

# Paving the Way

**CFLeads' Economic Mobility Action  
Network (EMAN) Builds Momentum  
Toward Generational Change**

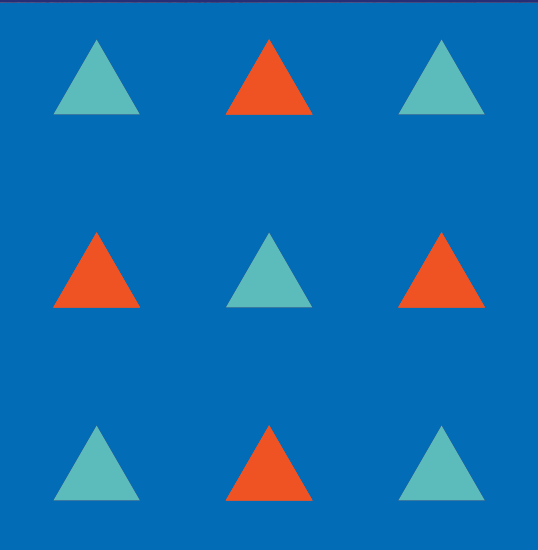


**CFLeads**

Community Foundations  
Leading Change

2024–2025





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# Introduction

**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.**

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.

Across the country, community foundations have recognized that they have a role to play in what has come to be known as “economic mobility” or “upward mobility.”

In its economic mobility efforts, CFLeads uses [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. And since 2019, community foundations have told CFLeads that helping people not just survive economically but thrive is a priority they want help advancing.

“This work is hard and thorny and requires commitment beyond money to change discriminatory systems,” says CFLeads President and CEO Mary L. Thomas. “It’s a long haul to become that thriving community that we all desire.”

This narrative report describes the activities of CFLeads’ 2024–2025 Economic Mobility Action Network, or EMAN, which was made up of 19 communities from across the nation. Led by a community foundation, each cross-sector team learned alongside others at in-person and virtual gatherings. This report reveals how CFLeads supported community foundations from urban, suburban, and rural areas in their efforts to strengthen their local economic mobility strategies and deepen their reserve of resources.

The details and stories shared here complement the [case studies](#) describing each community’s economic mobility journey.

“This work is hard and thorny and requires commitment beyond money to change discriminatory systems. It’s a long haul to become that thriving community that we all desire.”

Mary L. Thomas,  
CFLeads President and CEO



# Catalyzing Change Through a Network of Peers

**CFLeads believes community foundations are vital partners in building communities where all residents are prosperous, healthy, and secure.**

These trusted place-based anchor entities are primed for catalytic work and key to promoting economic mobility in the areas they serve while working across the nonprofit, public, and private sectors to create thriving communities.

*“Community foundations have their fingers on the pulse of the places in which they work,” Thomas says. “They’re ready to activate donors and other folks who want to ensure people have the opportunity to rise. They’re leading place-based change.”*

In that spirit, CFLeads convened EMAN from September 2024 to October 2025. Communities were divided into two cohorts, Advanced and Intermediate. CFLeads’ goal was for community foundations and their partners to learn with and from other communities as they worked to boost economic mobility over the long term, promoting local systems change.

The 19 community foundations represented in EMAN are leading the way toward economic mobility through community leadership practices. They are engaging residents, sharing data, working across sectors, marshalling resources, and shaping public policy.

EMAN 2024–2025 was generously funded by the [Gates Foundation](#)\*, whose economic mobility community of practice, facilitated by [Results for America](#), included CFLeads and nine other national organizations.

*\*This work was funded by the Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Gates Foundation.*



## Building on the Results of a Pilot Network

The 2024–2025 EMAN Cohorts built on the success of CFLeads’ earlier economic mobility pilot Network—which was funded by the Gates Foundation with additional support from Charles Stewart Mott Foundation—and extended its impact and learnings.

