



RESEARCH REPORT

Reclaiming Shared Space through City-to-Citizen Collaboration

A Formative Evaluation of the Love Your Block Program

Leiha Edmonds

Matthew Gerken

Mary Bogle

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Executive Summary

Love Your Block connects mayors' offices with city residents to revitalize their neighborhoods one block at a time. The Love Your Block model involves two main components: a two-year grant and the support of AmeriCorps VISTA members. In addition, the program's funder, Cities of Service, provides technical assistance and cohort support to grantees. In 2018, after a competitive grant application process, Cities of Service selected 10 cities to be in Love Your Block's second cohort: Buffalo, New York; Gary, Indiana; Hamilton, Ohio; Hartford, Connecticut; Huntington, West Virginia; Lancaster, Pennsylvania; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Newark, New Jersey; Richmond, Virginia; and South Bend, Indiana. Each city received \$25,000, and, in turn, the cities disbursed minigrants of \$200 to \$2,000 to community groups, block clubs, and informal groups of neighbors who propose volunteer-led projects focused on blight remediation, defined as improving land and properties that are vacant or in disrepair.

The Urban Institute's formative evaluation of Love Your Block describes how Cities of Service and Love Your Block affect neighborhood-level blight remediation, city government collaboration, and resident engagement. Key findings include the following:

- The 10 cities' minigrant projects collectively accomplished tasks aimed at reclaiming shared spaces, including the removal of 299,997 pounds of trash, the cleaning of 1,040 acres of vacant grounds, the removal of 1,313 square feet of graffiti, the creation of 637 new features such as pocket parks, and the planting of 146 trees.
- In interviews, staff of cities from across the cohort emphasized that resident engagement, trust building between city hall and neighborhood groups, and partnerships with local community organizations were beneficial outcomes of Love Your Block. These neighborhood-centered investments of time and money can help build social capital and strengthen connections between stakeholders working to address untended or underused spaces in a neighborhood.
- Love Your Block's emphasis on strong reciprocal relationships between citizens and city officials who work together closely at the neighborhood level can spark more integrated, citizen-centered reforms and innovations in city policy and practice.
- Cities valued the technical assistance from Cities of Service, the AmeriCorps VISTA members, and the Cities of Service network. Cities of Service offered 19 webinars and group calls and

more than 50 virtual engagements over the two years of the grant. Cities of Service offered programming specific to COVID-19, including webinars on local approaches to serving vulnerable populations and to food access.

- VISTA members were overwhelmingly recognized as a key benefit of LYB, expanding staff capacity and strengthening connections between residents and cities.

Reclaiming Shared Space through City-to-Citizen Collaboration

The Love Your Block (LYB) grant program connects mayors' offices with communities to revitalize residents' neighborhoods one block at a time. City officials use grant funding to encourage community groups to identify priority projects and develop volunteer-fueled community solutions. The program provides \$25,000 in funding and deploys two AmeriCorps VISTA members (VISTAs) to participating legacy cities to help mayors engage community members with low incomes. Under LYB, a mayor's office appoints a "city lead" to spearhead the program, manage the AmeriCorps VISTAs, and coordinate with other city officials to disburse the "minigrants" to neighborhood groups, block clubs, and residents leading projects that improve land and properties that are vacant or in disrepair and build community in low-income neighborhoods.¹ This report is the formative evaluation for the second cohort of LYB cities, which received two-year grants starting in 2018.

Background

Since 2009, Cities of Service (COS) has helped dozens of cities implement LYB programs (box 1). In 2015, it launched the Love Your Block AmeriCorps VISTA program.² Through LYB, COS provided grant funding, consulting, and two AmeriCorps VISTAs to mayors' offices in the first cohort of LYB cities: Birmingham, Alabama; Boston, Massachusetts; Lansing, Michigan; Las Vegas, Nevada; Phoenix, Arizona; Richmond, California; and Seattle, Washington (box 2).

BOX 1

Cities of Service

Founded in 2009 by New York City Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, Cities of Service supports a coalition of 280 cities, representing more than 84 million people across the Americas and Europe. Cities of Service works with mayors' offices to change the way local government and citizens work together. Through seven major programs, including Love Your Block, Cities of Service helps the coalition cities tap into citizen insights, skills, and service to identify and solve critical public problems. In 2020, Cities of Service found a new home at Johns Hopkins University.

LYB's second cohort is made up of 10 cities: Buffalo, New York; Gary, Indiana; Hamilton, Ohio; Hartford, Connecticut; Huntington, West Virginia; Lancaster, Pennsylvania; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Newark, New Jersey; Richmond, Virginia; and South Bend, Indiana. These are legacy cities—older, industrial, urban cities that have experienced significant population and job loss, resulting in high rates of property vacancy.³ Officials from legacy cities are often interested in initiatives that focus on maintaining affordable housing stock and helping people at risk of losing their homes keep them. Thus, LYB focuses resources on neighborhoods struggling to address properties in need of significant repair or remediation. Such properties could be single-family homes, apartment buildings, commercial buildings, vacant lots, parks, or other public spaces.

BOX 2

The Evaluation of Love Your Block's First Cohort of Cities

This is the Urban Institute's second, broader formative evaluation of Love Your Block. Our 2018 study, *Coming Together for Change: A Qualitative Study of Social Connectedness Outcomes Produced by the Love Your Block Program*, examined LYB grants that went to the first cohort of cities and were implemented in 2016 and 2017 (Bogle, Edmonds, and Gourevitch 2018). That study looked at how LYB grants built social connectedness among small groups of citizens who used minigrant projects to beautify their neighborhoods. The first round of LYB funding broadly focused on impact volunteering (volunteer strategies that target community needs, use best practices, and set clear outcomes and measures to gauge progress). Many of the strategies and metrics used to measure success (e.g., trash removal) were similar to those being used to evaluate the second cohort of cities.

Objectives and Report Structure

The Urban Institute's formative evaluation describes how COS and LYB affect neighborhood improvement efforts, city government, and residents engaged in LYB's impact volunteering model. This report is organized by the following three areas of inquiry:

- Did LYB projects address relevant community issues related to untended or underused spaces as outlined in the cities' key metrics, like trash collection and tree planting?
- Did LYB create tangible connections between city leaders, partner organizations, and neighborhood volunteers? What did these connections look like, and what have they produced?

- Did LYB funding, technical assistance, and the AmeriCorps VISTAs improve cities' policies and practices? This could include increased collaboration between city departments, increased civic engagement by volunteers, and other outcomes identified in the COS theory of change (see appendix A).

Methods and Data Sources

We use quantitative and qualitative data to address the three areas of inquiry into LYB's effects on cohort cities. The primary methods for the study are the following:

- **Survey of LYB city leads.** This brief online survey captured uniform data, including the role of COS in technical assistance delivery and cities' engagement with the broader COS network, from each city-level grantee. The survey was conducted twice, first in 2019 after the first year of the grant and again in 2020 when the program was concluding.
- **Administrative data assessment.** We analyze LYB grantee data (reported to COS in semiannual reports) related to LYB project outputs, such as the amount of trash and graffiti removed and grounds cleaned.
- **Visits to five LYB cities.** In spring 2020, we conducted in-person and virtual visits to Buffalo, Hamilton, Hartford, Lancaster, and Newark to collect qualitative data. The cities were chosen based on patterns or characteristics of interest observed in the administrative and qualitative data collected during year 1. We interviewed LYB city leads and AmeriCorps VISTAs, city staff members who collaborated on the LYB projects (from police officers, to sanitation department staff members, to the mayor), nonprofit partner organizations, and residents. In Lancaster and Newark, we conducted focus groups with LYB volunteers.
- **Interview data assessment.** In addition to the site-visit interviews with five cities, we conducted interviews with LYB city leads and some VISTAs from the other five LYB cities—Gary, Huntington, Milwaukee, Richmond, and South Bend. Across the 10 cities, interviews focused on how LYB technical assistance and other resources transmitted through the grant may have helped produce desired impacts. The semistructured interviews also explored the connections made between residents in the minigrant neighborhoods and city-level administrators, as well as city administrators' perceptions of the tangible (e.g., improvements to land and properties that are vacant or in disrepair) and intangible (e.g., social cohesion) results of the minigrants.

- **Social network analysis and outcomes mapping.** The evaluation team combined two research methods—social network analysis and outcomes mapping—to analyze how strategic relationship building might contribute to concrete results in policy or practice. The team began by analyzing the qualitative data collected during site visits to understand the social networks created or bolstered by LYB activity. Social network analysis allowed the team to build on the previous study by documenting the neighborhood-to-city-level networks that formed because of LYB. The team used simple social network analysis to develop basic “outcome maps” for Buffalo, Hamilton, Hartford, Lancaster, and Newark that show the influence LYB may have had on city policies and practices. The research team used R software to develop a more detailed sociogram of the social network generated by the LYB program in Lancaster. We analyzed the sociogram against interview data on the outputs and outcomes of LYB to explain how the “web of reciprocal relationships” created by deeper city-to-citizen engagement can lead to definable city policy and practice improvements. This analytic innovation (i.e., overlaying sociograms on outcomes maps) is well suited to tracing relationships to key outcomes in complex, nonlinear processes like LYB minigrant implementation.

Limitations

In early March 2020, the Urban team completed two in-person site visits, to Lancaster and Newark. Soon after, travel restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic began, and the remaining site visits—to Buffalo, Hamilton, and Hartford—were conducted virtually, via video and phone interviews. Although interviews were not significantly affected by this shift, virtual site visits constrained our ability to see project minigrant results in person and to collect in-depth data on the social networks of minigrant leaders. Our qualitative data are otherwise robust. For this reason, we used the more detailed data from Lancaster to illustrate how LYB projects might generate city-level outcomes through improved policies and practices. This study also has several limitations related to the quantitative administrative data, both public and private. Chief among them are that (1) the quality and availability of data used to assess neighborhood-level trends can vary widely across cities and that (2) without comparison data, ascribing any change to the LYB project itself using traditional analytical methods is difficult. Despite these challenges, LYB cities’ reporting on outputs—the immediate results of a minigrant effort, such as the number of pounds of trash collected—offers insights into the diversity of activities that cities undertook.

Report Structure

This report describes LYB grantees' activities and highlights the important lessons learned within the three areas of inquiry. We start with a brief description of cities' implementation of LYB across the two years of the grant and then focus on the three areas of inquiry: improvements to land and properties that are vacant or in disrepair through impact volunteering, the role of LYB in creating the social capital necessary at the city and neighborhood level to generate outcomes, and changes to cities' practices and policies. We conclude by discussing the implications of LYB for future initiatives and its alignment with the larger trend of new localism in cities across the country.

Implementing Love Your Block

The LYB model involves three main components: a two-year grant, the support of AmeriCorps VISTAs, and technical assistance and cohort support from Cities of Service.

In 2018, after a competitive grant application process, the second cohort of LYB cities was chosen. Each of the 10 cities received \$25,000. Cities used the funds to disburse minigrants of \$200 to \$2,000 to community groups, block clubs, and informal groups of neighbors who live and work in low-income communities. To receive a minigrant, groups applied to the LYB fund and proposed a volunteer-led project focused on blight remediation, defined by the grant as improving land and properties that are vacant or in disrepair.

