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New Study Identifies the Best Cities for Good Government.

What is good government and which cities practice it? Those are the questions driving a new annual report of U.S. cities.

For the first time ever, the nonprofit Living Cities partnered with Governing to study how cities measure up to their definition of a high-performing government. The authors of the study, which is called “Equipt to Innovate,” hope it will help the best ideas and practices spread.

Cities have long been creative problem solvers, but local officials still have trouble sharing information about their experiences and learning from their peers, says Ben Hecht, the CEO of Living Cities.

“There are a thousand flowers of innovation that are blooming,” he says, “but they don’t really provide you with a roadmap for how to systemically apply those innovations to the core elements of government.”

The Equipt report is meant to be a first step in providing that roadmap.

Governing, with the help of researchers at our parent company, e.Republic, invited 321 cities to participate in the study. About 19 percent — 61 — completed the 92-question self-assessment. Researchers at e.Republic also conducted an independent review of cities’ performances to make sure the responses squared with publicly available evidence.

The report defines a city as high-performing if it’s dynamically planned, broadly partnered, resident-involved, race-informed, smartly resourced, employee-engaged and data-driven. It sheds light on what local officials think their organizations do well and where they believe they need to improve.

Perhaps the biggest improvements needed (and in some cases, being made) appear to be in race-related policies and issues.

Almost all respondents (92 percent) said their human resources departments have plans and initiatives in place to ensure the local government workforce reflects the racial and ethnic makeup of the city. In addition, a majority of respondents (74 percent) said they have training programs around the importance of race in their workplaces.

But by other measures, cities are behind in enacting race-informed policies. Only 16 percent strongly agreed that there was trust in local government among their immigrant and minority communities. A majority of respondents (77 percent) said their cities needed a more equitable provision of services, such as transportation, education and community policing.

In other areas, the responses suggest that most places already meet the definition of a high-performing city. For example, 80 percent said they have up-to-date long-term strategic plans, and a majority said they collect sufficient input from agencies and residents. Almost two-thirds said city spending is based on evidence and oriented toward results. And almost eight in 10 respondents said their cities have some kind of open data portal.

Steven Bosacker of Living Cities says he was pleasantly surprised by how advanced cities appear to be on some of the operational elements, such as strategic planning.

“The survey actually not only renewed my faith but reminded me of how functional local government is, especially compared to state and federal government these days,” he says.

On Tuesday, Living Cities and e.Republic named Phoenix the best overall performing city, but nine others received recognition as well: Las Vegas, San Diego, Riverside, Calif.; San Jose, Calif.; El Paso, Texas; Fayetteville, N.C.; San Antonio, Philadelphia and Louisville, Ky.

They also identified the highest-performing city in each of the seven categories (in bold) and five additional cities that were high performers:

- Dynamically planned (**Fayetteville, N.C.**; Boston, Cleveland, the District of Columbia, Las Vegas and Riverside, Calif.)
- Broadly partnered (**Las Vegas**, Kansas City, Mo.; Louisville, Ky.; Philadelphia, Phoenix and Riverside, Calif.)
- Resident-involved (**Albuquerque**, N.M.; Atlanta, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, Providence, R.I.; and Seattle)
- Race-informed (**Seattle**, Grand Rapids, Mich.; Phoenix, Portland, Ore.; Richmond, Va.; and San Jose, Calif.)
- Smartly resourced (**El Paso**, Texas; Boston, Knoxville, Tenn.; San Antonio, San Jose, Calif.; and Virginia Beach, Va.)
- Employee-engaged (**San Antonio**, Denver, Fayetteville, N.C., Las Vegas, Louisville and Minneapolis)
- Data-driven (**Kansas City, Mo.**; El Paso, Texas; Long Beach, Calif.; Louisville, Phoenix and San Diego)

Findings from the study are summarized in a 20-page report that can be found [here](#). Cities that participated will receive private written feedback on how they compare to their peers and how they can improve. Living Cities and e.Republic plan to conduct another round of assessments and hope to document how government performance changes over time.

“This was a pilot year. It’s not designed or intended to report perfectly on perfection,” says Rhiannon Gainor, director of research at e.Republic. “It’s meant to stimulate a national conversation on what good governance is.”

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