

EMAN ADVANCED COHORT

CFLeads Economic Mobility Action Network Case Study

Stability now, future prosperity for all in Cambridge, Massachusetts

Home to two of the world's most famous and prestigious universities and a thriving biotech industry, this city of 120,000 people on the Charles River is defined by juxtapositions: success and shortfall, wealth and poverty. Cambridge, MA, is a city of many firsts, but not everyone benefits from its success, and the gaps are widening.

Leaders in Cambridge want this seat of knowledge, information, culture, and technology to also be a place where all residents have what they need to do and be well, be a part of the city's fabric, and feel at home.

They're experimenting with innovative approaches like guaranteed income for families earning up to 250% of the federal poverty line, strengthening the city's emergency food system, and gathering data to understand how to improve education for all students.

Led by [Cambridge Community Foundation](#), the city was part of [CFLeads](#)' Economic Mobility Action Network (EMAN) Advanced Cohort in 2024-2025.



CFLeads

Community Foundations
Leading Change



COMMUNITY FOUNDATION:

Cambridge Community Foundation

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES USED:

Working across sectors, commissioning and sharing local data, and shaping public policy

SUMMARY:

The city that is home to two of the world's most famous universities and a thriving biotech industry is experimenting with innovative approaches to economic mobility and strengthening the social safety net.



“Economic mobility is when people have the resources to make choices within the system, like where and how to live, what food they get and how they get it, instead of having to choose to do A at the detriment of B. It means people aren’t in crisis and can be actively engaged and involved in advocating or organizing for or against something in their communities.”

Christina Turner
Vice President of Programs and Grantmaking,
Cambridge Community Foundation

The Vision

Leaders in Cambridge envision a city that supports families so they can afford the cost of living there and build wealth, and where children can learn and grow into young people who have access to the post-secondary opportunities of their choice.

The Strategy

To grapple with the city’s growing income inequality, Cambridge Community Foundation is working with partners on a two-generation approach. This means providing material support to people to help them make ends meet now while also giving the next generation the resources, education, and support they need to reach their goals.

The EMAN Challenge

The Cambridge team came to the EMAN Advanced Cohort aiming to ensure the nearly 2,000 families in the city’s \$500-a-month guaranteed income project, [Rise Up Cambridge](#), received continued support after the 18-month program ended in February 2025. The team wanted to learn about strategies to enable low-income families to build assets and achieve economic mobility without losing public benefits.

Rise Up followed a smaller guaranteed income pilot, [Cambridge RISE](#), and was made possible by \$22 million in American Rescue Plan Act funding.

How Cambridge Community Foundation Is Leveraging a Community Leadership Approach

Cambridge Community Foundation is **working across sectors** and facilitating collaborations among government, nonprofits, universities, and the private sector on projects such as Cambridge RISE, Rise Up Cambridge, an ongoing [equity audit](#) of Cambridge Public Schools, the Education Equity Forum, and the Foundation’s [Food Access and Security Initiative](#).

The Foundation is also **commissioning and sharing local data** and **shaping public policy**. In 2025, Foundation staff analyzed economic and demographic data on Rise Up families to inform what a successor cash assistance program, using city dollars, might look like. In the spring, staff from Cambridge Community Foundation, the anti-poverty agency Cambridge Economic Opportunity Committee, and city government presented their recommendations to Cambridge City Council, which then asked the City Manager’s office to return with more refined policy recommendations for funding cash benefits.

The City of Cambridge and Cambridge Community Foundation also funded a rigorous, community-centered research study on Rise Up Cambridge, which culminated in [a report](#) published by research partner MDRC in February 2026. The two-year, mixed-methods evaluation examines how cash payments were used, outcomes for participating families, changes over time, and subgroup differences.



CONSIDER THIS:

How might your community ensure it is taking a multi-generation approach to its work to advance economic mobility?

