the next secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.⁵³

Los Angeles, California

Despite the fact that Los Angeles is the most populated city in California, the newly designated Promise Zone—an area that includes the Hollywood and Pico-Union neighborhoods—saw its population decrease by 13,000 people in just 10 years.⁵⁴ According to the *Los Angeles Times*, “The poverty rate in the zone is 35%, and in certain census block groups, 100% of youth are living in poverty.”⁵⁵ In 2010, the Youth Policy Institute, or YPI, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit, used a Promise Neighborhoods planning grant to engage residents and stakeholders in creating a community vision for education. Through this process, YPI built a collaborative partnership of more than 60 public and private organizations, surveyed more than 1,000 residents, and held a series of working groups to assess neighborhood strengths and needs.

In 2012, the community's plan to develop a cradle-to-career education pipeline earned them a highly competitive \$30 million Promise Neighborhoods Implementation Grant.⁵⁶ The centerpiece of the Promise Neighborhood is an innovative partnership with the city, county, and the Los Angeles Unified School District, or LAUSD, that blends diverse funding streams around a core set of outcomes and objectives.⁵⁷ In addition, through a 2013 Choice Neighborhoods Planning grant, YPI, and their partners will assess economic and housing drivers in the neighborhood, complete a formal market study, identify neighborhood needs, assets, and service gaps, and build the engagement and capacity of the residents and stakeholders.⁵⁸ Lastly, a Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation grant will help the two neighborhoods reduce violent crime in partnership with the city attorney and the Los Angeles Police Department.⁵⁹

FIGURE 3
Los Angeles, California: Neighborhoods of Pico Union, Westlake, Koreatown, Hollywood, and East Hollywood



Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Community Planning and Development.

As a Promise Zone designee, the city will continue to work with stakeholders to increase and preserve affordable housing, ensure all youth have access to a high-quality education, ensure all residents have access to high-quality career and technical-training opportunities, and invest in transit infrastructure.⁶⁰ For example, the YPI and LAUSD will work to expand its Full Service Community Schools model—which incorporates service learning, mentoring, performing arts, and parental leadership development—from seven schools to all 45 Promise Zone schools by 2019.⁶¹ The zone also plans on selecting two AmeriCorps VISTA members that are strategy specialists to help turn their promise zones proposal into an actionable 10-year plan. Dixon Slingerland, YPI executive director, says that the Promise Zones preference has already trickled down to the local level. According

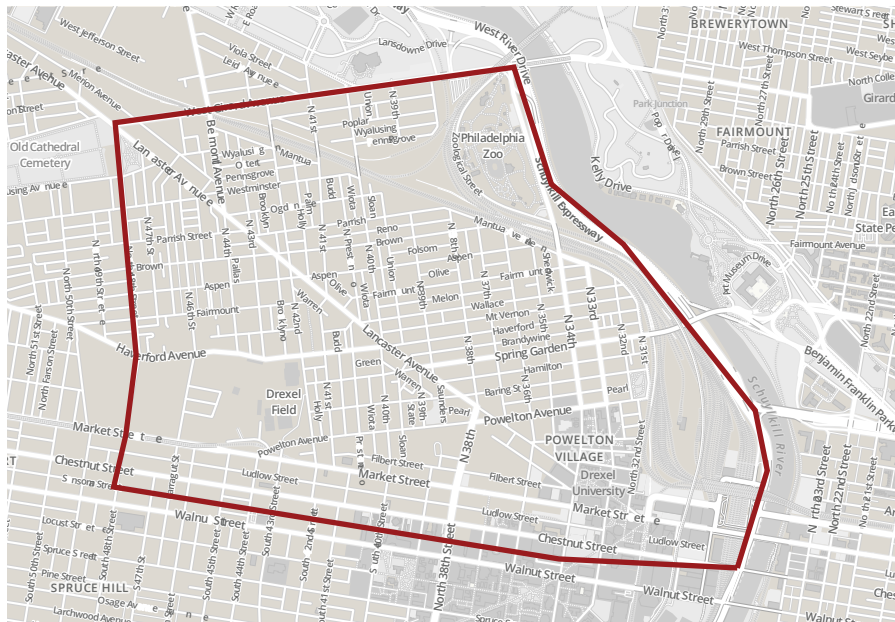
to Slingerland, an affordable housing developer who was planning on locating a new building downtown has approached the city about buying property in the zone. Other nonprofits are interested in partnering as well due to what Slingerland calls “the prestige of being in the zone.” So far, Slingerland has described the experience with the federal government as being very interactive, more so than previous federal grants.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

