

EMAN INTERMEDIATE COHORT

CFLeads Economic Mobility Action Network Case Study

A focus on thriving, inclusive neighborhoods in Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Well-known for its Midwestern work ethic and beer-brewing history, Milwaukee, WI, is increasingly recognized for its vibrant culture, lakeshore location, and neighborhoods full of character. With a population of 577,000 people, it's also a community where many have recognized the need to dismantle the divisions and disparities that past and present policies and systems created.



Leaders here are focused on engaging residents in neighborhoods that have historically experienced disinvestment; creating affordable housing without displacement; and investing in education, entrepreneurship, and small business ownership.

They're also digging deep into new local data to establish a starting point for understanding wealth in Milwaukee. The emerging picture helps illuminate residents' financial stability and resilience in the face of economic ups and downs and will enable leaders to better advocate for policies and investments that expand opportunity and help build a Milwaukee where everyone has the chance to thrive.

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

CFLeads

Community Foundations
Leading Change



COMMUNITY FOUNDATION:

Greater Milwaukee Foundation

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES USED:

Shaping public policy, commissioning and sharing local data, engaging residents

SUMMARY:

Leaders in this midwestern, lakeside city are prioritizing resident engagement, affordable housing, and equitable education and economic opportunity—and they're using local data to help focus their efforts.



“The level of respect Milwaukee’s philanthropic leaders have for resident voice is impressive.”

Teig Whaley-Smith

Chief Alliance Executive of the Community Development Alliance

The Vision

After two decades of population decline, the city’s mayor envisions increasing the population to a million.

“To reach that goal, we need thriving communities, affordable housing and equitable home-ownership rates, top-class schools for all children, opportunities for small businesses to thrive, and family-sustaining jobs,” says Janel Hines, Vice President of Community Impact for Greater Milwaukee Foundation. “We strive to be a community of opportunity where people feel connected and supported.”

The Strategy

Partners in Milwaukee are using data on Milwaukee’s wealth—an area for which reliable data was previously unavailable—to support community-informed decision-making and local collaboration to repair disparities, support economic mobility, and improve the quality of life for all in the region. Within communities that need investment, they’re working closely with residents to build strategies around affordable housing; quality, affordable early childhood education; and equitable economic opportunities.

The EMAN Challenge

The Milwaukee team joined the EMAN Intermediate Cohort to support the creation of a wealth index and translate racial wealth data into strategies and programs that advance economic mobility. They also strived to improve their measurement and outcomes tracking to ensure goals are met.

How Greater Milwaukee Foundation Is Leveraging a Community Leadership Approach

Greater Milwaukee Foundation is **shaping public policy**. Its Policy and Research Department, launched in April 2025, uses research, data, and civic engagement to enhance the Foundation’s evidence-based storytelling, collective action, and policy efforts.

The Foundation is **commissioning and sharing local data** through a series of reports, including the Wealth in Milwaukee Report, one of three reports being released as part of this effort. A first-of-its-kind look into the distribution of wealth in greater Milwaukee, the report was released in October 2025 by Data You Can Use, the Foundation’s EMAN Cohort data partner, and produced in partnership with The Data Center in New Orleans.

The Foundation is also **engaging residents**. With input from residents and neighborhood groups, the Foundation and its ThriveOn Collaboration partners, the Medical College of Wisconsin and Royal Capital, redeveloped a historic building in Milwaukee’s Bronzeville district, creating a community hub called [ThriveOn King](#). Now, the partners are working with the community to define a three- to five-year vision for the hub and surrounding neighborhoods.



CONSIDER THIS:

What missing local data could help you identify which neighborhoods most need investment in the factors driving your economic mobility strategy?

The Partners

Important partners in the work in Milwaukee include:

- [ThriveOn Collaboration](#), a partnership with [Medical College of Wisconsin](#) and [Royal Capital](#) that is dedicated to eliminating racial, health, economic and social disparities in Milwaukee by making generational investments in the well-being of its communities
- [Community Development Alliance](#), an affiliation of community development funders and practitioners, including the Community Foundation
- [City of Milwaukee](#)
- [Data You Can Use](#), an organization that works to democratize data and use it to improve communities in Wisconsin
- [The Zilber Family Foundation](#)
- [Northwestern Mutual Foundation](#)
- [MGIC](#), a mortgage insurance company
- [The Milwaukee Early Childhood Education Coalition](#), a cross-sector partnership building better systems for young children
- [Wisconsin Funders for Children and Families](#), a state-wide funders collaborative working to improve public policy
- [The Wisconsin Partnership](#), a state-wide collaboration of place-based partnerships focused on local and state policies that deliver better results for Wisconsin children
- [StriveTogether](#), a national network of place-based partnerships focused on advancing economic mobility for children from cradle to career

The Journey

The Greater Milwaukee Foundation has a history of bringing people together, marshaling resources, and expanding community knowledge to achieve the greatest possible impact. In 2017, the Foundation added impact investing to its toolbox and began to provide affordable access to capital for small businesses and entrepreneurship, housing, and early childhood education.

As a founding partner of the Community Development Alliance, the Greater Milwaukee Foundation supported the creation in 2021 of a [citywide plan](#) to provide a quality, affordable home for every Milwaukeean. The plan's strategies include turning vacant lots into starter homes, counseling low-income aspiring homebuyers, and raising funding for affordable homes via a Tax Incremental District.

Participating in the EMAN Intermediate Cohort introduced the Milwaukee team to technical assistance providers and tools that have enhanced their work, such as Urban Institute's [Upward Mobility Framework](#), TheCaseMade's [will-building principles](#), and asset-based communication that focuses on community strengths.

“The conversations and feedback helped me identify the communications part of it,” says Dr. Victor Amaya, President and Executive Director of Data You Can Use. “How do you communicate in a way that brings people together?”

Wins So Far

- In less than a decade, Greater Milwaukee Community Foundation has made \$24 million in impact investments for projects such as mixed-use developments, small business loans to primarily Black- and brown-owned businesses, the construction of a school, and ThriveOn King.
- Since 2020, the Foundation has made \$41 million in strategic and catalytic investments in Milwaukee's Bronzeville neighborhoods, including its contributions to the \$110 million redevelopment of ThriveOn King as a vibrant center for jobs, early education, food, wellness, community connection, and art, with 90 units of housing.



CONSIDER THIS:

Think about three problems your community faces. How can you reframe those problems in terms of solutions?

“One of our key takeaways from EMAN was to think more broadly about what economic mobility means to individuals and the community. It’s not just ending poverty, it’s building wealth.”

Janel Hines

Vice President of Community Impact, Greater Milwaukee Foundation

- In 2023, the Community Development Alliance doubled the production of entry-level homes in Milwaukee and built systems for collaborating with residents and collecting and sharing homeownership data. Members of the group have invested \$26 million in housing production and supported 3,000 new homeowners.
- The Foundation's Policy and Research Department saw a major win with over \$330 million in new funding to support early childhood education in the 2025-27 Wisconsin State Budget, the result of years of collaboration across the state.

What's Next

- The Milwaukee team plans to use the wealth report findings to create a predictive model, build a data dashboard, correlate wealth data with social determinants of health, disseminate data insights to community members and policymakers, and advocate for data-informed policies.
- With funding from the city's Tax Incremental District and other sources, 60 new affordable single-family homes will be constructed in Milwaukee's Harambee neighborhood over the next four years.
- Building off the state budget win, the Policy and Research Department will develop a policy agenda centered on economic mobility.

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.