



Child Poverty Collaborative and Project Lift

City of Cincinnati & Hamilton County, Ohio

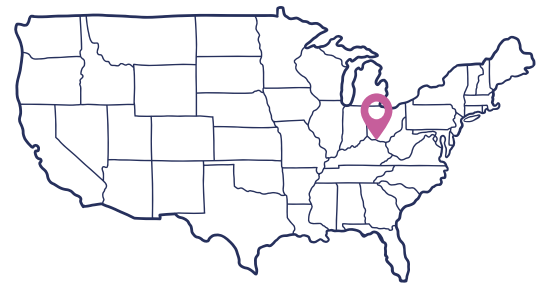
Helping families achieve economic mobility through access to flexible funding

I. Overview

The City of Cincinnati and Hamilton County have long had one of the highest rates of poverty among major U.S. metro areas. In 2016, the City and County partnered to ensure that poverty in the region was addressed in a holistic and meaningful way. They formed the Child Poverty Collaborative, comprised of a broad network of cross-sector partners that included nonprofits, businesses, faith-based organizations, and local residents. The Collaborative sought to create a pathway for families living in poverty to achieve true economic mobility and stability. To enact this vision, the Collaborative launched Project Lift in 2019.¹

Project Lift is an innovative private-public partnership that provides flexible funding to local nonprofits that directly serves families living in poverty. The project was primarily made possible due to an innovative state waiver request made by the County for use of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funding. The waiver allowed TANF funding to be used to meet resident needs not traditionally covered by TANF that contribute to poverty, such as vehicle repairs and employer-required uniforms.

Through the provision of flexible, short-term financial assistance via sponsoring partners, Project Lift removes financial barriers that impede economic mobility, empowers families to secure sustainable income, and helps families achieve financial independence. In addition to this critical short-term assistance and support, families receive coaching, workforce development, and other resources that provide them with the education, knowledge, and tools to create long-term economic solutions and overcome the cycle of poverty.



1. Interview with Moira Weir, President and CEO, United Way of Greater Cincinnati.

County/City Demographic Profile

| | Hamilton County, OH ² | Cincinnati, OH ² |
|---|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Size (square miles) | 405.4 | 77.8 |
| Total Population | 817,473 | 303,954 |
| Population Density | 2,016/sq. mile | 3,905/sq. mile |
| Race & Ethnicity | | |
| Asian | 3% | 2% |
| Black or African American | 26% | 42% |
| Hispanic | 4% | 4% |
| White | 65% | 48% |
| Other | 3% | 4% |
| Workforce & Economic Indicators | | |
| Unemployment Rate | 3.2% | 4.5% |
| Poverty Rate (persons below poverty line) | 14.5% | 23.1% |
| Child Poverty Rate (<18 below poverty line) | 21% | 32% |
| Median Household Income | \$60,198 | \$46,260 |

City/County Governance

The City of Cincinnati has a Mayor-Council form of government. Hamilton County has a three-person Board of County Commissioners and eight other elected officials who together hold administrative power.

2. U.S. Census Bureau. (2019). American Community Survey one-year estimates. <http://censusreporter.org/profiles/05000US39061-hamilton-county-oh/>

II. Need for Collaboration/The Challenge

In 2015, the greater Cincinnati area ranked 73rd out of 77 metropolitan areas in income disparity across the country.⁴ The City and the County experienced high rates of poverty and a growing income gap. Furthermore, the majority of people living in poverty were working but still unable to make enough money to support their families.⁵ From 2014 to 2018, an estimated 40% of children living in Cincinnati and 23% living in Hamilton County lived below the federal poverty level.⁶ These percentages were high compared to the national average of 19%.⁷ Furthermore, The Urban League of Greater Southwestern Ohio reported large income disparities between Black and white residents within the City that had not improved since the previous report 20 years earlier. The median household income for Black residents was \$24,272, compared to \$57,481 in white households. These disparities presented a significant equity challenge for the region.