In Philadelphia, nearly 4 out of every 10 kids live below the poverty line, with many living in the city’s struggling West Philadelphia area. In the area’s Mantua neighborhood specifically, only around 40 percent of adults have a high school diploma, and there are high youth crime rates. In June 2011, city officials, community leaders, stakeholders, and the overall Mantua community came together to develop a proposal to transform the Mt. Vernon Manor affordable housing complex—a 125 unit privately owned complex accepting section 8 vouchers—and the surrounding neighborhood, utilizing the Choice Planning grant.⁶² Prior to the award, stakeholders in Philadelphia had limited engagement with the Mantua neighborhood due to the lack of a strong community-based organization in the area. The Choice Planning grant to the Mt. Vernon Manor board of directors effectively changed this dynamic by positioning the board as community leaders. Now, stakeholders, particularly the Philadelphia Local Initiatives Support Corporation, or LISC, support Mt Vernon Manor’s emerging role as a neighborhood group. This collaborative structure laid the groundwork for Mt. Vernon Manor’s board of directors—to win a \$600,000 Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation grant to address crime hot spots in Mantua and focus on youth crime prevention, intervention services, and improvements of the built environment.⁶³

As a Promise Zone, the partnership will advance its focus on putting people back to work through skills training and adult education, improving high-quality education to prepare children for careers, and preventing and reducing crime in order to attract new residents and long-term investments.⁶⁴ For example, Drexel University and the William Penn Foundation are two prestigious institutions that will focus on improving education quality through teacher professional development, college access and readiness for middle and high school students, and parental engagement. So far, the designation has allowed the Promise Zone partners to bring in more organizations and solidify communication across silos in city agencies.

FIGURE 4
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: West Philadelphia



Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Community Planning and Development.

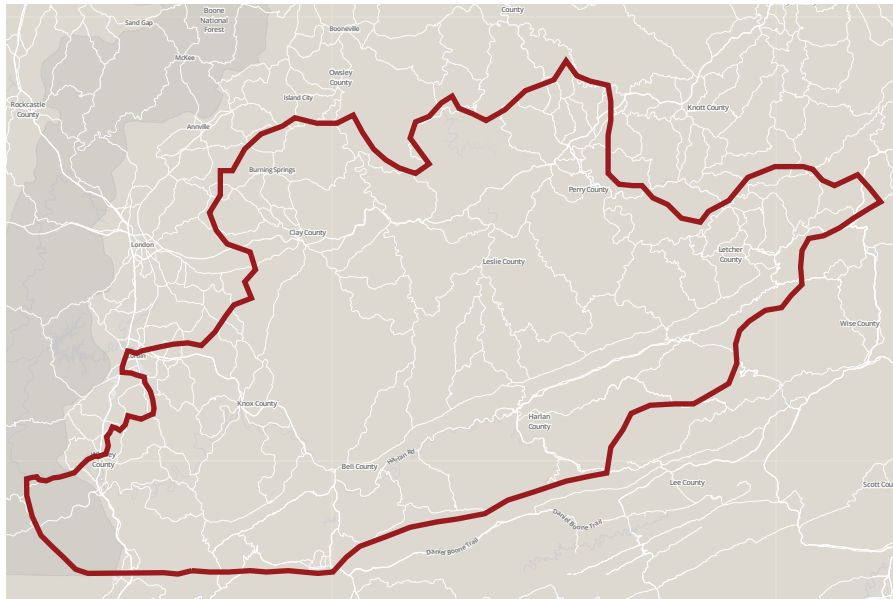
The partnership has also been planning around the proposed federal tax cuts—which are pending congressional approval—for businesses that hire and invest in the Promise Zone. According to Andrew Frishkoff, executive director of Philadelphia LISC, past experiences working with tax incentives motivated the partners to draw the zone boundaries in such a way that takes advantage of current ongoing and increasing commercial activity and thereby assuring private investors on the viability of locating in the zone. Private-sector investors are already expressing interest in working in the area. In addition, stakeholders selected the borders of the zone to take advantage of the area's proximity to public transportation, understanding that connections to mass transit will help with the long-term development of the community. Frishkoff, who has spent his career working on place-based initiatives, said that engagement with the federal government around Promise Zones has really reflected the direction that the local partners want to take, making for a more organic process.

Southeastern Kentucky

For southeastern Kentucky, economic diversification is one of their primary challenges as a new Promise Zone. For years, this part of Appalachia has relied on singular industries such as coal mining as the primary source of jobs and regional economic activity. Since the Great Recession of 2007–2009, about 2,000 coal-related jobs have disappeared in the region, making jobs increasingly scarce.⁶⁵ According to the Appalachia Regional Commission, seven of the eight counties designated under the zone had poverty rates exceeding 25 percent between 2007 and 2011.⁶⁶ This Promise Zone is also an important designation, along with the zone established in the Choctaw Nation, because they both represent the specific challenges of persistently poor rural counties.