LYB also funded up to two AmeriCorps VISTAs for each year of the grant. The VISTAs worked directly with the LYB "city leads" appointed by the mayor's office and typically played a large role in all aspects of project implementation, from meeting with community groups to inform them of the minigrants, to aiding residents in developing minigrant applications, to connecting with partner organizations.

Finally, the 10 cities were connected with the larger COS network and received technical assistance from COS. Technical assistance included designing grant metrics, providing advice on managing VISTAs, or troubleshooting challenges with grant disbursement. Through meetings and events, cities were also connected with fellow cohort members, previous LYB grantee cities, and the larger network of COS cities.

Year 1 Evaluation Findings

In the first year of the evaluation, data from the Urban Institute's annual survey and interviews found that the cities valued COS technical assistance, the COS network, and AmeriCorps VISTAs. Almost half of cities reached out for additional technical assistance beyond regularly scheduled calls, and 70 percent of cities connected with other cities in the COS network for advice on addressing blight through LYB. VISTA members were overwhelmingly recognized as a key benefit of LYB, expanding staff capacity and connections between residents and the city.

Findings from the first year of the evaluation also suggest that LYB raised the profile of cities' work improving land and properties that were vacant or in disrepair and provided small successes using different methods to support abating and reclaiming vacant and abandoned properties. City leads described how minigrant projects engaged residents to address neighborhood-level challenges in the built environment in their communities. In some cities, LYB enabled grantees to demonstrate a change in how the city handles code violations, switching from a model of fining residents to helping residents improve their properties. In other cities, the focus on elevating the use of 311 and data sharing for LYB influenced how the city collects data and responds to residents' 311 requests.

Adapting during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Pandemic shutdowns began three months into year 2 of LYB. Cities faced several challenges, including project delays, communication issues, and difficulties related to shifting city priorities (table 1). Almost all cities (8 out of 10) used Love Your Block as part of their broader responses to the pandemic.

TABLE 1

Challenges Experienced Because of COVID-19

Number and share of Love Your Block cities that experienced a given challenge

	Number of cities	Share of cities
Delays in planned events across minigrant recipients	10	100
Adjustments to communication and engagement to comply with social distancing measures	9	90
Delays in soliciting and awarding year 2 minigrants	7	70
Shifts in city priorities in responding to COVID-19	7	70
Reduction in staff time and/or resources because of budget cuts	3	30

Source: Love Your Block online survey.

Note: Sample is 10 cities.

LYB initiatives took different approaches to addressing their communities' needs during the pandemic. Cities of Service allowed for greater flexibility in the use of minigrant funds after the public health crisis began, and cities responded in several ways, including by redirecting funds to provide personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies to residents with low incomes and offering access to software and trainings on virtual engagement to community groups. Some also allowed minigrant recipients to use the funds to respond to emerging community needs. For example, in South Bend, one grantee bought a Wi-Fi enhancer and set up tables outside so students without internet at home could receive outdoor tutoring. "It's a way to get kids outside safely and get online," the city lead in South Bend said.

LYB emphasizes in-person engagement and meetings between AmeriCorps VISTAs and neighborhood volunteers, so the pandemic forced many cities to pause programs and reconsider how to engage residents. The city lead from Milwaukee said: "With LYB, so much of our work is community and resident engagement—canvassing work, knocking on doors, having residents interact with each other and city staff. LYB has been the most difficult transition during COVID-19 out of all of our other work. Resident-to-resident engagement has been difficult." Despite initial challenges, cities not only adapted their minigrants to meet community needs but also found ways to resume work that had started before COVID-19. In summer 2020, many LYB initiatives again began supporting their original minigrants while adjusting the projects so that small numbers of volunteers participated in outdoor engagements. The city lead from Gary said: "We expanded the LYB grant to get dumpsters in the communities to help address blight and set it up so that only 5 to 10 people were working outside at a time...That way, we are still addressing the blight issue without having large groups."

Reclaiming Space through Impact Volunteering

During the two years of the evaluation, many LYB city leads said the program had raised the profile of their city's work to address land and properties that were vacant or in disrepair and provided small successes on the long road to neighborhood-level community building. One city lead said, "Love Your Block's service in the community with residents gives us muscle when we talk to the mayor and other departments." From 2018 to 2020, the 10 cities collectively

- removed 299,997 pounds of trash;
- cleaned 1,040 acres of grounds;
- removed 1,313 square feet of graffiti;

- developed 637 new features, such as pocket parks;
- planted 146 trees;
- created 449 art displays;
- held 86 activation events, such as vacant lot cleanups; and
- built 271 structures.

After winning the LYB grant, each city selected community-building and blight-remediation metrics to track from eight possible output measures established by COS. This approach is set by COS as part of the impact volunteering model, which promotes strategies that target community needs, uses best practices to address neighborhood challenges like vacancy or litter, and sets clear outcomes and measures to gauge progress. Because cities focused on slightly different elements of community building and approaches to improving land and properties that are vacant or in disrepair, the cities' metrics are not points for comparison and should be understood as various community-informed approaches. Table 2 shows each city's metrics and the totals across all 10 cities.

TABLE 2
Love Your Block Metrics, 2018–20, by City

	Trash removed (lbs.)	Grounds cleaned (acres)	Graffiti removed (square feet)	New features	Trees planted	Art displays	Activation events	New structures
Buffalo	1,326	24	20	262	17	26	38	47
Gary	263,027	18	0	1	0	0	4	34
Hamilton	11,822	13	0	26	0	0	5	0
Hartford	3,092	470	360	28	50	43	13	68
Huntington	2,902	26	26	32	2	1	0	8
Lancaster	1,870	8	1	82	9	331	23	10
Milwaukee	1,251	2	0	30	0	34	1	21
Newark	550	1	0	0	7	0	1	0
Richmond	8,230	454	906	129	61	14	1	83
South Bend	5,927	25	0	47	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Total	299,997	1,040	1,313	637	146	449	86	271

Source: Cities of Service's Love Your Block city administrative data.

Notes: Data are as of November 16, 2020. N/a = not applicable; the city did not have minigrants focused on that metric. New features are those such as lighting and fences that do not change the use of a space. Activation events are pop-ups and other activities that transform spaces for a limited time. New structures are items such as edible gardens, playgrounds, and picnic tables that do transform the use of a space.

LYB cities' experiences improving land and properties that are vacant or in disrepair varied, and interview and reporting data suggest that preexisting capacity and the types of minigrant projects the city and residents focused on between year 1 and 2 affected how LYB was implemented. Interviews with the 10 city leads highlighted the differences in cities' starting points and how they used the program to build capacity. Several cities had established programs for addressing vacant or abandoned properties, and LYB bolstered their work. For example, in Hamilton, the city was focused on measuring blight remediation before LYB and leveraged its technical skill to support the LYB work. The city lead said: "We've been holding a blight assessment, where we're assessing all of the neighborhood houses and properties. We're going to a block assessment at the beginning of this year [2020] and next year [2021] to see how much impact has been had on blight through LYB and our other initiatives." In other cases, LYB helped cities expand their neighborhood-based efforts. In Hartford, staff noted: "We've made tremendous progress on city side with blight. Hiring a blight director, giving money for staff, changing policy—for the first time, we have really strong blight policy. LYB helps us grow this work in the neighborhoods."

From year 1 to year 2, cities made changes to their Love Your Block initiatives (table 3). Most cities expanded their LYB target geographic areas, informed by successes in year 1, demonstrated need, and residents who wanted to see the initiatives grow. A few cities mentioned that year 1 projects' coming in under budget and additional city funding allowed them to expand geographically and increase the size of the average minigrant award. In one city, expanded geographic scope came with the trade-off of lowering the average minigrant award. Another city worried it might be spread too thin if it expanded its LYB area.

TABLE 3
Changes from Year 1 to Year 2 among Love Your Block Cities

	Share of cities
Expanded the Love Your Block target geographic area	60
Increased average minigrant amount	40
Focused on new geographic areas	30
Lowered average minigrant amount	10
None of the above	20

Source: Love Your Block online survey.

Note: Sample is 10 cities.

In interviews, several cities noted that they shifted how they described LYB in year 2 and adjusted their support based on lessons learned during the first year. For example, Huntington focused year 2 projects to address a gap in the city's property assessment system. According to the city lead, "In the

second year, we homed in on housing issues and pride in neighborhood, with grants for beautification and minor home repair. We have a robust system in the city to deal with abandoned property, and we have those tools. But the missing tool is to catch properties before they get so bad that they need to be on the list of vacant—that’s what we’re doing through this program.” In several cases, cities modified their communications and branding in year 2 and updated funding levels. In South Bend, the city lead explained: “This year [2020], we took the minigrants’ focus off of blight elimination and highlighted that the grants are for folks who were doing things for their neighbors. We made them \$250 to \$300 grants instead of \$1,000 because we wanted to get money into the community as fast as we could. That meant people could start gardens, and a lot of folks are focused on how to help their neighbors, especially the elderly.”

These changes to LYB affected how the cities reported on metrics. Using Richmond as an example, table 4 shows how the city’s output reporting shifted from year 1 to year 2. In year 2, minigrants prioritized cleaning vacant lots, planting trees, and creating new structures and deemphasized graffiti removal and art displays.

TABLE 4
Richmond, Virginia, Love Your Block Metrics

	Year 1	Year 2	Total
Trash removed (lbs)	3,978	4,252	8,230
Grounds cleaned (acres)	103	351	454
Graffiti removed (sq. ft.)	906	0	906
New features	55	74	129
Trees planted	2	59	61
Art displays	13	1	14
Activation events	0	1	1
New structures	0	83	83

Source: Cities of Service’s Love Your Block city administrative data.

Notes: Data are as of November 16, 2020. New features are those such as lighting and fences that do not change the use of a space. Activation events are pop-ups and other activities that transform spaces for a limited time. New structures are items such as edible gardens, playgrounds, and picnic tables that do transform the use of a space.

All 10 cities indicated that they planned to continue LYB or a modified version of it after the COS funding ended. Cities implemented different strategies to ensure this continuation (table 5). Almost all cities planned to solicit alternative sources of funding; among those cities, half planned to explore additional funds within city government, with fewer cities looking to foundations and private businesses.

TABLE 5

Cities' Strategies to Ensure the Continuation of Love Your Block

	Share of cities
Soliciting alternative sources of funding	80
Hiring additional staff or redefining roles for existing staff to take on responsibilities traditionally conducted by VISTAs	60
Other	40

Source: Love Your Block online survey.

Note: Sample is 10 cities.

Other cities planned to ensure the continuation of LYB through staffing decisions. Of those cities, most planned to devote one or two full-time staff positions to the program, although one planned to devote four full-time staff positions. Two cities planned to continue to leverage the AmeriCorps VISTA program. Of these, one said it would devote one full-time city staff position to the program to match the sponsorship of two state AmeriCorps VISTAs.

Other strategies for continuing LYB included improving local ordinances that govern the program and allocating general funds for minigrants. Another city was examining its neighborhood housing programs and planned to institutionalize the LYB framework within those.

Building Social Capital across Citizens and City Hall

Although the role LYB has played in supporting or sparking city improvements to land and properties that are vacant or in disrepair is notable, the program's most intriguing aspect is how minigrants activate and build social networks to produce neighborhood-level results. In this section, we lay out data from LYB cities that suggest the reach and impact of social networks sparked by deep citizen-to-city-hall engagement may extend beyond small neighborhood-level improvements into the realm of larger, sustainable improvements to municipal practices and policies.