In the 2020–2022 [pilot Network](#), six community foundations spent two years developing strategies, building partnerships, and launching initiatives to advance economic mobility for low-income and vulnerable populations.

“Members of the pilot Network inspired each other, shared ideas, and appreciated having dedicated time to shape their goals,” says Amanda Holm Hartigan, CFLeads’ Senior Director of Programs, Strategy, and Culture. “Continuing that work with a larger group of communities at different stages of their economic mobility journeys was a natural next step.”

Due to the field’s deep interest in the 2024–25 EMAN programming, in addition to the two cohorts CFLeads supported four other community foundations: Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts,

“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**  
CFLeads President and CEO

Foundation for Northwest Illinois, Greater Houston Community Foundation, and Wayne County Community Foundation.

Over the course of four to six facilitated sessions, each member of this EMAN Extension group worked one-on-one with consultant Nicole McGovern of Zeta Metis Advising and created an economic mobility strategy or Theory of Change for its community.



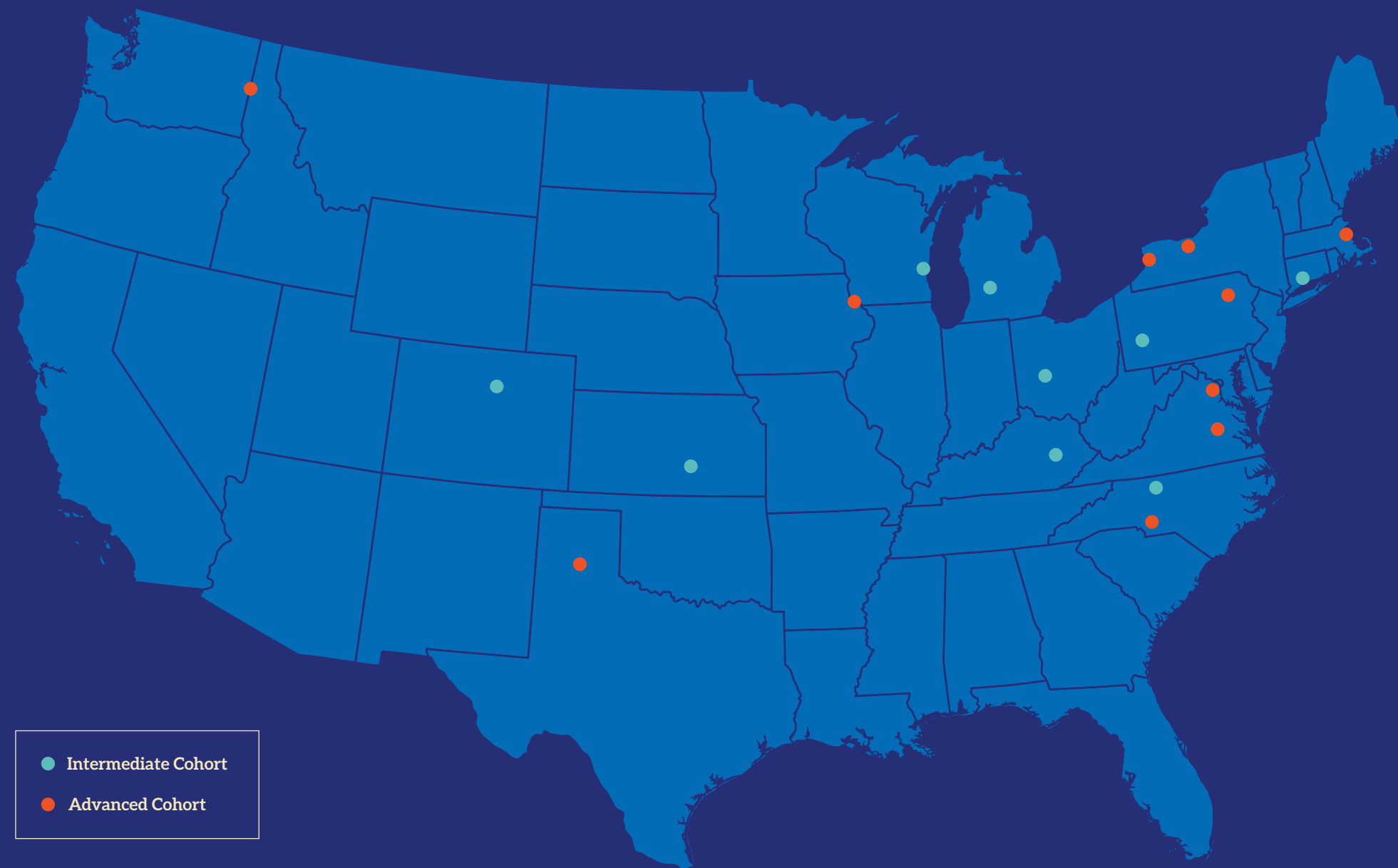
# The EMAN Communities

## Intermediate Cohort

- Appalachian Kentucky
- Boulder County, CO
- Fairfield County, CT
- Kalamazoo, MI
- Milwaukee, WI
- Greater Pittsburgh, PA
- Wichita, KS
- Winston-Salem, NC
- Yellow Springs, OH

## Advanced Cohort

- Alexandria, VA
- Buffalo, NY
- Greater Charlotte, NC
- Cambridge, MA
- Dubuque, IA
- Eastern Washington & North Idaho
- North Texas
- Richmond, VA
- Rochester, NY
- Scranton, PA



## The Community Foundations

### Advanced Cohort

- [ACT for Alexandria](#)
- [Cambridge Community Foundation](#)
- [Community Foundation for a greater Richmond](#)
- [Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo](#)
- [Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque](#)
- [Foundation For The Carolinas and Leading on Opportunity](#)
- [Innovia Foundation](#)
- [North Texas Community Foundation](#)
- [Rochester Area Community Foundation](#)
- [Scranton Area Community Foundation](#)

### Intermediate Cohort

- [Community Foundation Boulder County](#)