Led by the Kentucky Highlands Investment Corporation, or KHIC, an economic development agency born out of President Johnson’s War on Poverty, this promise zone will begin working with local universities to develop a regional economic plan with a focus on diversifying the economy. Additionally, KHIC and its partners will work with the private sector to establish a new \$1.3 million revolving loan fund for the zone.⁶⁷ This fund will support small business and job growth.

FIGURE 5
Southeastern Kentucky: Kentucky Highlands



Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Community Planning and Development.

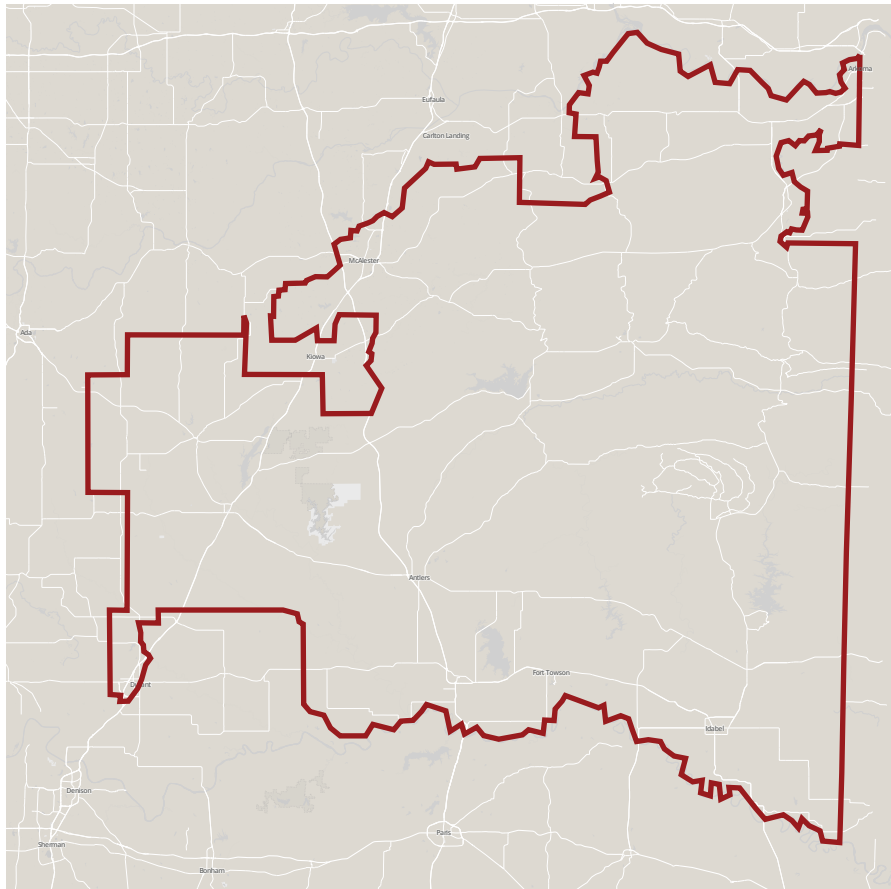
In addition to direct financial support for business and job growth, another goal of the Promise Zone effort will focus on building a new career pipeline for the region with a focus on today's needed job skills. Through partnerships with the Kentucky Economic Development Initiative and the East Kentucky Concentrated Employment Program, the plan is to create leadership and entrepreneurial training for youth, as well as re-training opportunities for skilled workers to transition into new industries. To better prepare youth for careers in sectors where they can find opportunities for employment, Berea College—a 1,600-student liberal arts college known for its academic standards—will develop and run evidence-based college and career readiness programs for high school students. Likewise, Eastern Kentucky University with 16,000 students will further expand its technical education programs.⁶⁸

Choctaw Nation

Some of the most concentrated and persistently poor communities in the country are American Indian and Alaska Native, or AIAN, communities. One of these is the Choctaw Nation in southeastern Oklahoma, which is the first tribal Promise Zone designation. Although the poverty rate for those living in the Choctaw Nation is nearly 23 percent, some communities within the zone are far higher. Nine of the census tracts designated as part of the Choctaw zone have poverty rates exceeding 30 percent, with one as high as 52.8 percent.⁶⁹ Choctaw youth face high rates of violence, teen birth rates nearly double the national average, and nearly one-quarter of the students are enrolled in special education programs.⁷⁰ According to the tribe, one in five residents of Choctaw have less than a high school education.⁷¹