In the first LYB outcomes study (box 2), we concluded that one of the program's key "social connectedness" outcomes was increased social cohesion (box 3) among neighborhood minigrant team members because of the shared sense of purpose and pride the projects sparked in those associated with them. (This was also the case, to a more limited extent, among residents who benefit from improvements like new pocket parks, murals, and garden enhancements.)

BOX 3

Measuring Social Connectedness

We primarily focused our investigation of social connectedness on the networks formed and results produced in the neighborhoods where LYB minigrants were implemented. We define “social connectedness” broadly, as any combination of social cohesion, social capital, and collective efficacy at work among groups of people. Definitions of the three key terms are as follows:

- **Social cohesion** is an emotional and social investment in a neighborhood and a sense of shared destiny among residents.
- **Social capital** is a community stock of social trust and norms of reciprocity embedded in social networks that facilitate collective actions. (This definition integrates elements of several scholarly definitions.)
- **Collective efficacy** is generally a neighborhood-level concept whereby community members create a sense of agency and assume ownership for the state of their local community, producing social action to meet common goals and preserve shared values.

Scholars often link or overlap the three concepts. For example, social cohesion and trust, when high, help structure collective productive action, which becomes the cornerstone of collective efficacy. Collective efficacy is a form of social organization that combines social cohesion and shared expectations for social control, which is a form of social capital according to some definitions.

Source: Mary Bogle, Leiha Edmonds, and Ruth Gourevitch, *Coming Together for Change: A Qualitative Study of Social Connectedness Outcomes Produced by the Love Your Block Program* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2018).

We also saw notable increases in the social capital held by minigrant teams and observed this to be an outgrowth of the direct and productive way city officials related to and resourced citizen teams—that is, team leaders and members knew who to call at city hall to achieve their goals. Minigrant teams referred to the focused action and recognition they got from city officials as a key driver of the boosted collective efficacy and increased feelings of neighborhood ownership they brought to their projects. Although city officials were clearly focused on achieving mayoral goals via this engagement (a one-way exchange), the reciprocal effects citizens were having on the efficacy and policymaking of city staff remained unknown. However, we did conclude the first study by observing the following:

The research team noted that the Love Your Block brand and many of its programmatic features are being adopted as the citywide label for ongoing citizen engagement initiatives in [some LYB cities]. Love Your Block concepts may be fomenting systemic changes at the city level in addition to the neighborhood-focused outcomes in this report. Although beyond the scope of this study, it is interesting to consider how these rebrandings may also signal nascent city leader recognition of greater two-way city-to-neighborhood social cohesion and capital building. City leaders are

inviting citizens to Love Your Block together with their elected and appointed public servants, with all the trust and mutual engagement that such an invitation implies. If this observation bears out, it may bode well for the momentum and long-term outcomes that LYB programs may have sparked. (Bogle, Edmonds, and Gourevitch 2018, 46)

The data collected for this second and larger formative evaluation of LYB appear to validate our preliminary observation that the social capital and collective efficacy sparked at the neighborhood level are also leading to improved collaboration at the government level. The social networks created by LYB flow between minigrant leaders and city hall officials in ways that reach beyond the standard target city practice and policy outcomes like improved code enforcement and municipal cost savings.

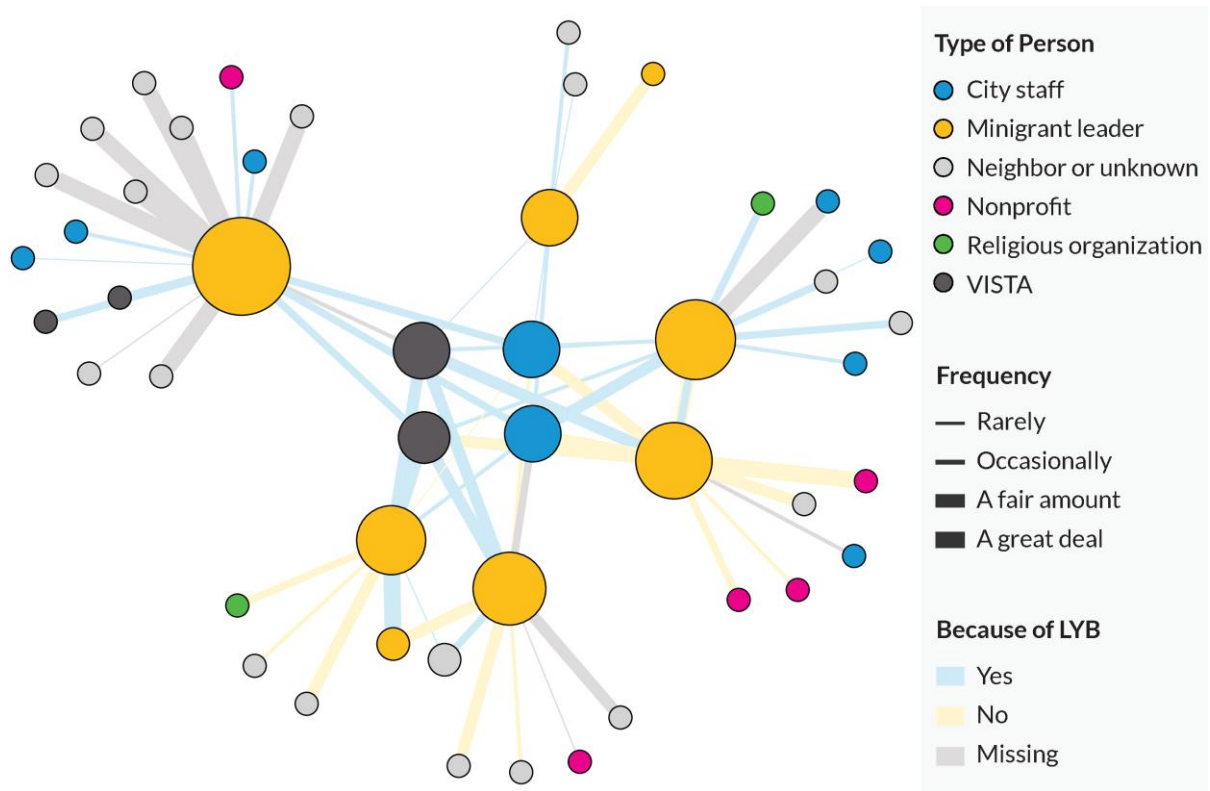
A Web of Reciprocal Relationships

City officials use LYB minigrants to cultivate the trust, reciprocity, information, and cooperation that are typical of strong social networks to generate real value (e.g., the creation of community gardens, a reduction of trash in the streets) at the neighborhood level, often becoming an integral part of the networks themselves. Here we examine the web of reciprocal relationships created by the LYB program in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

The sociogram below (figure 1) is based on data from worksheets that Lancaster LYB minigrant project leaders completed at the request of the Urban evaluation team during a focus group. The project leaders recorded the relationships they had formed or strengthened through their participation in LYB. With these data, we can show how just four city officials—Lancaster Mayor Danene Sorace, Director of Neighborhood Engagement Milzy Carrasco (LYB city lead), and the two VISTAs assigned to Lancaster by COS—form the core of the large social networks created by LYB. Shown as large blue and black dots or “nodes” in the center of the diagram, these four people catalyzed substantial levels of commitment and action from at least 40 city residents and staff members who helped achieve the goals of year 2 LYB projects. For Carrasco and the VISTAs, this catalyzing role was direct—as in, they had numerous meetings and other interactions with project team leaders to ensure they were well-resourced, advised, and encouraged to keep up the momentum of their work. Meanwhile, the mayor’s role was more about signaling—both inside and outside city hall—that LYB was a high-level city priority. The minigrant leaders themselves appear in the diagram as yellow nodes. The small gray, pink, and green nodes emanating from them are either other neighbors or representatives of nonprofit or religious organizations. The small blue nodes emanating solely from the yellow ones (the minigrant leaders) are city staff members who play public safety, housing, public works, sanitation, and other roles essential to neighborhood functioning. These people were typically deployed by one of the four central city officials, on a onetime or ongoing basis, to help minigrant teams achieve their goals.

FIGURE 1

Connections between Implementers of Love Your Block in Lancaster, Pennsylvania



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Source: Authors' analysis of interview and focus group data from Lancaster Love Your Block.

Notes: This figure underrepresents the size of the social network formed by LYB projects in Lancaster because not all minigrant leaders participated in the focus group and worksheet exercise held during the evaluation team's site visit. The two blue circles in the middle represent Lancaster's mayor and the city's director of neighborhood engagement.

Although year 2 LYB projects in Lancaster covered a range of activities (box 4), many focused, at least in part, on Lancaster's significant and costly problem of littering and illegal dumping (Burns & McDonnell 2020b).⁴

BOX 4

Year 2 Love Your Block Minigrant Projects in Lancaster, Pennsylvania

Almost all year 2 projects were in the Southeast section of downtown Lancaster.

- **#HopeforHoward:** planted flowers and plants and conducted a block cleanup to remove litter along Howard Avenue; formalized a neighborhood group called Mussertown Neighborhood Group that has focused on street and sidewalk safety concerns.

- **Putting the How in Howard Avenue:** repaired façades and removed litter along Howard Avenue.
- **Plaza San Juan:** improved signage, repaired plaza façade, and organized cleanups along Lime Street; installed public art on the history of the Southeast area.
- **TCP Network:** cleaned the interior and exterior of Crispus Attucks Community Center and created spaces within the center for new programming.
- **Beautifying Atlantic:** repaired façades and removed litter along one block of Atlantic Avenue.
- **Churchtowne Neighbors:** repaired façades and conducted regular cleanups to remove litter along North Street.
- **River's Edge Fellowship:** repaired façades and conducted regular cleanups to remove litter along Locust Street.
- **South End Park:** created a mural using children's drawing of anthropomorphized versions of street names in Lancaster; installed windows in former city storage facility to convert it to a community space.

In year 2, five of the eight minigrant projects included strategies to prevent or abate litter on the streets, often by setting up “Love Your Block” trash cans outside homes. A partner nonprofit organization bought and installed the cans, which were monitored for overflow by nearby residents and emptied via a special route set up by Lancaster’s manager of solid waste and recycling.



A mural created as part of a Love Your Block project and a Love Your Block trash can, both in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Photos by Mary Bogle.

Almost to a person, year 2 minigrant leaders said they got involved with LYB as a result of direct outreach from Lancaster's director of neighborhood engagement and/or the VISTAs. In addition, most minigrant leaders claimed a personal relationship with the mayor on account of LYB, noting that she had reached out to thank them for their involvement and acknowledged them at city convenings.

When asked about LYB's goals, minigrant leaders pointed to their hopes for more social connectedness, such as getting to know neighbors better or asserting social norms (e.g., not smoking marijuana in the streets), before citing blight reduction. Said one project leader, "It's about having community pride and being proud of where you live. For me, it was an opportunity to bring people together, to get to know your neighbors. That's a great joy to me, just walking out and getting to see people smiling and nodding at each other. Not just on my block, but for several blocks, because of the work that we've done." As discussed earlier, several cities adjusted their communications and implementation of LYB in year 2 to emphasize the importance of neighborhood pride and community building.

