

EMAN INTERMEDIATE COHORT

CFLeads Economic Mobility Action Network Case Study

Forging a path to big dreams in Appalachian Kentucky

On a map of Central Appalachia showing levels of economic thriving, Appalachian Kentucky—the commonwealth’s mountainous eastern half—appears the most distressed. That’s not the full story, though, of this region of 1.6 million people aspiring to stop “dreaming medium,” reject legacies of decades of extraction by outsider fossil fuel companies, and break the cycle of intergenerational poverty.



Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky

Fifteen years ago, a group of leaders starting a scrappy new community foundation listened to people across the region and learned they want the same things people all over the country want: strong education, housing they can afford where they want to live, vibrant arts and recreation, healthy neighborhoods and lives, and—living as they do in a flood plain—environmental resilience.

Today, 12 affiliated foundations in 20 Appalachian Kentucky counties are developing strategic investment plans tailored to each community. Leaders here believe no one should have to leave home to do well and build wealth, and they’re investing in local entrepreneurs and downtowns to make good, livable jobs a reality for more people.

Led by the [Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky](#), the region was part of [CFLeads’](#) Economic Mobility Action Network (EMAN) Intermediate Cohort in 2024–2025.

CFLeads

Community Foundations
Leading Change



COMMUNITY FOUNDATION:

Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES USED:

Engaging residents, working across sectors, and marshalling resources

SUMMARY:

Leaders in this rural region believe no one should have to leave the place they call home to do well and build wealth. They’re investing in local entrepreneurs and downtowns to make good, livable jobs a reality for more people.



“We’re working toward a future in which we have thriving communities that are invested in themselves, and we’re generating wealth that is going to stay right here in Appalachia.”

Jessica Bledsoe

Director of Impact Investing, Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky

The Vision

Leaders in Appalachian Kentucky envision a future in which residents can dream big and reach for the stars without leaving, and in which hard work, entrepreneurship, and community connection lead to prosperity, opportunity, and wellbeing for all—across generations.

The Strategy

Embracing its identity as a rural development hub for Appalachian Kentucky, the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky is working with partners to connect entrepreneurs to local assets and capital and help residents build durable local wealth. The Foundation’s five integrated strategies for advancing economic mobility are Growing Economies, Supporting Kids and Youth, Promoting Hope and Opportunity, Strengthening Nonprofits and Leadership, and Building Resilient Communities. A key to the region’s economic mobility efforts is [Invest 606](#), an impact investing and business development initiative that helps launch, accelerate, and fund small businesses.

The EMAN Challenge

The Appalachian Kentucky team entered the EMAN Intermediate Cohort asking two related questions:

- How do we foster a culture of philanthropy in a community with limited donor engagement?
- How do we build robust support for small business owners who need early-stage financial backing and don’t yet qualify for the assistance of Community Development Financial Institutions?

How Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky Is Leveraging a Community Leadership Approach

The Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky is **engaging residents**. Its affiliate foundations work closely with residents to plan new initiatives and roll out disaster responses. For example, the Foundation’s People Ready Communities, a partnership with Berea College’s Brushy Fork Leadership Institute, has trained folks from six communities in the Foundation’s affiliate network on how to attract new residents and give residents reasons to stay.

The Foundation is also **working across sectors** and **marshalling resources**. It is partnering with local governments, regional networks, and higher education institutions to coordinate housing, workforce, and entrepreneurial development. In addition, the Foundation is channeling public, private, and philanthropic capital toward equitable development and disaster recovery.



CONSIDER THIS:

What steps can you take to ensure you're engaging with people in every corner of your community?

The Partners

Among the partners working with the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky on economic mobility are:

- Berea College's [Brushy Fork Leadership Institute](#), which strengthens local and regional leadership in central Appalachia.
- [Mountain Association](#), a nonprofit Community Development Financial Institution that provides lending, business support, and advocacy for policy change to create a new economy in Kentucky.
- University of Kentucky's [Blueprint Kentucky](#), formerly the Community Economic Development Initiative of Kentucky, which nurtures economic development, healthy communities, and community leadership.
- [Community Farm Alliance](#), which advocates for farms and farm workers.
- [Shaping Our Appalachian Region](#), a nonprofit that invests in communities and attracts new people to the region.
- [Appalachian Investors Alliance](#), which promotes venture funding in Appalachia.

- [Appalachian Regional Commission](#), a partnership between the federal government and state governments.

