

## EMAN INTERMEDIATE COHORT

CFLeads Economic Mobility Action Network Case Study

# A strong spirit of fairness in Kalamazoo County, Michigan

In Kalamazoo County, MI, population 261,000, residents rally together. Its county seat, the City of Kalamazoo, was once known as “Celery City” and has long been home to pharmaceutical development and manufacturing, creating a strong base of local philanthropy .



As in many counties nationwide, residents in Kalamazoo struggle to afford the cost of living, gain access to quality housing, pursue an education, and navigate longstanding workforce disparities. In the midst of these challenges, community leaders are rising to the occasion, seeking opportunities to improve residents’ quality of life.

Leaders here are proud of the progress their city and county have made advancing practices that promote economic mobility. One such practice, the Kalamazoo Promise, has offered higher education scholarships to graduates of Kalamazoo Public Schools for more than 20 years. More recently, Kalamazoo Rx Kids launched in 2025. It supports local families by providing cash prescriptions to the city’s parents and infants for the entire first year of a newborn’s life.

Now, Kalamazoo-area leaders want to coordinate their efforts even further. They’re working to boost Black homeownership and wealth-building and prevent people from being displaced. They’re also finding ways to engage with communities across the county and to ensure everyone is heard and supported.

Led by [Kalamazoo 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:

Kalamazoo Community Foundation

### COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES USED:

Engaging residents, working across sectors, shaping public policy

### SUMMARY:

A Michigan county rich with resources is coordinating across business, nonprofits, and government; experimenting with cash payments to give people more economic choice; and focusing on economic mobility in urban neighborhoods and rural areas that have been left out.



“We’ve seen a transformation in who is given seats of leadership in the community. Many of the institutions leading change—from the hospital system to Kalamazoo Community Foundation to higher education institutions and the county and city—are now run by people of color.”

**Terra Bautista**  
Executive Director, Urban Alliance

## The Vision

*The work of Kalamazoo Community Foundation is guided by a clear mission to create a thriving community where people, resources and expertise are mobilized to advance racial, social and economic justice.*

At its core, the foundation believes that their community thrives WHEN:

- **Wealth** is attainable and people have resources to meet their needs and invest in their future.
- **Housing** is safe, affordable and available.
- **Education** is accessible and learners are supported.
- **Neighborhoods** and community spaces nurture health, safety, and strong social connections.

Every dollar is measured against the WHEN framework to achieve the vision of Kalamazoo County being the most equitable place to live.

## The Strategy

*“We’re focused on directly investing in people so they have the resources to participate in broader systems, make money and choices, have power and autonomy that has been systematically denied to them, take care of their families, and build wealth for the future,” says Alyssa Stewart, Chief Community Impact Officer, Kalamazoo Community Foundation.*

## The EMAN Challenge

The Kalamazoo team entered the EMAN Intermediate Cohort interested in exploring how guaranteed basic income, or direct cash models, could work in Kalamazoo County. In February 2025, the Rx Kids program, a no-strings-attached cash prescription for pregnant people and their babies, was launched. The program was piloted in Flint, MI, starting in 2024 and has now expanded to the City of Kalamazoo and 29 additional communities across Michigan.

With Rx Kids off the ground in Kalamazoo, the team turned their attention to other economic mobility strategies.

## How Kalamazoo Community Foundation Is Leveraging a Community Leadership Approach

Kalamazoo Community Foundation is **engaging residents** using “community voice” to inform the redesign of its strategic plan and community impact priorities. The Foundation conducted a countywide effort to determine what mattered most to local residents. A series of post-event surveys and focus groups and other qualitative and quantitative data the Foundation has collected further informed its strategy and direction.

The Foundation is also **working across sectors**, bringing together knowledgeable changemakers in the philanthropic sector, city and county government, housing organizations, public health agencies, and higher education. Inspired by EMAN peers from rural communities, the Foundation is boosting its presence in rural Kalamazoo County and has staff engaging community members each month across the county, even in the furthest corners.

*“We’re associated most strongly with the city,” Stewart says. “People from all sectors in our rural areas do not see our presence or feel we understand their needs.”*

Finally, the Foundation is **shaping public policy**. Select staff members serve on a steering committee focused on passing a Kalamazoo County early childhood millage. The Foundation also hired a team member dedicated to advancing a public policy agenda that aligns with WHEN priorities.



#### CONSIDER THIS:

**Map out the parts of your community that you have the strongest relationships with and those with whom you need to build more trust and understanding.**

### The Partners

Among the partners working with Kalamazoo Community Foundation on economic mobility are:

- [Urban Alliance](#), a social services organization in Kalamazoo
- City of Kalamazoo
- Kalamazoo County
- [Michigan Donor Alliance](#)
- [Rx Kids](#)
- [Black Wall Street](#)
- [MRC Industries](#)

### The Journey

Kalamazoo Community Foundation launched a new organizational strategic plan and its WHEN funding priority framework in January 2025.

With this scaffolding in place, the Kalamazoo team says, participating in EMAN strengthened their strategy and capacity to think in terms of systems change, rather than programs and grants. EMAN also helped them apply an equity lens to all aspects of their work, ensuring that race and lived experience inform every decision.

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*“We’ve already incorporated things we learned, like Urban Institute’s Upward Mobility Framework and FSG’s systems change models, into staff training, grantmaking criteria, and board education,” Stewart says.*

From other EMAN communities, Kalamazoo’s team learned valuable lessons, too, including how the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky is embedded throughout 20 counties in its large region.

“They told us, go work from the places that don’t know what you do, go work from the small townships, so the community sees you there and you get embedded and know more about them,” Stewart says. So, Stewart and others at Kalamazoo Community Foundation put sticky notes on a map to reach all corners of their county.

From Milwaukee, WI, they saw how having a central civic organization can regularly bring businesses, nonprofits, government, and faith organizations together to talk about solutions and put them in place. “We met with our Milwaukee peers, and now we’re thinking about what it should look like here,” Stewart says.

## Wins So Far

- Since 2022, the Foundation’s impact investing portfolio of low-interest loans has helped complete the capital stack for five housing developments that have created over 200 affordable housing units in Kalamazoo County.

**“The secret sauce of community foundations and place-based funders is that, unlike a national funder, we are part of the community we’re trying to serve.”**

**Alyssa Stewart**

*Chief Community Impact Officer, Kalamazoo Community Foundation*

- Nearly all (94%) of the babies born in Kalamazoo since Rx Kids launched in early 2025 have been enrolled in the program, meaning their families have gotten \$7,500 across 13 payments.

## What’s Next

- Inspired and influenced by anti-displacement funds in Atlanta, GA, and Milwaukee, the Foundation is developing a homeownership fund for residents of Kalamazoo’s Northside neighborhood.
- The Foundation also hopes over the next few years to advance strategies and policies that help more people reduce debt and build assets, such as child savings accounts, matched retirement savings, and student loan debt supports



### CONSIDER THIS:

**What communities elsewhere in the country have similarities to yours? What might you be able to learn from them?**

# 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.