- [Fairfield County's Community Foundation, Inc.](#)
- [Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky](#)
- [Greater Milwaukee Foundation](#)
- [Kalamazoo Community Foundation](#)
- [The Pittsburgh Foundation](#)
- [The Winston-Salem Foundation](#)
- [Wichita Foundation](#)
- [Yellow Springs Community Foundation](#)

# EMAN: A Dynamic Learning Journey

“EMAN was designed as a yearlong learning cohort, with communities’ aspirations and needs in mind,” Hartigan says. Communities were assigned to their cohorts based on their teams’ responses to readiness and leadership assessments and conversations with CFLeads staff.

## Intermediate

Community Foundations are:

- At the beginning or intermediate stages of deploying an economic mobility agenda or strategy  
*For example, this could include integrating economic mobility in grantmaking strategy or local engagement work*
- Active in 1 or more of the 5 Community Leadership Competencies
- At initial stages of integrating data into economic mobility work
- Collaborating with an existing community partner or has the ability to secure partnership

### Both Cohorts Must:

Have an institutional commitment to economic mobility from board, staff, and a community partner

Anchor racial equity in economic mobility work

Integrate data to inform processes and efforts

## Advanced

Community Foundations are:

- At the advanced stages of deploying an economic mobility agenda or strategy  
*For example, this could include shaping public policy, working across sectors, and sharing local data*
  - Active in 3 or more of the 5 Community Leadership Competencies
  - Leveraging data to inform activities related to economic mobility work, resulting in demonstrable outcomes
  - Collaborating with an existing government partner or has the ability to secure partnership

A key component of EMAN was the composition of the teams. CFLeads aspired for community foundations and their partners to break down silos and learn from each other, something they normally might not have the time or space to do. CFLeads also believed foundation leaders, board members, data partners, and other members of the teams could gain knowledge from peers in other communities.