Data from Lancaster and other LYB cities validate the essential role that personal attention from city officials plays in sparking collective efficacy and the application of social capital from neighborhood teams to help achieve mayoral priorities. However, an important new finding from our LYB evaluation is that the spark in collective efficacy is often bidirectional. Not only are city officials leveraging neighborhood social capital in service of mayoral goals (e.g., cost-effective litter removal and other forms of neighborhood improvements), but citizens are leveraging greater responsiveness from officials toward addressing their needs and priorities more holistically.

For example, Lancaster's collaborative citizen engagement programming enables city officials to broaden their understanding of neighborhood problems and potential solutions by giving them greater access to the perspectives of residents who experience the underlying causes of unsightly and unhealthy spaces in their lives every day. This contrasts with more traditional, siloed approaches to addressing untended or underused spaces, in which a city may not fully understand the problem because it can see only one part. In a given case, police officials may focus on illegal dumping, while a sanitation worker may focus on damage caused by rodents. But neighborhood residents know someone with a hoarding problem is the root cause of both problems. To break down these silos, Mayor Sorace convenes a neighborhood working group whose members are city workers with expertise in functions like public works, sanitation, and public safety. The group's members assess problems from a 360-degree perspective, which includes the input they have received from engaged citizens through programs like Love Your Block, and then apply their combined resources to take corrective action on a timely basis. In addition, the effective city-to-neighborhood coleadership model provided by Love Your Block motivated Carrasco, the neighborhood engagement director, to work with the mayor and other

officials to create Lancaster's Neighborhood Leaders Academy, a six-week training and grant program for community leaders to develop projects that beautify their neighborhoods and build community. The academy is yet another mechanism where citizens and city officials work shoulder to shoulder to reclaim shared city space.

Said Mayor Sorace: "The Neighborhood Leaders Academy was a direct result of Love Your Block. And the Neighborhood Working Group was part of our early efforts [inspired by multiple collaborative programs, including LYB] to understand how departments work together. [This was to] break down siloes in the city so residents don't have to make four calls...It is on us to not have residents pushing departments [to get things done]. Milzy sits at the center of that. People contact her all the time."

The spark in collective efficacy is often bidirectional. Not only are city officials leveraging neighborhood social capital in service of mayoral goals (e.g., cost-effective litter remediation), but citizens are leveraging greater responsiveness from officials toward addressing their needs and priorities more holistically.

Before leaving our deep-dive social network analysis of Lancaster's LYB program, it is important to note that not all neighborhood-level problems can be solved just between citizens and the mayor's office. Some of the most pivotal partners in achieving Lancaster's neighborhood revitalization goal were local businesses, civic organizations, and city council members pulled in by city staff and minigrant leaders. Across LYB cities, officials and minigrant leaders often speak to the value of their connections to nonprofit partners. In a Lancaster LYB neighborhood where residents struggle with opioid addiction and homelessness, project leaders and city staff members made referrals to nonprofits that provide harm reduction services. And staff from the Spanish American Civic Association's "Elm Street" Program—similar to Main Street organizations but instead overseeing noncommercial or mixed-use residential areas, rather than downtown areas—played a pivotal role in securing new funding resources from private and state-level sources for an expansion of LYB and other citizen-engaged programs.

New Policies and Practices for a Healthier City

Deep engagement between citizens and city hall can lead to the creation of policies and practices that improve a city's health—for example, citizens' helping city officials deal more sensitively with the

behavioral health problems of residents, rather than simply responding to problems like hoarding with costly fines for code violations. At a time when citizen frustration with some city functions (e.g., policing) is boiling over, the LYB program's capacity to create a natural feedback loop between citizens and city hall may be its most important contribution to the field of civic engagement.

Below we map how LYB's development of networks in which neighborhood- and city-level players are entwined produce short-range outputs in improving properties and land that is vacant or in disrepair and longer-term outcomes in municipal policy and practice. These maps highlight the five cities where we conducted in-person and virtual visits to collect qualitative data for mapping purposes. The cities—Buffalo, Hamilton, Hartford, Lancaster, and Newark—were chosen based on patterns or characteristics of interest observed in the administrative and qualitative data collected during year 1. The outputs and outcomes shown in the diagrams are not comprehensive but rather are key examples.

LANCASTER: EARLIER ACTION ON CORE ISSUES AFFECTING CITIZENS

The network of relationships stimulated by LYB and other collaborative programs not only addresses mayoral and citizen concerns like litter remediation in the short run but also produces earlier and more person-centered municipal action on citizen needs and concerns in the long run.

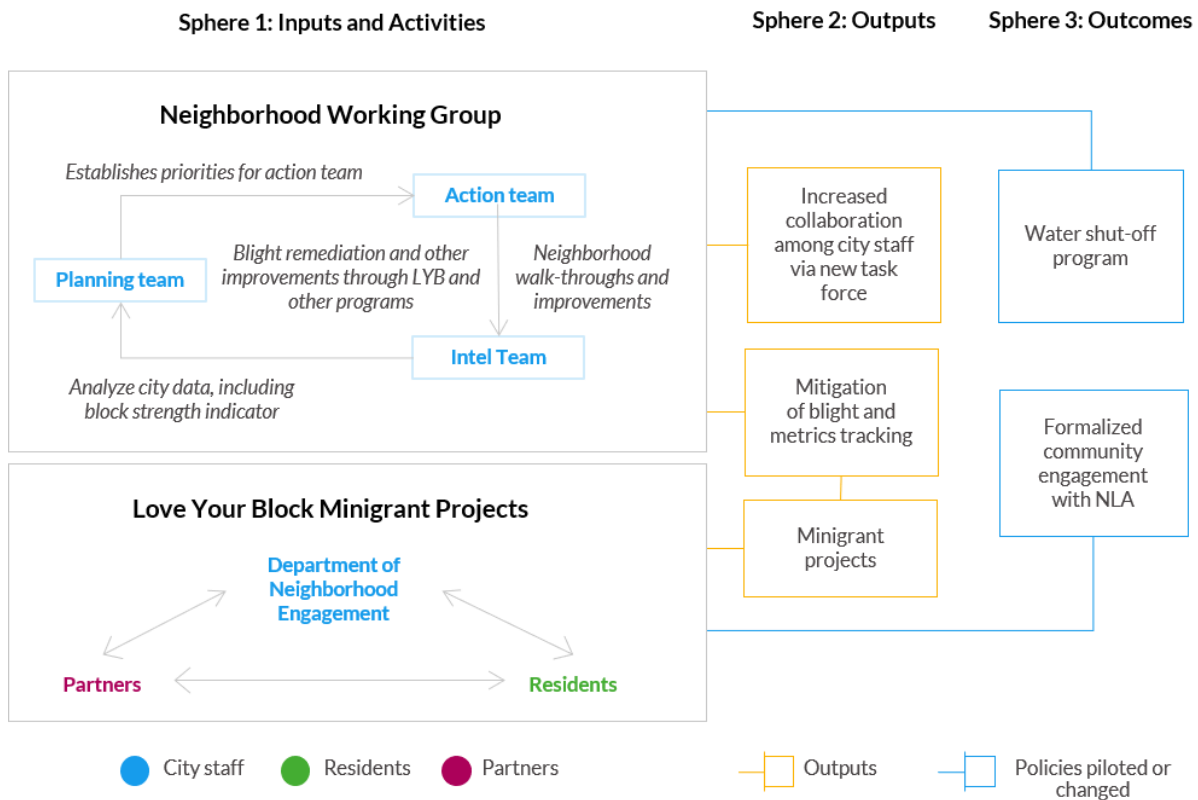
Data from Lancaster demonstrate that the web of relationships formed by LYB led to the reclaiming of public space (table 2). The real-time information on neighborhood needs produced by LYB also inspired Lancaster city officials to create a “block strength indicator” data tool to help assess and inform the resolutions of costly issues brewing at the hyperlocal level. Lancaster officials use the data tool to pinpoint where and how to direct their efforts quickly.

When asked about the policy or practice changes she attributes to the reciprocal citizen engagement sparked by programs like LYB, Mayor Sorace pointed to an early-alert program for reaching citizens after the first instance they let a water bill go unpaid: “A lot of people who fall behind in keeping their household going [properly] will stop paying their water bill first. And then...eviction. That's the worst possible outcome.” Sorace said the director of neighborhood engagement created the water shut-off program based on observations and data she and other department heads gained from deep citizen engagement. The Neighborhood Leaders Academy is another consequence of LYB's emphasis on bringing together city officials with citizens in ongoing collaborative efforts.

As figure 2 shows, these changes to programs and practices grew out of LYB activities such as convening stakeholders and outputs like the amount of trash collected.

FIGURE 2

Outcomes Map for Lancaster, Pennsylvania



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Authors' analysis of interview data.

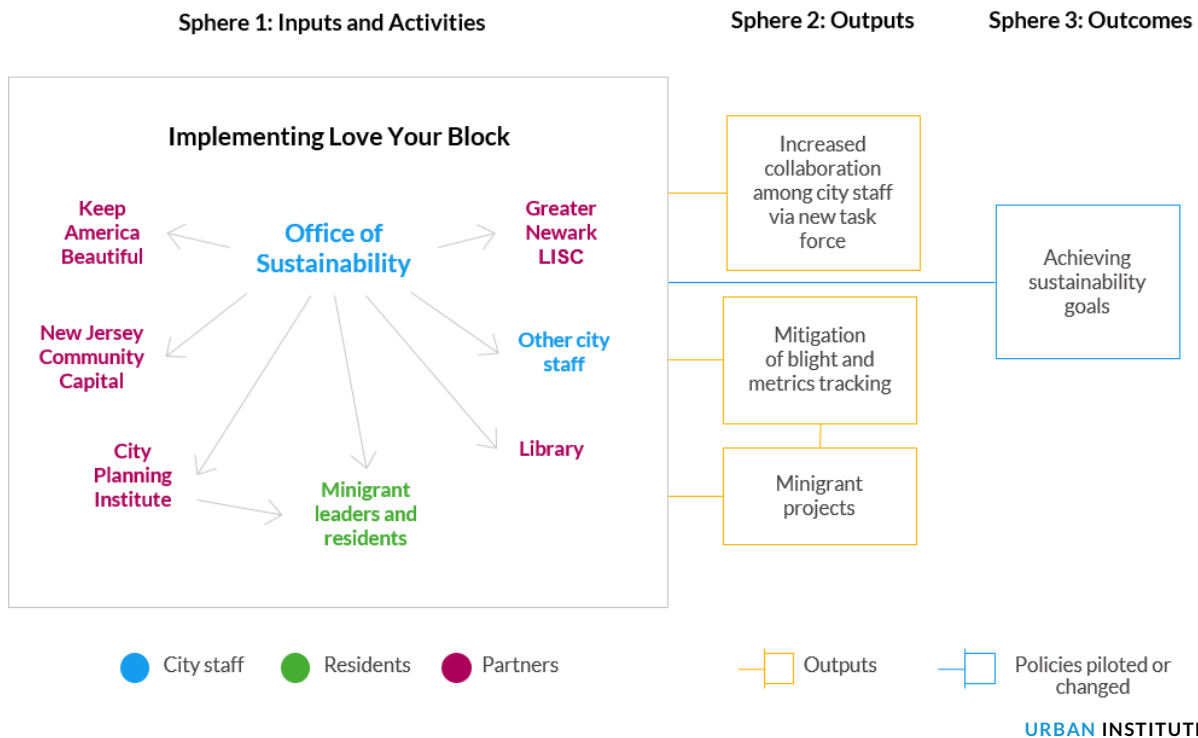
Note: NLA = Neighborhood Leaders Academy.