A broad group of government officials, agency representatives, economic development groups, and other local leaders came together to form the Revitalizing Our Communities Commission of Southeastern Oklahoma, or ROCC, to apply for the zone designation and begin working toward its mission with federal partners.⁷² The tribe is planning to focus heavily on education to help meet some of these challenges. The Choctaw Nation will partner closely with area universities, local vocational schools, and the 85 school districts that exist in the Choctaw service area. Through these educational partnerships, Choctaw hopes to significantly expand school-centered education and support programs and create a better workforce-training pipeline. The planned in-school programs will include traditional language courses, early literacy programs, and parent-support programs.⁷³

FIGURE 6
Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma



Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Community Planning and Development.

Recognizing the significant need to provide better training for science, technology, engineering and math, or STEM, careers, the partnership will also work closely with large local universities and local vocational training programs to strengthen educational opportunities for the skilled trades and licensed professions, including nationally recognized STEM certifications.⁷⁴

During community conversations to prepare for the Choctaw zone application, community and business leaders cited the lack of basic infrastructure as a serious impediment to economic development.⁷⁵ Although Choctaw has significant economic resources—natural, historical, and cultural—it cannot take full advantage of these without modern water and sewer infrastructure. With major sections of national forest in southeastern Oklahoma and a number of hunting, fishing, and hiking opportunities, the tribe recognizes the potential for small business and entrepreneurship with the right infrastructure in place.

Early observations

While the Promise Zone initiative is a relatively new program, these first five designees have spent the past few years working with the federal government through the Obama administration's core place-based programs. As a result, their experience with the roll out of the Promise Zones initiative, coupled with their past experiences, has yielded some overall insights into how the federal government can be the most effective partner going forward. The following insights were shared among two or more Promise Zone sites through interviews conducted by CAP staff:

- **The federal government should continue using a bottom-up approach for place-based work.** A bottom-up approach is a strategy in which local leaders demonstrate to federal leaders the best path toward transforming communities based on their knowledge of the local context to complement other federal efforts on the safety net. Sites believe this works better than a top-down or one-size-fits-all approach where they are forced to structure their efforts in a prescribed manner that might not fit the local context. However, multiple sites suggest that having a better sense of the administration's expectations for outcomes, or even best practices, would be helpful.
- **The federal government is an accelerator of local efforts.** Through previous place-based efforts, the federal government has played an important role in moving work forward through three key factors: providing resources, facilitating partnerships, and building capacity. With the Promise Zones initiative, merely having the president's endorsement has created unprecedented levels of interest from a broader set of local leaders in each site. In addition, the application process itself is serving as a catalyst for sites that are not even selected. While these communities are dealing with challenging problems in high-poverty communities, the process of bringing their strengths and resources together to set clear and shared goals is critical, regardless of whether a site is selected.

- **The Promise Zones initiative is helping streamline relationships with federal officials.** Interactions with the federal government have increased among the key agencies involved, as leaders from the various departments have visited the sites to determine how they can be more helpful and what resources might be appropriate, creating a more streamlined relationship.
- **Promise Zones need help engaging the private sector.** A few sites expressed that they have early interest from the private sector but that they are unsure at this point how to engage them outside of the pending tax credits. In addition, some sites are unclear about how to engage the private sector beyond housing.
- **Early funding would enhance efforts.** While all sites agreed that the Promise Zone designation has already been helpful, most sites mentioned needing additional resources to help build capacity and get the process going, even if they were modest grants compared to Choice or Promise Neighborhoods. Two sites mentioned that it was difficult to plan long term around the *possibility* of funding, while all sites agreed that funding up front would be helpful.
- **Process will be different for future zones.** All of the sites discussed how their past experience with federal place-based initiatives prepared them for the Promise Zones opportunity, however, this is not a requirement for future sites. While the first round of Promise Zones were required to be recipients of one of the core federal place-based grants, this criterion has been lifted for future zones. As a result, it is unclear how this change will affect the next round of applications. This could make early funding and greater technical assistance critical for new designees.
- **Federal place-based initiative boundaries do not overlap perfectly.** While overlap in boundaries between Choice Neighborhoods, Promise Neighborhoods, BCJI, and now Promise Zones was required, the initiatives do not overlap perfectly. Applicants from urban areas were required to draw a proposed zone's boundaries either within the boundaries of an effort they were already working in or an expanded version, and rural applicants needed significant overlap.⁷⁶ Because the geography is different from previous efforts, a couple of sites mentioned that it made navigating the various stakeholder groups a bit more complicated. For example, Hollywood is a Promise Neighborhood, while the Los Angeles Promise Zone encompasses Hollywood and three additional neighborhoods.

