

Justin Charles:

To understand the transformative work Living Cities is leading, we must begin with the Closing the Gaps Network. Born from a vision to address systemic inequities in wealth and opportunity, the network is a growing coalition of local government leaders, city officials, and community organizations dedicated to advancing inclusive wealth-building strategies.

The Closing the Gaps Network began as an evolution of Living Cities' history of place-based work to close gaps in income and wealth. Prior to the Closing the Gaps Network, most of Living Cities' initiatives had been short-term, partnering with cities around topic-specific initiatives for only 1–2 years.

We learned it takes a deeper investment in time, support, and relationship-building to achieve systemic changes. Thus, the CTG Network was launched to stay—a long-term initiative that convened cities Living Cities had already established relationships with and who had demonstrated their commitment to closing racial wealth and income gaps.

Today, the Closing the Gaps Network spans 24 cities across the United States, with an ambitious goal to grow to 30 cities by the summer of 2025. At its core, the network exists to break down systemic barriers and create sustainable, long-lasting pathways to economic equity for Black, Latine, and Indigenous communities.

To bring this vision to life, Living Cities facilitates two major cohort initiatives with cities in the network: Breaking Barriers to Business (B3) and the Closing the Gaps Cohort (CTG Cohort). These efforts target systemic challenges in business and homeownership and provide participating cities with catalytic grants, expert guidance, and tailored technical assistance.

Let's start with Breaking Barriers to Business, or B3. In partnership with the Truist Foundation and Main Street America, this initiative focuses on empowering small businesses owned by people of color in five cities: Atlanta, Charlotte, Memphis, Nashville, and Miami. These cities are currently in the implementation phase, working to dismantle systemic obstacles between local government agencies and community-based organizations to ensure entrepreneurs of color have access to the knowledge and financial resources needed to thrive.

The CTG Cohort, supported by Wells Fargo and Citi Foundation, operates in Austin, TX; Albuquerque, NM; Memphis; Minneapolis; Rochester; and St. Paul. This initiative takes a focused approach to expanding wealth-building opportunities through both business and homeownership. These efforts are in the evaluation phase, using stories of impact to encourage replication in cities across the broader network.

But what truly sets these initiatives apart is their data-driven and community-centered approach. Participating cities work collaboratively with local stakeholders—nonprofits, businesses, city departments, chambers of commerce, and more—to ensure that their strategies address real systemic barriers and create tangible opportunities for residents to build generational wealth.

As of today, St. Paul has used Living Cities' support to create new financial tools that allow business owners to transition to cooperative ownership and address displacement in the city's historically Black neighborhood. Miami and Charlotte are also leveraging our investments to support business owners of color in key commercial corridors.

I'm your host, Justin Charles, and you're watching—or listening to—Live with Living Cities.

In today's episode, we'll explore how the Closing the Gaps Network, born out of a transformative period, has become a force for change.

So how does all of this connect to the Year of Reckoning and Living Cities' broader mission to confront systemic racism?

Let's go back to 2020—a year that changed everything.

Year of Reckoning

2020 began with echoes of division and unrest—a storm brewing beneath the surface. By January, a new chapter of American history was unfolding.

Across the country, the COVID-19 pandemic raged, claiming millions of lives and triggering nationwide lockdowns. The first impeachment of President Trump brought new tensions to an already fragile nation. Communities were reeling, unsure what might come next.

But as these seismic shifts continued, something else was happening—something that would spark a reckoning with America's deepest wound.

On May 25, George Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. The killing was captured on camera, watched by millions. The world was horrified, angered, and finally moved to action.

Protests filled streets across the globe, and the call for racial justice reached a fever pitch.

For Living Cities, this marked a pivotal moment—a time when the urgent need to confront the lasting effects of systemic racism became clearer than ever.

In early 2020, we had already embarked on what we called the Year of Reckoning, a year-long deep dive to help leaders from our newly created CTG Network cities—Albuquerque, Austin, Memphis, Rochester, St. Paul, and Minneapolis—increase their racial equity awareness and confront inequities that remain deeply woven into our society.

Then George Floyd was murdered—in Minneapolis, one of our network cities. This horrific event not only shook the world but also deeply galvanized the work of the Year of Reckoning.

What began as a commitment to racial equity earlier that year was now invigorated by a global call to action.

Conversations that were once focused on a few cities suddenly became a national dialogue about race, exclusion, and equity.