NEWARK: A GREENER CITY

In Newark, LYB was led by the city's chief sustainability officer, who has been tasked with making Newark a healthier and greener city. The Mayor's Office of Sustainability regularly convened stakeholders from across city government before LYB, but interview data suggest that LYB presented a new opportunity, with funding to support sustainability goals such as increasing the number of trees and minimizing litter. For this reason, figure 3, which illustrates LYB's influence on city outcomes, emphasizes the city, resident, and nonprofit partnerships that coalesced through LYB and helped the city achieve its sustainability goals. As one member of city government described, "The Department of Public Works, the Mayor's Sustainability Office, Newark People's Assembly, and the Office of Communications all came together in LYB to push to make Newark a greener city. Once we really start to home in on those quality-of-life issues and you start with smaller things, then the big things will surface over time to make our community benefit from being a cleaner city."

FIGURE 3

Outcomes Map for Newark, New Jersey



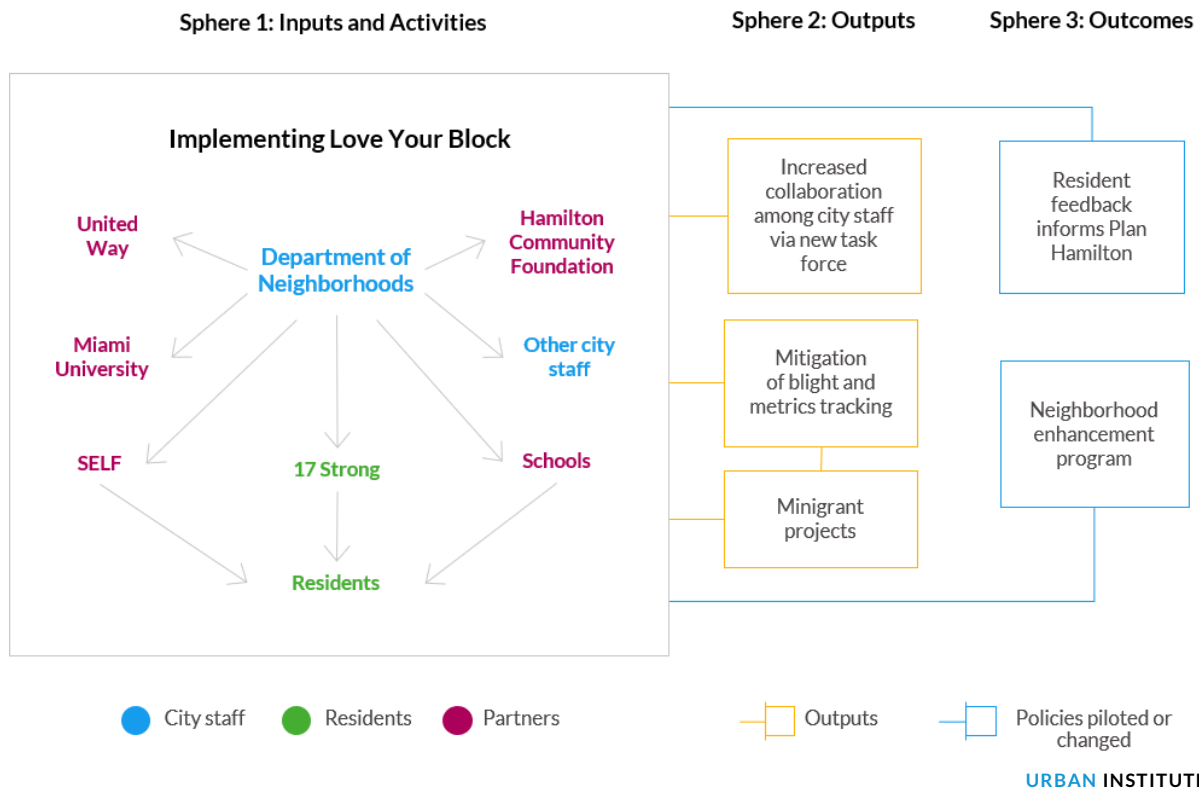
Source: Authors' analysis of interview data.

Note: LISC = Local Initiatives Support Corporation.

HAMILTON: CITIZEN PLANNING THROUGH REDESIGNED COMMUNICATION TOOLS

LYB in Hamilton aligned with the city's master development plan, known as Plan Hamilton. LYB minigrant participants provided valuable feedback to the city's planning process and participated in focus groups to improve the city's communication process. As the city lead explained, "LYB neighborhoods initiative has had a role in developing and implementing Plan Hamilton blight assessments, convening and developing exercises in focus groups with residents for redesign of website and 311 communication." As figure 4 shows, the city's existing neighborhood engagement program, 17 Strong, which works to create safe, clean, and engaged neighborhoods in Hamilton, incorporated LYB. The residents convened through the initiative connected with city government and stakeholders to participate in the Plan Hamilton process. Love Your Block also inspired a new task force, primarily composed of director and division head leaders in city organizations, that meets monthly about neighborhoods. The city is also looking to bring a neighborhood enhancement program it piloted in recent years—focused on minor exterior home repairs and code compliance—under the banner of LYB to have the program be people-centered rather than compliance-centered.

FIGURE 4
Outcomes Map for Hamilton, Ohio



Source: Authors' analysis of interview data.

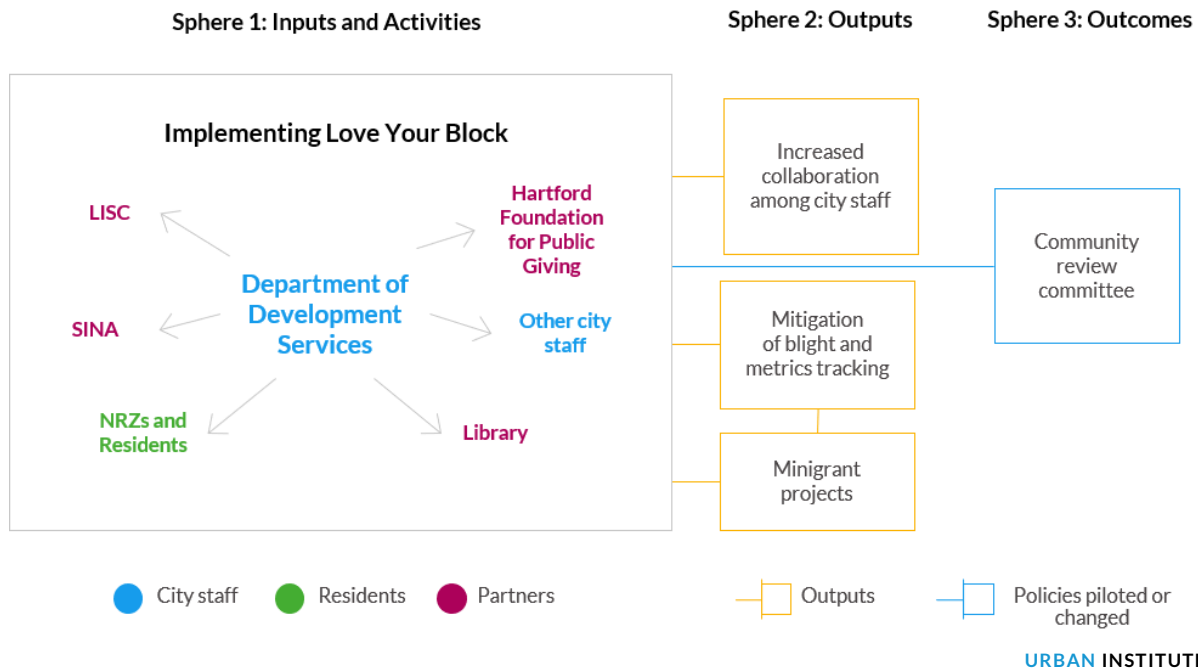
Note: SELF = Supports to Encourage Low-Income Families.

HARTFORD: AN INSIDE-OUT AND OUTSIDE-IN REVIEW PROCESS

In Hartford, the city is using a strategy developed during LYB minigrant applications that convened a diverse committee of residents and stakeholders as the model for selecting new neighborhood-based projects. According to the city lead, the minigrant application review committee had representation from neighborhood residents, city departments, police, local businesses, and nonprofits. "Even though they worked in a different capacity, we wanted them to work together and review LYB project applications together," the city lead said. "We wanted to eliminate biases that exist and have it be individuals that may look at the neighborhoods from an inside-out or outside-in perspective. We liked that so much that we continue to try to build that community model in other elements of city work." As figure 5 shows, the engagement process that brought together city departments, neighborhood organizations, and philanthropy through LYB has informed city practice more broadly, with the implementation of the community review committee.

FIGURE 5

Outcomes Map for Hartford, Connecticut



Source: Authors' analysis of interview data.

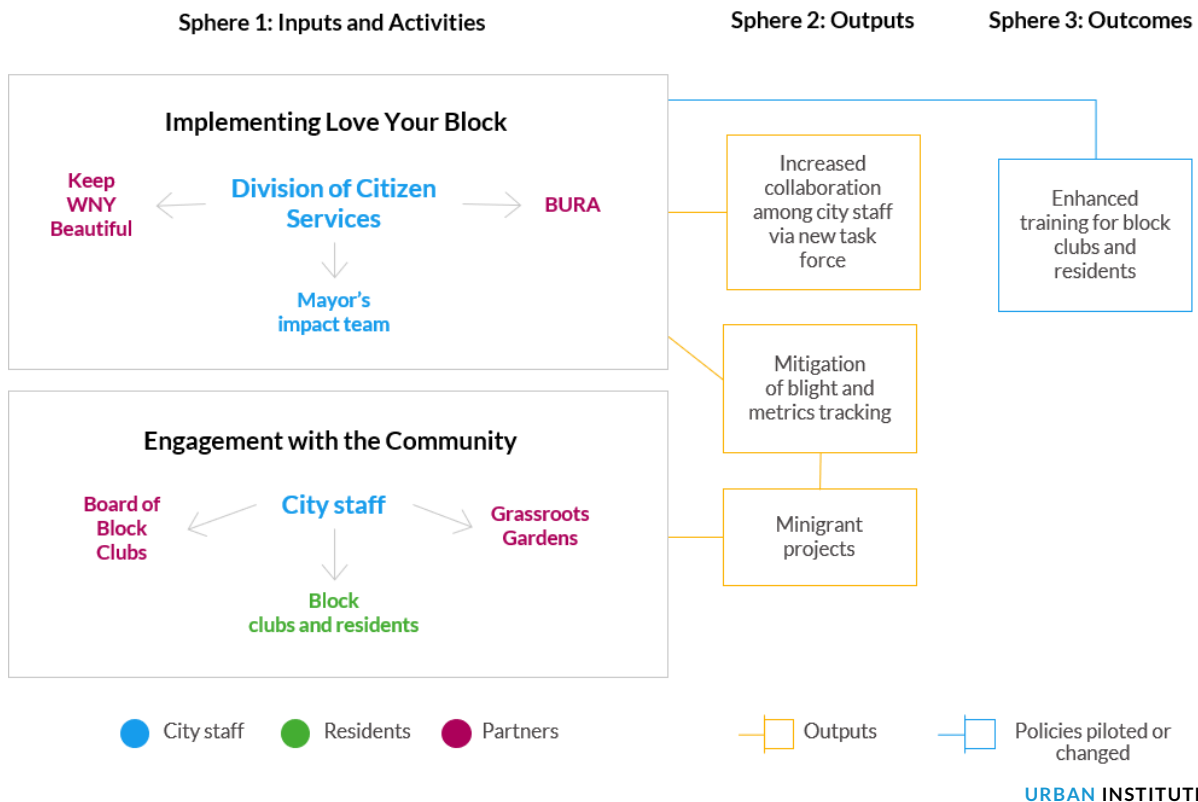
Notes: LISC = Local Initiatives Support Corporation. SINA = Southside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance. NRZ = Neighborhood Revitalization Zone.

