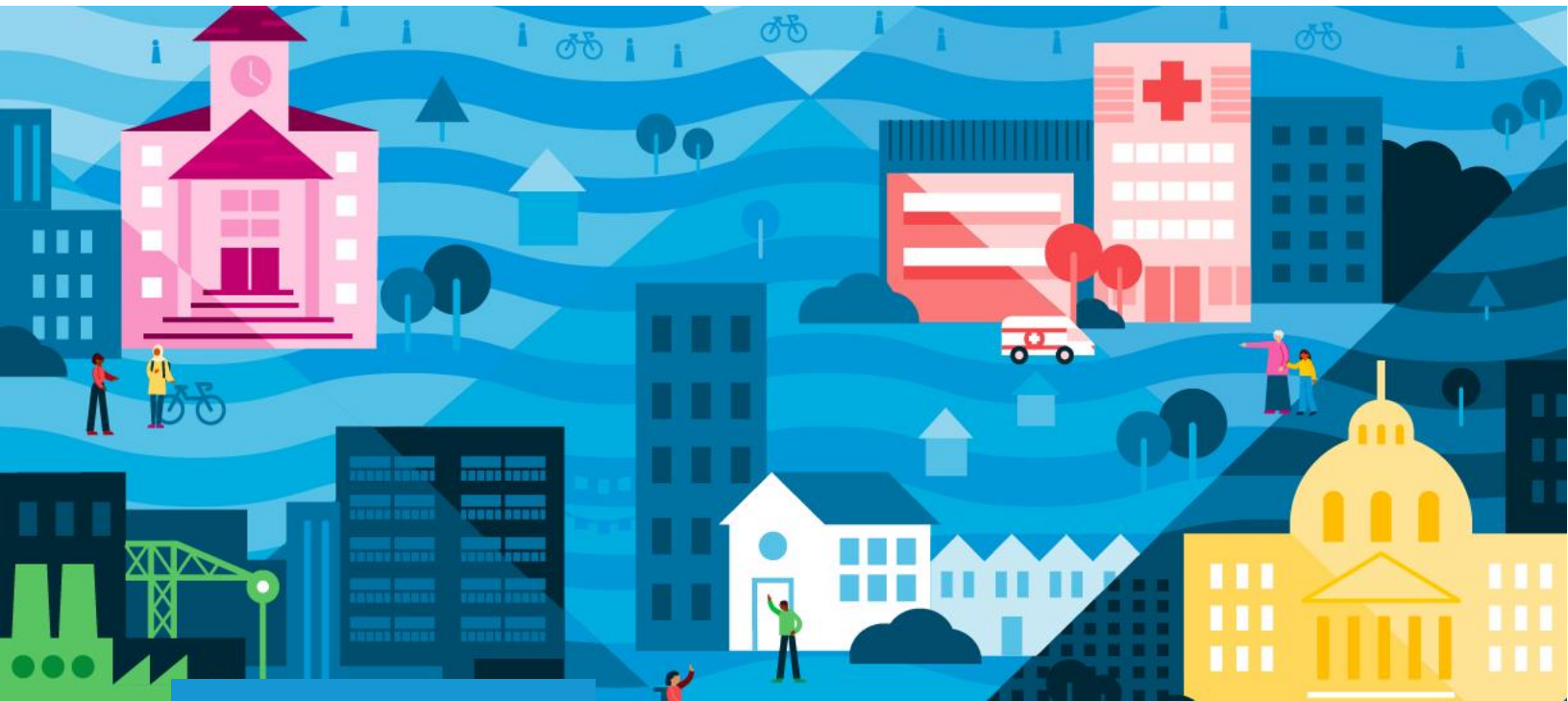




Upward Mobility Initiative

TOOLKIT

Toolkit for Increasing Upward Mobility in Your Community

Samantha Fu, Annie Heinrichs, Kiersten Vaughan, Emma Fernandez, and Joe Schilling
URBAN INSTITUTE

June 2025



ABOUT THE URBAN INSTITUTE

The Urban Institute is a nonprofit research organization that provides data and evidence to help advance upward mobility and equity. We are a trusted source for changemakers who seek to strengthen decisionmaking, create inclusive economic growth, and improve the well-being of families and communities. For more than 50 years, Urban has delivered facts that inspire solutions—and this remains our charge today.

ABOUT THE UPWARD MOBILITY INITIATIVE

We provide local leaders with data and tools to create the conditions that lead to economic success, power and autonomy, and dignity and belonging for all people, especially those historically excluded from prosperity. Visit upward-mobility.urban.org.

Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
How We Developed This Toolkit	vii
Upward Mobility Cohort	vii
Mobility Action Learning Network (by Mobility Action Teams)	viii
Introduction	1
How to Use This Toolkit	1
How We Define Upward Mobility	2
Upward Mobility Principles	4
Equity and Racial Justice	4
Systems Change	5
Cross-Sector Collaboration	5
Community Engagement and Ownership	5
Data-Informed Decisionmaking	5
Continuous Learning	6
Chapter 1: Embarking on an Upward Mobility Planning Process	7
Assessing Your Readiness to Undertake an Upward Mobility Planning Process	7
A Clear Commitment from Local Leaders across Sectors	8
Preparedness to Engage in Cross-Sector Partnerships across Policy Domains	9
A Shared Commitment to Systems Change and Addressing Structural Racism	9
Sufficient Capacity among Coalition Members to Participate in Both Planning and Implementation	10
Dedicated Resources for Meaningful Community Engagement	10
Deciding Whether to Embark on an Upward Mobility Planning Process	11
Writing and Publishing a Mobility Action Plan	12
Determine the Content and Format of Your Mobility Action Plan	12
Develop Engaging and Effective Messaging	13
Come Up with a Strategy for Releasing Your Plan Publicly	14
Determining Next Steps	15
Relevant Templates and Worksheets	16
Chapter 2: Building a Cross-Sector Mobility Coalition	17
Forming a Mobility Coalition	17
Consider the Necessary Collaborators	17
Designing and Structuring Your Mobility Coalition	22
Identifying Key Stakeholder Partners	27

Recruiting Members and Launching the Mobility Coalition	29
Get Acquainted	30
Discuss Expectations and Roles	30
Determine How Decisions Will Be Made	30
Develop Common Values and a Shared Understanding of Structural Racism	31
Form Smaller Working Groups	32
Ensuring the Sustainability of Your Coalition and Its Work	32
Strive for Mutually Supportive and Sustainable Partnerships	33
Ensure the Common Agenda Is Linked to All Three Dimensions of Upward Mobility	33
Commit to Racial Equity as Both a Process and a Goal	33
Acknowledge Diversity among Members and among Their Ideas and Beliefs	33
Focus on Continuous Learning and Improvement	34
Share Power Authentically	34
Be Patient	34
Build Sustainable Capacity	34
Celebrate Success	34
Determining Next Steps	35
Relevant Templates and Worksheets	35
Chapter 3: Engaging Community Members in Planning and Decisionmaking	36
When to Engage Community Members	37
Best Practices for Community Engagement	38
Clarify Who “the Community” Is for This Work	38
Take Time to Learn about the Community’s History of Engagement or Disengagement	39
Prepare Thoroughly for the Logistics of Community Engagement Work	40
Facilitate Ongoing Engagement	41
Center Racial Equity in the Engagement Process	41
Prepare Everyone to Participate Meaningfully in the Engagement	41
Treat People with Lived Experience as Experts	42
Seek to Redress Power Differences and Share Power among Participants	42
Try to Avoid Creating an Event Where People in Power “Talk at” Attendees for Too Long	42
Highlight Community Assets in Addition to Challenges	43
Invest in Developing Community Members’ Power and Autonomy and Dignity and Belonging	43
Methods to Consider for Engaging Community Members	44
Consult	45
Involve	46
Collaborate	48

Defer To	49
Determining Next Steps	50
Relevant Templates and Worksheets	50
Chapter 4: Using Data to Gain a Shared Understanding of Local Mobility Conditions	51
Using the Mobility Metrics	51
Gathering Additional Quantitative Data	54
Collecting Additional Publicly Available Data	56
Collecting Additional Data from Other Sources	57
Collecting Additional Data Using Original Surveys	58
Evaluating Potential Data Sources	58
Gathering and Analyzing Qualitative Data	59
Root Cause Analysis	60
Contextual Analysis	60
Community Asset Mapping	61
Ecosystem Mapping	61
Narrative Power Analysis	61
Determining Next Steps	62
Relevant Templates and Worksheets	62
Chapter 5: Identifying Strategic Actions for Systems Change	63
Creating a Community Vision Statement	64
Understanding How Current Systems Impact Upward Mobility	66
Developing a Logic Model and Identifying Strategic Actions You'll Pursue	67
Outcomes	68
Strategies	69
Inputs	73
Creating a Theory of Change	73
Determining Next Steps	75
Relevant Templates and Worksheets	76
Chapter 6: Measuring Your Coalition's Impact	77
Developing a Measurement Plan	77
Input Measures	78
Outputs	79
Outcome Measures	79
Measuring Systems Change and the Success of Your Coalition	80
Identifying Appropriate Measures and Data Sources	82
Communicating Your Impact	83
Reporting on Your Impact	83

Storytelling	84
Selecting Headline Indicators	85
Framework for Continuous Learning	87
Determining Next Steps	88
Relevant Templates and Worksheets	88
Chapter 7: Sustaining Upward Mobility Initiatives	89
Developing a Strategy for Sustaining Your Work	89
Building Block #1: Effective Structures for Collaborative Governance	91
Formalize the Coalition's Management Structure and Provide Ongoing Support for the Backbone Organization	91
Elevate and Empower Community Members within the Initiative's Leadership and Management	92
Maintain the Initiative's Progress and Expand the Coalition's Momentum	92
Building Block #2: Sufficient Capacity	94
Execute an Operations and Staffing Plan that Guides Implementation	94
Designate a Full- or Part-Time Project Manager	94
Cultivate and Expand the Initiative's Collective Community Data Capacities and Partnerships	95
Building Block #3: Stable Funding	96
Building Block #4: Adaptive Policy and Program Actions for Systems Change	98
Adapt Your Strategies in Response to Evolving Policy Landscapes	99
Maintain Strong Relationships and Partnerships with Actors in the Ecosystem	100
Determining Next Steps	100
Relevant Templates and Worksheets	101

Acknowledgments

This toolkit was developed as part of the Upward Mobility Initiative at the Urban Institute. The toolkit and its previous edition were funded by the Gates Foundation. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute's funding principles is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples.

How We Developed This Toolkit

The Upward Mobility Initiative and its resources, including this toolkit, are built on a foundation of research from the [US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty](#), hosted by the Urban Institute with funding from the Gates Foundation. The Partnership gathered insights from research, practice, and people who have experienced poverty about what it would take to dramatically increase mobility from poverty in the US.

To validate and operationalize the initiative's [framework for boosting upward mobility and advancing racial equity](#), Urban has provided training and technical assistance to dozens of communities across the country since 2021. This toolkit is informed in large part by the many valuable lessons we've learned from them. We are grateful to have had the opportunity to partner with communities working persistently to find real solutions to increase upward mobility for residents as part of the [Upward Mobility Cohort](#) and the [Mobility Action Learning Network](#).

Upward Mobility Cohort

- Alameda County, CA
- Boone County, MO
- Philadelphia, PA
- Ramsey County, MN
- Riverside County, CA

- St. Lucie County, FL
- Summit County, OH
- Washington, DC

Mobility Action Learning Network (by Mobility Action Teams)

- Using Data for Decisionmaking
 - » Forsyth County, NC
 - » Kansas City, MO
 - » Ramsey County, MN
 - » San Jose, CA
 - » San Mateo County, CA
 - » Tulsa, OK
- Building Coalitions for Systems Change
 - » Alexandria, VA
 - » Dallas, TX
 - » Green Bay, WI
 - » Hammond, IN
 - » New Haven, CT
 - » New Orleans, LA
 - » Palm Beach County, FL
 - » Santa Barbara County, CA
 - » Washington County, PA
- Empowering Community Partners
 - » Denver, CO
 - » Dubuque, IA
 - » Tacoma, WA
- Measuring Impact
 - » Charlotte, NC
 - » Dayton, OH
 - » Fairfax County, VA

- » Memphis, TN
- » Pima County, AZ
- » Providence, RI
- » Richmond, VA
- » Rochester, NY

Introduction

Helping people achieve long-term social mobility and economic prosperity is one of the biggest challenges of our time. Stagnating rates of economic mobility in recent decades have cast doubt on the promise that talent and hard work lead to advancement. [Research shows](#) that adults with the lowest incomes are unlikely to rise to the middle of the income distribution, much less to the top. And significant racial disparities persist in rates of intergenerational economic mobility, particularly between Black and white Americans.

If you are driven to increase upward mobility from poverty in your community but wondering where to start, this toolkit is for you. Bringing about the systemic changes necessary to boost upward mobility and advance racial equity is no simple task, and large-scale change will require concerted action from a coalition of stakeholders across the public, private, and community sectors.

Building on [Boosting Upward Mobility: A Planning Guide for Local Action](#), this toolkit walks through multiple pathways that local actors—whether leaders of community-based organizations, members of local government, or concerned citizens—can pursue to begin catalyzing change. Read the acknowledgments to learn more about how this toolkit was created.

How to Use This Toolkit

Because every community is unique and has different assets and needs, this toolkit offers seven chapters that can guide you as you begin—or deepen—your journey toward boosting upward mobility and advancing racial equity in your community:

- Chapter 1: Embarking on an Upward Mobility Planning Process
- Chapter 2: Building a Cross-Sector Mobility Coalition
- Chapter 3: Engaging Community Members in Planning and Decisionmaking
- Chapter 4: Using Data to Gain a Shared Understanding of Local Mobility Conditions
- Chapter 5: Identifying Strategic Actions for Systems Change
- Chapter 6: Measuring Your Coalition’s Impact
- Chapter 7: Sustaining Upward Mobility Initiatives

You are free to start with the chapter that's most appropriate for where you are in your work, but keep in mind that the seven chapters intersect and are mutually reinforcing. Pursuing most, if not all, of the chapters will position you to craft a more comprehensive approach to increasing upward mobility in your community.

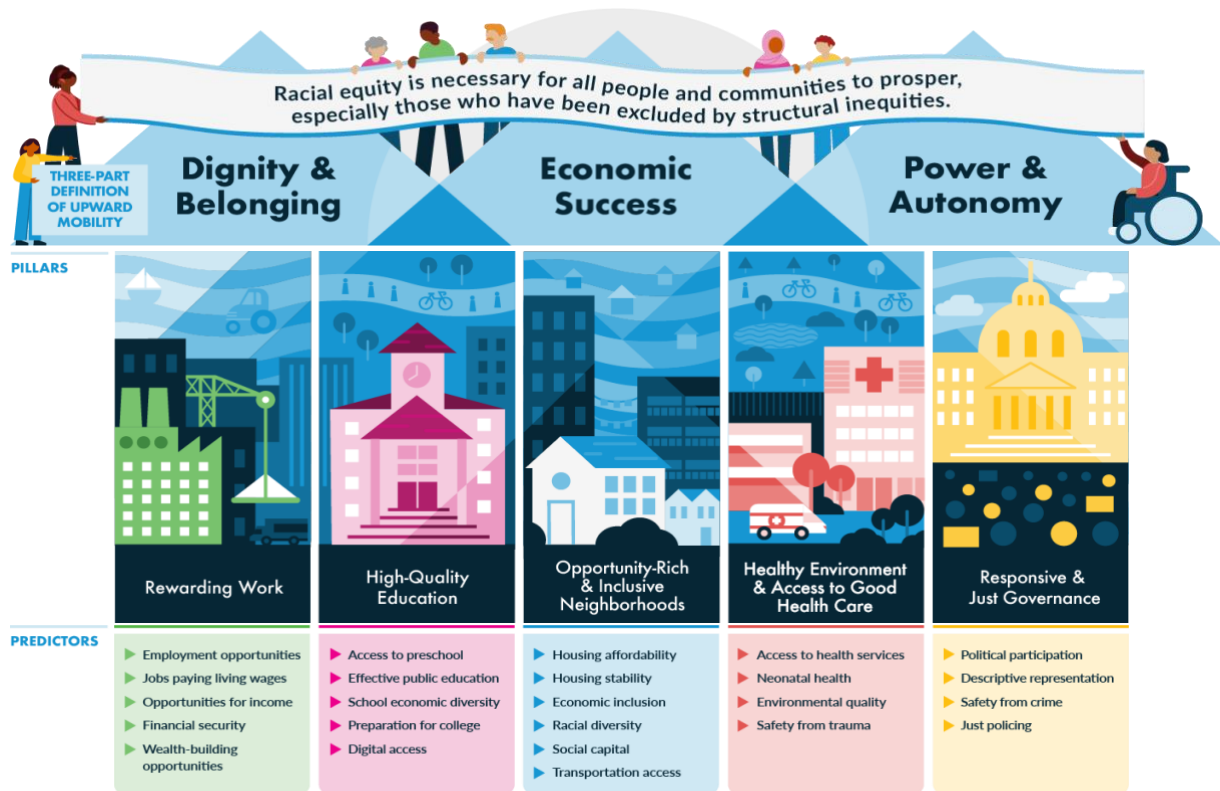
Throughout this toolkit, you'll find two types of boxes that offer additional information. The "LEARN MORE" boxes offer supplemental resources as well as tips and examples of how to undertake actions recommended in the toolkit. The "CASE STUDY" boxes describe how communities we've worked with have implemented recommended practices.

How We Define Upward Mobility

Before you dive in, it's important to understand how we define "upward mobility." This toolkit relies on the Upward Mobility Initiative's three-part definition in the [Upward Mobility Framework](#), which goes beyond **economic success** and requires that people have **power and autonomy** over their circumstances and decisions that affect their lives and also feel **dignity and belonging** in their communities (figure I-1). The three dimensions of this definition are inseparable. Work that serves only to promote new economic opportunities but does not consider ways to increase power, autonomy, and belonging for residents with low incomes may not sufficiently boost mobility from poverty or advance racial equity. Similarly, work that seeks to engage residents in decisionmaking but does not consider whether they can financially afford to participate or are positioned to benefit from the outcomes also may not effectively boost mobility from poverty or advance racial equity.

FIGURE I-1

The Upward Mobility Framework



In addition to this holistic definition of upward mobility, the framework includes a focus on [racial equity](#) and five interconnected pillars of support that people need from their communities to achieve mobility. It also identifies 24 predictors that measure the strength of these pillars in a community (figure I-1). Taken together, the Upward Mobility Framework provides an evidence-based foundation for efforts to advance upward mobility and racial equity for all people and communities.

LEARN MORE

How We Developed the Upward Mobility Framework

From 2016 to 2018, the Urban Institute hosted the [US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty](#), which sought to better understand what it would take to dramatically increase mobility from poverty in this country. After a year of gathering insights from research, practice, and people who have experienced poverty, the Partnership developed a holistic definition of upward mobility.

Building on this definition, in 2020, Urban published the [Upward Mobility Framework](#) in collaboration with a working group of distinguished academics from diverse disciplines. The framework offers local leaders the three-part definition of upward mobility and identifies factors they can influence to increase mobility for all people, especially those historically excluded from prosperity.

Since 2020, Urban's Upward Mobility Initiative has been working to provide local leaders with data and tools to assess and improve community conditions that advance upward mobility and racial equity, including by providing technical assistance to cities, counties, and networks across the country. Read [our story](#) and [key terms](#) to learn more about the initiative's approach to upward mobility.

Upward Mobility Principles

The Upward Mobility Initiative's approach to boosting upward mobility is anchored in the following six principles, which are based on our research; our experience working with actors trying to achieve structural change at the local, state, and federal levels; and our learnings from people with first-hand experience of poverty and structural racism. These principles should be the foundation of any effort to increase upward mobility for all people and communities. The seven chapters in this toolkit discuss each of these principles in further detail.

Equity and Racial Justice

A focus on equity and racial justice is fundamental to upward mobility work. Racial prejudice, discrimination, and segregation are built into many public policies, institutions, and processes. As a result, people of color face especially stubborn barriers to mobility from poverty, as reflected by [persistent racial disparities in rates of intergenerational economic mobility](#). This means that achieving upward mobility for all people and communities—especially those historically excluded from prosperity—requires confronting and eliminating racial and other inequities that prevent people of color, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ people, and members of other marginalized groups from achieving economic success, power and autonomy, and dignity and belonging.

Upward mobility work must embed equity and racial justice—in both processes and outcomes—to ensure it serves those who have been most harmed. We discuss how efforts to boost upward mobility can and should center racial equity in all seven chapters of this toolkit.

Systems Change

For most people experiencing poverty in the US today, opportunities to achieve greater economic success, power and autonomy, and dignity and belonging are blocked by long-standing structural barriers, not by a lack of individual effort. Increasing upward mobility and advancing racial equity therefore requires dismantling the systemic barriers that keep people in poverty and confronting the policies and practices that create and maintain these barriers. This calls for reexamining the underlying values, norms, and narratives that shape the processes, relationships, and power structures in your community. In other words, it calls for pursuing systems change. Read chapters 1 and 5 to learn more about systems change.

Cross-Sector Collaboration

Upward mobility initiatives require collaboration across a wide range of actors in multiple policy areas working together to achieve systems change. Actors that can contribute to upward mobility efforts include governments, nonprofits and community-based organizations, advocacy groups, community members, philanthropies, research organizations, anchor institutions, and private-sector entities. Read chapters 2 and 7 to learn how to build and sustain a cross-sector coalition.