With these principles in mind, the 2024–2025 Advanced and Intermediate Cohorts Teams were made up of four to five people, including:

- The community foundation’s president, executive director, or CEO
- A senior staff member at the community foundation
- At least one community foundation board member
- A government partner (Advanced Cohort) or community partner (Intermediate Cohort)

- A data scientist, manager, or staff person responsible for measurement, learning and evaluation, either on staff at the foundation or at a partner organization

Community foundations at the beginning stages of developing an economic mobility strategy benefitted from including a community partner they could work with to strengthen their approach and start to move economic mobility outcomes, says Leonard Brock, CFLeads’ Senior Vice President for Systems Change and Policy.

For foundations farther along the road, he says, with outcomes and progress to show, a government partner allowed a focus on driving public policy and developing a shared policy goal.

## Collaborative Curriculum Design

From the beginning, CFLeads knew the curriculum would include peer coaching, expert speakers, and “homework” between sessions.

## Components of the Advanced and Intermediate EMAN Cohorts

- Year-long learning network
- Three in-person network meetings; one virtual orientation meeting; additional virtual discussions with CFLeads staff
- Virtual technical assistance resources and option for additional support
- Peer coaching
- Site visits
- Focus on advancing economic mobility using a racial equity lens
- Emphasis on CFLeads’ [five community leadership competencies](#)
- Exploration of data tools and economic mobility promising practices
- \$50,000 grant to each community to support its economic mobility strategy



“What I find exciting about the Urban Institute Upward Mobility framework and other resources and tools EMAN provided is that they’re evidence based. We can take that well-formed research and apply it, confident that we have catalytic interventions and tools to measure their impact on our neighbors’ lives.”

**Erin Budd Barry**  
Vice President, Community Programs,  
Rochester Area Community Foundation

*As we were interviewing applicants in mid-2024, we collaboratively developed the economic mobility learning challenges they wanted to address,” Hartigan says. “They finetuned their challenges over time, and we worked with them to determine what technical assistance they needed, who speakers should be, and what data they needed access to.”*

For example:

- Alexandria’s team aimed to build a coalition of Alexandrians who would help lead and guide the city’s work to expand opportunities for low-income residents and break cycles of financial crisis. Participating in the cohort allowed the team to test and refine this approach with peers and experts in systems change and will-building.
- The Greater Charlotte team—having over a decade of steady progress improving economic mobility indicators in Mecklenburg County, NC—wanted to expand their impactful strategies throughout the region. They sought feedback on how to improve their data tools, broaden their advocacy regarding state and county policies, and encourage donors to direct funds toward economic mobility. They also had a lot of experience to share with other communities.
- Appalachian Kentucky’s challenge included several critical questions: “How do we foster a culture of philanthropy in a community with limited donor engagement?” and “How do we build robust support for small business owners in the earliest stages?” These questions ultimately led the team to refine their small business initiative, Invest 606.

## High Impact Interactions

An external evaluation of EMAN found that participants rated in-person peer learning the most highly of all activities. CFLeads often promotes the practice of sharing a peer learning challenge and receiving feedback, as it encourages reflection, solutions, and connection within learning cohorts. Community foundation leaders and their partners interviewed for this report say peer coaching interactions were dynamic and helped the teams

deal with a highly changeable funding and policy environment.

Many members of the Intermediate Cohort say a key moment occurred in their first meeting in January 2025, when the new administration signed a slew of executive orders that would soon affect social safety net programs and diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. The CFLeads team and technical assistance partners pivoted to meet the moment and provide timely activities for greater impact.