BUFFALO: BLOCK CLUB UNIVERSITY

In Buffalo, LYB operated within a larger body of neighborhood engagement and blight remediation work. LYB enhanced and amplified Buffalo's block club infrastructure by more intentionally engaging block clubs and by providing Crime Prevention through Environmental Design and data analysis trainings to neighborhood residents. LYB also resulted in the creation of Block Club University, through which the city provides free trainings and education to block club leaders and Buffalo residents to empower them with the knowledge and skills needed to successfully run block clubs, tackle quality-of-life issues, and become more civically engaged. According to the city lead, "Under Block Club University, we develop a joint strategy for transitioning graduates to apply for LYB." In this way, as figure 6 shows, LYB has had a small but important effect, as the minigrants offered funding to support resident-led community development programs.

FIGURE 6

Outcomes Map for Buffalo, New York



Source: Authors' analysis of interview data.

Notes: Keep WNY Beautiful= Keep Western New York Beautiful. BURA = Buffalo Urban Renewal Agency.

Cities of Service Support for Love Your Block

Almost all (9 of 10) Love Your Block cities indicated that collaboration among city departments had improved because of the technical assistance from Cities of Service. As one city put it, the technical assistance “fostered more robust communication between city departments and colleagues who may normally not engage in collaborative and systematic problem solving as pertaining to quality of life and blight reduction.” Cities also commented that the technical assistance helped the departments within which LYB was housed coordinate and enhance outreach efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as gain recognition by other city departments as a bridge to community engagement and stakeholders. In addition, one city shared a COS metrics spreadsheet with city departments, and that tool is now used to measure citywide outcomes and communicate progress with the public.

In year 1, cities communicated frequently with COS. In year 2, most cities continued to have biweekly calls with COS (table 6). And even though cities reached out to COS outside of regularly scheduled calls less frequently than they had in year 1, they increased their engagement with COS more broadly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

TABLE 6

Frequency of Communication between Love Your Block Cities and Cities of Service

	Share of cities in year 1	Share of cities in year 2, pre-COVID-19	Share of cities in year 2, during COVID-19
Calls for technical assistance			
Once a week	10	0	0
Once every two weeks	90	60	80
Once every month	0	40	20
City-initiated contact beyond scheduled calls			
Multiple times a week	0	0	11
Once a week	40	11	11
Once every two weeks	10	11	67
Once every month	50	78	11

Source: Love Your Block online survey.

Notes: Sample for the “calls for technical assistance” data is 10 cities for years 1 and 2. Sample for the “city-initiated contact with Cities of Service beyond scheduled calls” data is 10 in year 1; one city did not respond in year 2.

Cities of Service not only continued to offer webinars, group calls, and virtual engagements in year 2 but also increased the number of these engagements. COS offered 11 webinars and group calls in year 2, compared with 8 in year 1, and doubled the number of virtual engagements for VISTAs to 35. Among the COS offerings was programming specific to COVID-19, including webinars on local approaches to serving vulnerable populations and recurring “Getting Things Done in Your PJs” group calls with VISTAs. On average, cities participated in about two-thirds of webinars and six out of 10 virtual engagements and participated consistently over time.

Participation in webinars, group calls, and virtual engagements across cities was similar between year 1 and year 2 (table 7). The majority of cities participated in at least half of these engagements in both years. In year 1, three cities participated in all webinars and group calls, and five cities’ VISTAs participated in all virtual engagements. Although the share of cities attending all engagements decreased in year 2, Cities of Service offered more engagements in year 2. One city reported its VISTAs attended all 35 virtual engagements in year 2.

TABLE 7

Share of Love Your Block Cities That Participated in Cities of Service Engagements

	Webinars and Group Calls		VISTA Virtual Engagements	
	Share of cities in year 1	Share of cities in year 2	Share of cities in year 1	Share of cities in year 2
Less than a quarter of engagements	10	0	20	0
Between a quarter and a half	20	20	20	40
Between a half and three-quarters	30	50	10	40
More than three-quarters	10	30	0	10
All	30	0	50	10

Source: Love Your Block online survey.

Note: Sample is 10 cities.

In the year 2 technical assistance sessions, cities continued to discuss topics relevant to the mechanics of the Love Your Block program, in addition to changes in the minigrant applications from the previous year, sustainability, and future funding (table 8). Several topics were discussed more frequently in the context of COVID-19, particularly the refining of initiatives as cities adapted to the pandemic and the engaging of neighborhood volunteers.

TABLE 8

Cities of Service Technical Assistance Topics

Share of Love Your Block cities that discussed a given topic

	Year 1	Year 2	
	Share of cities	Share of cities, outside context of COVID-19	Share of cities, within context of COVID-19
Topics in year 1 and year 2 surveys			
The city's identified blight-related problem	80	60	40
Refining the city's proposed initiatives	80	60	90
Minigrant development and dissemination	80	100	90
Development of initiative metrics	80	90	70
Sustaining the initiatives	70	70	50
Role of AmeriCorps VISTAs	70	70	70
Data collection	60	60	40
How volunteers will be engaged	50	70	80
Identification and engagement of city partners	40	60	40
Identification and engagement of noncity partners	40	80	60
Communication with, engagement of neighborhood leaders	40	90	90
Other	20	0	0
Topics only in year 2 survey			
Changes in the minigrant application from year 1 to year 2	n/a	100	90
Sustainability after Cities of Service funding ends	n/a	100	70
Spending or budget	n/a	90	80

Source: Love Your Block online survey.

Note: Sample is 10 cities.

As we found for year 1, most cities found the technical assistance topics either “extremely” or “very” helpful in year 2. However, a minority of cities found some topics to be less helpful. Among cities that indicated they had discussed these topics with COS, a notable share indicated that the following topics were either “moderately” or “slightly” helpful: identification and engagement of city partners (43 percent of cities), data collection (33 percent), and development of initiative metrics (33 percent).

Almost all cities agreed that the technical assistance they had received from COS helped them refine their initiatives to improve land and properties that are vacant or in disrepair, engage noncity partners, better communicate with neighborhood leaders, bring about beneficial changes to city policies or practices, improve collaboration between city departments, and adjust LYB programming after the pandemic began. Cities appreciated the support and accountability that COS provided, as well as the connection to the broader Love Your Block network it facilitated. One city said that having Cities of Service as a guide and knowing that it had a team to support and believe in the city’s work were very important given that engagement within governments is not always supported. Another city noted that COS’s ability to keep cities on track to meet milestones and progress through the process was important. Cities credited COS staff and support for the program’s success—one city reflected that the COS staff members are “the perfect blend of being supportive and challenging.”

Cities did find some aspects of the technical assistance to be less helpful than others. In particular, one city struggled with its metrics tracker and wanted a more flexible system for collecting and organizing output and outcomes data, although other cities responded favorably to the tracker. Another city mentioned that COS’s unfamiliarity with local laws and regulations, particularly how the local context imposed spending constraints, was a challenge. One city reflected positively on its engagement with Cities of Service and said that, if anything, even more constructive criticism would have been helpful as it refined its work and plans for the future.

Technical Assistance Related to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Cities valued the support that Cities of Service provided during the pandemic. Group calls and the connection to the broader network of city leads gave cities an opportunity to reflect on their responses to COVID-19. COS also pushed cities to adapt to the pandemic. One city lead reflected that the city’s “first response was to ‘wait it out,’” but a conversation with COS “really woke [them] up to the need for change.” One city appreciated the time that COS gave it to regroup at the onset of the pandemic but would have appreciated more guidance and direction than it received. However, the city recognized the pandemic’s magnitude and that its unprecedented nature left many cities uncertain about how to adapt.

COS was also responsive to cities’ needs. It shared reference materials from other cities, both inside and outside the LYB network, that described how they had responded to the pandemic. One city lead

said, “The resources that Cities of Service shared provided best practices and the ever-changing ways that different communities had responded to the crisis.” COS was also flexible in working with cities to restructure their grants and repurpose LYB funding for COVID-19 response.

City-to-City Support

We asked cities to describe the benefits of engaging with other Love Your Block cities through formal Cities of Service programming. Cities reflected that the information sharing, especially during the pandemic, was helpful. Cities shared best practices and implemented those ideas to improve their LYB initiatives. Cities also appreciated being part of a cohort. As one city lead reflected, “I truly feel like I’m part of a very powerful and intelligent network of change agents in cities across the country.”

Cities also interacted outside formal COS programming. The total number of these interactions (16) was the same in year 1 and 2. Compared with the other LYB cities, Lancaster and Newark interacted with the most LYB cities outside of formal programming in year 1; the share of cities that interacted with Lancaster and Newark was the same, 30 percent (table 9). In year 2, Buffalo and Lancaster interacted with the most cities outside of formal programming; 50 percent of cities interacted with Buffalo, and 40 percent interacted with Lancaster. In both years, the interactions outside formal COS programming were relatively infrequent, occurring less than monthly.

TABLE 9

Share of Love Your Block Cities That Interacted with the Given Love Your Block City outside Formal Cities of Service Programming

	Share of cities in year 1	Share of cities in year 2
Lancaster, PA	30	40
Newark, NJ	30	10
Buffalo, NY	20	50
Hamilton, OH	20	10
Gary, IN	10	0
Hartford, CT	10	10
Huntington, WV	10	10
Milwaukee, WI	10	10
Richmond, VA	10	10
South Bend, IN	10	10

Source: Love Your Block online survey.

Note: Sample is 10 cities.

The reasons that cities interacted outside formal COS programming were more varied in year 2 than in year 1 (table 10). The most common reasons were wanting to learn about other cities’ blight-related problems, development and dissemination of minigrants, solutions to challenges, management of VISTAs, and engagement of volunteers and neighborhood leaders.

TABLE 10

Reasons That Cities Interacted with Other Love Your Block Cities outside Formal Cities of Service Programming

Share of total city-to-city interactions that occurred for the given reason

	Year 1	Year 2
The city wanted to learn about the other city's blight-related problem	44	56
The city wanted to learn about how the other city identified and engaged city and/or noncity partners	38	31
The city encountered a challenge that the other city had also encountered and wanted to learn how it had overcome challenges	25	50
The city wanted to learn about how the other city developed and disseminated minigrants	25	56
The city wanted to understand the other city's approach to data collection	25	6
The city wanted to learn how the other city engaged and managed its VISTAs	19	50
The city wanted to learn about how the other city developed initiative metrics (outputs and outcomes)	6	13
The city wanted to learn about how the other city engaged volunteers and neighborhood leaders through Love Your Block	0	50
The city wanted to learn about how the other city had adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic	n/a	31
Other	31	25

Source: Love Your Block online survey.

