Bloomberg Philanthropies City Data Alliance

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Program Journey

Cities around the world are entering a new era of data and artificial intelligence (AI). While many have built policies, tools, and governance structures, few have had the chance to test, adapt, and learn how data and AI actually work in real-world city government. The Bloomberg Philanthropies City Data Alliance (City Data Alliance or CDA) helps cities move beyond planning and into practice.

Led by the Bloomberg Center for Government Excellence at Johns Hopkins University (GovEx), the City Data Alliance equips city teams to apply data and AI responsibly to solve resident problems, manage risk, adapt to change, and scale solutions that work. Since 2022, the City Data Alliance has partnered with over 80 cities in 12 countries, representing 78 million residents, building deep, practice-based insights into what it takes to use data and AI effectively in city government.

What cities do

Cities enter with a resident-facing problem that has been difficult to solve. Through structured support, coaching, and practical tools, teams:

1

Translate a resident-facing problem into a focused use case

Refine a known problem into a clear, testable use case with defined users, constraints, and indicators of success.

2

Prototype to explore and narrow potential solution pathways

Use low-fidelity tests to explore multiple approaches, surface assumptions, and identify what solution is worthy of further investment.

3

Design, build, and test a solution

Create and pilot a minimum viable product (MVP) informed by user needs, real constraints, and implementation realities.

4

Strengthen capacity for sustainability and scale

Deepen skills, judgement, and internal city practices while developing a playbook that enables the city to sustain, adapt, or expand the solution.

Through this work, cities generate real-world evidence, build confidence in their approach, and leave with a validated, resident-centered use case and a practical foundation for long-term impact.

Program structure and pathways

All cities begin with a focused scoping phase, then are invited to move into the pathway that best matches their readiness and goals:

Scoping Phase (June–August)

GOAL	Translate a resident-facing problem into a clear, feasible use case.

City teams focus on	Key support provided
Identifying an actionable, high-impact problem Stress-testing solution ideas against constraints and available data Clarifying decision-makers, ownership, and delivery capacity	A scoping workshop to frame the use case and evaluate feasibility Strategic coaching tailored to city priorities and constraints A peer clinic to surface risks, assumptions, and readiness signals

Scoping follows a predictable cadence, with virtual sessions twice per week during the first two months and weekly sessions in the third month as teams consolidate decisions and finalize the use case. Between sessions, teams stay connected with CDA coaches and partners through a shared communication channel (WhatsApp, Slack, Teams, etc.) to address issues quickly and maintain momentum. At the conclusion of scoping, GovEx assesses readiness and recommends the next pathway.

Implementation Pathway – For cities ready to build & test solutions

Cities in this pathway use time-bound learning loops to iterate solutions in real-world conditions. Support integrates strategic coaching and technical assistance with strong city ownership, working within existing delivery routines to strengthen lasting internal capacity.

Capacity-Building Pathway – For Cities Strengthening Foundational Skills

Cities in this pathway receive tailored recommendations based on scoping, plus connections to Results for America's What Works Cities sprints, self-paced courses, and other resources to accelerate foundational data and performance practices.

How we work

Cities often find that investments in data infrastructure alone don't guarantee meaningful improvements for residents. Even well-designed interventions can fall short without a clear understanding of resident needs or testing in real-world conditions.

The City Data Alliance uses a test-and-learn approach that emphasizes:

- Action: testing ideas early to understand what works
- Evidence: generating data to validate assumptions and reduce risk
- Iteration: adapting solutions based on what is uncovered

Working in learning loops helps cities explore options before committing, strengthen internal capacity, and build confidence in decisions. Structured scoping ensures feasibility, clarifies risks, and sets up delivery.

Learning loops (For cities in the Implementation Pathway)

Learning Loop 1: Prototype (September–October)

GOAL	Generate early evidence about which approaches are most promising.

City teams focus on	Key support provided
Building low-fidelity prototypes to test competing ideas Gathering feedback from residents and frontline staff Narrowing options based on evidence and feasibility	Strategic coaching to assess findings and refine direction Technical sessions to resolve data and implementation hurdles Curated peer exchanges with cities working on similar problems

Learning Loop 2: Solution Build (November–January)

GOAL	Develop a minimum viable solution that works within real operational constraints.

