

EMAN ADVANCED COHORT

CFLeads Economic Mobility Action Network Case Study

Helping workers move ahead in Greater Buffalo, New York

This “City of Good Neighbors” and surrounding counties in Western New York strive to be a place where everyone can not just survive but have a good paying job and a thriving life.



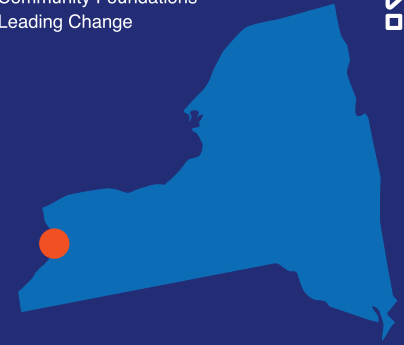
Community Foundation
for Greater Buffalo

Leaders in Buffalo, NY, envision a day when thousands more young people achieve a high school diploma, incomes have grown by \$3.5 billion, and more people can afford quality childcare, transportation, and homes. In that future, they’ve closed today’s large gaps in income, and the region is \$12 billion wealthier, which benefits everyone who lives there.

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

CFLeads

Community Foundations
Leading Change



COMMUNITY FOUNDATION:

Community Foundation
for Greater Buffalo

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES USED:

Leading across sectors, shaping public policy, and marshalling resources

SUMMARY:

Western New York’s “City of Good Neighbors” strives to be a place where the standard is not just survival, and everyone can have a good paying job and a thriving life.



The Vision

“We envision a vibrant and equitable Greater Buffalo region where every individual thrives,” says Maria Whyte, Chief Community Impact Officer for Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo. “We want everyone to be able to exercise choice and agency and dream about the future. We want our kids to have the best opportunities to reach their full potential and find fulfilling careers that allow them to raise their families here as well.”

The Strategy

The Community Foundation and its partners are building an education and career pipeline that will lift up and support those struggling most to enter or advance in the workforce today: young people who aren't working or in school and workers who live at or just above the poverty line and rely on public assistance. In the EMAN Advanced Cohort, they focused on Erie County, an area of nearly 1 million people.

“Buffalo has a lot to be proud of. We've linked arms as a community and we understand that there isn't one silver bullet solution that will allow us to leave the city a better place for future generations.”

Betsy Constantine
President and CEO
Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo

The EMAN Challenge

While participating in EMAN, Greater Buffalo focused on a particular piece of its strategy: developing supports so residents can move beyond the “benefits cliff.” This phenomenon, which occurs across the United States, prevents workers from advancing in their careers because a bump in salary may mean losing subsidies for basic needs like childcare, food, and housing, leaving them worse off overall.

How Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo Is Leveraging a Community Leadership Approach

The Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo is **leading across sectors**. Together with Buffalo's regional chamber, the Buffalo Niagara Partnership, the Foundation is spearheading a statewide coalition that advocates for policy reforms to eliminate the benefits cliff.

As part of the coalition, the foundation is **shaping public policy**. Alongside collaborative lawmakers, the coalition developed and is advocating for a policy platform based on best practices from other states. The platform would:

- authorize benefits programs to disregard income above cut-offs for six months after a worker gets a raise, so they can become financially stable before benefits cease;
- allow an increase in the asset limit up to \$10,000, from about \$2,500, depending on the benefit;
- allow job training and education to fulfill work requirements; and
- establish a state-wide task force to examine the issue further and make recommendations to state lawmakers and New York's budget office.

Finally, the foundation is **marshalling resources** by promoting economic mobility as part of its annual competitive grant process.



CONSIDER THIS:

How are you engaging with people in your community who might have to make a choice between a career path that could lead to more opportunity in the future and benefits that help them pay the bills now?

The Partners

Public-private partnerships working to improve economic mobility in Greater Buffalo include the following:

- [Say Yes Buffalo](#), a collective impact partnership co-created by the Community Foundation that aims to boost the local economy by helping more low-income students graduate and go on to college. This partnership brings together the Buffalo Public School District, parents, the Buffalo Teachers Federation, the Buffalo Association of Administrators and Supervisors, higher education, the City of Buffalo, Erie County, and a diverse group of Buffalo area corporate, non-profit, and philanthropic organizations
- [Greater Buffalo Racial Equity Roundtable](#), first convened by the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo in 2015. This group of more than 350 partners advances racial equity to achieve an expanded, inclusive economy that lifts everyone.

- [Buffalo Futures](#), which empowers 16- to 24-year-olds by supporting their basic needs, workforce training, and careers.

Important partners in the work include the [United Way of Buffalo and Erie County](#), [Erie County Government](#), [Buffalo Niagara Partnership](#), [Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta](#), and the [John R. Oishei Foundation](#).

The Journey

By participating in the EMAN Advanced Cohort, leaders in Buffalo say they learned that successful economic mobility strategies do more than boost people's economic success. They also help people feel like they belong and bolster their power over their own lives.

Through EMAN, the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo identified important new partners to invite into their coalition, including unions and people directly affected by the benefits cliff. The coalition also plans to gather new data to understand which parts of their region are most impacted.

“Oftentimes we assemble people from the community, we listen, and it stops there. But we’ve learned our job is to assemble, listen, and act.”

Lisa Chimera
Deputy County Executive
Erie County, New York

The Foundation also learned that a lot of employers don’t even know the benefits cliff is a problem, says Steven Finch, a member of the foundation’s board and former business leader. In response to this challenge, the coalition gathered a group of Western New York business leaders to learn about the benefits cliff. Finch says being able to interact and network with board members from other community foundations during EMAN convenings has led him to this sort of deeper involvement outside the boardroom.

Finch says, “As board members, we asked each other, ‘Are we leveraging our abilities to help the organizations we represent to move these issues forward? How can we use our influence in the business community?’”

Wins So Far

- Employ Buffalo Niagara and the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta developed a [benefits cliff calculator](#) for employees, employers, and workforce development agencies. When employers and policymakers better understand the trade-off employees must make—advancing in their careers vs. having support for housing, food, childcare, or healthcare now—they can come up with a plan to bridge the gap.
- The Foundation granted \$20,000 to Erie County, which bolstered the county’s ability to land \$9 million in state funding. The county will use the funding to provide cash assistance to families navigating the benefits cliff.

What’s Next

- The Foundation plans to refine its demographic data to provide a more precise estimate of the number of people affected by the benefits cliff in each of Greater Buffalo’s ZIP Codes and legislative districts.
- The statewide benefits cliff coalition is advocating that the governor establish a statewide benefits cliff task force. This entity would coordinate efforts to study the issue across the state, advance statewide legislation, and fund solutions.
- The Foundation aims to include residents in the coalition and elevate their voices with lawmakers and the news media.



CONSIDER THIS:

Who has—or could have, or should have—the power to change how things work in your community? Consider making a “power map” of everyone you can think of and strategizing how to involve them in your work.

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.