Community Engagement and Ownership

Deep and meaningful community engagement is one way to build community power, and it is rooted in the fight for racial justice and the right of communities to have agency over decisionmaking that affects their lives. (See the Urban Institute's [Community-Engaged Methods Model](#) for more information about the importance of community engagement.) To redistribute power and change systems, upward mobility initiatives must share decisionmaking power with people experiencing poverty and, in particular, communities impacted by systemic oppression. Read chapters 3 and 7 to learn how to conduct sustained and meaningful community engagement.

Data-Informed Decisionmaking

Successful upward mobility initiatives use data to identify areas to prioritize efforts, highlight interconnections across policy domains, set targets for improvement, and monitor progress over time. The data that inform such decisionmaking can be both quantitative (e.g., local administrative data or national US Census data) and qualitative (e.g., insights derived from focus groups, surveys, or

storytelling). Read chapters 4 and 6 to learn how to collect and analyze data that can be used for decisionmaking.

Continuous Learning

To ensure your upward mobility initiative is capable of advancing your racial equity goals and achieving lasting systems change, you should establish continuous learning efforts that can help you assess and reflect on your progress, improve your coalition's practices and services, and drive better long-term outcomes for people in your community. It is important that you engage in continuous learning as a cross-sector coalition to achieve collective (rather than individual) impact. Read chapter 6 to learn more about how to establish continuous learning processes and measure your impact.

Chapter 1: Embarking on an Upward Mobility Planning Process

To kick-start your work to boost upward mobility and advance racial equity, you may wish to undertake an upward mobility planning process—a journey that can help you identify a set of strategic actions to address the barriers to upward mobility in your community. A comprehensive upward mobility planning process should involve building a cross-sector coalition that is representative of your community, engaging a broad set of community members in your planning and decisionmaking processes, gathering and analyzing data you can use to understand local conditions and make appropriate decisions, identifying ways you can change systems and measure impact, and creating mechanisms to help ensure your work is set up for long-term sustainability and success.

This chapter can help you determine whether you are ready to embark on that journey. If you decide that you are not in a position to undertake a full planning process just yet, start with one of the other chapters in this toolkit instead, which can lead you through discrete steps to begin your journey toward boosting upward mobility in your community.

Keep reading to learn how to assess your readiness, decide whether to embark on an upward mobility planning process, write and publish a Mobility Action Plan, and decide on next steps.

Assessing Your Readiness to Undertake an Upward Mobility Planning Process

Undertaking a full upward mobility planning process can be especially helpful if you are new to upward mobility work. A planning process can guide you in engaging partners who are committed to this work for the long haul, building your and your partners' capacity to engage with members of your community and use qualitative and quantitative data, and, ultimately, identifying a set of comprehensive solutions that consider the full range of your community's needs and assets and are responsive to the root causes of inequities in your community. If you have already completed some of these steps independently, you may skip ahead to "Writing and Publishing a Mobility Action Plan" section below or to one of the other chapters in this toolkit.

Embarking on a comprehensive planning process might not be the right approach for all groups working to advance upward mobility. In our work with dozens of communities across the country, we've learned that certain readiness conditions are essential to have in place to maximize your chances of achieving meaningful change. To help you decide whether your community is ready to take on an intensive planning process, consider whether your coalition or team has the following conditions in place:

- a clear commitment from local leaders across sectors
- preparedness to engage in cross-sector partnerships across policy domains
- a shared commitment to systems change and addressing structural racism
- sufficient capacity among coalition members to participate in both planning and implementation
- dedicated resources for meaningful community engagement

A Clear Commitment from Local Leaders across Sectors

Commitment from local leaders—including, at minimum, government executive leadership (e.g., the mayor, city manager, or county executive) and leaders of community organizations—is a necessary condition for moving forward with an upward mobility planning process. To get local leaders on board, you will need to provide a clear, evidence-based explanation for why increasing upward mobility and racial equity is necessary to help all members of your community thrive. The [Upward Mobility Framework](#) and some of the resources listed below may help you make your case:

- [Boosting Upward Mobility: Metrics to Inform Local Action](#), Second Edition
- [Boosting Upward Mobility: Exemplars](#)
- [Boosting Mobility and Advancing Equity through Systems Change](#)
- [Mobility Action Plan Summaries from the Upward Mobility Cohort](#)
- [Exploring Approaches to Increase Economic Opportunity for Young Men of Color: A 10-Year Review](#)
- [What Would It Take to Overcome the Damaging Effects of Structural Racism and Ensure a More Equitable Future?](#)

Beyond a verbal commitment, leaders must also agree to dedicate sufficient resources—including funding, infrastructure, and time—to the process.

CASE STUDY

Creating an Interagency Leadership Group in Washington, DC

In [Upward Mobility Cohort](#) member Washington, DC, the Office of Planning and the Deputy Mayor of Planning and Economic Development (coleads for the District's Upward Mobility project) hosted an interagency kickoff meeting at the start of the initiative, where department heads and their staff could learn more about the Mobility Metrics, discuss project goals and deliverables, and determine a structure for future cross-departmental engagement. Ultimately, the interagency group brought together representatives from 15 agencies monthly for the duration of the project, which helped build support for the eventual launch of the coalition's [Mobility Action Plan](#).

Preparedness to Engage in Cross-Sector Partnerships across Policy Domains

Standing together with a broad coalition of community leaders—including elected officials and members of local government, nonprofits and community organizations, advocacy groups, philanthropic organizations, members of the business community, and private-sector actors—shows the public you intend to have a coordinated strategy that impacts the actions of a wide swath of public-serving organizations. It's also critical that your coalition reflects the diversity of your community and includes people with lived experience of poverty and structural racism.

To forge strong partnerships, it's important for you to understand how you can be a good partner to the members of your coalition—not just how they can be good partners to you. We discuss how you can prepare to engage in a cross-sector coalition in chapter 2.

A Shared Commitment to Systems Change and Addressing Structural Racism

Racial prejudice, discrimination, and segregation have created especially stubborn barriers to upward mobility for people of color in the US. (See our report [How Well Do US Communities Support Residents' Upward Mobility?](#) for a deeper discussion of structural inequities.) As a result, increasing upward mobility for *all* people requires a fundamental shift in practices, underlying values, or norms that can reshape policies, processes, relationships, and power structures—and ultimately address the root causes of racial and economic inequities in our communities. In other words, it requires systems

change, one of our six upward mobility principles (see chapter 5 for more information). Without a shared commitment to changing systems and addressing structural racism, your coalition's work is unlikely to result in upward mobility for all people in your community.

Sufficient Capacity among Coalition Members to Participate in Both Planning and Implementation

Organizations and coalitions need sufficient capacity to take on large-scale systems change work. The Project Management Institute defines “[organizational capacity](#)” as the people, processes, technology and support resources, physical resources, and organizational systems available to support an initiative. Perhaps the most important capacity consideration for undertaking this type of work is determining whether there are people in your coalition who can dedicate significant time to managing the planning process on top of their existing work. It's also important to consider whether those people have the relevant knowledge or experience to undertake the work you anticipate needing to do (e.g., gathering and analyzing data) and what additional training they might find helpful in building their knowledge. As highlighted in the Project Management Institute's definition of capacity, it's also important to consider the necessary systems and processes—including policies, procedures, and practices—that can support your mobility work and whether members of your coalition will be able to support the work beyond the planning stage into implementation.

Dedicated Resources for Meaningful Community Engagement

Achieving the dimensions of “power and autonomy” and “dignity and belonging” means creating opportunities for community members to make choices about their lives and contribute to efforts that shape their community. Engaging community members in a meaningful way—which entails going beyond merely consulting or informing them—is another of our upward mobility principles and requires adequate funds to cover staff time, plan and execute engagements, and compensate community members for their participation and expertise. Without these resources, your work may lose the support of the public and may not achieve the outcomes you desire.

Deciding Whether to Embark on an Upward Mobility Planning Process

There is no standard threshold for determining when each of the above conditions can be considered met. It is ultimately up to you and your partners to decide whether the appropriate readiness conditions are in place, where there may be gaps, and how to fill them. If you decide that you *are* ready to undertake an upward mobility planning process, you can work your way through chapters 2 to 7 in sequential order. They correspond to the upward mobility principles we previously introduced, though equity and racial justice considerations are integrated into each chapter.

While your work may take different forms, from an investment plan to a partnership strategy, one approach you could consider is creating a Mobility Action Plan (MAP). A MAP is a public document that details the strategies you and your partners will undertake to boost upward mobility and promote racial equity in your community. It can help formalize your coalition's work by documenting the activities you will undertake in the other chapters of this toolkit, including how you built a cross-sector Mobility Coalition, how you engaged community members in planning and decisionmaking, how your coalition used quantitative and qualitative data to gain a shared understanding of local mobility conditions, and how you identified strategic actions to change the systems underpinning those challenges.

You can reference the [summaries of MAPs](#) created by the [Upward Mobility Cohort](#), a set of eight counties and cities that partnered with the Urban Institute from 2021 to 2022 to deploy and test the Upward Mobility Framework.

CASE STUDY

Mobility Action Plans from Ramsey County, Minnesota, and Summit County, Ohio

[Upward Mobility Cohort](#) member Ramsey County, MN, identified five priority areas for its work: affordability, wealth creation, early childhood, health, and public safety. Its [Mobility Action Plan](#) outlined more than three dozen strategies related to these areas, such as increasing the supply of rental housing for residents with very low incomes and developing pathways to entrepreneurship for Black, Latinx, Asian, and American Indian residents.

Another Upward Mobility Cohort member, Summit County, OH, chose to focus its work on mental health and juvenile justice. Its [Mobility Action Plan](#) identified nine strategic actions related to these two areas, including piloting a program in public schools to educate families about mental health and collaborating with community partners to explore and expand diversion tactics that prevent youth who interact with law enforcement officials from entering the justice system.

Writing and Publishing a Mobility Action Plan

FIGURE 1-1

Contents of a Mobility Action Plan



Determine the Content and Format of Your Mobility Action Plan

If you decide to write a MAP (figure 1-1), we suggest you include at least the following sections:

- **Your coalition's work:** This section should describe how you formed your Mobility Coalition, including why you decided to pursue the work, who you engaged, and what steps you took to learn about mobility conditions and challenges in your community. Chapter 2 can lead you through the process of building a cross-sector coalition.
 - » You may wish to include a list of your coalition members and their roles within the coalition.
 - » You should include your plan for ongoing community engagement (see our "[Community Engagement Plan Template](#)" worksheet). Chapter 3 can guide you through this process.
- **Summary of local mobility conditions:** This section should include a summary of key findings from your data collection work (see chapter 4). It should describe current mobility conditions in your community and interweave quantitative and qualitative data to tell a story about how current conditions (both good and bad) were created, who they impact most, what outcomes they produce, and how they are being maintained.

- **Community vision, theory of change, and the specific strategies you’ve identified to advance upward mobility and racial equity in your community:** Your community vision should be a forward-looking statement describing what you want your community to look or be like when your work is done. A logic model links your vision to specific strategies you will undertake to achieve your desired outcomes (see “[Creating a Logic Model to Achieve Your Community’s Vision](#)” worksheet), while a theory of change statement articulates how you believe your selected strategies will lead to your vision for your community (see “[Developing a Theory of Change for Your Upward Mobility Work](#)” worksheet). Chapter 5 guides you through the process of cocreating a vision and identifying strategic actions with your coalition.
 - » If you decide to conduct an inventory of existing interventions (see “[Cataloging Existing Interventions](#)” worksheet) or an assessment of existing programs (see “[Assessing Existing Programs for Alignment with the Upward Mobility Framework](#)” worksheet), you should include them here.
- **Sustainability and measurement plan:** This section should describe how you plan to steward and sustain the strategies you identified in the previous section, including responsible actors and the resources needed, as well as how you will measure the success of your efforts (see chapter 7). You may also wish to include a continuous learning and improvement plan (see chapter 6).

After you’ve written your MAP, consider working with a designer to help you present it in an accessible way. Also consider whether to produce two different products: one that is more technical for policymakers and practitioners and one for a general audience.

Develop Engaging and Effective Messaging

In your MAP, it is important to use language that communicates your community’s needs and assets appropriately. Framing challenges in a “[deficit model](#)” preemptively assigns blame and responsibility to individuals (or specific groups), rather than to the failures or limitations of the socioeconomic systems within which they live and operate. To avoid this type of framing, you should ensure that your MAP—and any communications about it—emphasizes the structural context informing the mobility challenges your community faces.

In addition to the language in your MAP, it is important to craft a communications strategy that can ensure your plan will gain traction. Following are some resources to help you craft an engaging and effective message:

- Spitfire's [Smart Chart 4.0: Make Smart Communication Choices](#)
- Spitfire's [Mindful Messaging](#)
- The Urban Institute's [Do No Harm series](#), including a report on using data to craft more equitable narratives
- The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation's [Tips on Equitable Communication Practices in a Policy Context](#)
- Our worksheet for developing an impactful [story for your upward mobility work](#)
- The Urban Institute's [Framing Communications to Drive Social Change](#)
- The Urban Institute's "[Elevate the Debate](#)" worksheets can help you plan and strategize your research communication efforts

Come Up with a Strategy for Releasing Your Plan Publicly

When you are ready to release your MAP publicly, consider the following:

- **Authorship:** Will members of your coalition be attributed as coauthors of the MAP, will they be signatories, or will they write letters of support that can be attached to the document?
- **Branding:** Which organization in your coalition should publish the plan? Should it be a nongovernmental partner to protect the work from political cycles or should it be the city or county?
- **Key terms:** Is there a list of key terms and definitions that should be included? This is especially helpful for terms such as "equity," "inclusive," and "systems change," which are often used in different ways by different groups.
- **Web page:** Where will the MAP live? Are there other documents that should accompany the MAP when it is published, such as an FAQ, sample talking points, a list of partner organizations, or contact information for other groups that want to get involved? Will the web page host a dashboard or some other reporting mechanism to share updates on implementation progress and any changes in desired outcomes?

- **Dissemination:** Should your coalition host a press conference, write a press release, or conduct a social media campaign to share the MAP? What other communications platforms or strategies could be useful? Are there community members who have been engaged throughout the MAP's development who could be "MAP ambassadors" and help share information about the plan with their networks?
- **Adoption:** Should the city or county adopt the MAP through legislative action? Is a related budgetary appropriation needed to implement the strategies in it?

CASE STUDY

Launching a Mobility Action Plan in Boone County, Missouri

Upward Mobility Cohort member Boone County, MO, launched its [Mobility Action Plan](#) in 2022 to great success, in large part because of its deep engagement work with the community. The Boone County team kicked off its planning process by inviting community members, local leaders, and elected officials to participate in a Data Interactive, where the team presented the county's Mobility Metrics and other locally available data. Attendees then suggested initial priorities for the county's planning process and formed working groups focused on those priorities: early grade literacy, jobs and workforce development, and fair and inclusive housing. These groups then worked to uncover the root causes of inequities in their community and proposed strategic actions to address them.

Through the county's efforts to center community members and local leaders at every step of the process, the community developed a sense of ownership over the emerging Mobility Action Plan. As a result, when the county hosted a launch event for the plan in June 2022, the community showed up in support. The event received coverage from eight local news sources and gave the county and the working groups a strong foundation to pursue the strategic actions identified in the plan.

Determining Next Steps

Now that you understand what an upward mobility planning process involves and what capacities are needed to undertake such a process successfully, you are ready to make an informed decision on whether it is the right step for you and your partners. If you decide that it is, the remaining chapters of this toolkit will lead you through the necessary steps.

If you decide you are not in a position to undertake a full planning process, you may still be able to engage in the activities described in some of the chapters independently—for example, chapters 2, 3,

and 4. Alternatively, you might want to craft a preparedness plan to help you focus on building up the capacities you are missing and come back to this work when you've made progress.

Relevant Templates and Worksheets

- [“Assessing Existing Programs for Alignment with the Upward Mobility Framework”](#)
- [“Cataloging Existing Interventions”](#)
- [“Community Engagement Plan Template”](#)
- [“Creating a Logic Model to Achieve Your Community’s Vision”](#)
- [“Developing a Theory of Change for Your Upward Mobility Work”](#)
- [“Telling the Story of Your Upward Mobility Work”](#)

Chapter 2: Building a Cross-Sector Mobility Coalition

Creating and sustaining the conditions for upward mobility and racial equity requires an all-hands-on-deck approach. Bringing about systems change—a fundamental shift in practices, underlying values, or norms by local actors that reshape policies, processes, funding, relationships, and power structures—requires partners to think, act, and collaborate differently than they may have before. Communities that make only small policy or program adjustments—but otherwise maintain the status quo—will likely find their approach insufficient for achieving upward mobility for all residents. This is the reason cross-sector collaboration is one of our six principles for upward mobility work.

Developing a cross-sector Mobility Coalition will require you to engage a variety of actors who hold unique perspectives on community challenges, priorities, and assets, and to work across the various systems that can either promote mobility or hold poverty and inequity in place. The members of your coalition should be able to help you or your organization understand the barriers to upward mobility in your community and identify ways to dismantle those barriers and advance upward mobility for all (see chapters 4 and 5).

Keep reading to learn more about how to form a Mobility Coalition, identify key stakeholder partners and champions, recruit members, ensure the sustainability of your coalition and its work, and determine next steps.

Forming a Mobility Coalition

Consider the Necessary Collaborators

Working together with a broad coalition of community leaders—including local governments, the business community, anchor institutions, financial organizations, advocacy groups, and other community groups—can show the public you intend to have a coordinated strategy that prioritizes [collective impact](#), rather than individual impact. Additionally, [engaging those who face the greatest barriers](#) as stakeholders and decisionmakers early in the process can help ensure that your work advances both upward mobility and racial equity.

The partners in your Mobility Coalition should ideally represent multiple sectors and domains, because many of the actions needed to boost upward mobility likely cannot be accomplished by one actor alone. Strong cross-sector partnerships can help you brainstorm new ideas, build knowledge about challenges or assets within different sectors, and connect with residents who can shape your upward mobility work. Figure 2-1 illustrates the types of actors you might want to consider for your coalition. We discuss how each of these actors can contribute to your Mobility Coalition below.

FIGURE 2-1

Actors to Consider for Your Mobility Coalition



LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Your Mobility Coalition may include elected representatives or staff from city or county government or other public organizations and agencies, such as public school systems, housing authorities, economic development agencies, and regional planning authorities. While the focus of mobility work is local in nature, it may be helpful to invite representatives of the state or federal government, such as program managers of locally based federal programs like Choice Neighborhoods or Promise Neighborhoods. Government officials can be valuable members of your coalition because they can use their policy and regulatory authority to draft laws and create programs that enable systems change. They can also use public resources to scale effective strategies, collect and analyze administrative data to understand how well programs are working, and convene diverse stakeholders around particular issues.

CASE STUDY

Bringing Together Partners across Policy Domains in Lansing, Michigan

The [BOLD Lansing](#) initiative supports upward mobility by empowering students and families to attend college and become financially independent. The initiative brought together a wide range of partners who support students and families along different steps of the educational ladder and across multiple domains, including financial well-being, neighborhoods, education, and work. The [initiative's partners](#) include the Lansing School District, the City of Lansing's Office of Financial Empowerment, a local credit union, the Capital Area United Way, the Capital Area College Access Network, and the Community Economic Development Association of Michigan.

COMMUNITY MEMBERS

For the purposes of this toolkit, community members are people who live or work in a certain geographic area. They are a critical part of your Mobility Coalition because they can contribute unique perspectives that those who have traditionally held wealth or power cannot. Community members can help to cocreate policies and programs with policymakers and other stakeholders by participating in community visioning exercises and deliberative forums, where they can share their lived experiences and provide feedback on existing programs, help collect and analyze community data to make sure they are interpreted correctly, and serve as decisionmakers on how community resources should be allocated. They also have the power to hold stakeholders accountable by voting in local elections, donating to campaigns, and organizing community outreach.

Given the history of structural racism, discrimination, and disinvestment in the US, it is important that you seek to engage community members who are people of color, people with low incomes, people with disabilities, immigrants, English-language learners, people experiencing housing instability or homelessness, young people, people involved in the justice system, and anyone else with lived experience of poverty or discrimination.

Although some community members may work for organizations you may be considering for your Mobility Coalition, you should also invite community members to participate as individuals who have engaged with local services and systems designed to alleviate poverty. Careful attention should be paid to how power dynamics in the coalition might discourage some community members from speaking up or block opportunities for them to lead pieces of the work.

It's critical to [compensate community](#) members who agree to serve on your coalition for their time and expertise, especially because they may not be participating in their professional capacity like other coalition members. Note that inviting community members to join your Mobility Coalition is *supplemental to* doing community engagement. You will still need to engage a wider group of community members to inform your upward mobility work. See chapter 3 for more information on community engagement.

LEARN MORE

Positionality

Understanding your positionality and that of the institution you work for is vital for learning how to address power dynamics and imbalances. Positionality is the combination of all your identities—race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, education, income, family structure, employment status, ability, and more—that affects how you interact with other people and shapes your access to society. It is also connected to your social and economic power because your identities confer different forms of power.

A [common practice of recognizing your positionality](#) is to write a positionality statement to include in emails, presentations, or published work. A positionality statement is a brief overview of your individual, team, or institutional positionality as it relates to the work you are doing. By including a positionality statement in your materials or publications, you can prompt considerations for how individuals or entities relate to your coalition and its work. See our "[Examining Your Individual and Institutional Positionality](#)" worksheet to learn how to draft a positionality statement.

NONPROFITS AND COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Local and national nonprofits may include charitable and direct service organizations, volunteer service organizations, labor unions, chambers of commerce, and child care organizations. They may be based around a specific issue like homelessness, or they may serve as an intermediary and provide technical assistance to boost the capacity of other organizations. Intermediaries are organizations that connect groups working on the same topics or in the same geographic areas. Community-based organizations (CBOs), such as community development corporations, community development financial institutions, social service providers, advocacy groups, and neighborhood groups, are typically structured as nonprofits and work at the local level to meet community needs.

