

## EMAN ADVANCED COHORT

CFLeads Economic Mobility Action Network Case Study

# A focus on rewarding work in Greater Richmond, Virginia

Centered on Richmond, VA,—one of the U.S.'s oldest cities and among Virginia's fastest growing—this region of about 1.3 million people is responding to rapid change and rising costs.



Leaders from the region's cities, towns, and counties are improving how they share resources, data, and strategy. Deep data dives are informing the region's grantmaking, policies, and planning around economic and workforce development.

These partners envision a future where income gaps have closed, and everyone in Greater Richmond has equal opportunity for rewarding, meaningful work and a fair chance to thrive, regardless of race or ZIP code.

Led by the [Community Foundation for a greater Richmond](#), the region was part of [CFLeads](#)' Economic Mobility Action Network (EMAN) Advanced Cohort in 2024-2025.

CFLeads

Community Foundations  
Leading Change



### COMMUNITY FOUNDATION:

Community Foundation for a greater Richmond

### COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES USED:

Engaging residents, working across sectors, marshalling resources

### SUMMARY:

Partners in Virginia's capital city and the surrounding region envision a future where income gaps have closed, and everyone has equal opportunity for rewarding, meaningful work and a fair chance to thrive, regardless of race or ZIP Code.



“We’re a community navigating a lot of change at once, while on the whole doing well thinking about power and decision-making and who should have a say.”

Martha Shickle  
Executive Director, PlanRVA

## The Vision

*“In the future we’re after, every child will have a world of opportunities, regardless of their school and where they live,” says Christina Mastroianni, Chief Strategy Officer for ChamberRVA, which champions business growth in the region. “Business, philanthropy, and education will align behind deep, intentional investments in schools, training programs, and people. Children will be excited about future careers, from welder to data center worker to cyber security analyst—whatever sparks their interest.”*

## The Strategy

The Community Foundation for a greater Richmond and its partners have created a regional alliance whose work is informed by the best knowledge on how to boost economic mobility. Rich local data allows partners to identify areas of opportunity and align their efforts and resources to make the most difference.

## The EMAN Challenge

As a member of the EMAN Advanced Cohort, partners from Greater Richmond

leveraged their collective power, knowledge, and resources to develop an action plan for Rewarding Work—a pillar of Urban Institute’s evidence-based [Upward Mobility Framework](#)—by inviting dozens of organizations focused on educational success and workforce development to collaborate and shape effective solutions together.

## How Community Foundation for a greater Richmond Is Leveraging a Community Leadership Approach

The Community Foundation for a greater Richmond is **engaging residents** in a number of ways. They’ve collected and reviewed dozens of community surveys to reaffirm both residents’ struggles and their aspirations. Residents also had an opportunity to help name the collective effort among business, nonprofits, local government, and residents to ensure everyone can thrive in the region. It’s called RVA Rising. Now, a community engagement playbook is in the works. This collection of best practices and tools recommended by local practitioners will equip Richmond-area leaders to weave resident voice into future decision-making.

The Foundation is also **working across sectors**. It spearheaded the development and endorsement of a Declaration of Cooperation, securing a 10-year commitments from the five organizations currently anchoring RVA Rising: the Foundation, ChamberRVA, PlanRVA, United Way of Greater Richmond and Petersburg, and Richmond Memorial Health Foundation.

The Foundation is **marshalling resources**. It has attracted new funders and secured \$1.3 million from foundations, donors, and corporate partners in 2024 and 2025 to stand up RVA Rising and develop supports for economic mobility initiatives across the region.



## CONSIDER THIS:

# What questions do you have about how to listen to, engage, and act on what you and your partners hear from residents?

## The Partners

The Community Foundation is working with the following partners to align regional priorities and build out the cross-cutting supports that will help to shape, sustain and scale solutions to the region's unique mobility challenges and opportunities.

- [ChamberRVA](#), the regional chamber of commerce
- [PlanRVA](#), the region's planning commission responsible for coordinating holistic planning, projects and partnerships in areas such as community development, emergency management, the environment, and transportation
- [United Way of Greater Richmond and Petersburg](#)
- [Richmond Memorial Health Foundation](#)
- Nine county and city jurisdictions

Important partners in the work also include [Workforce Coalition RVA](#), Richmond's [Partnership for Housing Affordability](#), [Virginia Early Childhood Foundation's Ready Regions](#), and [Maggie Walker Community Land Trust](#).

## The Journey

Because of their participation in the EMAN Advanced Cohort, leaders in Richmond say they have deepened their knowledge and understanding of what drives economic mobility. They have also developed a solid framework for regional action, creating a strong foundation for the long-haul effort required to realize generational change. RVA Rising came about after years of listening to residents—and now it's all hands on deck to keep the momentum going.

Isabel Eljaiek, Vice President for Research and Strategy at Community Foundation for a greater Richmond, says EMAN's model of peer learning with other communities has been revolutionary. In particular, staff from Leading on Opportunity, which advances economic mobility in Charlotte, N.C., have helped the Richmond team shift gears. Instead of putting all their energy into interventions and programs, leaders in Richmond are now focused on supporting partners and grantees in using data, engaging with the community, and advancing policy.

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*“We were trying to boil the ocean,” Eljaiek says. “Through peer connections, we’ve learned real lessons that have shifted the trajectory of how we think about how to show grantee impact and measure social opportunity.”*

## Wins So Far

- RVA Rising is well on its way to rolling out a data platform that will show where economic mobility is breaking down or at risk in any of the nine jurisdictions the collective effort covers or across the entire region. The platform will give nonprofits, policymakers, funders, and governments a shared fact base from which to direct funding, resources, and attention.
- The partners assembled a working group of more than a dozen cross-sector leaders who rolled up their sleeves and identified potential Rewarding Work metrics for the platform.

## What’s Next

- RVA Rising will publish a white paper detailing its shared strategy, measurement architecture, and initial agenda.
- The Community Foundation for a greater Richmond will introduce a new strategic grantmaking program aligned with Urban Institute’s three-part definition of mobility:

*“We’ve changed how we look at the data. We’re not just listening for alarms, we’re asking why they’re going off. A lack of employment opportunity doesn’t necessarily mean we need more jobs. It might be that people need better transportation or childcare.”*

**Isabel Eljaiek**

*Vice President, Research and Strategy,  
Community Foundation for a greater  
Richmond*

economic success, power and autonomy, and dignity and belonging.

- Plans are underway to engage the City of Richmond and Henrico and Chesterfield counties to measure how local government programs influence regional mobility.



### CONSIDER THIS:

**How are you using data to measure economic mobility in your region?**

# 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.