III. The Partners

The business community, Urban League of Greater Southwestern Ohio, and social services organizations each launched efforts to get the City and County to address the high rates of poverty within Cincinnati that disproportionately impact Black families. The Mayor's Office had previously responded to this public pressure through one-on-one conversations and meetings, but they realized that the City needed to engage a broader base and create a collaborative group that included public, private, nonprofit, and business organizations to meaningfully address poverty and close racial and income gaps within the City and County.⁸ ⁹ City of Cincinnati Mayor John Cranley brought the business community, the Black community (led by the Urban League), and social service organizations together to create the Child Poverty Collaborative to identify solutions. The County joined the Child Poverty Collaborative to ensure that regional solutions could be implemented. Eventually, after years of planning, the Child Poverty Collaborative created Project Lift.

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4. Urban League of Greater Southwestern Ohio. (2015). *The State of Black Cincinnati 2015: Two Cities*. http://homecincy.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/The-State-of-Black-Cincinnati-2015_Two-Cities.pdf
 5. May, L. (2019). *Child Poverty Rates in Cincinnati, Hamilton County Still Higher Than the U.S. as a Whole*. <https://www.wcpo.com/news/our-community/child-poverty-rates-in-cincinnati-hamilton-county-still-higher-than-the-u-s-as-a-whole>
 6. U.S. Census Bureau. (2019). *American Community Survey five-year estimates*. <http://censusreporter.org/profiles/05000US39061-hamilton-county-oh>
 7. Ohio Development Services Agency Office of Research. (2020). *Poverty in Ohio by County: 2014-2018 American Community Survey*. <https://www.development.ohio.gov/files/research/p7005.pdf>
 8. Mongillo, M. (2019). *Anti-Poverty Group Launches New Programs to Help Cincinnati Families in Need*. <https://local12.com/news/childhood-poverty-a-cincinnati-crisis/anti-poverty-group-launches-new-programs-to-help-cincinnati-families-in-need>
 9. Interview with Bridget Patton, Director of Community Affairs, City of Cincinnati.



Structure of the Collaboration

The Child Poverty Collaborative was led by seven co-chairs and included a Steering Committee of approximately 50 people, including City and County staff, nonprofit organizations, churches, banks, and businesses. The co-chairs included:

- Cincinnati Mayor
- Executive Director of the local United Way of Greater Cincinnati
- President and CEO of the local Urban League
- Business community representative
- Children's Hospital representative
- Interact for Health representative
- Sisters of Charity representative

IV. The Shared Goal

The goal of the Child Poverty Collaborative was to move 5,000 families and 10,000 children out of poverty within Hamilton County and the City of Cincinnati over a period of five years.¹⁰ They decided to achieve this through the creation of Project Lift, which adopted these goals.

The Goal

To move 5,000 families and 10,000 children out of poverty within Hamilton County and the City of Cincinnati over a period of five years.

10. May, L. (2020). COVID-19 Makes Reducing Poverty Even Harder for Child Poverty Collaborative's Project Lift Program. <https://www.wcpo.com/news/our-community/covid-19-makes-reducing-poverty-even-harder-for-child-poverty-collaboratives-project-lift-program>

V. How Partners Collaborated



Impetus & Levers for the Collaboration

The business community, including the Cincinnati Chamber and Workforce Innovation Center, Urban League of Greater Southwestern Ohio, and social services organizations each launched efforts to get the City and County to address the high rates of poverty within Cincinnati.

- The Greater Cincinnati Urban League in 2015 released a scathing report describing growing racial disparities in Cincinnati.¹¹ Donna Jones Baker, president and CEO of the organization, said, "What we need in this region is...coordinated efforts that have the input and buy-in from many of the people who are affected." The report showcased how people were working but not making enough money to make it out of poverty.
- The Cincinnati Regional Business Committee (CRBC), which included multinational companies such as Kroger and Procter & Gamble, as well as smaller businesses, came together to push the Mayor's Office to see what could be done.