City teams focus on	Key support provided
Translating prototype learnings into a working solution Making explicit trade-offs on scope, features, and timelines Defining the pilot plan, user groups, and success criteria	Strategic coaching for execution and decision-making Technical sessions for hands-on development An MVP workshop to define scope, trade-offs, and good-enough criteria

Learning Loop 3: Scale & Launch (February–March)

GOAL	Test the solution in practice and prepare for long-term ownership and growth.

City teams focus on	Key support provided
Piloting the solution with real users in real environments Tracking early outcomes and implementation lessons Establishing governance, ownership, and paths for scale	Strategic coaching and technical sessions A peer clinic focused on lessons learned and sustainability planning A demo day to showcase results and next steps with peer cities

Participation expectations

Cities commit to:

- Completing a What Works Cities Data Snapshot if not already completed
- Assembling a cross-functional team with dedicated time, including data specialists and domain experts
- Engaging in cross-city learning through workshops, peer clinics, and convenings
- Hosting an in-city site visit after scoping for user testing or resident engagement
- Participating in two progress check-ins with the Mayor and, where applicable, the City Manager
- Keeping momentum between touchpoints by coordinating with the City Data Alliance team through an agreed communication channel
- Approaching the work with curiosity and a test-and-learn mindset

Who this program is for

Cities best suited for the City Data Alliance typically:

- Serve 100,000 or more residents
- Have a mayor with at least two years remaining in office
- Have a Chief Data Officer or equivalent role
- Demonstrate strong foundations of data use across services and functions
- Show leadership commitment to using data and AI to improve resident outcomes
- Can dedicate a team with decision-making authority
- Are open to being challenged in a supportive environment

Key dates and events

Welcome & Orientation Call

MAY 27 · VIRTUAL

City Data Alliance Leads (with optional senior leader participation) meet with program staff to launch the program, establish expectations, and prepare for the scoping phase.

First Coaching Call

WEEK OF JUNE 1 · VIRTUAL

Strategic coaching starts during the scoping phase, providing tailored support as cities clarify their use case and readiness to move into testing and delivery.

Site Visits

SEPTEMBER 1 - OCTOBER 16 · IN-CITY

Following the scoping phase, cities in the use case accelerator pathway host a two-day visit with their coach to align city leadership, validate assumptions, and advance prototype testing.

CDA Lead Convening

JANUARY 2027 · BALTIMORE

An immersive gathering for city leads to synthesize learnings, share progress, and strengthen collective capacity across the global network.

What cities take away

Cities leave with more than a single solution. They leave with a validated, resident-centered use case; evidence of what works in practice; stronger cross-department coordination and decision-making; and a practical playbook to sustain, adapt, or scale solutions. Cities also join a durable peer network that extends learning beyond any one project.

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Successful Teams

Success in the City Data Alliance depends on more than one department or a set of technical skills. Cities that advance from scoping to prototyping and building a minimum viable product (MVP) bring together core capabilities that support decision-making and delivery in real operating conditions. These capabilities do not require a fixed team structure. In some cities, one person may fill several roles; in others, responsibilities are shared across a group. What matters is that each capability is clearly owned and actively used throughout the program to maintain momentum and move solutions from concept to practice.

Core capabilities

Executive sponsorship with staffing authority

Cities that succeed have senior leaders who can set priorities, allocate staff time, and resolve cross-department issues. When this level of sponsorship is unclear, teams struggle to secure consistent participation, especially as work moves from scoping into prototyping and implementation.

Dedicated delivery coordination

Delivery requires clear city ownership of coordination, preparation, follow-through, and day-to-day momentum. When coordination is informal or spread across too many people, teams face delays, missed decisions, or loss of continuity. A designated coordinator helps translate program inputs into steady progress.

Deep knowledge of the resident-facing problem

Effective solutions depend on staff who understand the service context, workflows, constraints, and lived realities of the problem at hand. When this expertise is missing or peripheral, teams risk building technically promising solutions that do not fit operational needs or resident experience.

Data and technical capability across the data lifecycle

Cities need people who know where relevant data lives, how it is generated, and what limitations or risks it carries. This capability supports analysis, prototyping, feasibility assessment, identifying bias or gaps. Strong data capability also helps avoid delays related to data access, preparation, or anonymization.

How work gets done

The areas below outline some of the key functions that support progress across the program journey. Cities should identify who will hold primary ownership for each area and where additional contributors may be needed, recognizing that responsibilities may be combined or shared depending on team size and structure.