Nonprofits and CBOs can be valuable members of your Mobility Coalition because they can use their programmatic expertise and relationships in the community to help elevate issues of concern for residents and connect them to resources. For instance, organizations that deliver programs and provide services to community members are likely to have strong relationships with residents. Nonprofits that serve as intermediaries can also be valuable members of the coalition because they may be skilled in providing training and technical assistance or conducting policy research.

ADVOCACY GROUPS

Advocacy groups are organizations that advocate on behalf of a specific cause or community. Because they are typically nonprofit organizations, they may function similarly to nonprofits and CBOs described above. Their goal is to elevate and promote policy priorities to private and public actors who can draft policy and enact systems change. Advocacy groups can be valuable members of your Mobility Coalition because they can help provide data on specific policy topics and build support for the coalition's priorities while holding other actors accountable for following through on their commitments. They can also help develop and execute narrative change strategies.

PHILANTHROPY

Philanthropic organizations, such as [community foundations](#), provide financial support (typically charitable in nature) to other organizations. They can be valuable members of your Mobility Coalition because they can contribute financially to a cause and use their status to advocate for policy change. Through their relationships with grantees, philanthropies can encourage program evaluation and promote specific goals and outcomes. They can also play important research and development functions by funding local pilot projects.

RESEARCH ORGANIZATIONS

Research organizations, including universities and think tanks, can be valuable Mobility Coalition members because they can collect and analyze data, evaluate programs and policies, conduct original research on specific topics, and provide training and technical assistance. They can also serve as neutral conveners that bring groups together around a specific issue.

ANCHOR INSTITUTIONS

Anchor institutions are local or regional for-profit and nonprofit organizations that have a significant and long-standing presence in a community, such as universities, hospitals and other health care providers, financial institutions, religious organizations, and arts and cultural organizations. They can contribute to your Mobility Coalition by leveraging their status in a community and their political and financial capital to support cross-sector goals. Anchor institutions are often major regional employers and buyers of goods and services, which gives them additional power over mobility-boosting systems. They may also play a convener role and lend financial or technical capacity to support other organizations.

PRIVATE-SECTOR ACTORS

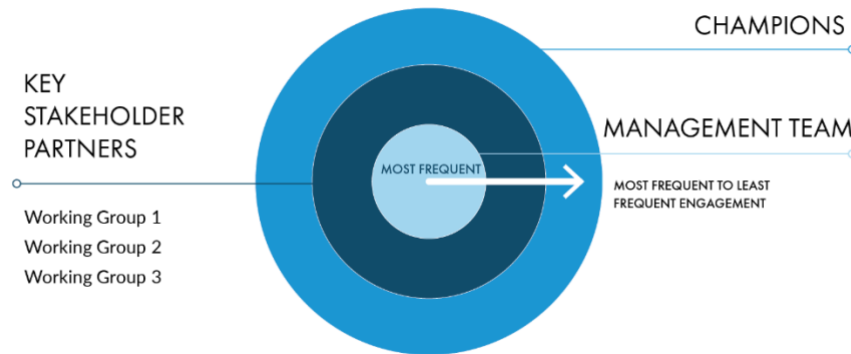
Private-sector actors are individuals, for-profit businesses, and other organizations that do not belong to the public or community sectors. They can be valuable Mobility Coalition members because they can support specific policy agendas or interventions and adopt more equitable business practices (e.g., living-wage policies). They can also contribute financially or provide other resources to social causes. Private-sector actors may need to be brought in with a persuasive strategy that convinces them of their value to the work and how the work aligns with their goals, which are generally more profit-oriented.

Designing and Structuring Your Mobility Coalition

While the exact structure of your Mobility Coalition will vary according to the needs of your work, you might consider organizing it into three groups: a management team, key stakeholder partners organized into working groups that focus on specific needs, and champions who can help support and advocate for critical aspects of the work. Figure 2-2 shows the frequency with which you should engage each group. The management team is central to the work and therefore should meet most frequently, while the champions are tertiary partners who should be engaged less often, most likely at critical junctures in the work.

FIGURE 2-2

Example of Mobility Coalition Structure



MANAGEMENT TEAM

Your Mobility Coalition’s management team serves as the main body for planning and launching the process to build your coalition, along with later activities to support and sustain the coalition. The team should develop a road map to not only launch the coalition but also to facilitate and lead the implementation of the coalition’s vision. The members of the management team—and the members of the coalition more broadly—should have a variety of lived experiences and ideally reflect the diversity of your community along multiple spectrums, including race and ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, and more. They should also have the relevant experience and connections, authority, and access to information required to advance the work, as well as a commitment to racial equity, diversity, and inclusion, as demonstrated by their prior work or their organization’s stated values. Below we describe some key roles that make up the management team. Although most of these roles are essential to the work, you should decide how to operationalize them in your community because local resources and capacities vary.

- **Project manager:** The project manager is the operational lead and is responsible for developing your work plan, identifying and liaising with the various working group leads, making sure everyone follows through on their commitments, and troubleshooting challenges. We recommend that the project manager be a member of the convening or [backbone organization](#) with the authority and information to lead other team members. This person should
 - » be highly organized,
 - » have deep understanding of organizational structures and processes,

- » possess strong communication skills,
 - » have expertise in advancing and communicating about racial equity,
 - » be able to coordinate work across departments and organizations,
 - » be a problem solver, and
 - » be able to delegate confidently.
- **Data lead:** The data lead will manage the collection, analysis, and visualization of data, as well as the development of mechanisms for regularly gathering and updating data and tracking success metrics. This person should have experience with disaggregating data, using data for storytelling and community engagement, and executing data-sharing agreements. Research organizations, anchor institutions, universities, or local governments might be good places to look for candidates.
 - **Community engagement lead:** The community engagement lead will plan and possibly facilitate your coalition's community engagement activities. This person should have extensive knowledge of engagement methods, be familiar with principles of [inclusive and equitable engagement](#), and have connections to CBOs in your community. Nonprofits or CBOs might be good places to look for candidates.
 - **Communications and outreach lead:** The communications and outreach lead will coordinate both internal and external communications regarding your coalition's work. This person should be familiar with multiple communications channels, including social media and platforms used by harder-to-reach populations, such as English-language learners, people without access to the internet, and older adults. Philanthropies or anchor institutions might be good places to look for candidates.
 - **Learning and evaluation lead:** The learning and evaluation lead will oversee the codevelopment of measures of success (along with the data lead and other relevant stakeholders and community members) and create an evaluation plan for your coalition's work. They will also facilitate continuous learning and improvement activities so your coalition can course correct as needed and modify its approach over time. This person should have experience with multiple forms of evaluation, organizational improvement, and information-gathering methods, including performance management, results-based accountability, qualitative research and interviewing, and evaluating systems change. Research organizations or philanthropies might be good places to look for candidates. Your data lead may also be the right person for this role, but if you decide to keep these functions separate, the data lead and

the learning and evaluation lead should work closely together to develop monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

Each member of the management team may decide to organize their own small operations team to provide additional capacity. For example, the data lead might gather a group of data analysts from across partner organizations to assist with data gathering, cleaning, and analysis. The community engagement lead might assemble a small management team composed of individuals from local nonprofits or CBOs who have experience working closely with community members. However, before they do so, they should have a clear sense of what support they need, how much time they're asking of people, and how they'll work to minimize the burden on these individuals if the work is not their primary job. Each lead should communicate these expectations clearly in their requests.

KEY STAKEHOLDER PARTNERS

Your key stakeholder partners are the members of your Mobility Coalition charged with executing tasks related to the strategic actions you intend to implement to advance upward mobility. They may be organized into smaller working groups to lead activities in specific areas. Keep in mind that your key stakeholders will likely grow or change as you deepen your work and clarify your key priorities and activities.

When forming a new Mobility Coalition, it's helpful to begin by learning who is currently working on the issues you're hoping to address and whether they might be appropriate partners. No one wants to be part of yet another project that duplicates efforts already underway. Rather than reinventing the wheel, talk to the people and organizations in your community about how you might work together to fill important gaps. There may be a collective impact initiative in your community that is already working on some of the policy issues you hope to tackle (see the Riverside County example below). If so, engage relevant groups early to see how you might collaborate to advance your mutual goals, and be prepared to make the case for how working with you will benefit their cause.

CASE STUDY

Building a Collective Impact Network in Riverside County, California

Lift to Rise is a collective impact organization based in Riverside County, CA. The organization was founded in 2014 when a group of community-based organizations serving Riverside County's Coachella Valley came together to discuss using a collective impact approach to address issues like housing instability and economic insecurity. Its initial work focused on housing instability and transformed the county's ability to successfully partner with cross-sector organizations. It built a

powerful collective-action network of more than 50 regional stakeholders, who collaboratively developed a cross-sector housing agenda that is still in operation.

Three years after the work started, Riverside County and Lift to Rise adapted Lift to Rise's successful collective-action model for their participation in the Upward Mobility Cohort. They used lessons learned from extensive community listening and qualitative research and worked with resident leaders to shape their priorities around economic opportunity and mobility. They relied on existing partnerships with local stakeholders to reach residents with lived experience and used Lift to Rise's analytic capacity to understand relevant data. Importantly, the county shared resources from the Mobility Cohort grant directly with Lift to Rise to support dedicated staff for resident engagement, data analytics, and project management. By building on an existing collaboration, Riverside County and Lift to Rise were able to quickly identify priorities, locate additional datasets, and facilitate community engagement and collective-action planning.

CHAMPIONS

Champions make up the final category of Mobility Coalition members. Champions need not attend every planning meeting, but they should be influential individuals who can support critical aspects of the work, such as determining direction and scope, persuading individuals who are difficult to bring into the work, seeking buy-in from elected officials, and reviewing the coalition's plans. Champions should have the following qualities:

- can clearly see the vision for change
- is committed to advancing racial equity
- is a coalition builder
- is well connected in the policy landscape
- can motivate others to act

Champions have several responsibilities, including the following:

- coordinating and convening additional stakeholders who may not have worked together before
- liaising with policymakers and elected officials to gain their buy-in for the work
- publicly advocating for the work, especially to individuals who need to be persuaded of its importance or persuaded to participate
- fundraising for the strategic actions the coalition identifies

- (when needed) helping to enact policy change
- sharing progress updates and reporting on early wins

Like the key stakeholder partners, champions may be found within the convening or backbone organization or within partner organizations whose job is to help promote the work of the Mobility Coalition or advocate for specific policies or programs publicly. For example, many community foundations have served as champions for local inclusive economic development and education initiatives.

Identifying Key Stakeholder Partners

To identify possible key stakeholder partners, create a stakeholder inventory by brainstorming a list of the various local actors working on upward mobility in your community. Feel free to use our [“Identifying Potential Coalition Members”](#) worksheet to assist with your brainstorming. Be sure to consider actors from all the different groups highlighted above (see figure 2-1), actors serving marginalized groups in your community (e.g., people of color, people with disabilities, or people with low incomes), as well as actors working on issues you believe are critical to upward mobility.

If your list of partners is long, that’s okay. This is just the inventory step. From here, you’ll narrow the list by looking for “critical partners,” without whom you would not be able to create a plan to boost upward mobility, successfully identify policy, practice, and programmatic gaps, or implement the ideas you eventually develop.

To identify critical partners, ask the following questions about the potential individuals and organizations listed in your inventory:

- **Aligned initiatives:** What activities or initiatives does the organization undertake that might align with your coalition’s efforts to boost upward mobility and bring about racial equity? Does it currently have an internal- or external-facing racial equity initiative? Does it conduct deep and meaningful community engagement? Does its work focus on promoting power and autonomy and dignity and belonging among participants? Is it focused on bringing about systems change?

- **Assets:** What assets might this stakeholder bring to the partnership? Assets include research and analytic capability, staff, financial resources, political clout, key relationships, strong connections to community members, fundraising capacity, experience creating a narrative change campaign, convening power, expertise in data-informed decisionmaking, or a demonstrated commitment to racial equity.
- **Partnership:** How would the partnership be mutually beneficial?
- **Motivations:** What motivates this organization? Who or what is it accountable to and what drives it to action?
- **Roles:** Are there individuals working for this organization who have critical frontline or technical knowledge that may be key to transforming systems and responding to community members' needs?

Once you've considered these questions regarding potential partners, some individuals or organizations will likely stand out as being the most critical to your Mobility Coalition. Because you will need to revisit this initial list of partners throughout your work, it's fine to start with a slightly smaller group and add others over time. Eventually, you might break the key stakeholder partners into working groups centered around specific community priorities or activities.

Another thing to take into account is that some of the potential partners on the list might be good candidates for a "keep informed" category. Organizations in this category need not be formally engaged as part of the Mobility Coalition, at least not initially, but should be kept in the loop about the work being planned, as you may want to engage them when you begin implementing your strategies and priorities.

CASE STUDY

Tapping into Existing Networks in Dallas, Texas

In 2024, three Dallas, TX, stakeholders committed to addressing inequities in financial security and access to credit—the City of Dallas' [Office of Community Care and Empowerment](#), [Ascend Dallas](#), and the [International Rescue Committee](#)—formed a Mobility Action Team to participate in the [Mobility Action Learning Network](#). The team started its mobility work by identifying key local stakeholders—including financial institutions, community organizations, faith-based groups, health care providers, and government institutions and officials—that needed to be engaged in its efforts to change credit conditions and opportunities in their community.

While conducting the stakeholder inventory exercise, the team realized that many of the stakeholders they needed to partner with already convene through an existing network called the Financial Inclusion Roundtable, organized by the United Way of Metropolitan Dallas. The team tapped into this existing network to launch a formal coalition and mobilize key partners around a common goal of supporting equitable access to credit.

Recruiting Members and Launching the Mobility Coalition

Joining a Mobility Coalition requires a substantial commitment of time, trust, and social capital. Thoughtfully framing the invitation to each potential partner or champion is key to starting the coalition off on the right foot. You should make a direct, personalized request that states a rationale for the invitation, describes what resources or support they will be given in exchange for their time and expertise, introduces them to the project manager, and proposes how the convening organization plans to share power during the work.

Invitations should also include a note about what makes this effort different from others. For example, many successful cross-sector initiatives began because local leaders observed some startling statistics about their community and decided to take action to address them. As you prepare to launch your Mobility Coalition, consider sharing some key data points about your community to illustrate why change is needed (see chapter 4). Refer to our [“Sample Invite Letter to New Coalition Members”](#) worksheet for wording you might find helpful as you draft your invitation.

CASE STUDY

A Coalition to Change Course in Charlotte, North Carolina

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Opportunity Task Force was launched in response to [research published](#) in 2014 by Harvard University and the University of California, Berkeley. Out of the 50 largest metropolitan areas in the US, the study ranked the Charlotte, NC, area as the worst region for upward mobility for children born into the lowest income quintile. Upset by the clear evidence of segregation and intergenerational poverty, the county commission chair and a group of nonprofit leaders decided to launch a task force to investigate the problem and recommend a plan of action for the area. Through investments in childhood programs and changes to local policies and hiring practices, Charlotte is now among the cities [where economic mobility is rising most quickly](#).

Once you've recruited all the necessary actors for your Mobility Coalition, the next step is to kick off the coalition's work. In the first few months, it will be important to make time for a few launch activities (listed below in a recommended sequential order) that can help build a well-functioning and sustainable coalition. We provide some sample agendas in our "[Sample Agendas for Building Your Mobility Coalition](#)" worksheet to help you set up your first few meetings.

Get Acquainted

People working closely together will need time to get to know one another and understand how each partner fits into the overall puzzle. You may want to set community norms that all coalition partners can commit to and build on as they work together. You may also want to create opportunities for partners to present their organization's work, talk about their positionality, and why they care about boosting upward mobility and advancing racial equity, especially because some partners will be new to the coalition or will not have had opportunities to join similar coalitions in the past. Making space for team building and introductions will help ensure that new voices don't get sidelined and that your coalition centers equity in both its process and outcomes.

Discuss Expectations and Roles

It is important to make space at the outset for partners to discuss their expectations and hopes for the Mobility Coalition. Specifically, your coalition should plan to agree on how frequently you will meet, what communication platforms you will use, what role each member will play, and how decisions will be made.

Determine How Decisions Will Be Made

Your coalition will need to determine how decisions will be made, who will get to provide input, and who will have the final say. There are many decisionmaking models your coalition can use. The following are a few common ones to consider:

- **Consensus model**, where groups work together to reach a decision that everyone can support.
- **Majority rules model**, where the majority vote determines the decision.
- **Unanimous support model**, where all must vote in favor of a decision.
- **Simple majority or plurality model**, where whichever decision has the majority of votes wins.

Develop Common Values and a Shared Understanding of Structural Racism

Tackling a complex problem without a shared understanding of its cause can lead to fragmented and/or inadequate solutions. To remove the barriers that systems have created and sustained, partners must develop common values and agree on a cohesive narrative about what has caused the community's challenges. It's likely that people in your coalition will have different understandings about how racial inequities came to be and varying levels of comfort in talking about privilege or experiences with racism. [Shared analysis](#) is a discussion approach through which participants can learn about the history of racism in their community, establish a common framework and language for discussing race and equity matters, develop strategies for talking about tough subjects in a respectful and honest way, and understand how to redefine leadership structures and roles to create racial equity-focused strategies.

Investigating structural racism and privilege is an ongoing process, but it is important to commit to building a shared understanding of structural racism as you begin your journey to advance upward mobility in your community. Following are some resources you can use to host meetings among stakeholders and undertake a shared analysis about race and racial inequity in your community:

- [FrameWorks's Communicating about Intergenerational Urban Poverty and Race in America: Challenges, Opportunities, and Emerging Recommendations](#)
- [Government Alliance on Race and Equity's Advancing Racial Equity and Transforming Government: A Resource Guide to Put Ideas into Action](#)
- [Government Alliance on Race and Equity's Racial Equity Action Plans: A How-to Manual](#)
- [The US Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration's Indigenous Economic Development Community of Practice](#)
- [Race Forward's Creating Cultures & Practices for Racial Equity: A Toolbox for Advancing Racial Equity for Arts and Cultural Organizations](#)
- [Race Forward's Building the We: Healing-Informed Governing for Racial Equity in Salinas](#)
- [Smithsonian Magazine's 158 Resources to Understand Racism in America](#)
- [National Museum of African American History & Culture's Talking about Race](#)
- [Washington Race Equity & Justice Initiative's Organizational Race Equity Toolkit](#)
- [The Michigan Department of Civil Rights' Racial Equity Toolkit: A Road Map for Government, Organizations and Communities](#)

CASE STUDY

Conducting Shared Analysis to Understand Structural Racism in Fresno, California

The [Fresno DRIVE Initiative](#) is a 10-year community investment plan to develop an inclusive, vibrant, and sustainable economy for residents in the greater Fresno, CA, region. It began its upward mobility work by hosting shared analysis sessions in which members of its executive committee reflected on their own experiences with race and racism. The group then created a [common framework and language](#) for understanding and communicating about race and equity matters in their community.

Form Smaller Working Groups

Dividing your Mobility Coalition members into smaller working groups can provide greater focus and accountability. These groups can meet for as long and as often as deemed necessary by the members involved (within the constraints of your goals and timeline). They can also be reorganized as needed. When convening working groups, make sure to prioritize cross-sector partnerships. For example, instead of creating a “Housing Group,” which may only resonate with subject-matter experts in housing, consider expanding the scope to “Opportunity-Rich and Inclusive Neighborhoods,” which may include subject-matter experts not just in housing but also economic inclusion, transportation access, and social capital. If your language is inclusive of systemwide factors, you are more likely to encourage engagement across multiple policy domains and a wider range of actors, such as developers, researchers, and nonprofit organizations. Working with a diverse range of colleagues or stakeholders can help challenge assumptions, check biases, and illuminate opportunities for systems change that may not have surfaced otherwise. Also, don’t forget to facilitate peer-sharing sessions between representatives from different working groups so that members of all groups can spend time identifying similar patterns and overlapping themes.

Ensuring the Sustainability of Your Coalition and Its Work

Although a lot of work may have gone into identifying and recruiting coalition members, forming and launching your Mobility Coalition is just the beginning of your journey. To meaningfully improve upward mobility and racial equity in your community, you will need to sustain the coalition and its work throughout the planning, implementation, and evaluation phases. Chapter 7 discusses how to do

so in more detail, but below are some general best practices informed by the [Collective Impact Forum](#), [Community Tool Box](#), and John Kania and Mark Kramer's work on [collective impact](#).

Strive for Mutually Supportive and Sustainable Partnerships

Typically, people partner with organizations that offer something they need. For example, people may leverage networks or use some of the funding and resources of partner organizations to amplify their own goals. However, creating strong and resilient partnerships and sustaining work over several years requires partners to mutually reinforce one another's work. To develop strong, mutually supportive relationships with your partners, assess your own resources, networks, and capacities to see what you can share and how you can support the work your partners are doing.

Ensure the Common Agenda Is Linked to All Three Dimensions of Upward Mobility

Achieving upward mobility for all people in your community—especially people of color and other historically marginalized groups—entails creating the conditions not only for economic success but also for power and autonomy and dignity and belonging.

Commit to Racial Equity as Both a Process and a Goal

It's important to work not only toward creating more racially equitable outcomes in your community but also to embed racial equity considerations in how your Mobility Coalition members work with one another and with the community at large. It's likely that people in your coalition will have very different opinions about and experiences with racial equity. To create an effective and cohesive coalition, you must seek to have a common understanding of what equity means to the group and how each member's identity might contribute to the group's understanding of equity, build trust among coalition members and with community leaders and members, invite individuals to the coalition who can share their lived experience in addition to their expertise, and commit to collecting disaggregated data and conducting deep and meaningful community engagement.