What Partners Did

To elicit community feedback and ensure they had a clear vision and goal for addressing poverty across the region, the City and County hosted three large community convenings and 100 smaller community conversations over four years. During these convenings, one of the key challenges identified was the lack of flexible funding to address the needs of those living in poverty—money for things such as new tires, baby formula, and work uniforms. Many of the low-income families in the region were doing everything they could to make ends meet. They were working, engaging with social service organizations, and trying to improve their lives. However, setbacks such as car trouble, unexpected medical bills, or a sudden threat of eviction wiped out the progress they worked so hard to make. These expenses were not covered by traditional supportive services yet continually contributed to the deepening of poverty, debt, and the income gap. Due to this identified gap in flexible supportive funding, the Collaborative developed Project Lift. As Moira Weir, former director of the County's Department of Job & Family Services and now CEO of United Way of Greater Cincinnati, stated, "Prior to Project Lift, we were just solving day-to-day problems. Project Lift gives people agency over their lives by giving them a tool they can use to address their barriers."¹² The project aimed to raise \$5 million to support 1,000 families to pay for items not covered by support services.¹³

11. Greater Cincinnati Urban League. (2015). *The State of Black Cincinnati 2015: Two Cities*. http://homecincy.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/The-State-of-Black-Cincinnati-2015_Two-Cities.pdf

12. Interview with Moira Weir.

13. Mongillo, M. (2019). *Anti-Poverty Group Launches New Programs to Help Cincinnati Families in Need*. <https://local12.com/news/childhood-poverty-a-cincinnati-crisis/anti-poverty-group-launches-new-programs-to-help-cincinnati-families-in-need>



Funding Sources

The City, County, and philanthropic organizations braided funding to launch the program. The City and County formalized their funding allocations with an MOU.

- The City utilized its Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Program funding and some flexible dollars to support Project Lift. This commitment was formalized with a City measure that earmarks the funding as part of the Human Services Fund.
- The County had a lot of TANF funding for which it requested a waiver from the state to obtain more spending flexibility. The State approved the waiver, thus providing a sustainable source of funding through which Project Lift could give individuals more financial support on an ad-hoc basis.¹⁴
- The philanthropic community also contributed funding, including the United Way of Greater Cincinnati, which dedicated a set portion of its annual revenues to the project.

Project Lift

The Child Poverty Collaborative created a committee to support the launch of Project Lift, which included:

- Board of County Commissioners
- Office of the Mayor
- Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce (through the Workforce Innovation Center, which is a department of the Chamber)
- Cincinnati NAACP
- City of Cincinnati Economic Development Department
- Hamilton County Job & Family Services Department
- United Way of Greater Cincinnati
- Urban League of Greater Southwestern Ohio

“Prior to Project Lift, we were just solving day-to-day problems. Project Lift gives people agency over their lives by giving them a tool they can use to address their barriers.”

Maira Weir, former director of the County's Department of Job & Family Services and CEO of United Way of Greater Cincinnati

In 2021, the Collaborative chose to house Project Lift at the United Way of Greater Cincinnati so that the United Way could assist with fundraising from the private sector and philanthropy, act as the collaborative convener, and provide a direct link to smaller community-based organizations that could directly allocate funds to those in need. United Way used data to identify areas with the highest level of need and allocated proportionate funding to those areas. Project Lift developed a network of 22 diverse sponsor organizations to disseminate funding throughout the community.

14. Interview with Bridget Patton, Director of Community Affairs, City of Cincinnati.

Sponsors included large social services organizations, faith-based organizations, and smaller nonprofits trusted by families most in need of the funds. Project Lift did not have formal partnership agreements or MOUs in place with these partners. The only requirement was that these organizations utilize the Salesforce platform, supplied through the United Way, to capture information, data, and track recipients.¹⁵ To enroll in Project Lift, families had to live in Hamilton County, have at least one child in the household, and be working or be on a path to employment. Each family agreed to participate in the program for at least one year. The City and County now act as funders of the project and receive frequent updates from the United Way.