Executive leadership & accountability

Authority to set priorities and allocate staff time	Accountability for overall city commitment and follow-through	Cross-departmental coordination across contributors and stakeholders	Planning for sustainability and adoption beyond the prototype phase

Delivery & program coordination

Primary point of contact with the City Data Alliance	Day-to-day delivery coordination and momentum	Maintaining the throughline from resident problem to solution	Change management and internal stakeholder engagement

Product direction & decision-making

Definition and management of prototype or minimum viable product (MVP) scope	Decision-making on tradeoffs, sequencing, and what not to build	Using evidence from testing and prototyping to guide next steps	Planning and conducting user or frontline testing

Resident & operational insight

Deep understanding of the resident-facing problem and service context	Alignment of solution design with operational workflows and constraints	Ongoing feedback from frontline staff and users	Ensuring solution feasibility within real service environments

Data & technical enablement

Knowledge of data sources, systems, and update cycles	Navigating data permissions, privacy, and compliance requirements	Assessment of data quality, gaps, and bias risks	Development and technical implementation (analysis, modeling, prototyping, engineering)

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Types of Projects

Cities participating in the City Data Alliance undertake resident-facing data projects. Each project centers on a clearly defined use case that can be scoped, tested, and adapted in real-time city operating conditions. The typology below describes common types of resident-facing problems in which data and artificial intelligence can help cities make better decisions. Many problems span more than one category. These types offer a starting point for scoping and alignment, while allowing flexibility in how cities shape their solutions.

1. Who to focus on (targeting & prioritization)

These use cases help cities identify which residents, locations, or cases to prioritize when needs exceed capacity, enabling earlier and more effective intervention.

Decision: Who should receive attention or resources first

EXAMPLE USE CASES

- Identifying households most at risk of eviction to prioritize prevention services
- Flagging properties most likely to present safety risks for proactive review
- Targeting outreach to residents likely eligible but not enrolled in benefits

2. Where to invest limited resources (allocation & optimization)

These use cases help cities make clearer tradeoffs about how to deploy constrained resources to maximize impact across neighborhoods, services, or populations.

Decision: How limited staff, time, or funding should be deployed

EXAMPLE USE CASES

- Optimizing inspection routes or schedules to reduce response times
- Allocating outreach staff across neighborhoods based on projected demand
- Balancing caseloads across teams to improve service quality

3. How staff make day-to-day decisions (frontline & supervisory support)

These use cases focus on improving real-time or recurring decisions made by frontline staff or managers by providing timely, relevant, and actionable information.

Decision: What staff or supervisors do in the moment

EXAMPLE USE CASES

- Supporting caseworkers in prioritizing daily tasks
- Helping supervisors identify bottlenecks or backlogs early
- Improving coordination across teams working on shared cases

4. How residents move through services (service pathways & experience)

These use cases help reduce friction, confusion, or drop-off by improving how residents experience city services across touchpoints and departments.

Decision: How services are designed and delivered to residents

EXAMPLE USE CASES

- Redesigning intake or referral processes to reduce delays
- Identifying where residents disengage from programs and why
- Improving access for multilingual or underserved communities

5. Which path to pursue (policy decision-making)

These use cases support leaders in weighing alternatives, modeling potential outcomes, and testing approaches before making or adjusting major commitments.

Decision: Which program, policy, or model to adopt

EXAMPLE USE CASES

- Modeling how different shelter placements would affect system flow
- Testing a proposed eligibility change with a small segment before full rollout
- Comparing alternative deployment strategies using scenario simulations

A note on advanced analytics and AI

The City Data Alliance encourages cities to thoughtfully explore how advanced analytics and AI can strengthen decision-making and improve resident outcomes. This may include approaches that surface patterns, risks, or opportunities from large or complex datasets. The City Data Alliance supports these efforts when they are grounded in real operational decisions, paired with human expertise, and used responsibly in live city contexts.

What is typically not a good fit

The City Data Alliance is not designed to support work that is primarily strategic, exploratory, or technology-driven without a clear path to action. This includes standalone data strategies or policy development efforts without a specific resident-facing use case, dashboards or reporting that are not tied to concrete decisions, technology procurement or vendor selection without the opportunity for testing and iteration, academic research without operational ownership, or citywide AI strategies that are not grounded in a near-term, testable problem.