Acknowledge Diversity among Members and among Their Ideas and Beliefs

Members of your coalition may hold very different identities, and they may also occasionally disagree. Make sure to take everyone's strengths, opinions, and constraints into account and to use diversity as a starting point for discussion, rather than a source of division.

Focus on Continuous Learning and Improvement

The systems that block racial equity and mobility are complex and dynamic. Actively learning whether organizational structures, relationships, or industry norms are hindering or helping you achieve your goals, and then adapting your approaches as needed, is critical to doing this work well. This requires taking time to reflect on how partnerships work and what could improve coordination.

Share Power Authentically

Although one organization or group may be the coordinating body of this work, you should include all coalition members at every stage, giving them real ownership and opportunities to inform and shape decisions. You should try to involve everyone in generating vision and mission statements, planning, and major decisions. The more people feel ownership of the coalition itself, the harder they'll work to achieve its goals and the less likely they'll be to allow turf issues or minor conflicts to get in the way of the coalition's progress.

Be Patient

Forging sustainable partnerships cannot be done quickly. It's important to take time to learn about your partners and their values, goals, and approaches to the work. Even after launching your Mobility Coalition, be patient with one another, because creating the conditions to boost upward mobility and advance equity will take years. Carefully forging your partnerships early on and devoting work to maintaining them will lead to more meaningful collaboration over time.

Build Sustainable Capacity

The success of the coalition will depend on procuring and allocating resources (staffing, funding, technical support, etc.) so the coalition can continue its activities over time, better prepare for potential changes in staffing and political shifts, and make sure resources are available for coalition priorities.

Celebrate Success

Celebrating achievements will help your coalition thrive and will give you a much-needed opportunity to remember why you're doing all this work.

Determining Next Steps

Now that you've built a Mobility Coalition united around the shared goal of advancing upward mobility and racial equity in your community, it's time to think about what your coalition will do to achieve its goals (see chapter 5). But before you start your work, you'll need to develop a shared understanding of local mobility conditions and barriers to upward mobility, which involves listening to and learning from members of your community (see chapters 3 and 4). The remaining chapters of this toolkit can guide you through that work.

Relevant Templates and Worksheets

- “Examining Your Individual and Institutional Positionality”
- “Identifying Potential Coalition Members”
- “Sample Agendas for Building Your Mobility Coalition”
- “Sample Invite Letter to New Coalition Members”

Chapter 3: Engaging Community Members in Planning and Decisionmaking

Working toward creating opportunities for all community members to have power and autonomy and dignity and belonging—two of the [three dimensions of upward mobility](#)—requires that they are given the ability to make choices about their lives and contribute to efforts that shape their circumstances. For that reason, deep and meaningful community engagement is one of our six upward mobility principles and should be a key component of all upward mobility initiatives.

Community engagement is a process by which community members come together to reflect on and make decisions about the future of their community. When done properly, community engagement is accessible, fair, and engaging; it builds trust, uplifts local values and knowledge, and redistributes power from organizational leaders—government officials, community-based organizations, philanthropies, research organizations, and more—to community members. In this chapter, we provide strategies for community engagement efforts that span from informing community members of policies, programs, and practices being implemented to deferring to them on the policies, programs, and practices that should be created. Although not all decisions can be made by community members, we encourage you to remember that the ultimate goal of your upward mobility work is to build power for community members, foster deeper democratic participation, and achieve equitable outcomes.

Some members of the community should already be a part of your Mobility Coalition. Still, you will need to engage a broader range of community members to inform your upward mobility work (see chapter 2). In addition to residents with lived experience of poverty, you may also wish to engage other community members with specific knowledge and perspectives to share, such as service providers, frontline staff, advocates, and business leaders. The methods we suggest can be used to engage all types of community members.

Keep reading to learn more about when to engage community members, best practices for community engagement, what methods to use, and next steps for creating a community engagement plan.

When to Engage Community Members

Community engagement can and should be integrated into every component of your efforts to boost upward mobility. Table 3-1 below illustrates how community engagement can be valuable at different phases of your work.

TABLE 3-1

When and Why to Engage Community Members

Phase	Why engage community members at this phase?	How can community members influence decisions at this phase?
Embarking on an upward mobility planning process	To understand what initiatives already exist in the community and whether a new plan is necessary.	Determine whether a new process and plan is needed or might be duplicative of other efforts.
	To evaluate your community's readiness to engage in a comprehensive planning process.	Decide what outputs (an investment plan, an action plan, etc.) might be most helpful to the community.
	To decide what form your work should take.	
	To help with writing and launching your plan.	
	To help with disseminating the plan and building support for it.	
Building a cross-sector coalition	To build power and autonomy by offering community members key leadership roles.	Inform who should be part of the coalition and how members should work together.
	To foster dignity and belonging by building relationships between community members and other actors involved in the work.	Determine priorities for upward mobility work.
Gathering data to understand mobility conditions and/or validating your findings	To help increase the rigor of the research and provide a more robust understanding of the data.	Determine what types of data are needed.
	To uncover new information sources.	Decide on the optimal data collection methods and sources.
	To learn about gaps in the available information.	Create a narrative of local conditions based on findings from—and gaps in—available data.
	To gather insights about why conditions are the way they are.	

Phase	Why engage community members at this phase?	How can community members influence decisions at this phase?
Identifying strategies to boost upward mobility and change systems	To understand how community members would prioritize different local challenges. To identify existing interventions or programs and understand how well they are working. To uncover new solutions to community challenges. To develop early buy-in. To solicit feedback on the design of new programs.	Prioritize between different strategies and/or decide on what strategies should be pursued.
Measuring your coalition's impact	To learn how your efforts are affecting their intended beneficiaries. To solicit feedback on any course corrections that might be needed.	Identify priority indicators and outcomes to measure dimensions of upward mobility.
Sustaining upward mobility initiatives	To create a feedback loop that demonstrates your coalition values community knowledge and expertise. To create accountability for achieving your intended outcomes.	Determine whether course corrections or new/different initiatives are needed.

Best Practices for Community Engagement

Before discussing specific methods for engaging community members, we share some engagement best practices, inspired by the work of the [Kirwan Institute](#), [PolicyLink](#), [Chicago Beyond](#), [Urban Institute's Community Engagement Resource Center](#), [Fresno DRIVE's Race Equity Plan](#), Helen "Skip" Skipper of the NYC Justice Peer Initiative, and one of the authors of the first edition of this toolkit.

Clarify Who "the Community" Is for This Work

In short, the community should be everyone who lives or works in a certain geographic area. However, given the history of structural racism, discrimination, and disinvestment in the US, the community members you should especially seek to engage for upward mobility work are people of color, people with low incomes, people with disabilities, immigrants, English-language learners, people experiencing

housing instability or homelessness, young people, people involved in the justice system, and anyone else with lived experience of poverty or discrimination.

When preparing to engage community members, make sure you know who your primary communities of interest are and whether there are specific groups within those communities that are disproportionately affected by poverty and structural racism. For example, within the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities, Cambodian Americans may experience [greater barriers to upward mobility](#) than Korean Americans or Chinese Americans. Analyzing data and consulting with key stakeholders, such as nonprofits and community-based organizations, can help you identify these groups.

Take Time to Learn about the Community's History of Engagement or Disengagement

Before beginning community engagement, it's important to learn about the efforts that have been conducted in the past and how the community perceived them. Upward mobility work does not exist in a vacuum. So it's important to understand whether there has been an absence of community engagement efforts or whether past engagement has been extractive, in which case people you are seeking to engage may have been over-engaged or over-researched and have participation fatigue. Both of these realities may lead to community members feeling skeptical of new engagement efforts or distrustful of power-holders in the community. Read Chicago Beyond's guidebook, [Why Am I Always Being Researched?](#), to learn how to shift power dynamic in ways that help community organizations, researchers, and funders uncover knowledge.

Another reason to learn about the community's history of engagement is to build on learnings from those efforts. When launching a new round of engagement, you should be clear about what is unique or additive about your particular effort.

LEARN MORE

Learning about What a Community Wants from Existing Resources

The [Investing in Us: Resident Priorities for Economic Mobility in Detroit](#) report by the University of Michigan's Poverty Solutions research center is an example of how to learn about what the community wants without conducting new community engagement activities. Instead of starting a process from scratch, the researchers acknowledged that Detroit residents had been sharing their thoughts on their city in a variety of public spaces over the last few years and worked to gather and summarize these thoughts from 129 neighborhood-level plans, 60 citywide plans, news articles, YouTube videos, and public meeting recordings.

Prepare Thoroughly for the Logistics of Community Engagement Work

[Fresno DRIVE's Race Equity Plan](#) makes the key point that “a precondition for community engagement is ‘readiness’ in terms of critical capacities (organizational capacities, funding, human resources, and infrastructure, such as space)” (p. 30). Before engaging community members, ensure your coalition has thoughtfully and appropriately prepared for what is needed. Your preparation should include the following:

- ensuring the team responsible for engagement activities is representative of the community in question and has been adequately prepared
- securing funds for community engagement activities, including compensation for community members' time and the cost of transportation and child care
- bringing in community partners to help facilitate (if appropriate)
- coordinating engagement activity schedules with external partners
- securing accessible and convenient locations for in-person engagement activities

People responsible for this work in your coalition should have experience conducting deep and meaningful community engagement. If they do not, you should consider ways to develop this capacity or partner with external organizations that already have these skills.

Facilitate Ongoing Engagement

One of the most common mistakes teams can make is engaging community members too late or not at all in the decisionmaking process and not following up to share how the engagement shaped decisions. You've likely heard complaints from community members during town hall meetings where those in power present an already-developed plan that is unlikely to change substantively based on their feedback. Instead of gathering feedback on a settled plan, you should engage community members early and often. We recommend implementing a system, such as a [continuous feedback and improvement loop](#), to ensure your work is responsive to the priorities and experiences of your community.

It's also important to share your findings from community engagement activities with the residents who provided their input and to continue to engage community members after programs are implemented to understand whether any course corrections are needed. Ongoing engagement with the community can bolster trust by showing community members that their feedback is being actively used to shape programs and policies.

Center Racial Equity in the Engagement Process

Decades of discriminatory policies and practices have resulted in disinvestment in communities of color. The failure of government planners and other key stakeholders to engage residents of color in policy and planning decisions has compounded the harms of disinvestment. Redressing these wrongs requires an intentional focus on racial equity at every step of planning and decisionmaking processes. These steps should include ensuring outreach to households that reflect the diversity of your community, learning about historical and present-day inequities, uncovering implicit biases and assumptions that your coalition may hold, and working to shift decisionmaking power to community members. Learn more about [putting racial equity and community engagement into practice in this Urban resource](#).

Prepare Everyone to Participate Meaningfully in the Engagement

Community members must know what to expect and feel well-prepared for the experience. They should be provided with the training and resources needed to participate in strategic planning discussions and the time to become comfortable with topics before being asked to engage. Facilitators should also take care to provide as much transparency as possible about how notes will be recorded and shared so participants understand what will happen with the information they share.

Treat People with Lived Experience as Experts

So often when community members with lived experiences of discrimination, racism, and structural disadvantage are asked to participate in community engagement activities, they are paid paltry sums of money for their participation or not compensated at all. Yet these individuals are subject-matter experts and should be treated as such. Plan to compensate participants as if they were consultants on your projects. Of course, compensating participants fairly and in a timely manner requires having these costs budgeted before you begin your work. Aside from compensation, you should also provide participants with transportation or transit passes to get to meetings, child care during the meetings, and other resources they need to participate as appropriate. Learn more about equitable compensation in Urban's [Equitable Compensation for Community Engagement Guidebook](#).

Seek to Redress Power Differences and Share Power among Participants

Power affects a person's community engagement experience in many ways. Race, class, age, occupation, disabilities, and language ability—in essence, a person's positionality—can all affect how comfortable someone feels sharing their opinions, create expectations about how much someone thinks their voice should be heard, and influence what feedback facilitators take most seriously. The engagement facilitator should be aware of their [individual and institutional positionality](#) and seek to redress power differences by sharing knowledge and making sure everyone understands the engagement process and their role in it. Learn more about examining your individual and institutional positionality in our "[Examining Your Individual and Institutional Positionality](#)" worksheet.

Try to Avoid Creating an Event Where People in Power “Talk at” Attendees for Too Long

The goal for organizers is to listen and seek clarification and additions to the information collected. A skilled facilitator can help mediate discussions between people whose experiences are very different from one another or who may feel that their lived experience is not reflected in the information gathered. A facilitator can also help redirect as needed to keep the conversation on track.

Highlight Community Assets in Addition to Challenges

Every community has both upward mobility assets to build on and areas of growth to investigate. We recommend you take an asset-based approach to not create harm by putting blame on individuals rather than the failures of systems, policies, and practices that are built on centuries of intersecting and compounding injustices. See chapter 1 for resources on asset-based language and framing.

Invest in Developing Community Members' Power and Autonomy and Dignity and Belonging

To work toward the ultimate goal of community ownership, your coalition should design opportunities for in-depth engagement that can build the power and capacity of community members. Besides having community members serve in key leadership positions in your coalition, create opportunities for them to lead portions of the coalition's work and ensure they have the resources necessary to do so (see chapter 2). You should also ensure that your coalition is prepared to provide support and technical assistance should community members require it. Learn more about how to support community voice and power in the Urban Institute's series of [Community-Engaged and Participatory Methods Toolkits](#).

CASE STUDY

Centering Community Expertise in Boone County, Missouri

Upward Mobility Cohort participant [Boone County, MO](#), sought to redress power differences and share power with community members throughout its mobility action planning process. County officials decided to center the expertise of community members by hosting a Data Interactive for residents, community leaders, and county officials to codetermine priority areas for future work. During the event, participants identified three key areas of focus: early grade literacy, jobs and workforce development, and fair and inclusive housing.

After determining the key areas of focus, Boone County continued to invest in developing community members' power and autonomy by having them both lead and participate in the working groups. These community-driven working groups were empowered to identify strategic actions within each priority area. They ultimately developed a [Mobility Action Plan](#) with distinct strategic actions that had common themes of needing to address systemic racism and structural inequities.

Methods to Consider for Engaging Community Members

When planning your community engagement work, you will need to identify community engagement strategies that best fit your goals and capacity. Facilitating Power's [Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](#) (figure 3-1) illustrates how different methods can help you reach a variety of goals. In this section, we highlight some community engagement strategies that fall under the consult, involve, collaborate, and defer to portions of the spectrum.

FIGURE 3-1

Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership



Source: [The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](#) (Salinas, CA: Facilitating Power, 2019), 5.

As mentioned above, while not all community engagement efforts can defer decisions to community members, the ultimate goal of involving community members in your upward mobility work should be to build their power, foster deeper democratic participation, and achieve more equitable outcomes. As you read this section, we encourage you to diagnose where your existing community engagement work lives and see if you can set goals to help you move further along the spectrum toward sharing power.

Consult

Gathering information or feedback from community members is the goal of many community engagement efforts. Typically, we have seen the goal of this type of engagement is to get input on a plan that is in development or has already been made. However, as we noted in the best practices above, it's important to consult community members *before* a plan is finalized. Two methods you might use to obtain community input are community surveys and focus groups.

You might consider **conducting surveys** with community members to collect original data that can be used for analysis or to solicit their input or opinions. Pick a survey style and scope that suits both your goals for data collection and your capacity for implementation. Rigorous, randomized surveys can offer more information from a representative sample of your community, but they can be complicated and expensive to perform. If you decide this is necessary for your purposes, explore whether partner organizations host ongoing surveys that you can add questions to instead of creating your own.

On the other hand, if you are not too concerned with generalizability and mainly want to use a survey to surface useful insights and capture ideas, less statistically rigorous approaches may be a better choice. For example, an opportunistic survey of people leaving a specific venue in a particular neighborhood might provide the information you are looking for. Consider the prompts in our [“Considerations for Collecting Original Survey Data”](#) worksheet to determine whether designing and fielding an original survey might be appropriate for your needs. Further along the spectrum, you might also consider involving community members in the design and administration of your survey. For more information on how to do this, consult Urban’s [Community-Engaged Surveys: From Research Design to Analysis and Dissemination](#).

Focus groups are another way to collect community members’ thoughts on upward mobility and racial equity in your community. They can be conducted independently or incorporated into existing community events. They can take many forms but should include a short presentation on the “why” and “what” of your coalition’s work, such as what distinguishes your effort from previous initiatives the community may have seen or participated in, as well as small-group discussions on certain questions or topics led by skilled facilitators. For an example of what you might want to cover in a focus group with community members, read the [“Sample Community Member Focus Group Discussion Guide”](#) created by Upward Mobility Cohort member Washington, DC.

Be prepared to have both a facilitator and a notetaker to capably guide the conversation and record as many thoughts as possible. When reviewing recordings or notes from a focus group, consider which voices are loudest and whether that is causing those opinions to receive more weight

and attention than others. When reviewing qualitative information, always interrogate your assumptions to make sure you do not perpetuate misunderstandings about why certain conditions exist. For more information on how to conduct focus groups, consult Urban’s resource on [focus groups](#).

CASE STUDY

Consulting Community Residents in Washington, DC

[Upward Mobility Cohort](#) member Washington, DC, partnered with three community-based organizations to lead stakeholder engagement with residents in their three priority domains of housing, workforce and adult education, and financial well-being. These engagement activities included focus groups, surveys, and interviews with affected residents. Washington, DC, also worked directly with more than a dozen community-based organizations, including organizations that focus on community development, workforce training, affordable housing construction and operations, youth and adult education, and human services.

Involve

Involving community members in decisions that affect their lives is critical to building power and autonomy and dignity and belonging. Although consulting community members often happens after a plan or program has been developed, *involving* community members integrates community needs and assets from the beginning. One way to involve community members in planning or decisionmaking is to host hands-on workshops, such as Data Interactives (sometimes known as Data Walks).

Data Interactives are a method of community engagement that presents data and information to community members through posters or another visual format, allowing individuals to engage with, analyze, and ask questions about information relevant to their lives. Whether held in person or virtually, a Data Interactive is a way to invite residents, service providers, and members of the community to engage with quantitative and qualitative data and spark conversations about what your coalition should prioritize and how the data does or does not align with lived experiences.

When deciding who to invite to your Data Interactive or other community workshops, we encourage you to think about the following questions to ensure a broad range of voices is represented:

- Which groups of residents do your Mobility Metrics or other data highlight as being particularly positively or negatively affected by the issue(s) in question?
- Are there groups not highlighted in the data that you know to be disenfranchised or that you are concerned about?
- Are there groups or organizations well-positioned or empowered to act based on what they learn from the data?
- Are there groups that would benefit from greater insight into their community and environment?

By engaging community members in a Data Interactive or similar event, you can bring to light new insights about the data that members of your coalition may not see. Note that you may want to hold more than one Data Interactive with different groups, in different locations, or at different phases of the information-gathering and analysis process. Learn more about hosting Data Interactives in Urban's [Data Walks: An Innovative Way to Share Data with Communities](#).

CASE STUDY

Using a Data Interactive to Highlight Data Gaps and Needs in Kansas City, Missouri

Mobility Action Learning Network member Kansas City, MO, formed a Mobility Action Team in 2024 comprising the city's District 3 Councilwoman, representatives from Metropolitan Community College, and representatives from the Health Forward Foundation. The team was interested in better understanding the experiences of Kansas City residents across four key priority areas: jobs, transportation, housing, and education.

After working to identify and consolidate key data sources that shed light on resident experiences in these areas, the team realized that while there was plenty of quantitative data available, there was not much qualitative data that described how residents actually engaged with programs in these areas. The numerical data lacked the context of the people behind those numbers and what their day-to-day experience was like taking public transportation, using housing vouchers, and sending their children to school.

The Kansas City team decided to host a Data Interactive as one way to gather some of this additional context. With support from Urban staff, the team planned and facilitated a Data Interactive at the Third District's neighborhood convention in October 2024. The event featured four stations, each facilitated by a local expert who helped guide residents through the data and led discussions centered around what the data revealed and how well (or not) it aligned with residents' personal experiences.

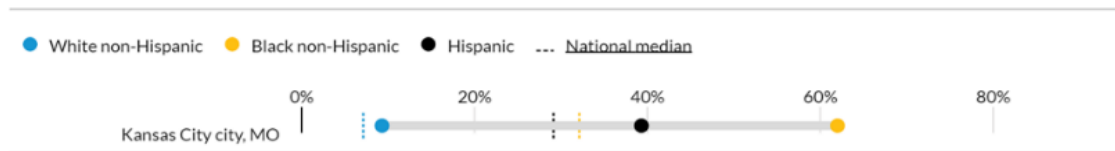
FIGURE 3-2

Example of a Data Interactive Poster

Station 3: Education, Mobility Metrics

In 2020, in Kansas City city, MO,

- 62.0% of Black non-Hispanic students attended high-poverty schools,
- 39.3% of Hispanic students attended high-poverty schools, and
- 9.3% of white non-Hispanic students attended high-poverty schools.



Sources and Notes

National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), SY 2020–2021; Urban Institute Modeled Estimates of Poverty in Schools (via Education Data Portal v. 0.21.0, Urban Institute, under ODC Attribution License). (Time period: School Year 2020–2021)

Residents offered insights that challenged initial interpretations, highlighted gaps in the data, and pushed the team to rethink how fully the data reflects conditions in the Third District. Attendees' insights will help shape solutions that the Kansas City Mobility Action Team intends to put forward in a forthcoming strategic action plan. Figure 3-2 is an example of a poster displayed at the convention, showcasing one of Kansas City's Mobility Metrics from the Upward Mobility Data Dashboard.

