

EMAN ADVANCED COHORT

CFLeads Economic Mobility Action Network Case Study

A strong collaborative for opportunity and change in the Carolinas

FOUNDATION FOR
THE CAROLINAS

 **Leading on
Opportunity**

Every day, about 117 people move to Charlotte, NC, and the surrounding region of 2.8 million people, one of the nation's fastest growing places. Knowing growth without intention won't benefit everyone equally, leaders in this finance hub are laser-focused on not leaving anyone behind.

Driven to action a decade ago by Charlotte's bottom-of-the-list ranking among 50 U.S. cities in an [influential 2014 economic mobility study](#), Charlotte and Mecklenburg County have made powerful strides toward boosting opportunity for more people.

They're using data, strategy, and policy to get—and keep—everyone on the same page, measure progress, and fix the things that matter most to people who live here, from transportation to housing to childcare. They're also ready to expand their work and bring their approach to [12 other North and South Carolina](#) counties and communities across the nation.

Led by [Foundation For The Carolinas](#) and its economic mobility initiative, [Leading on Opportunity](#), the greater Charlotte region was part of [CFLeads](#)' Economic Mobility Action Network (EMAN) Advanced Cohort in 2024–2025.

CFLeads

Community Foundations
Leading Change



COMMUNITY FOUNDATION:

Foundation For The Carolinas and its Leading on Opportunity initiative

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES USED:

Commissioning and sharing local data, engaging residents, shaping public policy

SUMMARY:

Leaders in economic mobility action, Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, NC, are using data, strategy, and policy to get—and keep—everyone on the same page, measure progress, and fix the things that matter most to residents.



“We’ll know we’ve succeeded when we wake up every day with all our region’s leaders thinking about how we can best care for everybody who lives here.”

AJ Calhoun

Director of Research and Impact
Leading on Opportunity

The Vision

Leaders here envision a day when all children—without exception—have the freedom and chance to dream, pursue their dreams, and live a purposeful life.

“As a person who moved here for the economic mobility of my family, I envision a future in which there are multiple options for my daughter for her education,” says Sherri Chisholm, Executive Director of Leading on Opportunity. “And if she decided to stay here when she was older, she could afford a house, and public transit would take her wherever she needed to go.”

The Strategy

Partners in Greater Charlotte are advancing economic mobility across the region by building data tools that center evidence and what matters to the community; equipping and emboldening civic leaders to advance policies that change systems; and building coalitions through the [Leading on Opportunity Council](#), a cross-sector working group.

The EMAN Challenge

The Greater Charlotte team joined the EMAN Advanced Cohort wanting to expand successful strategies beyond Mecklenburg County.

“As our city and region grow, challenges such as housing, transportation, childcare, and philanthropy demand regional solutions,” says AJ Calhoun, Leading on Opportunity’s Director of Research and Impact.

The team focused on three primary strategies for taking their work beyond Charlotte-Mecklenburg: expanding their data tools, broadening their advocacy to state and county policies, and getting donors on board.

How Foundation for the Carolinas Is Leveraging a Community Leadership Approach

Foundation for the Carolinas and Leading on Opportunity are **commissioning and sharing local data** and **engaging residents**. Their recently updated [Opportunity Compass](#) blends hard metrics with community voice. The Compass includes resident-weighted indicators—gathered through surveys and workshops in English and Spanish with over 500 residents—to ensure the most pressing community concerns are reflected in how partners measure success. [Compass Workshops](#), held in English and Spanish, help nonprofit leaders, community advocates, and residents interpret data and apply it to their work.

Leading on Opportunity is also **shaping public policy** around housing, childcare, and transit. Specifically, Leading on Opportunity supported Charlotte’s 2040 Comprehensive Plan, which eliminated single-family zoning and set a bold vision to shape neighborhoods

so that most daily needs are just 10 minutes away. On childcare, Leading on Opportunity has partnered with business leaders to advocate for extending pandemic-era grants for providers. In 2025, Leading on Opportunity also leaned into promoting regional transit solutions that would connect people to opportunities across the growing metro area.



CONSIDER THIS:

What future could be made possible if your region achieves its economic mobility goals?

The Partners

Among the partners working with Leading on Opportunity are:

- [City of Charlotte](#)
- [Mecklenburg County](#)
- [Charlotte Housing Opportunity Investment Fund](#), which aims to fill the gap in affordable housing in the Charlotte area
- [Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools](#)
- [The Charlotte Executive Leadership Council](#), which is made up of CEOs from more than 25 of the region's largest employers

The Journey

Charlotte began focusing on economic mobility in 2014 when the city ranked 50th out of 50 cities on measures of economic mobility in the landmark paper "[Where is the Land of Opportunity?](#)" by Harvard University's Raj Chetty and several collaborators.

Many in Charlotte already knew their region had an economic mobility crisis. Chetty's findings gave the issue new urgency. The community seized the opportunity, convening corporate, nonprofit, community, and government leaders and creating Leading on Opportunity to spearhead the work that would follow. A process that engaged hundreds of people identified what matters most for economic mobility in Charlotte: child and family stability, early care and education, and college and career readiness, along with social capital and the impact of segregation.

In September 2024, a [follow-up study](#) by Chetty and his colleagues showed how much Charlotte had progressed. The city had moved from No. 50 to No. 38 and had made faster progress than all cities but two.

In the EMAN Advanced Cohort, the Charlotte-area team saw how their model could be a blueprint for others. “We’ve developed something unique,” Chisholm says. “We see an appetite from other community foundations to learn from us, and CFLeads is giving us a platform to clarify our model and share it.

Wins So Far

- “We’ve moved a billion dollars in the past 10 years towards economic mobility,” Chisholm says. The investment has included establishing universal pre-K and constructing more than 3,500 new affordable housing units.
- As a step toward expanding its work, Leading on Opportunity has recently hosted sessions for municipal leaders from the Cities of Charlotte, Davidson, and Pineville, NC, diving into policies that could improve economic mobility. The group is planning additional sessions for Mecklenburg County policymakers.

“Participating in EMAN confirmed for us that the kind of work pioneered by Leading on Opportunity in Charlotte is vital to communities across the country.”

Laura Yates Clark
President, Foundation For The Carolinas

What’s Next

- Leading on Opportunity will continue to promote the use of their updated Opportunity Compass among policymakers, funders, and nonprofit partners.
- Leading on Opportunity is providing peer coaching to fellow EMAN Advanced Cohort participants from Greater Richmond, VA, and the organization is looking to coach leaders from other cities, too.



CONSIDER THIS:

What top three issues your community faces could galvanize a wide range of people and institutions to work together to advance economic mobility for all? Who will you engage with to find out?

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.