The Partners

Key economic mobility partners in the city include:

- [The City of Cambridge](#), especially the City's [Department of Human Service Programs](#)
- [Cambridge City Council](#)
- [Cambridge Economic Opportunity Committee](#)
- [Cambridge Public Schools](#)
- [Cambridge Housing Authority](#)
- [Cambridge Redevelopment Authority](#)
- [Just-a-Start](#)
- [Homeowner's Rehab Inc.](#)
- [My Brother's Keeper Cambridge](#)
- Other nonprofit partners working in food security, housing, economic security, and education

“These are the civic leadership activities that community foundations are uniquely positioned to do: lifting up issues, connecting the community around an issue, convening public-private partnerships, telling the story, raising money for the bigger idea. For me, participation in EMAN helped clarify the role of the Cambridge Community Foundation, or any community foundation, as the central player that adds value beyond what each individual organization we fund contributes.”

Geeta Pradhan

President, Cambridge Community Foundation

The Journey

Cambridge Community Foundation began work in the economic mobility space well before launching its 2023–2028 strategic plan. Then the plan codified the Foundation’s core approach. Two of its pillars are economic mobility (moving families toward economic mobility by supporting food security, housing stability, economic security, and education equity) and social cohesion (the ability of the community to come together through the arts, innovation, and engagement).

A \$1.1 million multiyear investment, the Food Access and Security Initiative came out of the strategic plan. It has so far helped eight nonprofit grantees with food pantries increase their hours, add staff, reduce customer wait times, and purchase, among other things, culturally appropriate foods. The initiative has also allowed pantries to integrate additional services and referrals and become resource hubs.

The Cambridge team says the EMAN Advanced cohort taught them to step back and think about economic mobility more broadly.

“Now we’re thinking about how our economic mobility approach shapes all our initiatives,” says Christina Turner, Vice President of Programs and Grantmaking at Cambridge Community Foundation. “Now we’re asking, ‘How do we think about the comprehensive work and build out outcomes and a theory of change not just for food security and cash assistance, but for everything that contributes to economic mobility, including social cohesion.’”

Wins So Far

- Through the Food Access and Security Initiative, the city has gained stronger infrastructure to store fresh, healthy emergency food. Now the organizations in the Cambridge Food Pantry Network are discussing shared buying and staffing strategies, says Cambridge Community Foundation President Geeta Pradhan. “They’re literally mobilizing together.” During the 2025 federal government shutdown, the groups planned how to support families and elders if their SNAP benefits didn’t come, and the [Foundation and the City](#) committed a combined \$500,000 to combat food insecurity.
- [BAY-CASH](#), launched in 2025 after nearly five years of planning, provides \$1,200-a-month stipends to 15 young people who experienced homelessness so that they can live independently. The program was seeded with funding from the Foundation and received American Rescue Plan Act funds from the City of Cambridge. Researchers from Northeastern University will evaluate the three-year program.
- Cambridge Community Foundation released the Equity Audit in February 2026 at a public event that included a panel discussion with local, state, and national education experts. The school district is

beginning their next planning process with the Equity Audit as one of three key foundational documents to shape the strategy.

What’s Next

- Cambridge Community Foundation is working with EMAN consultant [ESG](#), experts in systems change, to develop a theory of change for how partners in Cambridge will make economic mobility and greater social cohesion a reality in their city.
- After a Cambridge affordable grocery store shuttered, the Foundation used a portion of its \$50,000 EMAN grant to fund a feasibility study for a new nonprofit grocery store in Cambridge. The study’s food sourcing plan revealed that a new store would create more competition in the food supply system. To limit the already substantial strain on local food pantries, the coalition pivoted and will revisit the idea in the future.
- The Foundation’s [Culture Connects Cambridge](#) arts initiative is granting \$1.4 million over three years to local organizations using the arts to advance social cohesion.
- City Council will be briefed on data from the Rise Up Cambridge research report.



CONSIDER THIS:

How do the pillars of your community foundation’s strategic plan connect to economic mobility goals?

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.