



Angela Glover Blackwell
Founder and CEO, PolicyLink

Promise Zones Provide Opportunity and a Pathway to an Equitable Future

Posted: 11/06/2014 3:04 pm EST Updated: 11/06/2014 3:59 pm EST

In an area where many families live in homes without running water or telephone service, where nearly one-third of the children live in poverty, and proper skills training and education seem out of reach, building a better life for the next generation can seem impossible. For the Choctaw Nation in Oklahoma, such conditions may have described their present, but they were determined not to let it be their future. Government officials, agency representatives, economic development groups, and other leaders [came together](#) to form the Revitalizing our Communities Commission of Southeastern Oklahoma to apply for a Promise Zone designation.

First announced by President Obama in his 2013 State of the Union address, the Promise Zone Initiative [aims to build a broader, stronger middle-class](#) through partnering with local communities and businesses to create a pathway to greater economic stability for struggling families. The Promise Zones program was developed to create jobs, increase economic security, expand educational opportunities, increase access to affordable housing, and improve public safety. The first five Promise Zones -- San Antonio, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Southeastern Kentucky, and the Choctaw Nation -- were designated in January of this year. Ultimately, 20 sites will be selected within three years.

While it does not come directly with financial support, a Promise Zone designation boosts the chances of awardees receiving funds by cutting red tape to reach existing federal funds. For example, a Promise Zone designation provides extra points when applying for existing competitive grants. Because such grants are awarded based on a point system and because they are so competitive, every extra point in an application counts. In San Antonio, the Promise Zone designation [resulted](#) in \$27.3 million in federal grants to local institutions, including IDEA Public Schools, the San Antonio Independent School District, the George Gervin Youth Center, San Antonio for Growth on the EastSide or SAGE, St. Philip's College, and others.

Promise Zones also help communities organize, align their interests, and bring different partners to the table. In LA, the Promise Zone designation helped focus energy and engagement within the designated zone. The same is true in Philadelphia, where advocates have seen an increase in energy and engagement beyond the original organizations that were part of the application process.

Promise Zones restore the opportunity of economic mobility allowing the next generation's future to be determined not by where they are born, but by the chance to reach their true potential. Los Angeles [received \\$36 million](#) for a program that will offer a full range of social and education services to students and their families to provide "cradle to career" support.

According to Dixon Slingerland, executive director of [Youth Policy Institute](#), the organization overseeing most of LA's federal funding, the idea behind the program is that schools become community centers where families can access whatever they need: food, prenatal care, mental health services, and job training. This approach provides support for young people before they are born until they are on a career path, greatly improving their chances of success and creating a stronger future workforce.

As for the Choctaw Nation, water and sewer infrastructure improvements will let the Nation take full advantage of its natural, historical, and cultural resources. With the right infrastructure in place, the tribe's varied resources offer tremendous potential for small businesses and entrepreneurship development. The tribe is also focusing heavily on education, including creating a stronger workforce-training pipeline and expanding opportunities for entry into STEM careers and the jobs of the future.

The Obama administration is receiving applications for the second round of Promise Zone designations. The deadline for the second round is 5pm ET on November 21, 2014. More information can be found [here](#). Now is the time to apply and renew the promise of a brighter, better future.