And Living Cities was ready.

So what exactly did the Year of Reckoning do?

Living Cities granted over \$3.2 million to support cities in implementing community-driven solutions to some of the biggest issues facing Black, Hispanic, Indigenous, Asian American, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander communities—and other historically marginalized populations.

Here are a few of the key initiatives:

- Cities created community-owned land trust models, giving residents control over how land is developed.
- They expanded affordable housing options on city-owned land, particularly for Native and Black residents.
- New co-ownership models for homes and businesses were developed—by and for young people of color.
- They funded community-based business incubators, helping launch and grow businesses owned by historically excluded populations.
- They provided financial support to descendants of displaced residents seeking homeownership.

This wasn't about checking boxes. This was about rethinking how cities serve their communities—and how they can intentionally repair harm caused by systemic racism.

The power of the Year of Reckoning came from working with communities, not just for them.

Cities received deep support and technical assistance, including racial equity training from the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond. City representatives learned how to analyze data, listen to residents, and understand the landscape of wealth distribution in light of their racial histories.

And by confronting their pasts and listening to their people, these cities are now changing how policies are made—creating more opportunities for homeownership, business ownership, and generational wealth-building for people of color.

The Impact

Now—what’s been the impact of the Year of Reckoning?

In a word? Transformative.

Cities have taken community feedback and used it to inform their strategic plans. We’re seeing new programs centered on racial equity in housing and business ownership.

St. Paul and Memphis are already shifting power and resources back to historically excluded communities.

Affordable housing is being co-created with residents. New pathways for homeownership are being carved out. Cities are finally learning to reflect on their histories—and how past policies still affect people today.

This isn’t about short-term wins—it’s about building a foundation for an equitable future.

The Year of Reckoning was just the beginning.

Over the next three years, these cities will continue to implement their strategies, deepen relationships with community members, and hold themselves accountable for creating real, lasting change.

Joe Scantlebury:

One of the most optimistic things we saw after the Year of Reckoning—post George Floyd—was that across the country, people believed we could do better.

We saw a horrific, public lynching—on video—and we were forced to watch because we were home during the pandemic. We couldn’t avoid seeing it. And Americans said, “We can do better than that. We will do better than that.”

Throughout the pandemic, cities had to focus on taking care of their people. That’s what cities do—you live proximately with your neighbors, and you care once you recognize them as your neighbors.

Cities don’t have time to dither. In real time, they must solve problems: snow removal, crime, housing, poverty.

Our goal is to bring together city leaders, community leaders, philanthropies, and investors—to create safe spaces for real talk on real issues. That’s how we move together. That’s how we build the economy of the future—the economy we deserve.

And we have to start today—for the children born this year who will inherit a pluralistic nation in 2045.

Cross-City Learning & Closing

Justin Charles:

The work doesn’t stop there.

We focus on cross-city learning communities—spaces where cities can share what’s working, what’s not, and how to adapt innovative solutions to their own context.

The idea is simple: no city should have to start from scratch when we can learn together.

This is how systems change happens.

It’s local, it’s collaborative, and it’s rooted in equity.

Call to Action

Thanks for joining us today on Live with Living Cities.

Your time, curiosity, and commitment to change mean the world to us. We can’t wait to have you back for our next episode.

Want to get involved? Visit www.livingcities.org to learn more. Subscribe to this podcast and share it with someone who cares about building a more equitable future.

Are you part of an organization interested in joining Living Cities? Reach out at lcinfo@livingcities.org with the subject line “Member.”

Interested in having your city become a strategic partner in the Closing the Gaps Network? Email us at lcinfo@livingcities.org with the subject line “CTG Network.”

Before we go, we want to give a huge thank-you to the incredible organizations that make this work possible:

The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Surdna Foundation, Truist Foundation, Citi Foundation, Deutsche Bank, The Gates Foundation, McKnight Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, The JPB Foundation, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The M&T Charitable Foundation, The

Prudential Foundation, Melville Charitable Trust, MetLife Foundation, Morgan Stanley, WK Kellogg Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, and the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation.

Thank you for walking with us in the fight to close the racial wealth gap and create lasting change in cities across the country.

Until next time—stay engaged, stay inspired, and let's keep working together toward a future where equity is a reality for all.

I'm Justin Charles, and this has been Live with Living Cities.