



**How Can We Reduce Poverty and Create Opportunity?**  
A conversation with Johnson County City Managers and Staff

**Strategies for Cities**

Nearly 36,000 Johnson County residents live below the federal poverty level, a 6.6 percent poverty rate. Thousands more live in near poverty, earning just enough to avoid the technical definition of poverty but far below the cost of living. In total, 98,000 Johnson County residents are poor or near poor.

Every city in the county has experienced an increase in the number of poor residents. Therefore, each city will benefit from taking action to reduce poverty and create opportunity. UCS has developed a Framework for Reducing Poverty and Creating Opportunity, including three strategic focus areas for taking action. Here are a few specific ways that you can implement the Framework in your city:

Work	Education	Safety Net
<p>Make your city a provider of “good jobs” by ensuring that wages, benefits, paid leave, advancement opportunities, and professional development are adequate for families to meet basic needs and save for the future. This will serve as a model for other businesses and organizations.</p>	<p>Promote the “Talk Read Play” campaign in your city. Include information about the campaign in city newsletters, social media posts, public service announcements, or as “envelope stuffers” sent with city mailings. You can even download and co-brand the “Talk Read Play” materials by visiting the Family Conservancy website.</p>	<p>Partner with local agencies that administer safety net services, especially those targeted towards the poor—such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistant Program (SNAP). Train departmental staff to make referrals to these agencies when residents call seeking assistance.</p>
<p>Ask city employees what kinds of work arrangements and benefits they prefer. A survey or focus group could help determine the best policies to pursue.</p>	<p>Host a book drive to make children’s books available at your community centers, or parks and recreation programs.</p>	<p>Share a link to My Resource Connection and United Way 211 on your website. These tools are designed to connect Johnson County individuals with resources to meet their basic needs.</p>



## Best Practices from Other Cities

**Ban the Box.** Prior actions and criminal history often minimize employment opportunities for people who want to work. Several cities in the U.S. have implemented a “Ban the Box” policy, which removes inquiries about criminal history from initial job applications. Qualified candidates are then more likely to make it to the interview process rather than being denied that opportunity solely due to criminal history. Cities such as Kansas City, MO and the Canton suburb of Massillon, OH have successfully passed ordinances to “Ban the Box”. Learn more about Ban the Box best practices here: <http://www.nelp.org/publication/ban-the-box-fair-chance-hiring-state-and-local-guide/>.

**Limit the Impact of Predatory Loans.** Low-income families often have limited access to credit and banks, so they turn to payday lenders and check-cashing stores for money services. These high-fee, high-interest products can leave poor families worse off. Help families avoid “debt traps” by implementing policies to reduce the activity of predatory lenders. For example, a zoning ordinance to prevent new predatory lending storefronts from opening can reduce the use of these services, as demonstrated in Oakland and Sacramento, CA. Cities can then offer alternatives to high-interest loans by collaborating with banks, credit unions, and nonprofit agencies. Visit [www.responsiblelending.org](http://www.responsiblelending.org) for more information about predatory loan alternatives.

**Spot Warning Signs.** A spell of poverty can happen to anyone at any time. Cities can adopt procedures to spot “warning signs”, such as recurring code violations, for household experiencing economic struggles. This will enable cities to connect residents with resources before financial issues become too overwhelming.

**Partner to Encourage Literacy and Learning.** Children living in poverty know 30 million fewer words than their wealthier peers at the start of school, according to a [study](#) from University of Kansas researchers. Consequently, poor children have worse educational outcomes which leads to other risk factors for poverty. In addition to promoting “Talk, Read, Play”, cities can collaborate with other organizations to promote literacy in both children and adults. For example, the city of Baton Rouge, LA partnered with business and civic groups to create the Greater Baton Rouge Literacy Coalition, which targets the city’s illiterate population. To learn more about this innovative partnership, visit <http://theupalliance.org/>.

**Engage Residents.** The best way to understand what actions are necessary to reduce poverty is to hear directly from residents in your city. Find opportunities to connect with your city’s poor population by hosting public meetings or developing targeted outreach programs. Direct engagement is the most effective approach, but social media can be a useful tool. The suburban Sonoma County, CA has outlined best practices for community engagement here: <http://www.sonoma-county.org/health/community/>. The National League of Cities [website](#) contains many resources for Governance and Civic Engagement, as well.

**Collaborate for Maximum Impact.** Cities can work together to seek resources that meet common goals. In the suburbs of Chicago, several municipalities came together to address a home foreclosure crisis that was threatening the economic well-being of the entire community. When an opportunity arose to apply for federal Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP) funds in 2008, mayors and city managers from 29 municipalities decided to collaborate on the planning, application, and implementation process. Since 2009, the collaboratives have attracted \$44 million in federal funds to address the foreclosure crisis.

**Support Homeownership.** Homeownership is one of the primary ways families build wealth, and can go a long way in reducing poverty long-term. Cities can help homeownership become a reality for low-income families through down payment assistance programs, homeownership counseling, and investments in affordable housing. Seek federal funds for direct loans/grants to low-income or older property owners; these funds can be used for repair, renovation, energy conservation, and safety improvements. Partner with federal programs and private developers to improve the stock of affordable housing; the city of Coldwater, MI used this approach to sell affordable housing to eighteen low-income families. Visit [www.huduser.org](http://www.huduser.org) and [www.urban.org](http://www.urban.org) to learn more about low-income homeownership policies and best practices.

**Remember the Rental Properties.** Johnson County's cities are full of rental properties, where low-income families often seek housing because they cannot afford to buy a home. Background and credit checks are a common practice for landlords screening rental applicants, but they might be a barrier that prevents a family from securing affordable housing – even in substandard housing units. Cities can work with landlords to mitigate those barriers, while holding landlords accountable for the conditions of their property. The City of Troy, NY partners with housing specialists, law enforcement, code inspectors, and neighborhood leaders to provide an array of services including landlord training with the ultimate goal of increased homeownership. To learn more, visit <http://www.triponline.org/>. You can also help protect tenants and landlords by making information publicly available; the City of Salina, KS published a [Landlord & Tenant Handbook](#) on their website.

**Promote Health through Parks and Recreation.** Johnson County residents have access to a variety safe, high-quality of parks and recreation services. Because individuals living below poverty tend to have worse health outcomes, promoting these activities can give poor residents the opportunity for a healthier lifestyle. Make sure services are easily accessible and affordable. The City of Tucson, AZ offers [discounted](#) programs for low-income families, including swim lessons and youth programs.

**Inventory Existing Resources.** Your city might already have programs, policies, and practices in place to reduce poverty and create opportunity. Review them periodically, especially as poverty trends change, to determine what might need improvement or strengthening.