Collaborate

Moving along the spectrum from involving community members to collaborating with them requires working closely with community members and committing to cocreating solutions to boost upward mobility. Although including community members in your coalition is a good first step to delegating power, we recommend using other community engagement methods, such as community advisory boards, to ensure community members have a say in decisionmaking.

Community advisory boards (CABs) are one way to increase community engagement in research, policy, and practice and to ensure that your work is driven by lived experience. A CAB should be separate from your coalition and made up of community members who serve as a bridge between the broader community and your team. Refer to Urban's [Tools and Resources for Project-Based Community Advisory Boards](#) for guidance on how to establish a CAB.

CASE STUDY

Creating a Resident Advisory Council in Providence, Rhode Island

The Mobility Action Team in Providence, RI, coordinated by One Neighborhood Builders (ONB), formed a Resident Advisory Council (RAC) to guide the work of its collective impact effort seeking to improve health, economic, and racial equity in the nine neighborhoods that comprise Central Providence. The RAC serves as ONB's primary leadership and decisionmaking body in collaboration with strategic advisors from partner organizations.

The RAC has shaped how ONB measures and quantifies their impact by choosing which population-level indicators are most closely aligned with the outcomes ONB seeks to achieve. The RAC helps ONB ensure that its programmatic evaluation and long-term measurement decisions are grounded in community voice. Read our report, [Engaging Communities in Measurement and Data-Driven Decisionmaking](#), to learn more about ONB's work and how to integrate community engagement into measurement efforts.

Defer To

At the far right of the spectrum is deferring to community members, which can help build community ownership over the work. As the [Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](#) notes, community ownership means that communities “have a direct say over what is needed to survive and thrive” (p. 7). Investing in community ownership of mobility efforts takes both intentional planning and financial resources. You might need to train members of your coalition on community engagement best practices as well as provide training to community members to enable them to participate meaningfully.

One method you might use to build community ownership over decisionmaking is [participatory budgeting](#), a civic engagement strategy where governments and other actors allocate funds to projects proposed and voted on by the community. Although local governments often serve as conveners of participatory budgeting exercises, they could also be facilitated by other actors, including community-based organizations, philanthropies, and advocacy groups. Participatory budgeting can help [build stronger communities](#), deepen democratic participation and processes, and result in a more equitable distribution of resources. Consult Urban's [Best Practices for Inclusive Participatory Budgeting](#) or Participatory Budgeting Project's [Participatory Policy-Making Toolkit](#) to learn more about how to design and implement a participatory budgeting effort.

If you are undertaking a full upward mobility planning process, you might consider ways to make that process more community-driven, including by ensuring that community members play significant leadership roles in your coalition (see chapters 1 and 2).

Determining Next Steps

Determining how to advance upward mobility and racial equity in your community will require extensive and thoughtful community engagement. You may find it helpful to create a Community Engagement Plan to outline the activities your coalition will undertake to meaningfully involve community members at all stages of the process. Your plan should consider how to inclusively engage with community members with varying backgrounds and lived experiences, which engagement methods you will use, who will lead the overall engagement and associated activities, what you are hoping to learn from each engagement, how partner organizations may contribute, and key ethical considerations for engaging community members who are part of marginalized groups.

For additional guidance on what to include in this plan, review our “[Community Engagement Plan Template](#)” worksheet. Urban’s [Community-Engaged and Participatory Methods Toolkits](#) also contain a wealth of information on community engagement methods and how they can help you share power with members of your community. The insights that members of your community provide can inform all the other components of your work to advance upward mobility, from using data to understand local mobility conditions to identifying strategic actions that can change systems (see chapters 4 and 5).

Relevant Templates and Worksheets

- “[Community Engagement Plan Template](#)”
- “[Considerations for Collecting Original Survey Data](#)”
- “[Examining Your Individual and Institutional Positionality](#)”
- “[Sample Community Member Focus Group Discussion Guide](#)”

Chapter 4: Using Data to Gain a Shared Understanding of Local Mobility Conditions

Understanding local mobility conditions is an important step toward identifying strategies to improve those conditions, which we discuss in chapter 5. Data-informed decisionmaking is one of our six upward mobility principles because quantitative and qualitative data can help you understand current and historical conditions, prioritize areas that most need support, and ultimately make informed decisions that can contribute to boosting upward mobility and reducing inequities in your community.

Collecting data is not an end in and of itself, however—the aim of this chapter is for you to gather the data required for your team or coalition to come to an understanding of the key barriers to upward mobility in your community. Assessing local mobility conditions may involve multiple cycles of gathering data and engaging with community members and other stakeholders. People with lived experiences of structural racism, poverty, disability, and other barriers are important sources of local knowledge, and incorporating their insights can [increase the rigor and relevance of both quantitative and qualitative research](#). We discuss methods for learning from community members in chapter 3.

Keep reading to learn how to use our Mobility Metrics, gather additional quantitative and qualitative data to form an initial narrative about mobility conditions in your community, and determine what's next.

Using the Mobility Metrics

The [Mobility Metrics](#) offer ways to measure each of the 24 predictors in the [Upward Mobility Framework](#) over the short and medium terms. The Urban Institute developed the predictors and metrics in collaboration with a working group of distinguished academics from diverse disciplines and continues to update them to better reflect new research and the priorities of communities working to advance upward mobility locally. Learn more about how we developed the framework in our report on [Boosting Upward Mobility: Metrics to Inform Local Action](#), Second Edition.

The Mobility Metrics draw on nationally available sources to provide reliable, consistent, and easily comparable data that you can use to surface your community's areas of strength and areas for

improvement across policy domains, such as employment, housing, health, and education. They can help you understand local mobility conditions in your community by

- revealing disparities across demographic groups,
- contextualizing your community's performance by offering comparisons to peer communities and national statistics, and
- highlighting interconnections across predictors and policy areas.

You can access the Mobility Metrics data through the [Upward Mobility Data Dashboard](#), by downloading them from our [Data Catalog](#), or by recreating them using the code provided in our [public GitHub repository](#). The data are available for all US counties and for cities with more than 75,000 residents. To help illuminate racial and other disparities that may be masked by aggregate figures, we provide the data disaggregated by categories—such as race and ethnicity, age, gender, disability status, and other important characteristics—whenever possible. Disaggregated data can provide a more nuanced and representative understanding of the lived experiences of different groups of people. Beyond exposing racial and other disparities, disaggregated data also allow for better targeting of policies and programs according to the needs of different groups and more effective implementation and monitoring. The box about neonatal health below shows an example of the type of information you might glean from the Mobility Metrics data (figures 4-1 and 4-2).

LEARN MORE

Examining the Mobility Metric for Neonatal Health

The [Mobility Metric](#) for the [Neonatal Health](#) predictor is the share of infants with low birth weight.

FIGURE 4-1

Share of Infants with Low Birth Weights in County A



Figure 4-1 shows that in County A, slightly under 8 percent of all babies are born with low weights (less than 5 pounds 8 ounces). One question that might immediately come to mind is whether this is true for babies of all races and ethnicities. To find out, you can look at this metric disaggregated by race and ethnicity (select the “Race/Ethnicity” category on the [Upward Mobility Data Dashboard](#)).

FIGURE 4-2

Share of Infants with Low Birth Weights in County A, Disaggregated by Race and Ethnicity

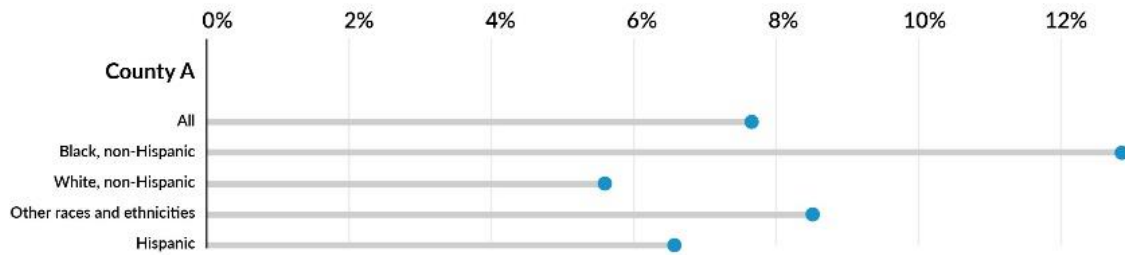


Figure 4-2 shows that less than 7 percent of white and Hispanic babies are born with low weights, compared with over 12 percent of Black babies. Disaggregating the metric by race and ethnicity paints a much more informative picture of what is happening in County A. The disparity in birth weights between Black babies and babies of other races and ethnicities reveals that neonatal health is a particularly serious challenge for Black families and highlights the importance of digging deeper to understand what conditions and challenges are contributing to this outcome. As you review your community's data, take note of any disparities you see.

To learn more about how to leverage our suite of Mobility Metrics, visit [Six Ways to Use the Mobility Metrics](#). To understand how to examine and interpret a given metric for your community, view our resource on [How to Examine Your Mobility Metrics](#).

Although we strive to provide as much information as possible, some of the Mobility Metrics rely on data that may not be available at the ideal frequency, recency, reliability, or level of disaggregation. For instance, we are unable to provide data on indigenous people or Asian Americans because they have limited representation in the data sources we rely on. We are also only able to provide data on people with disabilities for a handful of metrics, and the data that we do provide may be [missing large numbers of people with disabilities](#) because of limitations with how the US Census Bureau and other surveyors collect this information. To learn more about the Mobility Metrics, the criteria used to select them, and potential limitations, read the [Upward Mobility Data Dashboard: Appendix](#).

LEARN MORE

Completing Your Community's Descriptive Representation Metric

The metric for the [Descriptive Representation](#) predictor—the ratio of the share of local elected officials of a racial or ethnic group to the share of residents of the same group—is incomplete because we do not have data on the racial or ethnic makeup of local elected officials. You will need to collect this information to complete the descriptive representation metric for your community. Use our [“Collecting Data to Complete Your Mobility Metric on Descriptive Representation”](#) worksheet to learn how.

Because of these limitations, we suggest using the Mobility Metrics as a starting point for understanding local conditions and, whenever possible, pairing them with supplementary local data and insights from your community. This may include quantitative administrative or survey data; historical records about policies and programs that may have created structural barriers to equity and mobility from poverty; and other qualitative information gleaned from surveys, focus groups, and other community and stakeholder engagement activities (see chapter 3). Assembling insights from these different data sources can help you identify the root causes underlying the problems and successes you witness or diagnose.

Once you have reviewed the full suite of Mobility Metrics for your community and examined specific metrics that stand out, make a list of what else you need or want to know about local mobility conditions. This list of questions will help guide your search for additional quantitative and qualitative data in the next two sections. You may not need to gather the data from scratch, however, as some of this information might already exist. Consult the members of your coalition to learn about what insights are already available and where you might be able to find that information.

Gathering Additional Quantitative Data

The Mobility Metrics are based on data from nationally available sources, which makes it easy to see how your community compares to other places across the country. But this means that the data are limited when it comes to the set of variables included and their specificity to local contexts. They are also only available at the county and city levels. As a result, you may need to collect additional quantitative data to answer more nuanced questions about your community, or to understand how conditions vary between different neighborhoods.

Collecting supplemental quantitative data can be challenging, given that many different data sources exist; the quality of available data can vary widely; and getting access to sensitive data can be a lengthy, monthslong process, especially if data-sharing or data-use agreements need to be negotiated. As such, this process should ideally be led by someone who is familiar with different types of data and has experience collecting data from a range of partners and sources, in addition to analyzing, cleaning, and visualizing them. You can learn more about the different types of actors you might want to engage in upward mobility work in chapter 2.

[LEARN MORE](#)

Resources on Building a Data Team and Writing Data-Sharing Agreements

These resources provide more information on building a data team and writing data-sharing or data-use agreements:

- [Getting the Most Out of Your Community's Administrative Data](#): A series of five publications that can help states, municipalities, and local organizations identify, link, and analyze the administrative data sources in their communities to better track the outcomes of the social services they deliver.
- [NNIP Lessons on Local Data Sharing](#): A short blog post on lessons learned about data sharing from the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership.
- [NNIP's Collection of Example Data-Sharing Agreements](#): A catalog of sample memorandums of understanding and data-sharing agreements from the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership.

In this section, we introduce three primary sources of supplemental quantitative data—public sources, private sources, and data from original surveys—and provide suggestions on how to collect data from these sources.

Collecting Additional Publicly Available Data

We suggest specific sources of publicly available quantitative data in our resource on [Obtaining More Local Data](#). However, the following are generally reliable places to start when looking for public data to supplement the Mobility Metrics:

- **Census data:** National census data provide a wealth of demographic information, beyond those used to construct the Mobility Metrics.
- **Government websites:** Local, state, and national government websites often provide access to a wide range of public data, including demographic information, economic data, and public records.
- **Open data portals:** Many governments have open data portals, where they share datasets on topics such as transportation, education, health, and more. One example is [data.gov](#).
- **Public libraries:** Local libraries may have relevant resources and data available to the public, which librarians can assist with locating.
- **Community organizations:** Nonprofit organizations and community groups may collect and share data related to local issues.
- **Educational institutions:** Universities and research institutions publish research and data in various fields. Academic libraries and online repositories are good places to explore for more information.
- **Local newspapers and magazines:** Local publications may conduct investigations and collect data on community issues. Archives of newspapers or magazines can be a valuable resource.
- **Community surveys:** Some communities conduct surveys to gather information on topics important to residents. Look for survey results published by local government or community organizations.

CASE STUDY

Gathering Data to Understand Disparities in San Mateo, California

The San Mateo, CA, [Mobility Action Team](#) is led by the Shared Prosperity Coordinating Council (SPCC), a diverse multisector group of leaders convened by the County of San Mateo to advance equity and shared prosperity in a county that suffers from significant disparities in income and opportunity. The SPCC grounded its Economic Mobility Action Plan in the Upward Mobility Framework and added six additional elements—ranging from job training to system navigation

support—based on input from three countywide community engagement efforts that heard from more than 5,500 residents in 12 languages.

After reviewing data on the full suite of Mobility Metrics, the SPCC developed locally relevant universal goals across the three dimensions of upward mobility. Through an analysis of local human services data and Census data, and a partnership with the Public Policy Institute of California, the SPCC identified groups who were furthest from meeting its universal goals. Using a [Targeted Universalism](#) approach, the data on priority populations, and a landscape analysis of existing local efforts to address its goals, the SPCC identified seven strategies to fill critical gaps to boost shared prosperity.

Collecting Additional Data from Other Sources

In addition to publicly available data sources, consider whether your relationships with any of the following actors can provide access to data that is not publicly available. However, when collecting data from nonpublicly available sources, ensure you comply with any laws that regulate the collection and sharing of data containing personally identifiable or otherwise sensitive information.

- **Government partners** can shed light on your community's Mobility Metrics and provide access to additional data to supplement those metrics. They may also know of existing memorandums of understanding or data-use agreements you can leverage to access relevant information.
- **Anchor institutions** may hold data that can be used to assess local conditions. For example, hospitals collect data about the communities they serve in a Community Health Needs Assessment.
- **Nonprofits and community-based organizations (CBOs)** typically collect programmatic data to understand the success of the programs they deliver. If possible, you might consider working with a group of nonprofits and CBOs to systematize their data collection so it can be aggregated at the city or county level.
- **Philanthropic partners** may collect data on their grantees or funding trends. They may also be able to support nonprofits and CBOs in expanding their data collection efforts.
- **Research organizations** can play a key role in assessing data quality and planning and implementing original data collection. They can also conduct evaluations of existing interventions to assess their effectiveness or impact.

- **Private-sector companies** can provide data that may paint a fuller picture of local economic conditions, such as data on their employees or market conditions.
- **Advocacy groups** can provide historical context on data and information about a specific policy topic. However, because of their nature as advocacy groups, you should consider other sources of information that can complement their data advocating for a specific cause.
- **Community members** can suggest additional metrics or other local data sources that align with key predictors of upward mobility. They can also share their unique perspectives and help you understand whether the data align with community experiences.

Collecting Additional Data Using Original Surveys

If you can't identify a data source for information that might be critical to understanding conditions in your community, consider conducting an original survey to collect this data, or consider whether any organizations you are connected to host ongoing surveys that you can add questions to. Surveys may be particularly helpful for gathering data that is not consistently collected at the national level, such as data on social capital and data on belongingness. Conducting a survey that produces high-quality data is time- and resource-intensive, so consider the prompts outlined in our [“Considerations for Collecting Original Survey Data”](#) worksheet to help you determine whether designing and fielding your own survey might be appropriate for your situation.

Evaluating Potential Data Sources

Once you have identified a set of potential supplementary data sources, review the questions in our [“Evaluating Potential Supplementary Data Sources and Metrics”](#) worksheet to determine which sources are worth pursuing. Keep in mind that quality is more important than quantity. A concise set of reliable and consistent metrics is often more useful than a larger set of metrics collected at irregular intervals, which are difficult to track over time. After you've gathered and analyzed the supplemental quantitative data you prioritized to fill knowledge gaps, you may wish to move on to assembling qualitative information to fill any remaining gaps. We suggest potential sources and methods in the next section.

LEARN MORE

What to Do When Disaggregated Data Are Not Available

Sometimes data are not available at the level of specificity you need to observe disparities between different groups. This may be because there are too few data points or observations to compute a metric with reasonable accuracy, or because the data were never collected to begin with, such as when a survey or administrative data source fails to ask about race or lumps diverse groups together.

When faced with a lack of disaggregated data, it's still important to find a way to interrogate how structural racism, discrimination, prejudice, and implicit bias may be playing a role in the story the data tells. Wherever possible, you should collect local datasets that can help inform your understanding of local conditions (see our resource on [Obtaining More Local Data](#) for suggestions on where to look). Qualitative information, which can be collected from myriad sources such as interviews, surveys, town halls, and focus groups, can also be used to better inform the context around quantitative data outcomes or gaps in information.

One option for understanding potential disparities when examining data that can be disaggregated by subgeography, but not by race/ethnicity or other demographic characteristics, is to visualize it on a map and overlay relevant demographic data to examine variations that might trigger new questions or hypotheses. View our "[Overlaying Demographic Data to Understand Potential Disparities](#)" worksheet for an example of how to do this. Urban's [Spatial Equity Data Tool](#) can also help you perform this analysis on your own dataset of nondisaggregated data.

Gathering and Analyzing Qualitative Data

The Mobility Metrics data and the supplemental quantitative data that you gather can tell you what conditions currently exist in your community, but you also need to assemble qualitative information to understand why conditions are the way they are. This information may include historical records about policies and programs that may have created structural barriers to equity and mobility from poverty, evaluations of existing programs and how well (or not) they are working, ecosystem maps that show networks and relationships between organizations in the mobility-from-poverty space, and information on narratives that underpin systems of power and oppression.

People with lived experiences of structural racism, poverty, disability, and other barriers are important sources of local knowledge. If your coalition is representative of your community, some members should be able to contribute these perspectives. However, you should also learn from a broader cross-section of community members as you try to paint a fuller picture of local conditions.

We discuss methods for doing so in chapter 3. Below, we introduce methods for gathering and analyzing additional qualitative information.

Root Cause Analysis

A root cause analysis entails examining social and historical contexts to identify the root causes of the disparities and inequities you observe in the data. Performing a root cause analysis helps ensure your efforts can address the underlying problems in your community, not just their symptoms. One frequently used technique is digging deeper into a problem by asking yourself why until you are no longer able to answer the question. Consult the worksheet “[Understand and Identify Root Causes of Inequities](#)” from County Health Rankings for additional guidance on how to perform a root cause analysis. As the authors of the [Education-to-Workforce Indicator Framework](#) note, “direct engagement with people with lived experience is key to conducting reflective root cause analyses that seek to identify systems drivers of disparities” (Data Equity Principle 4). This means you should ideally perform this analysis in partnership with members of the community most affected by existing inequities (see chapter 3).

Contextual Analysis

Contextual analysis refers to analyzing the many overlapping factors and local contexts that influence evidence-based policy decisions. To perform this analysis while evaluating the information you’ve collected, consider the various factors that provide *context*, such as the following:

- the greater political atmosphere
- historical background (e.g., regulations, first-hand accounts, population change)
- the relationship between public institutions and various relevant stakeholders
- shared assumptions and shared culture
- organizational capacity (e.g., staffing and expertise)
- regulatory environments and the momentum of management or processes
- financial, technological, and infrastructural resources

See the [Context Analysis Tool](#) developed by the National Democratic Institute for an example of this analysis in the context of political party assistance and development.

Community Asset Mapping

Community asset mapping is a tool for understanding what assets exist in your city or county that are serving community members' needs. Various approaches to community asset mapping exist, but all are designed to capture the full landscape of opportunities, needs, and strengths in a given community. Assets may refer to institutions, infrastructure, community groups, parks, churches, grocery stores, clinics, community centers, and the talents and capacities of local residents. The key to identifying assets is to clarify what makes them valuable and for whom. Community asset mapping is also meant to empower local residents by positioning them to be their own spokespeople and to advocate for changes in the community. For further information about community asset mapping and an example of what it might look like in practice, consult the Preston City Council's [Community Mapping Toolkit](#).

Ecosystem Mapping

An ecosystem refers to any network of connections between various actors, such as governments, nonprofits, and other stakeholders, relevant to upward mobility work. Mapping an ecosystem can help you visualize relationships that exist in your community and may reveal leverage points, blockages, or opportunities that aren't obvious until you've better examined how and why certain parties interact the way they do.