Note: Sample for both years is the 16 interactions between Love Your Block cities outside formal Cities of Service programming.

In year 2, a third of interactions between cities outside formal COS programming were related to COVID-19; cities sought to learn how other cities had adapted the delivery of programs and the management of VISTAs and created bilingual material. In both years, cities generally perceived these relationships to be at least moderately useful in achieving their objectives as well as the other city's objectives (table 11).

TABLE 11

Usefulness of Relationships between Love Your Block Cities outside Formal Cities of Service Programming

Share of interactions that cities indicated were useful in achieving objectives, by usefulness level

	Year 1		Year 2	
	In achieving the city's objectives	In helping the other city achieve its objectives	In achieving the city's objectives	In helping the other city achieve its objectives
Extremely useful	13	13	6	0
Very useful	31	38	56	38
Moderately useful	38	19	19	19
Slightly useful	19	0	13	19
Not useful	0	31	6	25

Source: Love Your Block online survey.

Note: Sample for both years is the 16 interactions between Love Your Block cities outside formal Cities of Service programming.

We also asked cities to reflect on how they benefited from engaging with the LYB mentor cities Lansing, Michigan, and Phoenix, Arizona, through formal COS programming. Cities appreciated the lessons that Lansing and Phoenix shared about expanding LYB from its first to second year, as well as their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially considering that the local contexts of Lansing and Phoenix are similar to those of some second cohort cities.

Unlike in year 1, most cities did not interact with older LYB or other COS coalition cities outside formal COS programming in year 2 (table 12).

TABLE 12
Share of Love Your Block Cities That Interacted outside Formal Cities of Service Programming with the Given Older Love Your Block or Other Cities of Service Coalition Cities

	Share of cities in year 1	Share of cities in year 2
Lansing, MI	30	0
Flint, MI	20	0
Birmingham, AL	10	0
Boston, MA	10	10
Kalamazoo, MI	10	0
Phoenix, AZ	10	0
Erie, PA	0	0
Kettering, OH	0	10
Richmond, CA	0	0
Round Rock, TX	0	10
Seattle, WA	0	0
Tulsa, OK	0	0
Other older Love Your Block city	0	10
Did not interact with older Love Your Block cities or Cities of Service coalition cities outside formal Cities of Service programming	30	60

Source: Love Your Block online survey.

Note: Sample is 10 cities.

In year 2, cities reported interacting with Boston, Massachusetts; Kettering, Ohio; Round Rock, Texas; and Scottsdale, Arizona. The most common reason for these interactions was to learn how the cities were engaging volunteers and neighborhood leaders.

Lessons Learned from Love Your Block

The lessons that the Urban research team has compiled here arise from the findings of this study but are not findings *per se*. Rather, they are insights that LYB may offer to the broader fields of city planning, municipal management, and community organizing.

- **Sustaining blight reduction results requires sustained citizen engagement that perhaps only deeply collaborative programs can provide.** A recent study commissioned by Keep Pennsylvania Beautiful estimated that Lancaster spends \$2.1 million a year to clean up litter and illegal dumping (Burns & McDonnell 2020a). In a news release referring to the study, which covered multiple Pennsylvania cities, the state’s environmental protection secretary lamented that “Pennsylvania has a littering problem that cleanup efforts alone can’t solve.”⁵ LYB’s capacity to deliver citizen-led neighborhood revitalization services explains why city officials are trying to find new funding sources for their LYB programs now that the two-year grants have ended. Recognizing that short-term results of the small minigrant effort are impressive, a key informant from Hamilton cautioned: “At this point, we can’t really point to positive change that has happened in neighborhoods because there’s a sustained, continued effort that needs to happen. Even in one of the most economically healthy times over the past few years, we still struggle with blight in our communities.”
- **VISTAs are an effective way for cities to inject energy and effort into results-focused neighborhood engagement.** VISTAs were overwhelmingly recognized as a key benefit of LYB, expanding staff capacity and strengthening connections between residents and the city. Many city officials were as worried about losing their VISTAs as they were about the end of the COS LYB funding. Cities with long-standing VISTA programs, like Buffalo, were often called by the other LYB cities for peer-to-peer technical assistance on how to keep VISTAs in place.
- **A small but visible commitment from the mayor and other well-placed city officials can energize the grassroots.** In cities where the mayor had identified LYB as a high priority and showed up to meet and thank minigrant leaders, the energy underlying the minigrants’ painstaking volunteer work was palpable. Attention from well-placed department officials, such as public works officials, also appeared to fuel neighborhood teams’ motivation. It is telling that the mayor of Lancaster was only one of four “nodes” at the heart of the social network created by the city’s successful LYB program. Across the board, project leaders said the minigrant funding itself demonstrated that a city took their hard work seriously. In cities where the mayor

played a hands-on role, minigrant leaders appeared to be especially driven by the high-level appreciation they received.

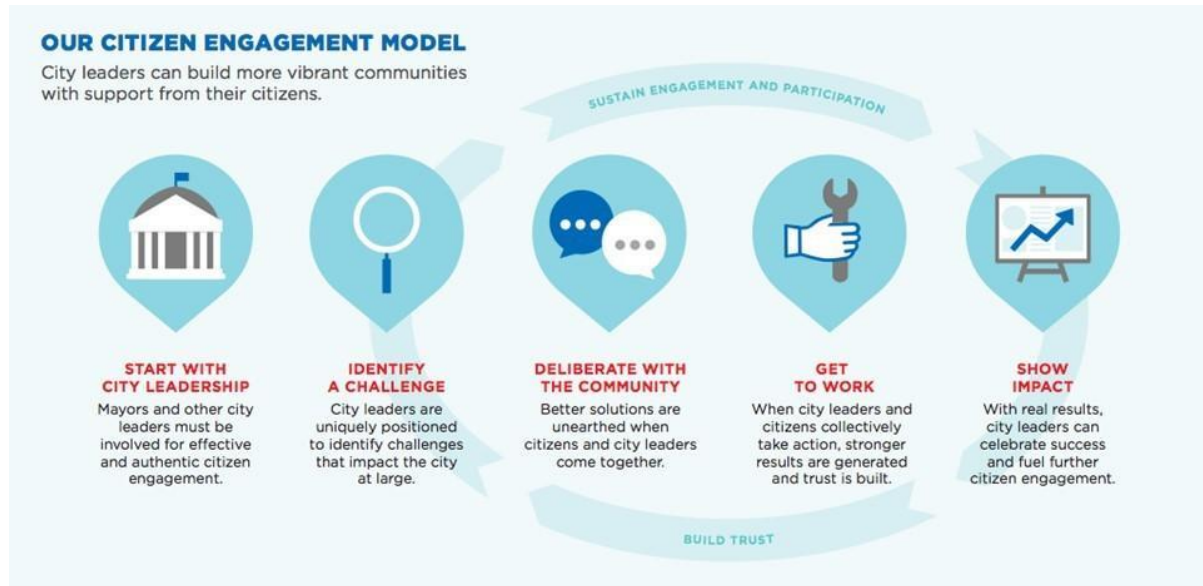
- **Collaborative citizen engagement efforts like LYB may offer a sustainable and cost-effective way to solve persistent municipal problems.** “Impact volunteering” relies on compiling everyday people’s seemingly small efforts to solve big local problems. Although collective impact approaches—which emphasize bringing together influential players like philanthropists, city agencies, and large nonprofits to work on achieving big results—are often held up as the best collaborative solutions to local and regional problems, efforts like Love Your Block may offer a much-needed “small and mighty” alternative. The field of new localism, which has been popular in the UK for several decades but has only recently found a foothold in the US, posits that power is shifting “downward from the nation-state to cities and metropolitan communities, horizontally from government to networks of public, private, and civic actors” (Katz and Nowak 2018, 1). Some proponents of new localism, especially overseas, have expressed interest in finding new models for neighborhood governance that engage citizens in solving problems, in part by improving the responsiveness of the public services meant to help them do that. Our findings suggest that Love Your Block may be just such a model.

Love Your Block’s 10-city cohort provides diverse examples of how mayors’ offices can connect with city residents to revitalize their neighborhoods one block at a time. Although the grants were relatively small, each city, through its respective neighborhood-led projects, creatively identified and implemented improvements to land and properties that were vacant or in disrepair while increasing city government collaboration and resident engagement. Although many LYB-related outcomes are nascent, insights from interviews suggest that with sustained financial and programmatic support from mayors’ offices, the successes of the LYB initiatives can continue beyond the Cities of Service grants.

Appendix A. Cities of Service Theory of Change

FIGURE A.1

Cities of Service Citizen Engagement Model



Source: Cities of Service.

Appendix B. City Profiles

Buffalo, New York

Buffalo's Love Your Block program funded proposals from block clubs, community-based organizations, and local businesses for vacant lot activation, community space revitalization, and accessibility improvements. In its first year, Love Your Block targeted four neighborhoods: Broadway-Fillmore, Lower West Side, Masten Park, and Kensington-Bailey. In its second year, it funded projects in some of the original target areas and expanded to new neighborhoods. Projects included community gardens, neighborhood cleanups, repurposing of vacant lots, and community murals. Across the two years, Buffalo's efforts removed 1,326 pounds of trash, cleaned 24 acres, and removed 20 square feet of graffiti (table B.1). In the first year, Buffalo's Love Your Block program added features, trees, art displays, and structures.

TABLE B.1
Buffalo, New York, Love Your Block Metrics

	Year 1	Year 2	Total
Trash removed (lbs.)	596	730	1,326
Grounds cleaned (acres)	0	24	24
Graffiti removed (square feet)	20	0	20
New features	262	0	262
Trees planted	17	0	17
Art displays	26	0	26
Activation events	31	7	38
New structures	47	0	47

Source: Cities of Service's Love Your Block city administrative data.

Notes: Data are as of November 16, 2020. New features are those such as lighting and fences that do not change the use of a space. Activation events are pop-ups and other activities that transform spaces for a limited time. New structures are items such as edible gardens, playgrounds, and picnic tables that do transform the use of a space.

Gary, Indiana

Love Your Block in Gary expanded its previous efforts at improving land and properties that are vacant or in disrepair, increasing the size of its existing programs and recruiting new volunteers to participate in a broad strategy to beautify and maintain neighborhoods. Across the two years, Gary's efforts removed 263,027 pounds of trash and cleaned 18 acres (table B.2). In the first year, Gary's Love Your Block program added structures and a feature and hosted several activation events.

TABLE B.2

Gary, Indiana, Love Your Block Metrics

	Year 1	Year 2	Total
Trash removed (lbs.)	15,525	247,502	263,027
Grounds cleaned (acres)	18	0	18
Graffiti removed (square feet)	0	0	0
New features	1	0	1
Trees planted	0	0	0
Art displays	0	0	0
Activation events	4	0	4
New structures	34	0	34

Source: Cities of Service's Love Your Block city administrative data.

Notes: Data are as of November 16, 2020. New features are those such as lighting and fences that do not change the use of a space. Activation events are pop-ups and other activities that transform spaces for a limited time. New structures are items such as edible gardens, playgrounds, and picnic tables that do transform the use of a space.