## A Glance at EMAN Technical Assistance Providers and Speakers

[Urban Institute](#), creator of many frameworks, resources, and data sets that support local leaders as they foster upward mobility

[FSG](#), experts in equitable systems change and strategy

Dr. Tiffany Manuel, Founder and CEO of [TheCaseMade](#) and coach in will-building and adaptive leadership, and her team

Michael McAfee, President and CEO, [PolicyLink](#), a national research and action institute working to redesign the United States so that it governs for all

Dr. Joy DeGruy, CEO, [Joy DeGruy’s Publications](#), passionate leader in tackling structural and systemic inequities

[Interaction Institute for Social Change](#) (IISC), teachers of facilitative leadership and strategies for navigating challenging topics while building alignment

[Results for America](#), creators of the [Economic Mobility Catalog](#), a compilation of evidence-based strategies to improve upward economic mobility

[My Connect Community](#), a purpose-built community working to bring about lasting change in Gulfton and Sharpstown, TX

[Manumission Tour Company](#), guided cultural heritage tour highlighting Alexandria, VA’s extensive African American History

[Westside Future Fund](#), equity development committed to restoration without displacement for five Atlanta neighborhoods

Soni Gupta, Associate Vice President for Community Wealth at [The Boston Foundation](#), a leader in its approach to small business support as a resident wealth building strategy

Luc Schuster, Executive Director of [Boston Indicators](#), with guaranteed income pilot research in Massachusetts

[Greenroots, Comunidades Enraizadas Community Land Trust](#), and [The Neighborhood Developers](#): local partners in Chelsea, MA, catalyzing community wealth building, economic mobility, environmental justice and community organizing



“We had to adapt and change course,” Hartigan says. “No one would have been able to focus on the planned agenda that day.”

Technical assistance provider Dr. Tiffany Manuel, founder of the will-building firm TheCaseMade, quickly changed the focus of her speech, spelling out for participants the urgent task of sustaining trust with their nonprofit partners. Likewise, CFLeads tweaked the sessions that day to keep people focused on what was important: serving their communities and building trust.

Throughout each cohort’s yearlong program, participants refined their work through conversations with each other and the structured peer coaching.

“It was valuable to be able to talk to people from similar cities and similarly minded community foundations, bounce ideas off of them, and share how we’re doing things,” says Vivian Williams, Vice President of Strategy for Scranton Area Community Foundation, which is focusing on building greater regional cooperation around economic mobility. “We learned that we don’t give ourselves enough credit, and in conversations with peers about their work, we realized ‘Wow! We already do that.’ Now we’re more confident in our region’s framing of how we’re going to advance economic mobility.”

“Peer learning levels the playing field. CEOs are problem solvers alongside scientists and nonprofit partners. Board members have the opportunity to be hands-on and provide a different perspective on the challenge. Everyone has the chance to see their colleagues as peers in a new way.”

**Amanda Holm Hartigan**  
Senior Director of Programs, Strategy, and Culture, CFLeads



# Making Progress Through Community Leadership

EMAN was designed with the idea that by helping foundations and their partners use the [Framework for Community Leadership by a Community Foundation](#) and strengthen their

leadership competencies, CFLeads could boost community foundations’ readiness to advance economic mobility.



CFLeads' external evaluator found an increase in participants' confidence in their community leadership skills. They made the strongest gains in marshalling resources and shaping public policy.

In practice, the EMAN communities are using interconnected strategies and the Community Foundation Leadership Competencies to boost predictors of economic mobility. Among other things, they are:

- Helping people obtain better jobs without a net loss of income due to lost benefits, a phenomenon known as "the benefits cliff"
- Supporting entrepreneurs and small businesses through grants, technical assistance, and impact investment
- Strengthening childcare and education pathways
- Striving to ensure immigrant communities feel at home and connecting them to local opportunities
- Working with employers to create belonging and pathways to advancement for workers
- Creating affordable housing and wealth building opportunities for Black and Brown families through homeownership
- Engaging community members in pinpointing their needs and putting in place solutions



## Community foundations are using the following community leadership skills to achieve these goals:

### Marshalling Resources

*"Marshalling resources beyond the foundation's grants—from private foundations as well as from local, state, and federal government—to address community needs."*

Innovia Foundation is boosting local philanthropy by rolling out a "forever fund" for each county it serves in Eastern Washington and North Idaho. The goal is to enhance or create a local endowed fund that will provide sustainable funding for resident-driven action plans.