The Journey

Since its creation in 2009, the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky has revitalized downtowns, expanded workforce training opportunities in trades and green energy, and addressed barriers to affordable, climate-resilient housing.

In a disaster-prone and vulnerable region, the Foundation and its partners have learned that economic mobility is impossible without quick, powerful regional responses to crises. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, the Foundation and its affiliates raised and awarded over \$1 million in grants to six Appalachian Kentucky downtowns, 207 businesses, and 138 small family farms, saving nearly 1,000 jobs.

In the wake of catastrophic flooding in 2022, the Foundation followed a similar playbook. It brought together nonprofit and local government partners to swiftly fill gaps in federal aid. In addition to disbursing

nearly \$19 million, the Foundation also used private donations of land and resources to develop a 56 single family home neighborhood for families displaced by the flood.

Even during their participation in the EMAN cohort, the Appalachian Kentucky team was called to respond to disasters: a multi-county flood in February 2025, for which they distributed \$1.3 million for recovery efforts, and a tornado in May 2025, for which they distributed \$900,000.

Like other rural areas, Appalachian Kentucky has learned that they need their own definition of economic mobility.

“Economic mobility is most often discussed within an urban context,” says Kristin Walker Collins, CEO of Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky. “But while moving away from a region can increase an individual’s economic mobility, it might also limit the economic progress of a community or region. In Appalachian Kentucky, we’re asking, ‘How do we balance our work and discussions of this dynamic?’”

Wins So Far

- Launched in 2017, in its first eight years Invest 606 gave out \$1.8 million in strategic grants and \$5.5 million in disaster recovery grants, made more than \$2 million in impact investments, created more than 2,000 jobs, and supported more than 750 businesses and nonprofits.

“EMAN has helped us realize that even though we are small, rural, and under-resourced, we can still do work that makes a difference.”

Kristin Walker Collins
CEO, Foundation for
Appalachian Kentucky

What’s Next

- The Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky and its partners will continue to focus on Invest 606 and on changing how people talk about success and belonging in Appalachian Kentucky. “There used to be a narrative of having to move away from Appalachia and change the way you talk if you wanted to be successful,” says Les Roll, Special Projects Manager at Mountain Association, a Community Development Financial Institution with offices in Berea, Hazard, and Prestonsburg, Kentucky. “It’s switching to ‘You can make a life here as an entrepreneur or small business owner.’”
- The Appalachian Kentucky partners are also making the case for collecting data that will help them better understand economic outcomes in their communities. “We’re working on a plan to identify specific data points to track across our region and across time to see how our work is making an impact,” Collins says.



CONSIDER THIS:

What narratives about your community are barriers to your work? What narratives do you want to replace them with?

Why Economic Mobility Matters



No matter where you live or what background you come from, we all want—and deserve—to build a better future for ourselves, our families, and our neighbors.

But not everyone in every community has the same access to quality education, good life-sustaining jobs, housing they can afford in the places they want to live, a safe environment, and civic participation and justice.

“True economic mobility comes when communities work together to remove barriers and create pathways for people to succeed. The EMAN community foundations and their partners are showing how local leadership, collaboration, and trust can create lasting change for everyone.”

Mary L. Thomas
President and CEO, CFLeads

CFLeads utilizes [Urban Institute's three-part definition](#) and defines economic mobility as the ability of people to improve their economic status, have power and autonomy over their lives, and be engaged in and valued by their community.

To communities, economic mobility means that people are able to put food on the table and have more time to spend with their kids or doing things they love. It means kids have good education options, and adults can build generational wealth through buying a home, leave a legacy, and retire comfortably. It means people feel at home in their community, can find good jobs there, and have the power to shape a brighter future for everyone who lives there.

Economic mobility means people have enough, however they define it.

CFLeads Economic Mobility Action Network (EMAN)

Community foundations catalyze change and are trusted place-based partners who work across the nonprofit, public, and private sectors to create thriving communities where all people can prosper.

In that spirit, from September 2024 to October 2025, CFLeads brought together 19 communities to learn from each other as they worked to boost economic mobility over the long term.

The 19 community foundations represented in EMAN are leading the way toward economic mobility by engaging residents, sharing data, working across sectors, marshalling resources, and shaping public policy.

How will YOU advance economic mobility in your community?

Start your journey by learning more about [CFLeads' work on this issue](#) and exploring economic mobility resources from Urban Institute, Results for America, and Opportunity Insights.