

EMAN INTERMEDIATE COHORT

CFLeads Economic Mobility Action Network Case Study

A strong commitment to people power in Winston-Salem, North Carolina

Once a hub for tobacco and textile manufacturing, Winston-Salem, NC, has in the past few decades become a vibrant center of arts and innovation—an act of reimagining locals are fiercely proud of. Now, leaders in the city and surrounding Forsyth County, population 390,000, are creatively approaching a new challenge: how to transform historic and present-day systems that keep opportunity out of reach for too many.

They're laser-focused on supporting authentic community engagement so people across the region—especially those who have experienced poverty and members of the area's Black communities—have the “civic muscle” to create a better place for everyone. Ultimately, leaders here are working to lift up community-led solutions that make Forsyth County a place where family-sustaining jobs and careers enable more people—from all corners of the region—not only to meet basic needs and weather life's storms, but also to build nest eggs and thrive.

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

THE WINSTON-SALEM FOUNDATION

CFLeads

Community Foundations
Leading Change



COMMUNITY FOUNDATION:

The Winston-Salem Foundation

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES USED:

Engaging residents, commissioning and disseminating local data and research, and marshalling resources

SUMMARY:

Leaders in Winston-Salem, NC, and surrounding Forsyth County, are working to lift up community-led solutions that make the region a place where family-sustaining jobs and careers enable more people—from all corners of the region—to not only to meet basic needs and weather life's storms, but also to build nest eggs and thrive.



“We want to make sure we’re not continuing to do business as usual. Business as usual is what has gotten us to this place where people can’t meet their basic needs. We want to make sure we distribute resources to the communities and individuals who need them most.”

Sandra Fishel-Booth

Director, The Winston-Salem Foundation

The Vision

“When I think about economic mobility in the future, I think about a thriving community where residents are engaged and have a say in decisions impacting their lives,” says Elaine Summerfield, Vice President, Community Impact, at The Winston-Salem Foundation. “I think about a community that supports the creation of more opportunities for those most affected by the inequitable systems of the past.”

The Strategy

The Winston-Salem Foundation is empowering community leaders and collaborating with them to address systemic barriers to economic mobility.

The EMAN Challenge

The Winston-Salem team entered the EMAN Intermediate Cohort wanting to learn how to use research and data to demonstrate the impact of taking a community-led approach.

How The Winston-Salem Foundation Is Leveraging a Community Leadership Approach

The Winston-Salem Foundation is **engaging residents, commissioning and disseminating local data and research, and marshalling resources.**

Foundation staff are incorporating community-led solutions into their work on economic mobility and strengthening their ability to engage residents. For example, in 2025 the Foundation and its data partner Forsyth Futures surveyed leadership development, grassroots organizing, and community empowerment nonprofits. Several messages came through loud and clear: The groups wanted flexible funding that wasn’t tied to grant cycles, so they could continuously build trust in communities. They also wanted the freedom to focus on challenges community members identified, rather than funder priorities.

In a follow-up meeting with more than a dozen nonprofits, the Foundation heard that the groups wanted a “table” where they could regularly come together to share best practices, brainstorm new ideas for supporting communities, and build power together.

“Five organizations volunteered to assist with agenda setting and meeting plans to ensure the momentum is driven by partners, and the Foundation will continue providing support through meeting logistics,” Summerfield says. “After a few more meetings to build trust and understanding, we’ll announce how the Foundation will provide grant support to advance long-term work to build people power.”



CONSIDER THIS:

Map out five organizations in your community that work in different neighborhoods, with different populations, or on different issues related to economic mobility. What questions can you ask them to learn how your community foundation can better support their work?

The Partners

Among the partners working with The Winston-Salem Foundation on economic mobility are:

- [Forsyth Futures](#), an organization that uses data and research to study the county's biggest challenges and inform solutions
- [Action4Equity](#), which works closely with communities to advance Black liberation and ensure every Black child in Forsyth County can thrive
- [The People's Research Council](#), which actively involves community members in local research
- The Foundation's [Black Philanthropy Initiative of Forsyth County](#) and [Women's Fund of Forsyth County](#), two collective philanthropy initiatives that prioritize equity in economic mobility

The Journey

Beginning in 2017, Building an Inclusive Economy has been one of The Winston-Salem Foundation's two grantmaking pillars. Reducing the racial wealth gap and building pathways to family-sustaining careers are two major priorities within that pillar. To advance these goals, the Foundation has supported Black entrepreneurship, efforts to reduce the "benefits cliff" that can reduce people's overall earnings when they receive a pay raise, and pathways to higher paying careers, among other initiatives.

Over the years, the Foundation has engaged community members in participatory grantmaking and community-based research. Now, it is embedding community engagement into its strategic plan. Participating in EMAN has helped Foundation leaders and staff better see how to do that, they say.

"Our new strategic plan provides more clarity in our role to advance Forsyth County and support a thriving community for all," Summerfield says. "Economic Mobility provides a framework for articulating our grantmaking strategies and community leadership work. We're updating our grantmaking guidelines in 2026 to reflect this shift in our thinking."

Working with CFLeads technical assistance providers [ESG](#), experts in systems change, and [TheCaseMade](#), experts in will-building strategy, has led the Foundation to focus on communicating opportunities, rather than challenges. People need to be able to see themselves in the Foundation's work, Summerfield says. "We recognize that narrative change is a part of systems change."

The Foundation and its partners also learned not to compare themselves to big cities with huge projects, says President LaTida Smith. "There's no one way to advance economic mobility. The EMAN cohort has taught us to focus on where we really see opportunity."

“Because we sit at the intersection of business and nonprofits, the public sector and philanthropy, community foundations have a unique ability to bring folks together around a shared understanding of our communities’ needs, our aspirations for joint prosperity, and our shared commitments to arriving at solutions together.”

LaTida Smith

President, The Winston-Salem Foundation

Wins So Far

- The Foundation, Atrium Health, Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church, and others came together to support the Metropolitan Village development of affordable and workforce housing in East Winston-Salem. The first units opened in 2023. The Foundation invested \$1 million in the project through its impact investing fund and made a grant for landscape beautification.
- Asset Building Coalition of Forsyth County’s report on people’s struggles finding affordable housing spurred cross-sector interest in housing challenges and led to the formation of a housing network to study and act on the issue.

What’s Next

- In 2026, the Foundation launched its overarching strategy to build a [thriving community](#) with economic mobility for all, with responsive grant cycles that include funding to address Belonging and Civic Muscle, the idea that strong communities with shared power are vital for health. “We’re advancing a unified grantmaking framework centered on equity and economic mobility,” Summerfield says.
- The Foundation has funded a consultant who is supporting the work of a cross-sector housing network and the development of a strategic housing plan for Forsyth County. The strategies outlined in the plan will inform the Foundation’s grants and investments related to housing.



CONSIDER THIS:

What role do faith institutions play in advancing economic mobility goals in your community?

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.