Hamilton, Ohio

Love Your Block in Hamilton complements the city's 17 Strong microgrant program, focusing on minor exterior home repairs and community cleanups. It has concentrated its efforts in four neighborhoods: Armondale, East End, North End, and Jefferson. Across the two years, Hamilton's efforts removed 11,822 pounds of trash and cleaned 13 acres (table B.3). The city added 26 features in the first year and hosted several activation events in the second.

TABLE B.3

Hamilton, Ohio, Love Your Block Metrics

	Year 1	Year 2	Total
Trash removed (lbs.)	10,640	1,182	11,822
Grounds cleaned (acres)	2	11	13
Graffiti removed (square feet)	0	0	0
New features	26	0	26
Trees planted	0	0	0
Art displays	0	0	0
Activation events	0	5	5
New structures	0	0	0

Source: Cities of Service's Love Your Block city administrative data.

Notes: Data are as of November 16, 2020. New features are those such as lighting and fences that do not change the use of a space. Activation events are pop-ups and other activities that transform spaces for a limited time. New structures are items such as edible gardens, playgrounds, and picnic tables that do transform the use of a space.

Hartford, Connecticut

Love Your Block in Hartford focused on vacant lots, beautification of gateway spaces, and civic pride. It expanded its focus from one neighborhood—Frog Hollow—in its first year to the entire city in the next. Across the two years, Hartford's efforts removed 3,092 pounds of trash, cleaned 470 acres, and removed 360 square feet of graffiti (table B.4). The city also added features, trees, art displays, and structures and hosted 13 activation events.

TABLE B.4

Hartford, Connecticut, Love Your Block Metrics

	Year 1	Year 2	Total
Trash removed (lbs.)	1,005	2,087	3,092
Grounds cleaned (acres)	1	469	470
Graffiti removed (square feet)	300	60	360
New features	8	20	28
Trees planted	0	50	50
Art displays	13	30	43
Activation events	5	8	13
New structures	14	54	68

Source: Cities of Service's Love Your Block city administrative data.

Notes: Data are as of November 16, 2020. New features are those such as lighting and fences that do not change the use of a space. Activation events are pop-ups and other activities that transform spaces for a limited time. New structures are items such as edible gardens, playgrounds, and picnic tables that do transform the use of a space.

Huntington, West Virginia

Love Your Block in Huntington focused on vacant lots, property maintenance, trash, and litter. Projects were focused on Huntington's West End neighborhood and included converting vacant lots into community gardens, using murals to paint over graffiti, removing trash, and making minor exterior home repairs. Across the two years, Huntington's efforts removed 2,902 pounds of trash, cleaned 26 acres, and removed 26 square feet of graffiti (table B.5). They also added features, trees, art displays, and structures.

TABLE B.5

Huntington, West Virginia, Love Your Block Metrics

	Year 1	Year 2	Total
Trash removed (lbs.)	1,992	910	2,902
Grounds cleaned (acres)	1	25	26
Graffiti removed (square feet)	0	26	26
New features	28	4	32
Trees planted	2	0	2
Art displays	0	1	1
Activation events	0	0	0
New structures	4	4	8

Source: Cities of Service's Love Your Block city administrative data.

Notes: Data are as of November 16, 2020. New features are those such as lighting and fences that do not change the use of a space. Activation events are pop-ups and other activities that transform spaces for a limited time. New structures are items such as edible gardens, playgrounds, and picnic tables that do transform the use of a space.

Lancaster, Pennsylvania

Love Your Block in Lancaster focused on beautifying streets and improving land and properties that are vacant or in disrepair through community cleanups, block façade repairs, trash can installations, and murals. LYB focused on Lancaster's Southeast area in the first year and expanded to other areas of the city in the second. Across the two years, Lancaster's efforts removed 1,870 pounds of trash, cleaned 8 acres, and removed 1 square foot of graffiti (table B.6). They also added features, trees, art displays, and structures and hosted 23 activation events.

TABLE B.6

Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Love Your Block Metrics

	Year 1	Year 2	Total
Trash removed (lbs.)	1,728	142	1,870
Grounds cleaned (acres)	7	1	8
Graffiti removed (square feet)	1	0	1
New features	54	28	82
Trees planted	9	0	9
Art displays	0	331	331
Activation events	5	18	23
New structures	10	0	10

Source: Cities of Service's Love Your Block city administrative data.

Notes: Data are as of November 16, 2020. New features are those such as lighting and fences that do not change the use of a space. Activation events are pop-ups and other activities that transform spaces for a limited time. New structures are items such as edible gardens, playgrounds, and picnic tables that do transform the use of a space.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Love Your Block in Milwaukee sought to bolster existing efforts, such as its Strong Neighborhoods Plan, by engaging residents in block-level blight and foreclosure mitigation strategies. Projects included community gardens, artistic board-ups (for example, adding art to boarded-up windows of vacant homes), community parks, murals, and chalk distribution. In its first year, the program focused on nine targeted investment neighborhoods; in the second year, it maintained the same nine neighborhoods but expanded its focus to include up to five blocks outside each of those boundaries. Across the two years, Milwaukee's efforts removed 1,251 pounds of trash and cleaned 2 acres (table B.7). They also added features, art displays, and structures.

TABLE B.7

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Love Your Block Metrics

	Year 1	Year 2	Total
Trash removed (lbs.)	1,165	86	1,251
Grounds cleaned (acres)	2	0	2
Graffiti removed (square feet)	0	0	0
New features	14	16	30
Trees planted	0	0	0
Art displays	0	34	34
Activation events	0	1	1
New structures	3	18	21

Source: Cities of Service's Love Your Block city administrative data.

Notes: Data are as of November 16, 2020. New features are those such as lighting and fences that do not change the use of a space. Activation events are pop-ups and other activities that transform spaces for a limited time. New structures are items such as edible gardens, playgrounds, and picnic tables that do transform the use of a space.

Newark, New Jersey

Love Your Block in Newark focused on neighborhood beautification and community-building projects. The program concentrated on the South Ward in its first year and then expanded to the Central and West Wards. Across the two years, Newark's efforts removed 550 pounds of trash and cleaned 1 acre (table B.8). They also planted trees and hosted one activation event.

TABLE B.8

Newark, New Jersey, Love Your Block Metrics

	Year 1	Year 2	Total
Trash removed (lbs.)	550	0	550
Grounds cleaned (acres)	1	0	1
Graffiti removed (square feet)	0	0	0
New features	0	0	0
Trees planted	7	0	7
Art displays	0	0	0
Activation events	0	1	1
New structures	0	0	0

Source: Cities of Service's Love Your Block city administrative data.

Notes: Data are as of November 16, 2020. New features are those such as lighting and fences that do not change the use of a space. Activation events are pop-ups and other activities that transform spaces for a limited time. New structures are items such as edible gardens, playgrounds, and picnic tables that do transform the use of a space.

Richmond, Virginia

Love Your Block in Richmond focused on improving land and properties that are vacant or in disrepair and community beautification projects, including community cleanups, community gardens, and murals. Across the two years, Richmond's efforts removed 8,230 pounds of trash, cleaned 454 acres, and removed 906 square feet of graffiti (table B.9). They also added features, trees, art displays, and structures.

TABLE B.9

Richmond, Virginia, Love Your Block Metrics

	Year 1	Year 2	Total
Trash removed (lbs.)	3,978	4,252	8,230
Grounds cleaned (acres)	103	351	454
Graffiti removed (square feet)	906	0	906
New features	55	74	129
Trees planted	2	59	61
Art displays	13	1	14
Activation events	0	1	1
New structures	0	83	83

Source: Cities of Service's Love Your Block city administrative data.

Notes: Data are as of November 16, 2020. New features are those such as lighting and fences that do not change the use of a space. Activation events are pop-ups and other activities that transform spaces for a limited time. New structures are items such as edible gardens, playgrounds, and picnic tables that do transform the use of a space.

South Bend, Indiana

Love Your Block in South Bend focused on improving land and properties that are vacant or in disrepair and neighborhood beautification, including small home repairs. It also provided residents with access to tools—such as lawn mowers, rakes, and weed eaters—through a Tend the Bend trailer. Across the two years, South Bend’s efforts removed 5,297 pounds of trash, cleaned 25 acres, and resulted in 47 new features (table B.10).

TABLE B.10

South Bend, Indiana, Love Your Block Metrics

	Year 1	Year 2	Total
Trash removed (lbs.)	5,927	0	5,927
Grounds cleaned (acres)	25	0	25
Graffiti removed (square feet)	0	0	0
New features	47	0	47
Trees planted	n/a	n/a	n/a
Art displays	n/a	n/a	n/a
Activation events	n/a	n/a	n/a
New structures	n/a	n/a	n/a

Source: Cities of Service’s Love Your Block city administrative data.

Notes: Data are as of November 16, 2020. New features are those such as lighting and fences that do not change the use of a space. Activation events are pop-ups and other activities that transform spaces for a limited time. New structures are items such as edible gardens, playgrounds, and picnic tables that do transform the use of a space. N/a = not applicable; the city did not have minigrants focused on that metric.

Notes

- ¹ The LYB grant broadly refers to issues with dilapidated, vacant, or abandoned properties, litter, and disrepair in public spaces as “blight.” In several cases, cities that receive the LYB grant implement policies and operate local programs and ordinances that use the term “blight.” When possible, this report describes the specific interventions, rather than relying on the terms “blight” and “blighted neighborhoods,” because of the underlying racial legacy of the term. See “Blight Literature Review,” Vacant Property Research Network, <https://vacantpropertyresearch.com/blight-literature-review/>.
- ² AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) is a national service program designed to alleviate poverty.
- ³ For more information on legacy cities, see “Legacy Cities,” Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, <https://www.lincolninst.edu/research-data/data-toolkits/legacy-cities>, and Mallach and Brachman (2013).
- ⁴ Keep Pennsylvania Beautiful, “Keep Pennsylvania Beautiful Shares Results of Litter Cost Study Comprising Data from Nine Cities across Pennsylvania,” news release, February 5, 2020, <https://www.keeppabeautiful.org/keep-pennsylvania-beautiful-shares-results-of-litter-cost-study-comprising-data-from-nine-cities-across-pennsylvania/>.
- ⁵ Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, “Pennsylvania to Ramp Up Litter Prevention Measures,” news release, February 5, 2020, <https://www.ahs.dep.pa.gov/NewsRoomPublic/articleviewer.aspx?id=21804&typeid=1>.

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About the Authors

Leiha Edmonds is a research associate in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center at the Urban Institute. Her research interests include community and economic development strategies to support more equitable cities and regions. Before joining Urban, Edmonds was a transportation and mobility planner for the City of Evanston, Illinois, and a community organizer in cities across the Midwest.

Matthew Gerken is a research associate in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center. His areas of interest include affordable housing, homelessness, and community development. Before joining Urban, Gerken interned with several organizations engaged in affordable housing and community development, including Habitat for Humanity, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Self-Help Credit Union, and Thrive DC, a homeless shelter in Washington, DC.

Mary Bogle is a principal research associate for the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center. She conducts formative and summative research on policies and place-conscious interventions intended to help low-income parents surmount the economic, equity, and mental health challenges that often interfere with their efforts to create healthy, productive, and protective environments for their children.

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