Kalamazoo, MI, rolled out Rx Kids, a cash prescription program for families. Since its launch in 2025, nearly all the babies born in the city have been enrolled, and their families have received \$7,500 in 13 payments. Inspired and influenced by anti-displacement funds in Atlanta, GA, and Milwaukee, WI, Kalamazoo Community Foundation is now developing a homeownership fund for residents of Kalamazoo's Northside.

*"EMAN helped us think about creating an activated network of grantees. Giving organizations money is good, but it's not enough. Many leaders in our communities have not had access to corridors of power. We want to open those doors for them."*

**Rose Bradshaw**  
*CFLeads Board Chair and President and CEO, North Texas Community Foundation*

### Shaping Public Policy

*"Shaping public policy, recognizing that government systems have a significant impact on the lives of every resident."*

Partners in Buffalo, NY, created a "Benefits Cliff Calculator" to help employers and employees understand how career advancement can, counterintuitively, threaten families' public benefits and reduce their net income. Now, Buffalo has joined a statewide coalition advocating that the governor establish a task force to study and help solve the issue statewide.

As a step toward expanding its work, Leading on Opportunity hosted sessions for municipal leaders from the cities of Charlotte, Davidson, and Pineville, NC, diving into policies that could improve economic mobility. The group planned additional sessions for Mecklenburg County, NC, policymakers.

“EMAN deepened our commitment to making sure we’re centering community in everything we do. It also underscored the importance of nurturing relationships with local city government and nonprofits.”

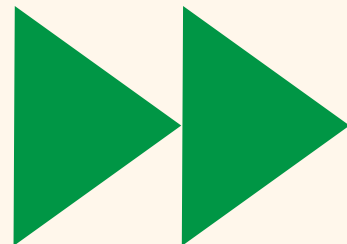
**Brandi Yee**  
Chief Program Officer, ACT for Alexandria

### Engaging Residents

*“Engaging residents to hear their concerns, lift their ambitions, and harness their talents.”*

After rethinking their strategy during the EMAN Cohort, the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque and its partners brought together 90 stakeholders to start talking about supporting Dubuque, IA’s immigrant communities in the current political climate.

To further refine its understanding of what hinders or helps families’ economic mobility, in 2026 The Pittsburgh Foundation will hold focus groups with clients of three community-based organizations that are helping the Foundation refine its economic mobility strategy.



### Commissioning and Sharing Local Data

*“Commissioning and disseminating local data and research to help understand the nuances of community challenges and provide information to help solve problems.”*

A report by Asset Building Coalition of Forsyth County—a coalition of 30 Winston-Salem, NC-area organizations working to ensure families have a financial cushion—on residents’ struggles finding affordable housing led to the formation of a housing network to study and act on the issue.

Led by Director of Early Childhood Dr. Tyana Velazquez-Smith, the Rochester Area Community Foundation created a research-based, ten-pillar Early Childhood Upward Mobility Framework. Based on Dr. Velazquez-Smith’s findings, in 2025 the Foundation’s board approved \$450,000 in grants to support home-based childcare across New York’s Monroe and Wayne Counties.



### Working Across Sectors

*“Working across sectors because the challenges facing communities are multifaceted and interconnected and cannot be solved by any one entity or sector.”*

The Community Foundation for a greater Richmond spearheaded the signing of a Declaration of Cooperation and secured 10-year commitments from five partners who make up a group called RVA Rising: the Foundation, Chamber RVA, Plan RVA, United Way of Greater Richmond and Petersburg, and Richmond Memorial Health Foundation.

Fairfield County’s Community Foundation hopes to launch a regional collaborative for inclusive growth out of a new CEO Roundtable. Technical assistance provider FSG is facilitating the CEO Roundtable and helping Fairfield County, CT, build out a “missing markets” community development initiative with Federal Reserve Bank of New York.

