

EMAN INTERMEDIATE COHORT

CFLeads Economic Mobility Action Network Case Study

Creating a new economic narrative in Fairfield County, Connecticut

Conveniently located between New York City and Boston, Fairfield County, CT, has long been known as a collection of bedroom communities where residents have strong connections to their towns and neighbors. But rising costs, residential segregation, and ever-widening income inequality mean affording to live in Fairfield County has become harder for many, especially people of color and workers in low-paying industries.



In a region—and a state—with higher income inequality than other parts of the nation, an ecosystem of individuals and organizations is using data and convening power to make the case for solutions that close gaps and foster inclusive economies where all can thrive. Their strategies include boosting equitable housing and homeownership, education and career opportunities, and access to healthcare.

Laser-focused on creating a new economic narrative with prosperity for all and racial equity at its center, partners in Fairfield County are taking action to put more residents on a pathway out of economic precarity and toward intergenerational wealth-building.

Led by [Fairfield County's Community Foundation](#), the region was part of [CFLeads](#)' Economic Mobility Action Network (EMAN) Intermediate Cohort in 2024–2025.

CFLeads

Community Foundations
Leading Change



COMMUNITY FOUNDATION:

Fairfield County's Community Foundation

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES USED:

Commissioning and disseminating local data and research, working across sectors, marshalling resources

SUMMARY:

A commuter county outside New York City is using data, its convening power, and narrative change to build will for solutions that foster inclusive economies where all can thrive.



“With our ties to the nonprofit, private, and public sectors, community foundations are unique hubs that can pull people together and shift conditions to create opportunity for everyone, making economic mobility a more realistic possibility.”

Mendi Blue-Paca

President and CEO, Fairfield County’s Community Foundation

The Vision

“We envision a connected region in which people understand that advancing equity is not a zero-sum game,” says Mendi Blue-Paca, President and CEO of Fairfield County’s Community Foundation. “Everyone has a stake in building an inclusive and resilient regional economy.”

The Strategy

The Community Foundation and its partners are building will and cross-sector partnerships to advance inclusive economic growth. They aim to create greater opportunity for Black and Latino residents and close gaps between them and white residents in housing and homeownership, education and careers, and civic engagement.

The EMAN Challenge

The Fairfield County team entered the EMAN Intermediate Cohort wanting to know how they might create a full spectrum of accessible and affordable housing options in the county’s communities. As the cohort progressed and the federal funding climate shifted, the team focused more broadly on strategies for shifting narratives and changing systems to create an economy that leaves no one behind.

How Fairfield County’s Community Foundation Is Leveraging a Community Leadership Approach

Fairfield County’s Community Foundation is **commissioning and sharing local data**. In March 2025, the Foundation, in partnership with DataHaven and Urban Institute released [“The Upside—Growth, Potential and the Future of Fairfield County, Connecticut,”](#) a report that quantifies the economic gains the region would enjoy if it eliminated racial disparities in housing, education, and workforce.

The Foundation used the report’s launch to accelerate its **work across sectors**. In June 2025, the Foundation’s [Upside Forum](#) brought together 125 leaders from a variety of sectors, including corporate CEOs, elected officials, Connecticut Governor’s Office staff, and nonprofit directors.

The Foundation has also created a CEO roundtable to boost corporations’ buy-in into a vision of a more equitable region and create a shared strategy for economic mobility.

The foundation is also **marshalling resources**. Over the years, it has worked with countywide funder collaboratives to support affordable housing development, early childhood systems, workforce development, and grassroots organizing.



CONSIDER THIS:

What narratives about economic mobility are obstacles to your work? What new narratives do you want to replace them with?

The Partners

Among the partners working with Fairfield County's Community Foundation on economic mobility are:

- The [CT Early Childhood Funders' Collaborative](#), a group of 22 philanthropies that helped establish a state Office of Early Childhood and aims to transform the state's early childhood systems
- The [Fairfield County Business Collaborative for Education Equity](#), whose 13 corporate philanthropies have invested \$1.1M in local nonprofits and \$100K in public school classroom projects and commissioned research on career pathways for young people
- [Supporting Organizing Work-CT](#), whose 15 members pool resources to strengthen the organizing capacity of Connecticut's grassroots organizations
- [Opening Doors Fairfield County](#), made up of 150 nonprofits and other leaders working to end homelessness

- [Fairfield County Center for Housing Opportunity](#), which is working toward a future of abundant, affordable housing in the county
- [DataHaven](#), a local nonprofit that provides data and research to gauge and improve [well-being and quality of life](#) in Connecticut
- [Urban Institute](#), the national research organization that provides data and evidence to help advance upward mobility.

The Journey

Fairfield County's Community Foundation's 2022 strategic plan, "[Fairfield County Forward](#)," invited readers to "Imagine a Fairfield County where everyone has an equitable opportunity to thrive."

The plan focused squarely on systemic and structural change to get at the root causes of inequity by building up the nonprofit sector, advocating for equitable policies, building public will, acknowledging the county's racial history, and creating a shared vision of an inclusive, antiracist future.

“Fairfield County has the wealth and tax base to address our most pressing regional issues, but we’ve lacked public will,” says Blue-Paca. “We’ve got to change the narrative so everyone can see the clear benefit for everyone from growing the pie.”

Taking part in EMAN’s site visits, technical assistance training, and peer learning has helped the Foundation reenvision its housing strategies and think even more deeply about “how best to frame and message our work,” says Dr. Tanya Hills, Director of Learning, Evaluation & Research at Fairfield County’s Community Foundation.

Blue-Paca says, “We’ll build more public will if we break down siloes and work more collaboratively together across race, economics, sectors, and neighborhoods.”

They’re starting with business leaders, through a new CEO Roundtable that met for the first time in fall 2025.

“We’re empowering them to understand that as key employers in a region that accounts for 50% of state GDP, they can have an outsize effect on building a better future for everyone in our region,” Blue-Paca says.

Wins So Far

- “The Upside” gives a clear understanding of how closing racial and ethnic gaps in income, educational attainment, homeownership, and housing values will benefit the entire community by generating revenue that could fund infrastructure, parks, and libraries; reduce taxes for everyone; and pay the salaries of more teachers.

“It’s on us to think about what’s important to those who are not at the table to get them to engage in conversation with us and stay to think about solutions. One way we think we can successfully persuade them to get involved is through an economic argument.”

Dr. Tanya Hills

*Director of Learning, Evaluation & Research
Fairfield County’s Community Foundation*

- New York Federal Reserve Bank selected Fairfield County to be one of five pilot communities in the bank’s [Making Missing Markets](#) initiative, which aims to promote economic equality, health, and environmental resilience in disinvested-in communities.

What’s Next

The Foundation hopes to launch a regional collaborative for inclusive growth out of its CEO Roundtable. EMAN technical assistance providers from [FSG](#), experts in systems change, are facilitating the CEO Roundtable and serving on the Foundation’s planning team to build out its Making Missing Markets work with Federal Reserve Bank of New York.



CONSIDER THIS:

What matters most to people in your community? How can you “speak their language” in your arguments for change?

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.