Ecosystem mapping can also help you clarify roles and levels of contribution across a pipeline of partners, determine gaps in grant funding, and much more. The scope and depth of your ecosystem map should depend on the key factors you are trying to identify or deconstruct. Mapping an ecosystem with the broader community can also reveal insights from varied perspectives. For more information on ecosystem mapping methods, visit Urban's [Guide to Civic Tech and Data Ecosystem Mapping](#).

Narrative Power Analysis

This is a method for analyzing the narratives that underpin systems of power and breaking them down into constituent assumptions and components. It is based on the idea that people understand the world and their role within it through stories, and that stories have great power to either maintain the status quo or disrupt expectations of how things "should be." Read [Re:imagining Change: An Introduction to Story-Based Strategy](#) for more information and use the [Narrative Power Analysis Worksheet](#) to guide you through the process.

Determining Next Steps

The goal of this chapter was for your coalition to learn how to form an initial narrative about the critical barriers to upward mobility in your community. Once you have analyzed your community's Mobility Metrics and identified and collected supplemental quantitative and qualitative data, you will need to come to a consensus with your team or coalition on what the data say about the conditions in your community and the key barriers to upward mobility.

To help build this narrative, you may wish to convene as a group to discuss what you learned and how to interpret it. In advance of this meeting, it may be helpful to put together a brief summary for each issue you gathered data on to frame the discussion. These summaries should ideally interweave quantitative data with qualitative data and tell a story about how current conditions (both good and bad) were created in your community, how they are being sustained, who they affect most, and what outcomes they're leading to. It may also be helpful for your coalition to vet your initial findings with a broader cross-section of community members, which you can learn how to do in chapter 3.

The gaps and uncertainties in your emerging narrative will highlight where you will need to invest time and effort in gathering more and/or different information. Some of this information may come from additional quantitative data, in which case you may repeat some of the exercises in this chapter. Some information may come from qualitative data that can only be gleaned from continued engagement with community members or other stakeholders. Gaining an understanding of local mobility conditions is only one step in the process of boosting upward mobility, however. To improve those conditions, you will also need to identify the actions your coalition can take to advance mobility and address inequities, as well as ways you can sustain your work over the long term. Chapters 5 and 7 can guide you through these activities.

Relevant Templates and Worksheets

- [“Collecting Data to Complete Your Mobility Metric on Descriptive Representation”](#)
- [“Considerations for Collecting Original Survey Data”](#)
- [“Evaluating Potential Supplementary Data Sources and Metrics”](#)
- [“Overlaying Demographic Data to Understand Potential Disparities”](#)

Chapter 5: Identifying Strategic Actions for Systems Change

For most people experiencing poverty in the US today, opportunities to achieve greater economic success, power and autonomy, and dignity and belonging are blocked by long-standing structural barriers, not by a failure of individual effort. Poverty, precarity, and inequality are not inevitable consequences of market economies, nor are they the result of individual deficits or behaviors by people experiencing these conditions. Instead, these outcomes result largely from policies and practices—both public and private—that have produced deep and persistent racial and other inequities. (See our report on [Boosting Mobility and Advancing Equity through Systems Change](#) for how historical and ongoing policies and practices have created structural barriers that block equitable upward mobility.)

Increasing upward mobility and advancing racial equity requires dismantling the systemic barriers that keep people in poverty. Doing so will likely require significant investments from public and private resources, as well as shifting the distribution of political power away from the wealthy and historically privileged. It will also require confronting the policies and practices that create and maintain structural barriers to mobility and racial equity—not just their symptoms and results. This calls for reexamining the underlying values, norms, and narratives that shape the processes, relationships, and power structures in your community. In other words, it calls for pursuing systems change, which is one of our six upward mobility principles.

One way to think about systems in the context of upward mobility work is as inclusive of subsystems, such as the housing system, justice system, health system, and more. The upward mobility system includes all the organizations and people whose work or actions impact upward mobility, as well as the relationships between these organizations and people and the work they are doing. This means that taking a systems-change approach requires looking at how often distinct and diverse efforts can be aligned to address the root causes of inequities holistically. For example, an issue such as high unemployment may stem from a combination of low education rates, poor transit access, unreliable child care options, low wages, and employer discrimination. Solving such a multifaceted problem requires first identifying the underlying causes and then working across sectors to address them. It also requires probing existing norms and narratives around current conceptions of employment and employment rates—for instance, exploring how we might better recognize forms of informal and often unpaid labor, such as child or elder care, within official employment statistics.

Complex policy challenges involving multiple intersecting systems, such as upward mobility from poverty, require collective impact approaches that span sectors and agencies. Taking a collective impact approach means involving a wide range of stakeholders and meaningfully engaging residents (see chapters 2 and 3) to develop comprehensive strategies that consider the full range of a community's needs and assets. Because structural barriers, political context, and potential resources all vary by place, each community will need to define its own approach to systems change. However, this chapter offers a series of steps your coalition can take to begin the process of articulating your goals and priorities and identifying specific strategic actions that can change systems and ultimately result in better outcomes for the people in your community.

Keep reading to learn how to create a community vision statement, understand how current systems affect upward mobility in your community, develop a logic model and strategic actions, create a theory of change, and determine next steps.

Creating a Community Vision Statement

For your team or coalition to move successfully from understanding local mobility conditions to creating a shared plan for action, it is critical to articulate a vision for your work. A community vision statement is forward-looking: it describes what you want your community to look or be like when your work is done. It should be based on your understanding of current mobility conditions in your community and the root causes of those conditions—that is, the barriers that block residents from achieving upward mobility. If you aren't sure what local mobility conditions are in your community, review chapter 4 for guidance on identifying them.

A community vision statement is different from a mission statement. Instead of describing the purpose of your team's work, a community vision statement paints a vibrant picture of your destination by articulating the population-, community-, or environment-level impact you hope to have in your locality. Your vision should be ambitious, easy to understand, and demonstrate why your work is important. If done well, a purposeful vision can

- inform strategic decisions and align efforts with your goals and values;
- inspire people while still being achievable;
- build buy-in and support from partners, stakeholders, and community members; and
- help push team members through tough patches by reminding them why they're doing this.

To create a vision statement for your community, your team or coalition will need to have a shared understanding of the root causes of inequities you've observed. It might be helpful to engage a skilled facilitator to help your team arrive at this understanding because people might have different feelings or opinions on why inequities exist in the community. Be aware that these can be uncomfortable conversations, and they might become contentious, so the coalition may have to work through real tensions or conflicts to arrive at a shared acknowledgment of community conditions and the barriers blocking people from achieving upward mobility. This can take time, but skipping over it may undermine the long-term success of your efforts. Your discussion might cover some of the following questions:

- Which policies, laws, and institutional practices have been created and continue to sustain the conditions we see? Who created those policies and practices? For what purposes were they created?
- What is the prevailing narrative about poverty in our community? About people of color? Why does this narrative exist? How do these narratives get perpetuated?
- What values and constraints dictate the way each of us does our work now?
- How can we champion a new way of thinking about our community's challenges and strengths? What are we still not talking about but should be?
- How might conditions in one policy domain block or facilitate progress in another?

Below is an example of a community vision statement from a member of the Upward Mobility Cohort Philadelphia, PA. If you need ideas on how to go about cocreating a community vision statement with your team or coalition, see our [“Creating a Community Vision Statement”](#) worksheet.

CASE STUDY

Philadelphia's Community Vision Statement

Upward Mobility Cohort member, Philadelphia, PA, created the following community vision statement as part of its work: “Philadelphia strives to be a city where every resident is healthy, safe, and has economic prosperity and a good quality of life. We aim to be an equitable city that eliminates the barriers to health, safety, and connectedness that exist based on race and ethnicity, disability status, age, and gender identity” (p. 9).

Understanding How Current Systems Impact Upward Mobility

Before you can determine how to change systems in ways that can help you achieve your coalition's vision, you first need to understand how the systems that impact upward mobility in your community work and what the elements of those systems are. Systems mapping is one way to accomplish this. There are [many possible ways to map a system](#), and your coalition should select the approach that best suits your needs. One helpful resource is [this workbook](#) from the Omidyar Group, which leads users through a comprehensive set of exercises designed to help them visualize and understand complex systems. Some of the exercises include the following:

- surfacing the core forces that keep the system unhealthy and that can nudge it toward a healthier state
- analyzing each of these forces to understand their causes and effects
- identifying areas where causes and effects feed into each other and capturing these dynamic loops
- pinpointing the deep structure (the central driving forces) of the system
- creating a visualization of the system that shows the deep structure and how the loops are interconnected

Mapping the systems that impact upward mobility in your community will help you identify opportunities to intervene, often called "[leverage points](#)." It will also help you precisely articulate what is wrong with the current system (what problem you are trying to solve in your community), which will be helpful as you move on to thinking about the specific actions or interventions required to achieve your community's vision. For instance, using the example of Philadelphia's vision statement above, a problem statement might look like the following: "Many people in our community are financially insecure and unable to access health care, housing, transportation, and other basic needs." If your coalition is trying to address multiple issues in your community, you may want to create several problem statements rather than trying to describe complex challenges in one statement.

In addition to understanding the big picture of how current systems work, you will need to identify existing interventions—including policies, programs, plans, practices, projects, and even pilot initiatives—that affect upward mobility so that your coalition does not duplicate efforts. Refer to our "[Cataloging Existing Interventions](#)" worksheet as a starting point for the information you might want

to collect about each intervention. You might also want to understand how well specific programs or practices embody the factors that evidence shows boost upward mobility and support the autonomy and dignity of those they serve. Our [“Assessing Existing Programs for Alignment with the Upward Mobility Framework”](#) worksheet can help you identify areas of strength and potential gaps in existing programs and practices.

Developing a Logic Model and Identifying Strategic Actions You’ll Pursue

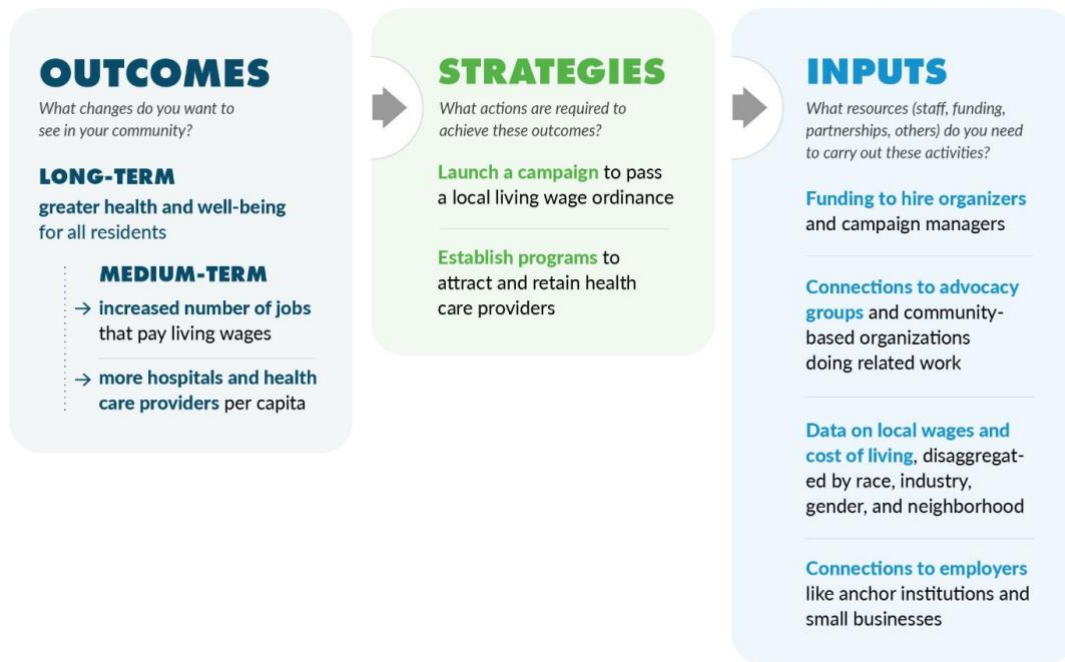
Armed with your coalition’s vision statement and a clear understanding of the current system, you can now move on to developing a logic model. This tool can help you identify what your coalition needs to do to achieve its intended impact and what inputs you will need for your work. Developing a logic model involves three steps:

- First, articulate the outcomes you want to see based on your community vision and what you know about local mobility conditions. You may want to refer to the predictors in the Upward Mobility Framework as a guide to selecting outcomes of interest.
- Second, identify the strategies and activities you will need to pursue to generate those outcomes.
- Third, name the inputs you will need to perform those activities.

Figure 5-1 shows a simplified logic model with an example of one possible outcome that you might wish to see. You’ll find additional details about each component of the logic model below. You may also want to refer to [Developing a Theory of Action and Logic Model](#) from the Institute of Education Sciences for more information on developing a logic model.

FIGURE 5-1

Example of a Logic Model



Outcomes

The example of a logic model in figure 5-1 builds on Philadelphia’s vision statement. It starts with outcomes (or goals), which you can identify by asking what changes you want to see in your community. Outcomes are typically long-term, aspirational changes and may include the following:

- changes for the entire community or specific groups, such as changes in conditions, capabilities, or relationships
- changes in systems, including policies, practices, norms, and narratives

You may find it helpful to identify both long-term outcomes and intermediate and medium-term outcomes. In the logic model, “greater health and well-being for all residents” is the long-term outcome. Returning to Philadelphia’s vision statement, other potential desired long-term outcomes could include the following:

- every resident has access to affordable and high-quality health care
- employers no longer discriminate based on race/ethnicity or gender

The logic model highlights “increased number of jobs that pay living wages” and “more hospitals and health care providers per capita” as related medium-term outcomes, but it’s possible that you will identify more. Your logic model should contain one row for each long-term outcome you hope to achieve. A template for creating your own logic model is available in our [“Creating a Logic Model to Achieve Your Community’s Vision”](#) worksheet.

As you identify your desired outcomes, avoid confusing outcomes with outputs. Outputs are the short-term observable results of actions that could lead to desired outcomes, but they may not get you all the way there. In the example above, an output for the “launch a campaign to pass a local living wage ordinance” strategy might be to “gather 5,000 signatures for a petition to city councilors” or “hold 10 community meetings to build support for the ordinance.” Gathering signatures and building community support are both important steps toward getting the ordinance passed, but alone they will not lead to more jobs paying living wages or greater levels of health and well-being for residents. However, identifying the outputs that may lead to achieving your desired outcomes can be a helpful exercise to establish short-term goals. We provide guidance on how to measure your impact, including both outputs and outcomes, in chapter 6.

Strategies

Strategic actions are the activities and interventions your coalition will undertake to achieve its desired outcomes. In the logic model above, the strategic actions are “launch a campaign to pass a local living wage ordinance” and “establish programs to attract and retain health care providers.” Identifying these actions will likely involve several iterations as members of your team or coalition meet to brainstorm ideas, vet the ideas with community members and leadership, and revise and rank the ideas. Finally, for each action, outline key steps, responsible actors, and associated success measures.

For guidance on how to identify and select these actions, see our [“Selecting Strategic Actions for Your Logic Model”](#) worksheet. As you engage with members of your coalition and your community to identify actions that can boost upward mobility and advance racial equity, keep the following considerations in mind.

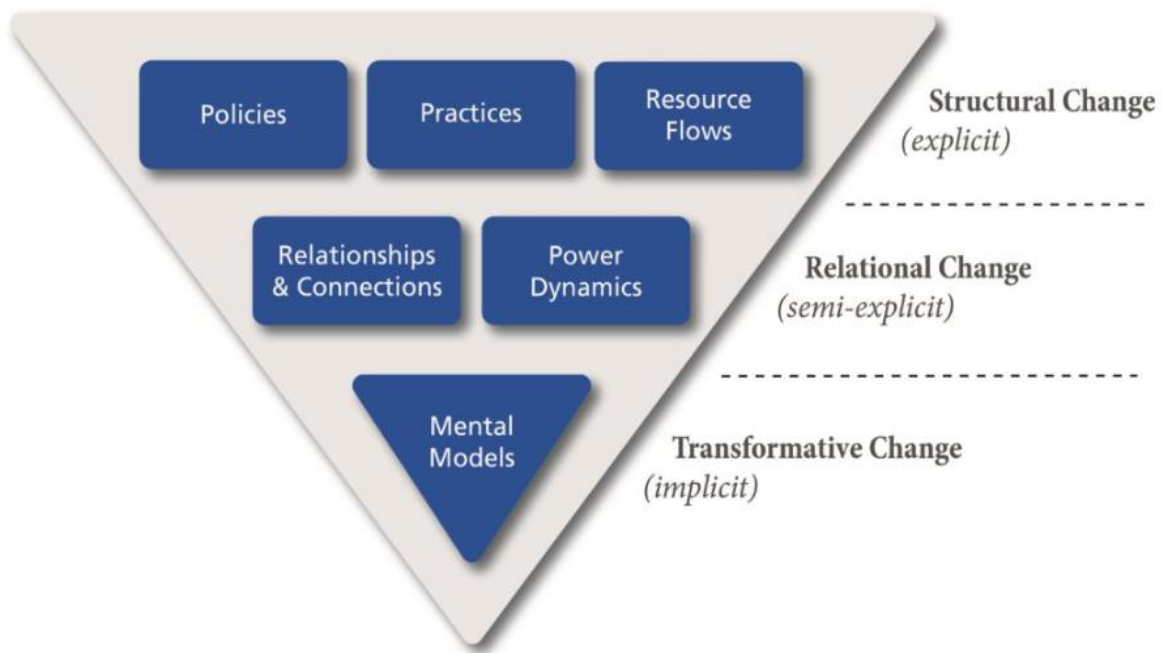
FOCUS ON SYSTEMS CHANGE, AND DON’T FORGET ABOUT NARRATIVE CHANGE

Remember that systems change is a fundamental shift in practices, underlying values, or norms by local actors that reshape policies, processes, relationships, and power structures. As you brainstorm strategic actions, you may find it helpful to keep in mind the six conditions in the [Water of Systems](#)

Change framework: policies, practices, resource flows, relationships and connections, power dynamics, and mental models (figure 5-2).

FIGURE 5-2

Six Conditions of Systems Change



Source: John Kania, Mark Kramer, and Peter Senge, *The Water of Systems Change* (Boston: FSG 2018).

Changing mental models (also known as narrative change) is arguably the most important—yet most overlooked—strategic action a group of key stakeholders can take. The narratives that people hold in their heads about why certain groups of people have less wealth than others or why some people are left behind while others succeed can either help support a specific change agenda or prevent solutions from making transformative changes. For example, if the prevailing narrative in your community is that people experiencing poverty are lazy and just need to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps,” you might find passing universal basic income legislation difficult. On the other hand, if the prevailing narrative in your community is that people experiencing poverty face barriers to accessing the supports they need to move out of poverty, then you might be more successful in passing policies that address those systemic barriers.

LEARN MORE

Narrative Change Resources

Below are some resources that may help you create a strategy to change narratives around upward mobility and poverty:

- The US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty's [Changing the Narrative](#)
- Tools and resources from the [FrameWorks Institute](#)
- Tools from [The Opportunity Agenda](#)
- [Narrative Strategy](#) resources and toolkit from Race Forward
- ORS Impact's [Measuring Narrative Change](#)
- ideas42's work on [Shifting Harmful Narratives about Poverty in the US](#)

CENTER EQUITY AND RACIAL JUSTICE

As noted throughout this toolkit, a focus on equity and racial justice is fundamental to upward mobility work. As you consider actions your coalition can take to advance upward mobility, consider how you can dismantle the specific barriers resulting from structural racism that Black people and other people of color face daily. Rather than focusing on universal strategies that lift all boats, consider a targeted universalism approach, which entails setting universal goals but using targeted strategies tailored to the needs of different groups of people to achieve those goals.

PRIORITIZE STRATEGIES THAT CAN AFFECT MULTIPLE DOMAINS

Because the factors that impact upward mobility span many different policy areas, it can be tempting to work in silos and address one area at a time. However, as you begin to brainstorm your strategies and activities, remember that all five pillars of upward mobility are interconnected. Any strategies you identify that are centered in one policy domain should be considered in light of challenges in other domains that could hinder their success. The strategies should then be expanded to tackle those related challenges. (See our report on [Boosting Mobility and Advancing Equity through Systems Change](#) for more on structural barriers to mobility and how they intersect.) For example:

- An economic development strategy that creates new, living-wage jobs should also consider workers' transportation and child care needs so they don't experience barriers to applying for or keeping those jobs.

- Programs that aim to improve high school graduation rates should be coupled with efforts to address the cost of higher education and the racial wealth gap, both of which make it harder for students of color to pay for college. Without tackling these two components, those programs will have a limited impact on college attendance.

Remember that strategies should focus not just on economic success but also on advancing people's power and autonomy as well as dignity and belonging. Read our report, [Boosting Upward Mobility: Exemplars](#), for examples of interventions that have successfully addressed all three dimensions of upward mobility.

CASE STUDY

A Holistic Approach to Challenges with Housing Affordability in Richmond, Virginia

[Mobility Action Learning Network](#) member Richmond, VA, faces challenges of rising housing costs, stagnant income growth, and a widening affordability gap, compounded by rapid gentrification and neighborhood segregation. In this context, the Richmond team framed its housing strategy around two interdependent pillars in the Upward Mobility Framework: [Rewarding Work](#) and [Opportunity-Rich and Inclusive Neighborhoods](#), with an emphasis on the links between the two pillars.

In addition to tracking housing affordability through indicators, such as the number of available housing units affordable for households at various income levels, the Richmond team tracks several metrics related to Rewarding Work, including business center locations, transit costs, and child care availability. This comprehensive data has helped Richmond better understand how housing influences, and is influenced by, access to opportunity across neighborhoods.

