Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress, explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges. The National League of Cities represents more than 19,000 cities, towns, and villages across the country. They work with mayors, city managers, and other local leaders to find solutions to pressing community issues. Robert Blaine is the senior executive and director for the Institute for Youth, Education & Families with NLC. And Robert joins me to today on the podcast. Thank you.

Robert Blaine, National League of Cities:

Thank you. It's wonderful being with you today.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

It's good to hear from you again. We spoke last at [Nilkin 00:00:50], people may have seen that video. And I was really interested in everything that NLC is doing to help communities address all today's issues, especially workforce initiatives, of course. So today I wanted to start out by talking about the new Youth Excel Initiative, which you're focusing on connecting BIPOC youth with STEM careers. Give me a little bit more about what that program entails.

Robert Blaine, National League of Cities:

Absolutely. So this work is work that's being funded through a grant with the Siemens Foundation. And essentially we're looking at STEM opportunity for youth that have been disconnected. And this is really about trying to reconnect youth and build positive pathways towards workforce and economic mobility. One of the things that we've seen through the course of the pandemic is that there are a group of students that have become disengaged. And we've seen that for all kinds of different regions, ranging from the lack of availability for in school, as well as maybe lack of access to broadband or ways of being able to connect in communities have been virtual during this space.

Robert Blaine, National League of Cities:

And so this really brings together some intentional opportunities and pathways for students to really build STEM opportunities along with communities, and really think about how we can leverage those opportunities to create sustainable and durable pathways for how their futures are going to move, and especially when we start to think about economic mobility and their pathway towards a sustainable living wage.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You mentioned the pandemic, but this has been going on for a long time. This is not new. It's accelerated perhaps by the pandemic, but some of the issues that you mentioned, this little lack of access to opportunity is really one of the clear issues that is pressing a lot of communities now. So what are you focusing on to fix that issue?

Robert Blaine, National League of Cities:

Yeah. Thinking about opportunities, and how we build opportunities into communities that have been historically underinvested and disinvested, is really the footprint that our institute stands on. That's the space that we truly try and inhabit. And we do that through a myriad of ways. But one of the things that

I think is really pressing today, and you put your finger on it, these issues have been really long standing. This is not anything new. The pandemic has shown something of a spotlight on those issues and really brought them to the fore. And one of the things that I'm excited about is that as the administration has brought out new funding programs, especially through the American Rescue Plan and the infrastructure and jobs act, there has been an intentional focus on disadvantaged communities and communities that have been historically disadvantaged.

Robert Blaine, National League of Cities:

So one of the things that we've been doing as an Institute is really working with communities to build data informed methods of prioritizing for cities that really look at the parts of their communities that have been historically disadvantaged. So we partnered with a group called the Social Progress Imperative and began the work in the Deep South where we actually built maps of communities that we were working with that disaggregated data down to the census track level, looking at every funding stream that was available through the American Rescue Plan and creating sets of indicators, census track by census track in each community.

Robert Blaine, National League of Cities:

And what that did was it gave us the data of disparities in community and showed where their disparities were. And then it allowed us to be able to sit down with the municipality and say, "These are the parts where the inequities are in your community. And this is how this links to an opportunity, for example, in a competitive federal funding stream." It's a way of bringing data to the conversation of equity and using that to drive cities towards, first of all, thinking about how they can use that in order to be able to connect with these federal funding streams, but then on the back end, how are we creating the programmatic input that is actually going to demonstrate change on the ground? What does that look like?

Robert Blaine, National League of Cities:

And so in our conversation with the administration, I said that my goal was to return back to them what I called an I told you so document. Essentially, a document that spoke to the efficacy of these dollars in community and what impact looks when we prioritize the communities that have been historically under or disinvested.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Using this data approach, are you able to identify the opportunities for change? Are you able to identify programs and initiatives?

Robert Blaine, National League of Cities:

That's exactly the point. Yeah, that's how we're trying to drive the work, is to really... I should take a step back. My position before coming to the National League of Cities was that I was the chief administrative officer for the City of Jackson, Mississippi. So I was actually in the position of running a city for four years before I came to this job. One of the things that I observed most directly was that those who have the most voice in the conversation are those that have the most access.