- **There is currently limited involvement from state or regional leaders.** Most Promise Zones have not engaged with their state governments over leveraging financial resources or leadership, even though this was one of the criteria assessed under capacity and local commitment, but there is some interest from leaders throughout the cities and counties to commit resources to the zones. One site stated that the neighborhood is where you build trust, but eventually, you want to build connections and pathways to help people seek out opportunities outside the neighborhood.

Recommendations: Enhancing the federal role in place-based work

On April 17, 2014, the Obama administration released a request for comment on the application for the next round of Promise Zones, as well as details on preferences for funding from participating agencies. The Obama administration has already ushered in a new generation of place-based work that incorporates lessons from the past 50 years, promoting strategies that are bottom up, utilizing data, and working across agencies. Despite the progress in reimagining the federal government's role in this work, additional work is necessary to ensure that federal place-based efforts better support local leaders and leverage our national efforts to cut poverty and create economic opportunity.

Throughout the summer, the administration will be continuing its work to improve the initiative, but this is also an opportunity to demonstrate to future administrations how the federal government can be the most effective partner to local leaders working to transform high-poverty communities.

Given the impacts to social mobility, as well as the lessons garnered from the ongoing and emerging federal efforts, we recommend the following:

Utilize social mobility research to guide initiative goals

One of the strengths of the Promise Zones initiative is its commitment to the use of data and evaluation, as well as replicating what works. As economists such as Raj Chetty and his colleagues continue to study the key characteristics of communities that limit social mobility—such as family structure, segregation, and social capital—federal officials should encourage zones to focus on these issues and incorporate them into the application assessment. For instance, several studies show that greater social capital leads to better social and economic outcomes.⁷⁷ Applicants can be awarded more points for affordable housing efforts that work with community based organizations to create opportunities for social engagement such as tenant associations or other programming.⁷⁸

Congress should support Promise Zone tax incentives

As mentioned earlier, one of the tools the administration hopes to offer each of the Promise Zones are tax incentives. President Obama has proposed, and called on Congress to act, to provide private businesses tax incentives for hiring and investing in Promise Zones; this will create jobs and attract additional private investments.⁷⁹ Congress should enact legislation creating these tax credits in order to advance the important goals of this initiative. Such approaches to economic development traditionally enjoy bipartisan support.

Award planning grants

While each Promise Zone will receive preferences for a variety of existing federal grants from participating agencies, a small initial planning grant could further catalyze efforts for each zone. During CAP's interviews, each of the current Promise Zones designees expressed the need for an initial, modest planning grant to help build capacity and enhance current efforts. For example, the first round of Choice Neighborhood Planning grantees received up to \$250,000. Rather than a preference, new Promise Zones could be awarded funding from existing discretionary or competitive sources, such as Choice Neighborhoods Planning grants or the Economic Development Administration's technical assistance programs. The White House should call on agencies to identify discretionary or competitive funding streams where, under current statutory parameters, a percentage of funding could be set-aside for new Promise Zone designees. While each current zone has had prior federal funding through the signature programs outlined earlier, the Promise Zone boundaries vary, bringing in a new set of players and a new set of challenges. One site expressed confidence that work in the zone would become sustainable as city, county, and state funding in the area aligns with the goals of the zone over the next few years, but that it takes money to start this work. This is particularly important for future zones that might not have participated in past federal place-based efforts and need help scaling their work. While the first round of Promise Zones applicants were required to be recipients of previous federal place-based grants, this criteria has been lifted for new applicants. Such applicants could experience different outcomes than the first five zones. Awarding planning grants is just one step to overcome the difference in experience among potential sites. New zones would likely benefit from other resources, including technical assistance to get work off the ground, and more rigorous training for VISTA volunteers as deep planning and implementation will be occurring simultaneously.

Place a greater emphasis on connections to regional opportunities

The Promise Zones application assesses the strength of local partnerships, including county, Metropolitan Planning Organizations, and state officials as demonstrated by the commitments of leaders from these broader jurisdictions. This is critical as neighborhoods operate within a broader political and economic context that is regional in nature, whether one is focusing on the housing market, transportation system, or employment opportunities. However, there has been limited participation from regional leaders in the work leading up to and since the Promise Zones designations were made. It is critical for communities to capitalize on regional opportunities in order to enhance their targeted neighborhood strategies. As a result, the Promise Zones initiative should place a greater emphasis on the strength of these relationships through the goals of the initiative itself, as well as the weight given to the partnerships when assessing the applications.