MAKE SURE SELECTED ACTIVITIES CAN ACTUALLY ACHIEVE THE SCALE OF YOUR GOALS

For example, if one of your desired outcomes is that “everyone has access to high-quality health care,” but your strategic actions will only affect a small number of people, then either that goal is not appropriate or that action is not significant enough.

STRIKE A BALANCE BETWEEN “SURE THINGS” AND LONGER-TERM ASPIRATIONS

Although boosting upward mobility and advancing racial equity won't happen overnight, it's important to have “sure things” (ideas that you are almost certain can be accomplished) on your list of selected activities that can demonstrate the success of your work and help build momentum among your team or coalition for longer-term efforts.

Inputs

Once you have decided on a set of strategic actions, you will also need to identify the necessary inputs or resources for implementing those activities. Inputs can include things such as funding, staffing, partnerships, political will, technology, evaluation capacity, data, and regulatory approval. Figure 5-1 above includes the following inputs:

- funding to hire organizers and campaign managers
- connections to advocacy groups and community-based organizations doing related work
- data on local wages and cost of living, disaggregated by race, industry, gender, and neighborhood
- connections to employers like anchor institutions and small businesses

You should have a specific list of inputs for each strategic action in your plan, and they should all be measurable, even if the measure is about quality rather than quantity. To develop this list, consider the following questions:

- What organization or person should lead the effort to adopt and implement the action? What other partners need to be involved? What type of expertise is needed?
- What technology, staffing, or infrastructure is needed to implement this action?
- Where can you obtain funding for this action? Can funds be reallocated from elsewhere or will you need a new source of funding to implement this action?

Articulating these inputs will help you and your coalition move beyond a planning mindset toward implementation and increase the chances that your work will lead to measurable change in your communities.

Creating a Theory of Change

Once you've created your logic model and identified the strategies your coalition plans to pursue to increase upward mobility and racial equity, a final step is to create a theory of change, which can help you communicate succinctly about your work and the changes you intend to bring about in your community.

If a logic model articulates the *what* of your work, a theory of change articulates the *how*. Use figure 5-3 to create a theory of change statement for your work.

FIGURE 5-3

Example of a Theory of Change Statement



FORMULA

In order to [insert your problem statement], we will [insert your strategies], which will lead to [insert your medium-term outcome(s)], thereby [insert your longer-term outcomes(s)].

THEORY OF CHANGE STATEMENT

In order to ensure that people in our community can achieve financial security and meet their basic needs, we will launch a campaign to pass a local living wage ordinance and establish programs to attract and retain health care providers, which will lead to increases in the number of jobs paying living wages and the number of health care providers serving our community, thereby helping residents achieve greater levels of health and well-being.

As figure 5-3 shows, there are three questions to ask as you create a theory of change:

1. **What problem are you trying to solve?** In the example, many people in the community are financially insecure and can't meet basic needs like housing and health care.

2. **How do you plan to address the problem?** In the example, the problem could be addressed by campaigning to pass a local living wage ordinance and establishing programs to attract and retain health care providers.
3. **How will you know if your efforts are successful (i.e., how will your strategies achieve your desired outcomes)?** In the example, medium-term success is defined as having more jobs paying living wages and more health care providers serving the community. In the long term, residents will be healthier and enjoy greater well-being.

Answering these questions should leave you with a theory of change that follows this formula:

In order to [insert your problem statement], we will [insert your strategies], which will lead to [insert your medium-term outcome(s)], thereby [insert your longer-term outcomes(s)].

You can use the template in our “[Developing a Theory of Change for Your Upward Mobility Work](#)” worksheet to craft a theory of change statement with your coalition. You may also find it helpful to engage a designer or artist to help you represent your theory of change in a more visually compelling way. Below are examples of theory of change statements and graphics you can draw inspiration from:

- [Examples](#) highlighted by the Annie E. Casey Foundation from organizations such as KUA Hawai'i
- [Race Forward](#)
- [Fresno DRIVE](#)

Determining Next Steps

Once you've developed a community vision, a logic model, and a theory of change, you should seek feedback from stakeholders outside your team or coalition, because your efforts won't succeed without support from elected officials, partner organizations, and the public to adopt, implement, and fund the strategies you identified. Although the process for seeking feedback will vary from place to place, you may wish to consider developing a plan for public review to ensure that community members who are not in your coalition have plenty of opportunities and ways to engage (read chapter 3 for more information). A public review plan might include hosting both in-person and virtual events, using online crowdsourcing platforms, or leveraging community partners to help engage key groups for more targeted review events.

Once you've finalized the set of strategic actions your coalition intends to pursue, you will need to move into implementing those actions. Chapter 6 guides you through how you might evaluate whether your work is having the intended impact, and chapter 7 offers a framework for thinking about how to sustain your work over the long term.

Relevant Templates and Worksheets

- [“Assessing Existing Programs for Alignment with the Upward Mobility Framework”](#)
- [“Cataloging Existing Interventions”](#)
- [“Creating a Community Vision Statement”](#)
- [“Creating a Logic Model to Achieve Your Community’s Vision”](#)
- [“Developing a Theory of Change for Your Upward Mobility Work”](#)
- [“Selecting Strategic Actions for Your Logic Model”](#)

Chapter 6: Measuring Your Coalition's Impact

Measuring your impact is critical to understanding whether you are creating the change you want to see in your community. Continuous learning is one of our six upward mobility principles as it will allow you to learn from your work and adjust your strategies as needed. A continuous learning strategy is also a key component of sustaining your work, because you need to be able to communicate your impact to get buy-in from key stakeholders and maintain accountability with your community partners.

When measuring your upward mobility initiative's impact, your goal should be to understand how your initiative is creating systems change. This means that beyond just measuring the results of any single program, you should seek to understand how your work is changing the ways decisions are made in your community, the collaboration and power dynamics between actors, and the narratives and mental models (see chapter 5 for more information).

Keep reading to learn how to develop a measurement plan, measure systems change, identify appropriate measures and data sources, communicate your impact, understand how to implement continuous learning principles, and determine next steps.

Developing a Measurement Plan

Creating a measurement plan that builds on your theory of change and logic model can help you track progress toward your goals (see our [“Developing a Theory of Change for Your Upward Mobility Work”](#) and [“Creating a Logic Model to Achieve Your Community's Vision”](#) worksheets). We suggest developing a measurement plan alongside your logic model to build in your measurement activities from the beginning of your implementation work.

Our [“Developing a Measurement Plan for Your Coalition's Work”](#) worksheet provides space for you to identify relevant measures for each strategic action in your logic model. Table 6-1 contains examples of measures you might identify for a hypothetical strategic action. You should ensure your measurement plan aligns with community priorities for measurement. (See Urban's report on [Engaging Communities in Measurement and Data-Driven Decisionmaking](#) for how to do this.)

TABLE 6-1

Example of a Measurement Plan

Strategic action: Launch a campaign to pass a local living wage ordinance.

Inputs	Input measures	Outputs	Medium-term outcomes	Medium-term outcome measures	Long-term outcome	Long-term outcome measures
Funding to hire organizers and campaign managers	Amount of funding raised	Number of community meetings held	More jobs pay living wages that allow workers to meet their families' needs	Number of jobs paying living wages	Greater health and well-being for all residents	Percentage of residents with access to high-quality, affordable health care
Connections to advocacy groups and community-based organizations doing related work	Number of connections with advocacy groups and community-based organizations	Number of signatures gathered for a petition	More hospital and health care providers per capita	Percentage of residents paying more than 30 percent of income in housing costs		Percentage of residents with more than \$5,000 in savings
Data on local wages and cost of living disaggregated by race, gender, and industry		Number of doors knocked and residents engaged		Percentage of residents experiencing food insecurity		Percentage of residents who report being in good physical and mental health

Note: Outputs are short-term observable results of actions that *could* lead to desired outcomes but may not get you all the way there.

Input Measures

Inputs are necessary to implement your strategies and can include things such as funding, staffing, partnerships, political will, technology, evaluation capacity, data, and regulatory approval. Input measures may reflect the amount or quality of the resources, human labor, relationships, technology, or investments being applied to implement the strategic actions. Examples of input measures include the following:

- dollars spent
- number of staff

- technology needed
- partnerships

Outputs

Outputs are the short-term observable results of actions that *could* lead to desired outcomes but may not get you all the way there. Output measures are likely to rely on administrative data that are collected locally, and they should show how much of something was done or how well it was done. Performance measures (or data that indicate how well programs, service systems, or organizations are performing) produce one type of output measure. Examples of outputs include the following:

- number of workshops facilitated
- satisfaction ratings of programs
- number of people served

Outcome Measures

Outcomes (or goals) are typically long-term, aspirational changes. They may include changes for the entire community or for specific groups, such as in conditions, capabilities, or relationships; and changes in systems, such as policies, practices, norms, and narratives. Outcome measures should capture the consequences of outputs.

The measures you choose to track progress on outcomes should help reveal whether the intended people are being helped or the intended conditions are being changed. Outcome measures that can help you track your ability to change systems include increases in staffing or other resource capacities, changes to the structure or hierarchy of decisionmaking, or changes in prevailing narratives or norms.

You may choose to use the [Mobility Metrics](#) as outcome measures, or you may select other measures that might be more likely to show change in the medium term. Examples of outcome measures include the following:

- median household income
- affordable housing availability
- air quality

LEARN MORE

Results-Based Accountability

The [Results-Based Accountability](#) framework provides three questions that can help you and your coalition identify important measures:

- How much did we do?
- How well did we do it?
- Is anyone better off as a result?

[Upward Mobility Cohort](#) participant Boone County, MO, used the framework to select key areas of focus, strategic actions, and indicators to measure progress. Read a case study of Boone County's work in chapter 3 and learn more about the county's full process of incorporating Results-Based Accountability in its [Mobility Action Plan](#).

For more information about using the Results-Based Accountability framework to advance racial equity, see [Racial Equity: Getting to Results](#) from the Government Alliance on Race and Equity.

Measuring Systems Change and the Success of Your Coalition

To adequately reflect systems-level change, the measures you choose should be specific, supported by data and evidence, easy to use, and capture the results of systems change, not just a particular program. You should identify measures that capture the characteristics of the systems that influence your desired long-term outcome. Table 6-2 provides examples of measures corresponding to the six conditions of FSG's [Water of Systems Change](#) framework for a hypothetical long-term desired outcome.

TABLE 6-2

Example of Systems Change Measures

Desired long-term outcome: Everyone has access to high-quality, affordable housing.

Condition	Measure
Policies	Number of affordable units created through inclusionary zoning policies
Practices	Presence of training and professional development programs for developers of color
Resource flows	Funding allocated by the city and county toward affordable housing
Relationships	Strength of connections between tenant organizations and local policymakers
Power dynamics	Number of renters serving on local planning commission
Mental models	Share of residents who consider housing a human right

When thinking about your impact, remember not to overlook the work you've done to build a successful cross-sector coalition. By intentionally bringing partners together, you've already begun working toward changing relationships and connections, resource flows, and power dynamics. Examples of output and medium-term outcome measures that could reflect the success of your coalition include the following:

- number of cross-sector partners engaged
- collaboration with champions in and from the community
- coalition members agree on an effective structure for collaborative governance
- partners decrease their silos and collaborate more*
- partners implement the same race equity framework*
- coalition members strengthen their relationships with community-based organizations*
- organizations across sectors create new positions that have adequate power to advance their diversity, equity, and inclusion goals*

For more information on the types of measures that best capture systems change, consult our report, [Boosting Mobility and Advancing Equity through Systems Change](#).

* Adapted from Joel Gutierrez, Sarah Stachowiak, and June Han, [I2L2: Impact, Influence, Leverage, and Learning](#) (Seattle, WA: ORS Impact, 2023).

Identifying Appropriate Measures and Data Sources

To identify appropriate measures that are relevant to your coalition's goals, revisit the data sources you used to understand upward mobility in your community in chapter 4. Data that inspired a strategic action may be a good contender for tracking progress over time. Valid data for measuring progress can come from a variety of potential sources, including the following:

- publicly available data, such as Census data or the Mobility Metrics
- local administrative data (review our resource on [Obtaining More Local Data](#) for specific recommendations on local data sources)
- qualitative evaluations, such as survey or poll data
- direct observation, focus groups, and community reporting
- data documenting notable actions, policy reforms, and/or implementation efforts
- data that your coalition collects on costs, staffing, and/or participation in programming, community events, and more

When selecting a data source, it's also important to consider how long you will need to track the information, how feasible it will be to continue collecting it throughout the lifetime of your upward mobility initiative, and what steps your coalition will need to take to gather data from that source. The latter may include finalizing data-sharing agreements, considering available funding and sustainability, projecting needed staff capacity, or planning to survey community members. The measures you ultimately select should rely on consistently collected and calculated data to enable evaluation and comparison over time. If any of your measures are ratios, you should ensure the data source and collection for both the numerator and the denominator remain consistent.

Even after you have chosen a set of measures and corresponding data sources, keep in mind that this process is flexible and iterative. As your coalition's work evolves, you may discover that your strategies have shifted course significantly enough to require new measures, or that different measures better reflect your goals or are simply more feasible to collect and track. If so, you should adapt your approach accordingly. If there is a lot of ambiguity around what measures of success would be best for a given strategic action, consider starting the process with a wider selection of measures, with a plan to revise or narrow down your scope once you have more information to assess how well each measure is helping you track progress toward your goals.

Communicating Your Impact

Sharing the impact of your work with others is important to demonstrate accountability to your partners and community. It also provides an opportunity to share your successes, build momentum, and recruit new champions for your work. Make sure you consider ways to communicate your impact through both formal reporting mechanisms and storytelling. Your communications should also be tailored to specific goals and audiences. Consult Urban's report on [Framing Communications to Drive Social Change](#) for further guidance.

Reporting on Your Impact

Consider the following questions to decide what, how, and to whom you will report on your progress:

- Will you report the measures you identified to all coalition members at regular intervals?
- Which measures could demonstrate the need for a pivot if the intervention doesn't appear to produce the impact you're hoping for?
- What accountability do you owe your community? At what point will successes or failures be communicated to the public?
- Who will make these decisions, and how can your team be proactive and thoughtful about the language used in your communications?

Be timely and transparent with updates on the progress of your strategic actions, because these are the key insights on which your continuous learning will be based. For many efforts, especially in the early years of implementation, it may be hard to determine whether you are witnessing success or failure because these terms are subject to various descriptions and perspectives. Nevertheless, general trends are important to track, and regular updates on the progress of your efforts will help you build trust with community members and create robust feedback loops to learn what's working and what's not.

You should also consider what dissemination methods will be most likely to reach and be understood by your target audiences and the community at large. While any plan for reporting on your progress will be contingent on the timeline and frequency of reported results (based on your data collection and evaluation), we suggest considering the following reporting frequencies:

- **Biannually:** Every six to eight months, report on the inputs for each strategic action. Make sure to answer the following questions:

- » Are we doing what we said we were going to do?
 - » Have we held ourselves accountable for shared responsibilities?
 - » (Within your coalition) Are there any adjustments that need to be considered or made to budgets, scheduling, staffing, or planned measurement?
- **Annually:** Approximately every year, report on the outputs for each strategic action. Make sure to answer the following questions:
 - » What outputs and early outcomes are we seeing?
 - » Have we addressed what is not working?
 - » Do we need to modify any inputs or actions?
 - **Every three to five years:** Report on your progress toward outcomes. Create a public progress report detailing any achievements that deserve celebration and any inputs or actions that require adaptation. Make sure to answer the following questions:
 - » What positive changes are we seeing among the community or groups we hoped to impact?
 - » What persistent challenges may require a new approach or different ways of thinking?
 - » In what ways have we changed our local upward mobility ecosystem for the better?

Storytelling

Using what you have learned through your evaluation efforts to tell a compelling story about your work is a skill that will help your upward mobility initiative expand its audience, influence changemakers, keep community members informed about your work, and even change narratives and mental models.

Consider a variety of communication methods to tell the story of your work, including written publications, video, photo, multimedia projects, creative publications (e.g., a “zine”), media coverage, social media, and in-person or virtual presentations. Your storytelling should center the voices of those most impacted in your community when appropriate, including by giving community members agency to tell their own stories and having them guide the selection of platforms and venues. Some resources to support your storytelling efforts include the following:

- FrameWorks Institute’s [The Storytelling Power of Numbers](#)

- FrameWorks Institute's [Framing Success Stories](#)
- The Opportunity Agenda's [Vision, Values, and Voice: A Communications Toolkit](#)

Selecting Headline Indicators

Headline indicators are a subset of your outcome measures that can serve as the focal points for your work and communicate your coalition's key priorities. While your measurement plan will likely include many outcome measures to track, selecting a smaller number of headline indicators can help simplify your message in both storytelling and formal reporting about your work.

If you decide to select a few headline indicators from the many measures your coalition is tracking, be sure to provide sufficient context when communicating about them, since a single indicator is unlikely to represent the full picture of upward mobility conditions in your community. You should also ensure the headline indicators you select reflect your community's priorities.

Choosing headline indicators may be challenging for your coalition, as each partner may bring different priority measures based on their focus areas. You may wish to consider the following four factors, adapted from the Results-Based Accountability framework above, to identify headline indicators:

1. **Communication power:** Does the indicator communicate to a broad range of audiences? Could you stand in a public square and explain this indicator to your neighbors?
2. **Proxy power:** Does the indicator say something of central importance about one of your coalition's desired outcomes? Can this measure stand as a proxy for a statement of well-being?
3. **Data power:** Is high-quality and timely data available for this indicator?
4. **Equity:** Does this indicator account for disparities or inequities in outcomes across different demographic groups or neighborhoods?

See our "[Selecting Headline Indicators that Communicate Your Priorities and Impact](#)" worksheet for a table you might use to prioritize between different indicators.

CASE STUDY

Developing Headline Indicators in Rochester, New York

The Rochester-Monroe Anti-Poverty Initiative (RMAPI) is a collective impact organization in Rochester, NY, focused on implementing a [Unity Agenda](#) that brings upward mobility to every person in Rochester. RMAPI tracks 39 metrics across six pillars, allowing a comprehensive view of areas of progress, decline, or stagnation on their upward mobility priorities. However, a large set of metrics can make it challenging to communicate impact and key measures to the public.

Through their engagement with the [Mobility Action Learning Network](#), RMAPI aligned their metrics with the Upward Mobility predictors and Mobility Metrics. Using the four factors of communications power, proxy power, data power, and equity, the RMAPI Steering Committee and their Shared Measurement and Impact Working Group identified 11 headline indicators to measure systems change in each of their six pillars:

- Poverty concentration
- Rent as a percentage of income
- Kindergarten readiness
- ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, and Employed) households
- Homeownership rate
- Ratio of pay on an average job to the cost of living
- Maternal morbidity per 10,000 deliveries
- Life expectancy
- Incarceration rates
- Neighborhood exposure
- Voter participation rate

While still maintaining its full set of metrics, RMAPI will prioritize tracking efforts related to their headline indicators and use them to report on the impact and organizational progress for their community. The headline indicators also serve as a helpful north star for aligning and prioritizing strategic actions.

Framework for Continuous Learning

Measuring the impact of your coalition's work is not a discrete process contingent on specific intervals of reporting; it should be ongoing once your strategic actions are underway. By continuously tracking progress, you will be able to adapt to any signals that your work is not having the intended impact. Failures to achieve an intended goal or benchmark are critical opportunities for learning, as they are valuable touchpoints for considering whether you are falling short because of external factors outside of your control, ineffective implementation, or unrealistic or misguided expectations about how change occurs (as described in your theory of change).

Additionally, continuous learning is important because it helps you track not only whether things are succeeding or failing but also *why* they are succeeding or failing. By asking those responsible for implementing strategic actions why they think things are working or not working, you will gain critical insights about the actions and conditions needed to boost upward mobility and advance racial equity. Table 6-3 describes a framework for thinking about continuous learning and suggests questions you can use to reflect on how well your coalition's work is going.

TABLE 6-3
Framework for Continuous Learning

Type of learning	Questions
Single loop	What are we learning about what we are doing?
Insights point you to strategies for improving logistics and execution	- What are the strengths and limitations of our strategic actions? - What are the strengths and limitations of the relationships and processes we have leveraged to implement our strategic actions? - What are the strengths and limitations of the capacity and resources we currently have?
Double loop	What are we learning about our assumptions, understanding, and thinking?
Insights will give you a better understanding of context and the relationships you must strengthen or leverage	- What challenges are we trying to address with our implementation? How or why do these come up? - What are the systems, or context, in which our challenge is embedded? How does this inform our choices? - What are the strengths and limitations of our current measurement strategy? - What are the strengths and limitations of our current implementation strategy?

Type of learning	Questions
Triple loop	What are we learning about how we are being?
Insights point you to the landscape that is informing your work and the assumptions that need to be reinforced or challenged	- What emotional triggers are tied to this strategic action? - What habitual responses inform this action and its measurement? - What social norms and group dynamics are relied on during implementation and measurement? - What individual or shared values (or narratives) are informing the implementation or measurement of this action?

Source: Adapted from Mark Cabaj, “Evaluating Systems Change Results: An Inquiry Framework” (Ontario, CAN: Tamarack Institute, 2018), <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library/paper-evaluating-systems-change-results-an-inquiry-framework>.

Determining Next Steps

Understanding whether your coalition’s work is having its intended impact is critical to determining what comes next. If you find your coalition is falling short of its goals, you should course-correct as needed, whether by revisiting your logic model and theory of change to identify new strategies (chapter 5), recruiting new members to the coalition that can help you achieve your desired impact (chapter 2), or rethinking how your coalition works together and is governed and managed.

On the other hand, if you find your coalition is moving in the right direction—although slowly, as systems change takes time—you may wish to review chapter 7 to understand how to sustain your work over the long term.