Robert Blaine, National League of Cities:

And if we're really going to prioritize communities that have been underinvested and disinvested, we have to find new ways to make their voices heard. And one prominent way of being able to do that is to use data as a way of being able to push back against what we used to call the vocal minority and really try and bring into the conversation the voices of the silent majority. And we did that through this data informed approach.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Once before, when you and I spoke, you described it as creating economic models of human dignity. And I thought that was a beautiful way to put this because there is so much that goes on in communities. And again, if you don't have a voice, you're on the, I think your other description was economic model of humiliation. So if you don't have that voice, then you're not going to be able to achieve what everybody wants to achieve in the community. Give me an example of this new initiative. Where are some of the places that you're using this data approach to try to change the way people have opportunities presented to them?

Robert Blaine, National League of Cities:

So we're working right now in a little bit over 350 cities across the country. We started the work in the Deep South in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas. We were fortunate enough to be funded by the Doris Duke charitable foundation to do that work in the Deep South. They have been generous enough to extend that funding now to include the state of Alabama. We then moved to the Great Lakes region and were funded by the Joyce foundation to do that work in the states of Minnesota, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin, essentially surrounding the great lakes. And then most recently we've added the state of Missouri through the Missouri Health Foundation. And now we're about to move out to the state of Washington supported by the Balmer foundation. And so we've created this essentially phased work that has built on this fundamental work that we began in the Deep South.

Robert Blaine, National League of Cities:

And as I said before, we'll have somewhere north of 350 communities that we'll be working directly with. What's really exciting to me is that we've partnered with both the philanthropies as well as the state leagues. What that means is that there are opportunities for us to partner and to think about what funding is available through the state, as well as funding that's available through the federal government, so that we're able to braid funding streams together, and really think about the capital stacks that are needed for some of these larger projects in communities. There's lots of thought about sustainability work and green jobs, and green futures, and the like, workforce ecosystems, and how those are not just constructed, but how they are sustained and enhanced. And of course, we've seen a lot of foundational work that communities have really begun to dig in on.

Robert Blaine, National League of Cities:

So the three most resonant themes that we've heard in communities have been around housing, thinking about equity around housing, they've been around broadband and access, and durability, and broadband, as well as water infrastructure, which is a huge issue for those communities. One of the things that's really exciting for me is that each one of those categories are really driven locally by workforce, being able to have a workforce that's engaged in the development. And as our mayor in Jackson, Chokwe Lumumba used to say, "We want to build the new economy off of the labor that the old economy left behind." How are we bringing in those folks that may have been left out of the

economic mobility of the previous wave? And how are we intentional about building the new economy with the assets of that labor force?

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Well, given that infrastructure bill that was passed at the end of last year, that gives a lot of opportunity, a lot of federal dollars, and that are going to be flowing through this state. And you mentioned infrastructure, and you mentioned the green economy in there because a lot of that is going to be toward something like water infrastructure. Louisiana for example, I was talking to someone there the other day, and that's a big issue in clean energy and for everyone. In the past, some of these communities have been very much the target of environmental racism. So they build the bad plants in the communities of color. So are you able to really dive down, you were saying, zip code by zip code, block by block, able to figure out how can you help the people who have been most impacted get these jobs that could help change not only their financial lives, but their health.

Robert Blaine, National League of Cities:

Yes, absolutely. So I'll give you a really, really brief example. And this is from the work that I was doing when I was in Jackson, Mississippi. Not necessarily connected to green economy, but thinking about impacts of the pandemic. So one of the things that we realized at the beginning of the pandemic, we were about to take the public school system in Jackson, 100% virtual. We quickly realized that 25% of students in Jackson have zero access to broadband, an additional 15% of students had very poor access to broadband. So upwards of 40% of children in the school district had little to no access to broadband. Students like my kids, like my son, who was a senior in high school is operating in this fully synchronous virtual world. You could not have had a more stark example of lack of equity in a community.

Robert Blaine, National League of Cities:

And so one of the things that we did was, through the mayor's office and the local school district, the superintendent, we partnered along with the Kellogg foundation, the city actually owned much of the fiber that was under the ground. And we had already invested in a high speed network that we were using for municipality itself, but it gave us the opportunity to leverage that network. And the city also owned 75% of the cell phone towers. So we were able to map where all of those cell phone towers were in the communities that lacked broadband access. We partnered with the school district. They actually bought radio equipment that... And we partnered with a technology firm. We hung that radio equipment on the cell phone towers that was connected to the fiber that we had. And we created this wireless internet provider, this wireless internet service. The next phase of the project was that we were going to take high school kids who had been disengaged or dropped out and worked with a technology partner in town to train them as installers.