Regional partnerships have been particularly helpful when it comes to employment opportunities. An example of such a strategy is Partners for a Competitive Workforce, a cross-sector partnership in the Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana tri-state region, that is working to align public and nonprofit employment resources with the needs of employers. Their goal is for 90 percent of the labor force to be gainfully employed by 2020.⁸⁰ Since 2008, Partners for a Competitive Workforce has served more than 6,100 individuals, 75 percent of whom retained employment after a year. The organization works with employers to create workforce development programs based on need; create industry partnerships among employers, school districts, colleges and universities, and community organizations to support career pathways in priority industries; and improve work readiness services.

Strengthen the nation-to-nation relationship with tribal governments

Federal officials should identify ongoing ways to strengthen the nation-to-nation relationship with tribal government designees and support their unique needs. Government-to-government consultation and improving respectful federal engagement with tribes has been a serious priority of the Obama administration. The increased level of partnership between designees and federal officials offers new opportunities for these officials to facilitate and continue to improve this nation-to-nation relationship with tribal government grantees. There are several important differences for federal officials to consider as they move forward

with future tribal government designees. For instance, tribal governments have to provide a wide range of basic services to their citizens, including law enforcement, emergency response, and housing. However, they lack the same kind of tax base as state and local governments. If their income and employment grow, their tax bases will not necessarily grow with it the same way as some of the other non-tribal Promise Zones. Tribes do not have property tax revenue, nor do they have the population to generate other kinds of tax revenue that constitute the kind of income other governments rely on for basic services. Many tribes also have significant legal infrastructure needs, including the development of commercial codes and other resources that cities and other local governments already rely on for sustainable economic development. As federal officials work with future tribal designees, it is important that they consult with tribes to support the assessment of these unique needs and identify appropriate solutions to ensure their future success as designees in the program.

Place greater emphasis on leveraging private investment

One of the goals of the Promise Zones initiative is to help each zone leverage private investment in order to advance the goals of the zone, as well as ensure the longevity of the effort.⁸¹ Despite emerging interest from the private sector in each of the current zones, some communities are unsure how to engage the private sector at this time. Federal officials should encourage Promise Zones facing challenges engaging private-sector actors to seek out technical assistance to better understand their local markets, assess the strengths and weaknesses of different private-sector partners, and build capacity to guide investment toward greater social outcomes. Critical issues to assess include:⁸²

- Which actors steward investments from beginning to end, who takes the lead, and what happens when things go wrong?
- How are grants, training, data, and coordination used to boost the effectiveness of community investment?
- How are economic development, social equity, and sustainability goals integrated into deals and programs?

Living Cities, a large philanthropic collaborative that works with cities to transform low-income communities, discovered that, according to its literature, “many communities did not have intermediaries with lending experience in the areas that philanthropic partners wanted to concentrate on nor were there always lenders of sufficient scale to work with the capital that Living Cities wanted to invest.”⁸³ For example, many lenders had experience investing in housing, but had not worked in small business development or healthy communities. Through their work on capital absorption capacity—the ability of communities to make effective use of different forms of capital to provide needed goods and services to underserved communities—Living Cities discovered that a number of functions are required to make effective community investment, including shared investment priorities, a pipeline to generate deals, and the proper policy and regulatory environment. As a result, the organization devoted time to help sites assess their capacity to use capital and advance the goal of leveraging investments. The U.S. Department of Treasury’s Community Development Financial Institutions Fund can identify intermediary organizations such as Living Cities that can be engaged for technical assistance.

This is illustrated well by Living Cities’ work with The Woodward Corridor initiative, or WCI, in Midtown Detroit. WCI seeks to connect and integrate place-based strategies along Detroit’s main thoroughfare to stabilize neighborhoods, increase investment, and attract new residents. In order to overcome challenges deploying private capital for public purposes, the Detroit team decided to import a national financial intermediary, NCB Capital Impact, to work in the city. NCB brought their expertise, balance sheet, and relationships with national funders to their local partnership.⁸⁴ The initiative also incorporated a creative strategy to raise capital by working with its anchor institutions, including the Henry Ford Medical Center and Wayne State University.⁸⁵ The anchor institutions offered employees home loans and renters allowances to move to the community, promoting a mixed-income neighborhood. The first year of the program was shortened due to an overwhelming number of applicants.⁸⁶

By engaging in this work, Promise Zone designees will also demonstrate innovative ways to leverage private and public dollars and help the federal government better understand how to motivate community investment and how to direct other investors toward better social outcomes.

