

## EMAN ADVANCED COHORT

CFLeads Economic Mobility Action Network Case Study

# Building a powerful sense of belonging for all in Dubuque, Iowa

Many have heard of “Iowa nice”—a phrase that captures the state’s culture of politeness—but what about “Dubuque unique”? The seven-county region around Dubuque, IA, bounded to the east by the Mississippi River and home to 234,000 people, was once the window and door manufacturing capital of the world, thanks to timber brought downstream. The city itself, population 59,000, is one of the oldest west of the Mississippi.

Today, leaders in Dubuque recognize new immigrants’ potential to help drive the region’s economic growth and meet employers’ workforce needs. From 2010 to 2024, the foreign-born accounted for 187% of the area’s population growth. In response, a growing coalition is working to make the region and its workplaces welcoming for all, so everyone here can have a shot at a better future for themselves and their children.

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



CFLeads

Community Foundations  
Leading Change



### COMMUNITY FOUNDATION:

Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque

### COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES USED:

Commissioning and sharing local data and engaging residents

### SUMMARY:

Leaders in the region surrounding one of the oldest cities west of the Mississippi recognize new immigrants’ potential to help drive economic growth that benefits everyone.



“We want families with deep roots here and newcomers alike to know how to find their way in the community. Instead of just filling gaps for our workforce, we want to grow something stronger for the future so people have the tools and social connections to fulfill their version of success.”

**Nic Hockenberry**

Director of Workforce Programming  
Greater Dubuque Development Corporation  
and Board Member, Community Foundation  
of Greater Dubuque

## The Vision

*Leaders here envision a vibrant and inclusive Dubuque region where families' material needs are met and they have access to family-supporting jobs, no matter how long they've lived in the area.*

## The Strategy

Immigration is one of the primary demographic drivers in the region; unemployment is low, and employers say workforce is a major need. Yet immigrant populations are underemployed in many parts of northeast Iowa.

“Our community is resource rich, incredibly generous, and has a lot of opportunity, but with changing demographics we lack the connections to allow everyone to access those opportunities,” says Alex Baum, the

Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque's Director of Advocacy, Data, and Learning. “Our economic mobility strategy is creating a welcoming workforce environment and system and making sure everyone who comes into our community can take advantage of its benefits in a way that makes our entire community flourish.”

## The EMAN Challenge

The Foundation and its partners entered the EMAN advanced cohort asking

- How can we support immigrant populations and employers by helping businesses hire and retain immigrants in high quality, family-sustaining jobs?
- What are the most effective ways to help businesses of all sizes gain the cultural competency necessary to hire, support, and retain immigrant workers?
- How do we best promote economic mobility for each unique immigrant community?

## How Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque Is Leveraging a Community Leadership Approach

The Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque is **commissioning and sharing local data**. Over the years the Foundation has collaborated with Iowa University, MIT's USA Labs program, and the Greater Dubuque Development Corporation to collect data that has informed new initiatives on workforce, immigrant services, and more. During the EMAN Advanced Cohort, the Foundation and its partners dived into data from the [Opportunity Atlas](#), Opportunity Insights' dataset on economic mobility. They [presented findings on Dubuque](#) at a September 2025 [data walk](#), an interactive way to share and make sense of research with residents and community leaders.

The Foundation is also **engaging residents**. For example, it collected 3,000 ideas for new community projects from Dubuquers for its Envision 2030 project. Communitywide voting and a volunteer selection committee narrowed the ideas down to the [top 10](#), which were announced in October 2025.



### CONSIDER THIS:

**What are three assets that can help your community advance its economic mobility goals? What are three gaps you need to fill to reach your goals?**

## The Partners

Among the partners working with the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque on economic mobility are:

- The Better Together Committee, a strategic collaborative of more than 90 stakeholders, including members of immigrant groups, launched by the Community Foundation
- [Inclusive Dubuque](#), a collaborative network created by the Community Foundation to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion
- [University of Iowa Community Empowerment Law Project](#)
- [MIT Sloan School of Management USA Lab](#)
- City of Dubuque [Office of Economic Mobility](#)
- [Greater Dubuque Development Corporation](#)
- [Northeast Iowa Community College](#)

## The Journey

To advance economic mobility among immigrant populations, the Foundation has focused on bringing together a wide range of stakeholders to address the systemic barriers that prevent many immigrants from achieving family-sustaining careers

The Foundation's research on [the priorities and goals of immigrant residents](#) led to the launch in 2023 of the Better Together Committee, a diverse group that is taking on challenges and seizing opportunities related to immigrant and migrant populations in the Dubuque region. One focus is supporting international students at Dubuque-area colleges and universities.

Dubuque's EMAN team had planned to develop workforce pipelines to train immigrants and connect them to culturally competent local businesses.

“As a community foundation, we have influence and the responsibility to use it to be advocates and bring people together for the greater good. We want Dubuque to be a place where people are not just welcomed but where they feel they belong.”

Mary Jo Jean-Francois  
Vice President of Impact, Community  
Foundation of Greater Dubuque

But early in 2025, increased immigration enforcement was causing growing fear and uncertainty among Dubuque’s immigrant communities. The Foundation knew it had to take a new direction.

Conversations with EMAN peers helped the Dubuque team develop a new strategy: address pressing needs of immigrant populations and create a trusted communication network that can become a launching pad for future economic mobility efforts.

## Wins So Far

- The Foundation’s Project HOPE, an effort to boost economic mobility and end poverty, launched a workforce program called Opportunity Dubuque, which offers wrap-around support and funding to help people train for and gain certification in well-paying careers.
- After rethinking its team’s strategy during the EMAN cohort, the Foundation leveraged its partnerships to launch a series of collaborative initiatives focused on supporting Dubuque’s immigrant communities in the current political climate.

## What’s Next

- To fight misinformation among immigrant groups, the Foundation and its partners are working with local experts to develop a trusted community information network on communication channels immigrant communities frequently use, such as WhatsApp and Facebook. The MacArthur Foundation has funded a part-time facilitator for the project, called the Trusted Information Initiative. Funding from Press Forward and Delta Dental of Iowa Foundation will also support the effort.
- The Dubuque team also plans to use data collected during their participation in EMAN to apply for future funding for other economic mobility and civic engagement initiatives.



### CONSIDER THIS:

**If new developments or outside influences made it necessary to change your strategy or rethink part of it, who would you bring together to make a new plan?**

# 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.