*“We’re small enough that we should be able to solve the problem of affordability and economic mobility. We should be able to serve our 300 families in poverty. We’ve got the resources to do it.”*

**Chloe Manor**  
Programs Manager, Yellow Springs Community Foundation

# A Focus on Racial Equity

In addition to using Community Leadership approaches, the EMAN teams are weaving racial equity principles into the fabric of their strategies to advance economic mobility. In the external evaluation, EMAN teams said their organizations prioritized equity in decision-making and funding. Three quarters said their organization has clear goals for advancing social and economic justice and equity.

In Rochester, NY, economic mobility partners are centering the voices of Black, Latinx, and immigrant women whose caregiving labor has historically been undervalued and underfunded.

In Fort Worth, TX, the North Texas Community Foundation designed its new Beacon Fund—for nonprofits embedded in neighborhoods that have historically been disinvested from—with input from racial equity grantees during a period of heightened polarization.

In Milwaukee, WI, Greater Milwaukee Foundation's impact investing program aims to bridge generational wealth gaps by providing affordable access to capital to support thriving communities, particularly communities of color.

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*“Our EMAN participants have an understanding now that economic mobility touches everything community foundations and their partners do,” Hartigan said. “This work needs cross-sector collaborations, it needs people well-versed in the five leadership competencies. We know these teams will keep on working on economic mobility from every which way.”*

# Conclusion

**CFLeads will continue lifting up economic mobility as a key focus for community foundations. The team is providing ongoing opportunities for EMAN participants to connect, including through quarterly alumni engagements and the Economic Mobility Summit in July 2026.**

Alumni say they will keep using the tools introduced through EMAN, and several are working with FSG and TheCaseMade to continue learning how to make systemic change. In addition, Foundation for a Greater Richmond has contracted with Leading on Opportunity, which will help Richmond learn from Charlotte's successes.

EMAN participants and CFLeads see opportunities to pave the way for further advancement in the field of economic mobility.

*“I would love to see CFLeads and EMAN debunk the myth that a lack of economic mobility is an urban problem,” says Geeta Pradhan, President of Cambridge Community Foundation. “Let’s lift up the rural aspect of this issue. We need to give policymakers more pause to think about what policies they support when they see their constituents suffering.”*

Leaders from rural and more sparsely populated areas see a need for more data and tools to help them describe their communities' strengths and struggles. “Urban Institute’s Upward Mobility Data Dashboard is a great tool—but it does not work for many rural communities,” says Kristin Walker Collins, CEO of Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky.

Over the long term, Brock and Thomas see the need to help more community foundations be strong and effective economic mobility leaders.

“Solving economic mobility isn’t a three-year grant program,” Thomas says. “It will take lots of money and energy and time to help give the next generation better opportunity than the generation before them.”



Brock says communities with high levels of poverty don't want to be "saved" by outsiders—they need opportunities to take agency and contribute to solving the issues they and others in their regions face.

"Change doesn't just look like better outcomes in education, housing, and workforce," he says. "We envision real engagement and involvement in local communities, residents being partners in this work. And we envision communities that not only have aspirational goals but real systemic strategy for building partnerships, collecting and using data, sharing accountability, and tethering economic mobility to the community's comprehensive plan."

Just as important, Brock says, is changing mental models and nurturing adaptive leaders who are open—and ready for—the long haul of systems change.

*"The social justice movement for economic mobility is the civil rights movement of the 21st century," he says. "Boosting economic mobility for more people will make strong communities that allow us to make a strong nation."*

Now more than ever, community foundations need to lead change, and CFLeads is their partner to do it.

CFLeads is the country's national network of community foundations committed to community leadership. Through CFLeads, hundreds of community foundations from across the U.S. come together to strengthen their community leadership muscle, share field innovations, and tackle the key issues of our time.





# CFLeads

Community Foundations  
Leading Change

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