Enhance the role of anchor institution partners

One of the criteria used to assess the relative strength of a potential Promise Zone's capacity was by examining the commitment of local anchor institutions, or hospitals, colleges and universities; major employers and business leaders; and national and community foundations.⁸⁷ Anchor institutions spend billions of dollars every year on goods and services, employ millions of people, and own land across the country. As a result, they are potentially critical economic engines rooted in their communities. Currently, the first five Promise Zones are primarily focused on engaging anchor institutions around job training, yet there are additional ways to benefit from these partners.

First, HUD and the U.S. Department of Education should identify existing resources to facilitate deeper partnerships between colleges and universities and their communities. In addition, these federal agencies should convene college and university leaders to discuss strategies and best practices, such as the Detroit example above for using their assets in the service of their community. One of the Promise Zones has already witnessed how effective this can be. In 2006, the University of Pennsylvania shifted more than 10 percent of its annual expenditures to purchasing locally, redirected an estimated \$80 million into the struggling West Philadelphia economy, and has aimed to increase this amount since this time.⁸⁸ By investing this money to purchase goods and services locally, institutions encourage local business improvement and growth that will ultimately help to create more healthy and stable communities. Another opportunity comes through the Affordable Care Act, or ACA. Under the ACA, nonprofit hospitals must partner with community and public health representatives to identify and develop strategies for addressing community health needs. Promise Zones should be encouraged to work with hospitals as they conduct community health needs assessments and help them identify how their required "community benefit," or improving the overall health in a community, can align with goals of the initiative.⁸⁹

Promote the principles of collective impact more explicitly

The Promise Zones initiative is designed to support cross-sector teams working to transform their communities with greater access to flexible federal dollars. The federal government's shift toward supporting cross-sector teams stems from the demonstrated success of collective impact, which is a strategy for solving complex local problems through data-driven, outcomes-focused, cross-sector partnerships.

The Promise Zones initiative is already pushing designated zones to work with multi-stakeholder tables and utilize data, but a more explicit focus on the principles that make collective impact successful is needed.

First, such initiatives are focused on the systems level rather than the project level.⁹⁰ The Strive Partnership, described earlier, was successful in improving the educational system in Cincinnati, Ohio, after stakeholders created common goals, followed shared metrics, and redirected resources accordingly. This is the difference between improving the educational system that serves all students in a community and a fraction of students. While individual programs are important for driving people-level outcomes, collective impact takes on the task of transforming an entire system. This requires explicitly asking Promise Zone applicants to indicate community-wide outcomes for success and that cross-sector partnerships demonstrate involvement from institutional leaders, as well as their staff. In addition, metrics for measuring progress must include changes to institutional functions, such as demonstrating that the flow of dollars is shifting away from what does not work to what is working.

Second, data are critical in order to align resources and ensure the initiative is producing results. However, with comprehensive initiatives, there are a lot of different actors involved and various indicators that must be followed, making robust data collection a critical, yet challenging role for many stakeholders.⁹¹ In order to promote the continued use of data among all stakeholders, federal officials should consider creating incentives, such as giving greater preference for funding to zones that demonstrate interim successes.⁹² In addition, AmeriCorps VISTA members will be available to create evaluations and build data capacity.⁹³ However, this is a complicated task that should be undertaken by a partner with demonstrated success. AmeriCorps VISTA members could help coordinate efforts between partners through data collection and entry.

Foster leadership potential of AmeriCorps VISTA members

As mentioned earlier, each Promise Zone will receive five full-time AmeriCorps VISTA members to support the community's goals and recruit and manage volunteers. Among other tasks, the AmeriCorps VISTA members will work to build the capacity of the Promise Zone to work with federal agencies, coordinate key stakeholders, and create the community's project evaluation.⁹⁴ According to Center for American Progress Fellow and national service expert Shirley Sagawa, when you

have people coming from outside of a community to help, it is important to have a community orientation that ensures that members understand the local history, meet with community leaders, and develop a deeper understanding of the challenges the community faces.

One value of national service is that you often get people into fields that they might not have joined. This should also be viewed as an opportunity to foster the next leaders of anti-poverty work who are bringing new skills and knowledge to the arena. This makes the need for mentorship and support of VISTA corps members even more important. Because some zones are discussing spreading out members between different agencies and organizations, it is also helpful to have someone convene the members weekly to present on what they are working on and check in with them about how their work is going. Sagawa explains that it is particularly helpful to have a least one VISTA corps member be from the community. This also helps to foster leadership from long-term residents who may be more likely to reside in the community and contribute to its long-term success beyond the term of national service.