Relevant Templates and Worksheets

- “Creating a Logic Model to Achieve Your Community’s Vision”
- “Developing a Theory of Change for Your Upward Mobility Work”
- “Developing a Measurement Plan for Your Coalition’s Work”
- “Selecting Headline Indicators that Communicate Your Priorities and Impact”

Chapter 7: Sustaining Upward Mobility Initiatives

The systems changes needed to boost upward mobility will not happen overnight. Advancing equity and racial justice can take decades as communities address systemic inequities built into policies, processes, institutions, and culture. At times it may be challenging to see the direct impact of your work, so it's important to develop a strategy for sustaining your upward mobility initiatives over time.

While every community will have different approaches to boosting upward mobility, all upward mobility initiatives will need to sustain effective structures that can facilitate collaborative governance, sufficient capacity to carry out the work, stable funding to support ongoing efforts, and adaptive policy and program actions that are responsive to changing landscapes. We refer to these as the building blocks of sustainability. In this chapter, we offer promising examples and suggested resources as a starting point for you and your partners to understand and implement strategies that can strengthen each of these building blocks.

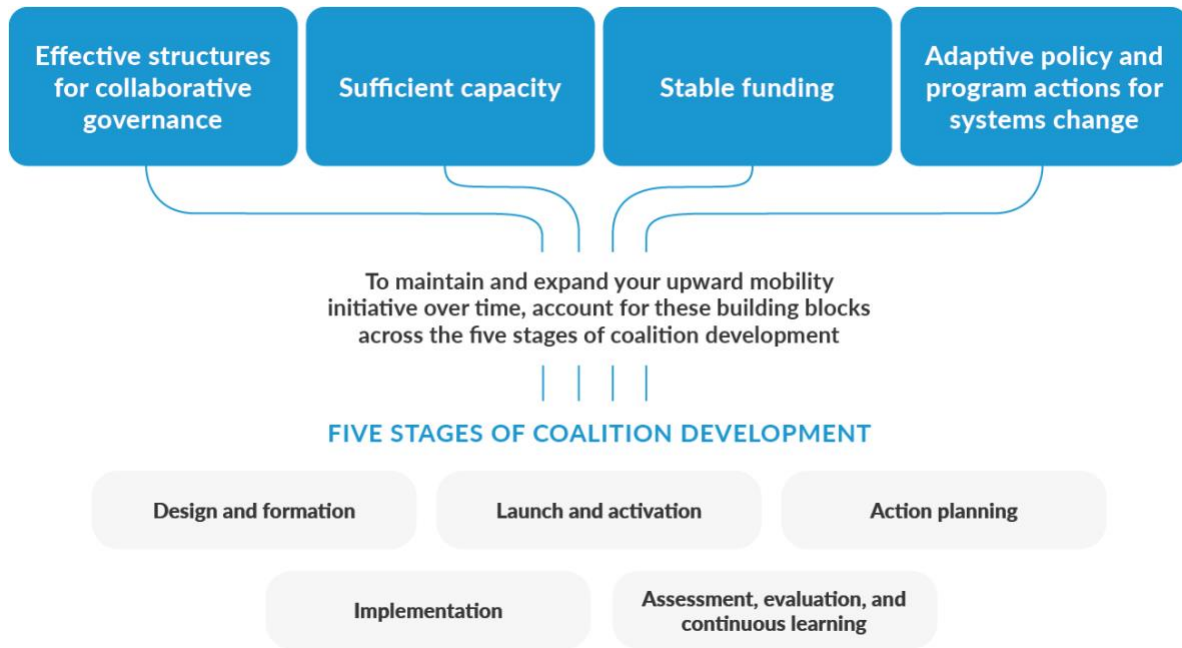
Developing a Strategy for Sustaining Your Work

Figure 7-1 illustrates the four building blocks of sustainability, which are necessary to sustain upward mobility initiatives over the long term. Assessing your coalition's strengths and weaknesses in these four areas will help you decide on next steps and effectively pursue the strategic actions you identified to advance upward mobility and racial equity in your community.

The cross-sector coalition you build to address upward mobility in your community will cycle through five stages: (1) design and formation, (2) launch and activation, (3) action planning, (4) implementation, and (5) assessment, evaluation, and continuous learning. The building blocks of sustainability outlined at the top of figure 7-1 are important to consider at all stages of coalition development.

FIGURE 7-1

Building Blocks of Sustainability



We suggest you begin your sustainability planning process by taking stock of your coalition's baseline capacities across the four building blocks, which will help you prioritize and sequence your next actions to sustain and scale your initiative. You should also consider developing a written sustainability strategy that can align and connect the four building blocks of sustainability. Your strategy should be grounded in your coalition's vision for your community, theory of change, and priority strategic actions you intend to pursue over the next 12 to 24 months. It might outline the roles and responsibilities of coalition members and other partners, coordinate outreach and engagement activities, identify stable sources of funding capable of supporting the short- and longer-term systems changes that your upward mobility initiative seeks to advance, and describe how you intend to measure your impact and implement continuous-learning principles (see chapter 6). If your coalition is working on creating a Mobility Action Plan, your sustainability strategy might be one of its components (see chapter 1). Alternatively, you may decide to develop a sustainability strategy in an earlier design or launch phase that can help set the stage for a more comprehensive planning process.

Building Block #1: Effective Structures for Collaborative Governance

A central theme throughout this toolkit is ensuring that communities establish and sustain a strong, cross-sector coalition of diverse organizations, leaders, and community members committed to a common vision and set of actions to advance upward mobility and racial equity in their community. Successful upward mobility initiatives demand a collaborative, collective impact approach that brings together different assets and perspectives to address the structural barriers to upward mobility.

The long-term sustainability of the initiative and the coalition will hinge on having an effective backbone organization and consistent rules of engagement that outline clear roles for coalition members and other partners. As we discussed in chapter 2, coalitions should consider a governance structure that includes a dedicated management team as well as other members who may engage less frequently. Below we outline several major management and governance milestones that upward mobility coalitions will likely confront throughout their lifetimes, with a few promising next steps and resources to help you effectively navigate through them.

Formalize the Coalition's Management Structure and Provide Ongoing Support for the Backbone Organization

With the coalition's launch and its shift from action planning to implementation, it will be important to formalize the structure of the upward mobility initiative, outline the rules and customs for engagement, and ensure partners can take on roles that support the backbone organization. Some strategies your coalition might consider include the following:

- Adopt a written charter that captures your core principles, rules of engagement, community agreements, or standards of conduct. The charter's principles could include a commitment to ongoing learning and improvement (refer to our upward mobility principles in the Introduction for inspiration). Ensure all members of the coalition endorse the charter. You could consider hosting an event when the coalition launches to publicly sign the charter and pledge specific commitments. As your coalition continues working together, make sure to review and regularly revise the charter every year or two.
- Support the backbone organization by having partner organizations lead working groups and/or take on critical program responsibilities, such as data collection, analysis and evaluation, policy development, and outreach and communication. Such contributions can go

a long way to ensuring the sustainability of the backbone organization's pivotal role in coordinating the coalition. They can include actions such as

- » empowering a core management team that can colead the coalition with support from the backbone organization, and ensuring these management team representatives receive resources to defray some of the costs of taking on this critical role; and
- » establishing two to three or more working groups that have specific tasks, such as the planning committee for a citywide upward mobility workshop or the community engagement and empowerment committee.

Elevate and Empower Community Members within the Initiative's Leadership and Management

Sustainability requires activities that can empower community leaders and elevate community priorities. This means that the coalition's governance structure should include local residents who can contribute their lived experiences to the coalition's management and strategic direction. Some ways to include community members and people with lived experience in decisionmaking structures include the following:

- Establish a collaborative and fair process for recruiting resident leaders and compensating community members (read Urban's [Equitable Compensation for Community Engagement Guidebook](#) for recommendations).
- Support opportunities for professional development and mentoring to allow community members to advance their individual and community leadership skills.
- Create a community advisory board or resident leadership council that can cultivate trusted relationships with community members who can steer the direction of your mobility work (see chapter 3 and Urban's [Tools and Resources for Project-Based Community Advisory Boards](#) for more information).

Maintain the Initiative's Progress and Expand the Coalition's Momentum

Often so much energy and resources go into the design and formation of coalitions that leaders, partners, and champions can experience fatigue once they have successfully launched their upward mobility initiatives. Collaborative implementation of the coalition's agenda requires strong coordination and execution.

At the same time, external events, such as a pivot from a major funder or a shift in political leadership, could pose new challenges and weaken commitments to action. Thus, it is imperative for the coalition to host regular events and activities that can expand and energize the existing membership while also recruiting new leaders, partners, and champions who can infuse innovative ideas and additional assets that can help the initiative successfully achieve its goals. Below are a few suggestions for keeping members invested in the work:

- Celebrate successes by holding an annual upward mobility summit that brings together all members of the coalition to report on the actions taken to advance upward mobility over the past year.
- Leverage the summit to recruit new organizations, sponsors, potential funders, and members as the initiative evolves and begins to consider other aspects of upward mobility or expands its focus to additional communities.
- Set aside time during regular initiative management, planning, and program meetings for reflection on what seems to be working and what needs improvement; regular check-ins can go a long way to sustaining the energy and commitment of not only the members but also the partners, management team, and backbone organization.
- Develop a robust communications and marketing strategy that shares compelling narratives about the challenges members of the community face and the coalition's plans to address these structural inequities (see chapter 6 for more information on storytelling and sharing your coalition's impact).

LEARN MORE

Resources on Backbone Organizations

- [The Central Valley Community Foundation](#) serves as the backbone organization for Fresno DRIVE, a collective impact and inclusive economic growth initiative. It hosts a 20-person resident leaders working group that guides the DRIVE's executive committee, helping it set the initiative's strategic direction.
- The EdRedesign Lab's report on [Building Strong, Sustainable Backbone Leadership](#).

Building Block #2: Sufficient Capacity

With the general governance structure in place, the next phases—action planning, implementation, and evaluation and assessment—will require consistent staffing and a series of technical and administrative capacities. While the coalition’s management team or backbone organization generally takes the lead in stewarding the work, many initiatives distribute implementation efforts among several member organizations and/or engage consultants when they have sufficient funding.

During the first few years of implementation, multiple organizations are typically responsible for different program activities and tasks, with a blend of funded and in-kind programming and support. As the coalition implements its strategic actions, it will inevitably confront changes to its staffing, membership, funding, and community dynamics that will require skillful and quick adjustments and recalibration. Below we discuss several common strategies a coalition and its partners can put in place to help sustain the staffing and other core capacities that are necessary to advance its goals.

Execute an Operations and Staffing Plan that Guides Implementation

Given all the moving parts and diverse actors and organizations that need to be involved in an upward mobility initiative, it can be helpful for the coalition to adopt and execute a written plan. A component of the plan includes its sustainability strategy, which outlines roles and responsibilities for management (see sections above), the respective assets and assignments for core partners, and how internal operations support the coalition’s identified strategic actions. The plan should also include strategies for succession planning that capture the initiative’s recent activities, identify temporary stand-ins for specific roles when needed, and create processes for selecting and onboarding new leaders, partners, and members. A robust operations plan ensures the coalition can effectively and efficiently respond to whatever changes it may encounter and make the necessary adjustments to its work.

Designate a Full- or Part-Time Project Manager

Effective implementation requires an organization and/or person to serve as the initiative’s “quarterback” and oversee internal operations and programming. Someone within the backbone organization may play this role or it might be shared among several partner organizations as part of a leadership/management team with support from the backbone organization. The project manager can help implement the strategic actions and outline the processes for reporting and holding partners and

members accountable for their responsibilities. They should have the authority to engage consultants or contractors to support the work based on available funding.

Cultivate and Expand the Initiative's Collective Community Data Capacities and Partnerships

As outlined in chapter 4, data serves as the essential foundation for any work that advances upward mobility. Community data capacity means that everyone—at the individual, organizational, and collective levels—within a community can access and use data to understand and improve outcomes where they live. To advance upward mobility, your coalition will need to know what data are available and have the skills and systems to access and use the data, as well as identify partners that can help expand your data capacities. Building on insights and lessons from the [National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership](#), below we discuss two strategies and concrete next steps coalitions can take to sustain and expand their collective data capacity:

1. **Undertake a baseline assessment:** To begin, the initiative's management team and working groups should chart how data currently inform the coalition's internal operations and its external policy and program activities, and use that baseline assessment to identify areas that will require more investment of time and resources over the next one to three years to sustain and expand its collective community data capacity. Consider where the coalition's current data resources and capacities live, how those efforts will be resourced, and any key gaps that may exist.
2. **Expand community data capacity by establishing data partnerships and collaborating with nonprofit data intermediaries:** University centers, community research organizations, regional city and county agencies, private firms, and even individual consultants may make good partners.

LEARN MORE

Resources for Expanding Community Data Capacity from the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership

- [Investing in Data Capacity for Community Change](#)
- [Elements of Community Data Capacity](#)
- [Envisioning a New Future: Building Trust for Data Use](#)

- Collaborating for 21st Century Solutions
 - NNIP Lessons on Local Data Sharing
 - NNIP's Collection of Example Data-Sharing Agreements
-

Building Block #3: Stable Funding

Developing a consistent source of funding is a key component of sustaining an upward mobility initiative. In the early stages, upward mobility initiatives often rely on in-kind contributions of staffing and resources from core organizations to support engagement, design, and development. As initiatives grow, transitioning from formation to launch to implementation, they will need to obtain more consistent sources of funding to implement their strategic actions.

Broadly speaking, upward mobility initiatives generally have two main sources of funding: public and philanthropic. Most initiatives will use a mix of funding mechanisms to support their work. For example, local governments already direct significant funding toward upward mobility strategies and programming. Therefore, your upward mobility initiative should consider opportunities for alignment between your priority areas and local government strategic plans. These areas of overlap are good avenues to focus on funding your upward mobility strategies.

CASE STUDY

Leveraging Public Funds for Upward Mobility Initiatives in Washington, DC, and Summit County, Ohio

In Washington, DC, the completion of the city's [Mobility Action Plan](#) helped advance programs that fit within their Stability-Mobility-Prosperity framework, including \$1 million allocated toward a guaranteed income program for single mothers and \$33 million proposed in the FY 2025 budget to support homeownership programs.

In Summit County, OH, priority areas of mental health and juvenile justice identified in its [Mobility Action Plan](#) were carried forward in the City of Akron's updated [Youth Violence Intervention and Prevention Strategic Plan \(2023\)](#). Akron's Mayor allocated \$4.44 million of American Rescue Plan Act resources to fund youth violence work.

A pilot program can be a good way for government agencies to try out new strategies that can be expanded if successful. Developing an understanding of your city or county's budgeting cycle will be key to working with government partners to find opportunities for funding. In most local governments, the annual budgeting process begins in departments or agencies, and then their proposed budgets are shared with mayors, managers, or councils as relevant.

Philanthropic funding can complement public resources and be an important source of funding for the nongovernmental partners in your coalition. It may be deployed more quickly and with a greater tolerance for risk than government funding. Philanthropic funding can also be a helpful catalyst for working across policy areas and breaking down silos in government. Philanthropic funders include the following:

- independent foundations
- family foundations
- community foundations
- public charities
- corporate foundations
- corporate social responsibility programs

Philanthropies may fund initiatives through competitive requests for proposals, formal grant cycles, or invited proposals. In all cases, it is important to understand how your upward mobility initiative aligns with the strategic priorities of the philanthropic organization in question. While many philanthropic funders focus on priorities connected to upward mobility, not all frame it in those terms or focus on the cross-sector nature. If your initiative shares priorities with a philanthropic funder, you can focus on that upward mobility pillar and then show the prospective funder that by supporting your coalition's work in this one area they are contributing to broader mobility gains.

Your theory of change will be key to identifying well-aligned funders in your ecosystem (see our [“Developing a Theory of Change for Your Upward Mobility Work”](#) worksheet). You should look for funders that have strategic priorities, program areas, and grantmaking work that align with your goals, desired outcomes, and strategic actions. A good funding proposal will articulate the problem, explain your proposed solution, and show how your initiative is positioned for success.

When developing a funding strategy for your upward mobility initiative, you will need to work with your coalition partners to consider a collaborative funding approach. Rather than creating a funding strategy to support an individual organization, you should create a strategy to support your collective work. Before soliciting funding, you should define roles among your coalition, including developing a shared budget, determining how resources raised will be allocated across coalition partners and working groups, and deciding which organization will serve as the grantee and hold fiduciary responsibility for any funds raised.

Specific steps your coalition can take include

- mapping the funding ecosystem in your community—consider all types of funders and their alignment with your goals;
- analyzing local government strategic plans to look for areas of overlap and opportunities to influence future funding; and
- formalizing roles within your coalition related to budgeting, funding, and reporting.

Building Block #4: Adaptive Policy and Program Actions for Systems Change

Systems change is one of our six upward mobility principles and should be the long-term goal of your efforts. While systems change involves many components, one of the more promising pathways for ensuring the sustainability of your upward mobility initiative is through formal policies and programs that can better weather the inevitable changes your coalition and community will confront. Initiatives must operate within and across these complex policy ecosystems (national, state, regional, and local), which are often in states of flux. The challenge for many initiatives is taking full advantage of the opportunities for change and then maintaining some level of continuous activities that can support the institutionalization of these positive changes to advance upward mobility.

Other chapters of this toolkit outline strategies and tools that upward mobility initiatives can use to develop their policy and programmatic focus, better understand the underlying stakeholder and organizational interests at play, and map the relevant ecosystems. In this section, we discuss how to sustain the momentum of your coalition's work by ensuring your strategic actions remain responsive to the evolving policy landscape and by maintaining your relationships and partnerships with relevant actors and organizations.

Adapt Your Strategies in Response to Evolving Policy Landscapes

When it comes to changing the myriad systems that impact upward mobility, public policies and programs offer perhaps the most promising pathways to initiate and, more importantly, institutionalize positive change. As outlined in chapter 2, upward mobility initiatives operate within a complex ecosystem with a diverse range of actors within somewhat discrete policy domains. Below we offer some strategies to help you and your coalition stay responsive and adapt your strategic actions as needed:

- Undertake periodic scans of new or revised federal, state, and local laws, programs, and grants, as well as pending actions relevant to your initiative's areas of focus. Are there recently enacted or pending proposals that would make your initiative's work easier or more difficult?
- Update your ecosystem map to reflect changes that have occurred since you formed your coalition and launched your upward mobility initiative. Consider whether the changed ecosystem will be more or less receptive to your planned work. What support and strategic guidance can your coalition's champions provide?
- Revisit the policies and programs you identified as part of your strategic actions. Are they still relevant given changes to the ecosystem? If not, how can you adapt them to stay relevant?
- Document and assess the initial list of successes your coalition has had. Which of your desired outcomes have you achieved, and what is still left to do? Are there any preliminary or short-term impacts you can attribute to your work? Do you have the right data and compelling narratives to build on to continue expanding on these systems changes?
- Monitor developments in the field of upward mobility as new research, policy analysis, and program evaluations continue to emerge. You may want to follow relevant research organizations and nonprofit groups that work on upward mobility, as well as national and state associations of local governments that often provide resources or summaries of relevant developments and produce case studies and other tools highlighting promising new policies and programs.

Maintain Strong Relationships and Partnerships with Actors in the Ecosystem

By their very nature, policy ecosystems involve a constant shift in priorities, frequent pivots, and a consistent churn of actors that will have implications for your initiative's systems change efforts. It is important to understand the policymaking processes in your community and leverage your coalition's relationships to advocate for policy and program changes that advance upward mobility. Perhaps more important now than in the past is to closely monitor how changing federal and state political administrations can lead to potential preemption of local government actions. To sustain your work, your coalition must maintain strong relationships with policymakers, local government staff, and civic, institutional, and community leaders who operate within your upward mobility ecosystem. Below are some suggestions for doing so:

- Cultivate champions among policymakers, nonprofit organizations, community-based leaders, and other actors within the policy and program focus of your upward mobility initiative.
- Partner with departments, agencies, and organizations that administer the policies and programs and/or provide direct services that are relevant to your strategic actions.
- Monitor shifts in policy agendas and be prepared to adjust and realign the policy direction of your initiative with the policy priorities and goals of current and new policymakers. Consider which local leaders must be at the table, how to get them to the table, and what to do at the table to move forward.
- Convene regular briefings (workshops, orientations, etc.) for new and existing policymakers and their staff as well as nonprofit, civic, community, and institutional leaders.
- Align your initiative's work and strategic actions with the design and development of relevant local government agency budget planning and discussion.

Determining Next Steps

As your coalition continues to work toward its desired outcomes, consider actions that can formalize your work, institutionalize practices, and change systems and organizational cultures to advance sustainable upward mobility in your community. These actions may include the following:

- Draft a resolution that endorses the launch and ongoing activities of the upward mobility initiative and recruit a state and/or local policymaker to introduce it for adoption by the legislature, county commission, city/town council, or other relevant body.

- Launch a public Mobility Action Plan (see chapter 1). Consider creating a public-facing Mobility Action Plan that describes your coalition’s intended work. Formally adopting such a plan can institutionalize commitment to the strategic actions your coalition has developed. You can also look for ways to incorporate your Mobility Action Plan into existing local government plans, such as a comprehensive plan, a local housing plan, or other strategic plans.
- Advocate for the creation of an upward mobility office or coordinator role within the local government. Such a person or office could provide dedicated attention and resources to help align policies and programs and facilitate connections across government agencies and departments to ensure the interdisciplinary nature of upward mobility work is carried forward.

Relevant Templates and Worksheets

- [“Developing a Theory of Change for Your Upward Mobility Work”](#)



500 L'Enfant Plaza SW
Washington, DC 20024

www.urban.org