Robert Blaine, National League of Cities:

And so creating this internet service provider then created the service for the communities that had been disconnected. It was creating jobs for students that had been disconnected from the learning environment and was creating further opportunities for the delivery of content to homes, thinking about what it looks like for early childhood or any of these services. And these were the communities that the traditional telecoms did not see a return on investment in order to be able to put the infrastructure there. So for the municipality to put the infrastructure there, it created an environment where if a telecom wanted to come later on and play on our network, that was just fine, but we owned the middle mile.

Robert Blaine, National League of Cities:

So now it created a revenue source for the city that was sustainable, it created resources for the community, it created jobs for the students that might have been disconnected and cut out of the system. And it created a renewable resource that we could use for the benefit of the school system, for the benefit of the community, and it was a win, win, win for everybody. I think that there are myriad opportunities like that all around the country for us to not think about those kinds of ecosystems, not just in the educational space, not just in the broadband space, but thinking about what that means for communities that have been situated in environments of environmental segregation and environmental disintegration in the same way.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Well, that kind of brings us back to The Youth Excel Initiative too, because if you don't have that access... I mean, look, one of the things you're trying to do is connect youth to STEM careers. So you have to be on a computer 90% of the time for these jobs, right? You can do the training on your job, you can work remotely, you can apply for jobs having that broadband access. But if you don't have it again, you're immediately cut out of the circle on that.

Robert Blaine, National League of Cities:

That's exactly right. That's exactly right. So the foundation is the infrastructure, the broadband itself, but then the access and what that access brings is really all of the digital equity tools, right? So that's where it becomes... Access itself is just a road, right? It's just a road that you can drive on, but what can drive on that road? All of the equity tools that are available on that road are actually the vehicle that takes someone from one place to the next, that's what creates mobility, economic mobility in communities.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So you're helping provide another roadmap for the communities to figure out how do they get the financing that they need? How do they get the support they need? Have you seen any outcomes yet in general, that you would like to highlight? Anything that you'd like to tell us? I know the youth initiative is fairly new.

Robert Blaine, National League of Cities:

It is fairly new. So we haven't gotten any data back from that initiative, because we've just gotten past the funding point, and we're now starting to bring cities into the mix. I think that one of the exciting things that we've seen is that this conversation of equity and investing in equitable outcomes in communities, first of all on the federal side, it's a totally new conversation. It's the first time many of these agencies have ever been given guidance on equitable resources for communities, which is very exciting. And it also means that they're having to think very differently about how they're prioritizing projects in communities. It's an opportunity for us to be a influencer in some ways, on the federal side of the conversation. On the side with communities, they are now understanding that there is this new prioritization from the federal side.

Robert Blaine, National League of Cities:

It allows them to dive into human infrastructure projects that might not have been necessarily the bread and butter in previous days. And so one of the challenges in a city is this push and pull between what we call hard and soft infrastructure. What's the infrastructure of roads and bridges, and sewers, and

drainage, and all of that. And what's the infrastructure that invests in community and thinking about what it looks like to lead a dignified life in a community, right? This is actually a way of starting to bridge those two conversations and bring them together because we're both talking about hard and soft at the same time.

Robert Blaine, National League of Cities:

Because in order to be able to have that hard infrastructure, you've got to be able to support the soft infrastructure that actually leverages itself so that it can make those investments in hard infrastructure. And I think it's exciting that this is one of the first times that I've heard that full some conversation and what that looks like. And I'm excited by the opportunity. It doesn't mean that we don't have ample opportunity to mess it up as we've seen in the past, but I think that we have a real chance to get it right. And it's smart people and smart conversations like this that give us a framework that we can work within.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Robert, thank you for sharing that with us because it's very important. We love sharing that message as well, of bringing together all the different players in the field that can make a difference, whether it's the nonprofits and the funders, the city leaders, local businesses, and educators, to bring everybody together to talk about a problem so they can solve it, and each solution is different, each community is different. So Robert, thank you so much for joining me on Work in Progress today.

Robert Blaine, National League of Cities:

It is a pleasure to be with you. Thank you so much for the opportunity. You're very welcome.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking with Robert Blaine, senior executive and director for the Institute for Youth, Education & Families with the National League of Cities. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you very much for listening.