It is also important to include in all agreements that volunteers must write transition plans as their service comes to an end. While VISTA members often gain full-time employment after their year of service, it is critical not to lose the institutional knowledge these members gain.

Build a common agenda at the national and local levels between community organizations

Federal officials should partner with community-based affiliate organizations at the national and local level to support Promise Zone designees and build a common agenda. Another key resource in communities across the country is community-based affiliate organizations such as United Way, Girl Scouts, and Big Brothers/Big Sisters. These kinds of organizations play a critical role as community conveners between government, business, and nonprofit organizations. Some of these organizations also serve as community-driven funding entities making critical investments in programs and services that can strengthen the work of Promise Zone designees. Others provide volunteer, training, and mentorship opportunities for community youth who can serve as valuable partners in working toward progress in each Promise Zone. As federal officials work with new designees, they should partner with these affiliate organizations to identify opportunities where they can add value and align goals and resources with Promise Zone efforts.

Establish a “community of practice” for local partners

While focusing on the local context should continue to be at the center of how the federal government supports place-based initiatives, past efforts demonstrate the value of sharing best practices and experiences across sites. One zone cited this as something that would be helpful now. In order to facilitate the exchange of ideas between local leaders, HUD should establish a community of practice for Promise Zones. HUD set up a community of practice for the Partnership for Sustainable Community grantees, a joint effort of HUD, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Department of Transportation, which supported regional planning and development efforts. The Partnership helped tribal, state, regional, and local governments by providing communities with training and peer-to-peer learning through calls, webinars, and annual conferences, such as the National Sustainable Communities network, launched in 2012.⁹⁵ According to one participant from the Atlanta Development Authority, it would be nearly impossible “to get that much high-quality information in such a short period of time.”⁹⁶ Outside partners can also play an important role in facilitating such cross-site collaboration. For example, the Promise Neighborhoods Institute, or PNI, at PolicyLink facilitates the community of practice for the Promise Neighborhoods initiative. The PNI Network includes 61 communities that share tools and resources, attend trainings and webinars, and support each other’s work.⁹⁷ One grantee from the Portland, Oregon, Promise Neighborhood explains, “You’re trying to change lives, change communities for the better. Sometimes you feel like you’re on an island by yourself. What the Institute does is brings us together to let us know that we’re not alone... and it gives us hope.”⁹⁸ Facilitating this exchange will help these leaders—who are on the forefront of addressing some of our nation’s most challenging problems—learn from one another as they build out their work.

Guidance on how to leverage safety net program

Often times, place-based initiatives and federal poverty programs operate on separate tracks. However, programs such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, or TANF, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program—better known as SNAP and formerly known as food stamps—and other income supports can enhance the work of Promise Zones, as all of these efforts share the goal of lifting people out of poverty. As a result, agencies overseeing these safety net programs, such as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department

of Agriculture, should issue a guidance on how safety net programs can be leveraged in place-based work. For example, the Utah Department of Workforce Services places staff at Road Home, a nonprofit social services agency that helps families get connected to benefits and provide the intensive employment services they need to find jobs quickly. The State Department provides TANF resources to the Road Home to cover the first four months of rent for families facing homelessness while parents search for employment.⁹⁹ As many of the Promise Zones are looking at workforce development strategies, aligning existing resources could enhance these efforts.

Conclusion

While the United States is often called “the land of opportunity,” for many communities across the country, opportunities for a better future remain limited, and children are sentenced to a life of poverty. As a result, communities suffering from concentrated poverty continue to be isolated from mainstream social and economic opportunities, depriving the larger region of their human capital. It is evident that the intersection of community and poverty requires place-based strategies that focus on the entire range of issues a community faces and confronts those challenges simultaneously.

Over the past several years, the Obama administration’s core place-based efforts have demonstrated a shift away from traditional community development approaches that focused solely on public housing to more comprehensive strategies designed to catalyze local action and make existing programs more effective and efficient. More importantly, the federal government continues to work to refine its strategy based on the latest evidence and best practices available.

This is why the Promise Zones initiative is so important. The goal of the initiative is not only to transform the selected zones but also to change how the federal government works with local communities. As the next round of Promise Zones begins, the federal government can ensure that it is being a better partner by continuing to support community-driven work and strengthening the initiative through critical measures, such as engaging anchor institutions, ensuring greater access to private capital, advancing the collective impact model, and fostering leadership among AmeriCorps VISTA members. By utilizing place-based strategies that leverage the federal government’s continued investment in keeping families out of poverty, we can ensure that our country lives up to its promise of being the land of opportunity.

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