VI. Keys to Success

- **Strong champions and leaders:**
 - » **Mayoral champion:** Mayor Cranley prioritized the initiative and brought key stakeholders to the collaborative table. He met weekly with the steering committee for three years before formally launching Project Lift in 2019. This longstanding commitment kept partners at the table.
 - » **Collaborative champions:** The Director of the Job & Family Services Department at Hamilton County championed the project for the County and led the effort to attain a waiver for the County's TANF dollars.
 - » **Broad-based support and pressure:** The Urban League, Black community, NAACP, business groups, and community-based organizations all voiced concerns about the high rates of poverty and economic immobility in the region. This broad base of concerned stakeholders applied pressure on the Mayor and encouraged him to innovate.
- **Shared commitment and goals:** The Collaborative took four years to convene and ensure that all entities were engaged and had a shared vision to reduce poverty. Through this shared goal, personal relationship building, and trust, the Collaborative realized that the goal was not just to help people in poverty, but rather to move people out of poverty. This change in mindset catalyzed Project Lift.
- **Strong data systems:** With so many organizations collecting and utilizing data, Project Lift determined that using Salesforce, hosted by United Way, was the most effective way to gather and track data in a central location to enable evaluation of impact.

15. Interview with Moira Weir.

VII. Challenges & Lessons Learned

- **Time-intensive nature of collaboration:** It took a long time to get from listening and talking to an on-the-ground program and measurable outcomes and action. It took outside influences from the business community and engaged residents to make the City and County move forward with the Collaborative and create a program with measurable outcomes.
- **Need for shared data systems and metrics:** Once the Collaborative determined that its goal was to move people out of poverty, participants realized that each partner's metrics for recognizing poverty were different. Some of the metrics were income-related and/or based on national statistics. The Collaborative determined that it would need to build a shared platform to collect and utilize the data to obtain clear outcomes.
- **The County was brought in late:** The County's Jobs & Family Services Department was responsible for providing many social services to those living in poverty, yet the County was not initially invited to the Child Poverty Collaborative. Interviewees stated that having someone from the County at the table earlier would have streamlined the process to develop and implement Project Lift.

VIII. Collaboration Impact

The Child Poverty Collaborative morphed into the ongoing Project Lift. Project Lift had the following impact metrics in 2019:

1,000+

households enrolled since April 2019.

1 in 5

families reported a 20% increase in income.

45%

of families had significant barriers removed.

10%

of households increased income by one Federal Poverty Level.

Additionally, because of the success of this program, the United Way is planning to scale this model outside of the County to northern Kentucky.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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RESOURCES

Project Lift website:

<https://www.uwgc.org/your-impact/programs-initiatives/project-lift>

Cincinnati Child Poverty Collaborative YouTube video (2016):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5IUpRQ66Uc>

Housing in Affordability in Hamilton County: An Analysis of Households, Housing Affordability, and Housing Subsidy in Hamilton County and Cincinnati, Ohio. Community Building Institute (2017):

https://www.lisc.org/media/filer_public/a1/16/a116fbab-4be3-4704-98e6-83f633b7d893/asset_upload_file30_13212.pdf

Three Ways Cities Can Support a Modern Workforce. American City & County (2021):

<https://www.americancityandcounty.com/2021/09/13/three-ways-cities-can-support-a-modern-workforce/>

Dream Becomes Reality with the Help of Project Lift. United Way of Greater Cincinnati (2021):

<https://www.uwgc.org/blog/stories/dream-becomes-reality-with-the-help-of-project-lift>

Project Lift Expands Our Role in Helping Families. Hamilton County Job & Family Services (2018):

<https://www.hcjfs.org/project-lift-expands-our-role-in-helping-families/>