



EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY

Executive Summary: Mobility LABs Annual Learning and Evaluation Report

Implementation Year 2 (2022-2023)

Prepared for The Robin Hood Foundation | January 2024

EQUAL
MEASURE

FINDING
PROMISE
FUELING
CHANGE



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

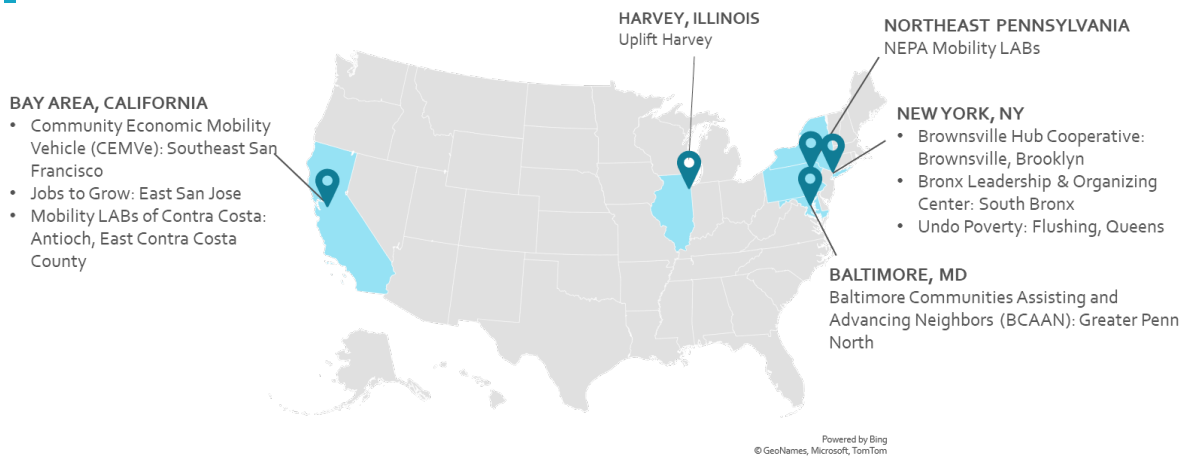
Launched in 2019, Mobility Learning and Action Bets (“Mobility LABs”) is a national investment led by the Robin Hood Foundation and supported by multiple funding partners, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, and Tipping Point Community. The initiative partners with local organizations in nine communities across the country (Figure 1) to develop community-driven solutions to sustainably lift families out of poverty.

Drawing from the work of the U.S. Partnership on Mobility from Poverty,¹ Mobility LABs defines mobility from poverty as encompassing three equally important dimensions: **economic success, power and autonomy, and sense of belonging**. Sustained mobility can only be achieved through building up all three dimensions for both individuals and for communities. The initiative is highly contextualized to the strengths and needs of the nine communities. It is guided by a community-centered approach, grounding the work in the voices and experiences of those living in poverty and centering racial justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. The principles ensure that the nine community projects are reflective of and driven by the priorities of the residents who live and work there.

“...while economic success is an essential principle, it does not fully capture people’s experiences with poverty and mobility.”

—U.S. Partnership on Mobility from Poverty, 2018.

FIGURE 1. MOBILITY LABS COMMUNITIES



This report documents the changes resulting from the community-driven mobility strategies implemented across the nine Mobility LABs projects during Year 2 (spring 2022-spring 2023) of the initiative and reports how communities hope to sustain the work. Findings are based on data collected through 1) a survey of anchor partners (“Learning Tool”) designed to understand strategies and outcomes, and 2) interviews with individuals in each community including anchor partner staff leading

¹ <https://www.mobilitypartnership.org/>



the Mobility LABs work, staff members from their partner organizations, and residents involved in work groups, programming, and other activities.²

Year 2 Accomplishments

The Mobility LABs partnerships reported meaningful change across the mobility constructs – **economic success, power and autonomy, and sense of belonging** – as well *emerging changes* in **narratives** and **local policy** – all evidence-based outcomes related to long-term economic mobility.³ Partnership activities during 2022-23 entered a new stage of maturity in which anchor partners, community partners, and community residents leveraged established relationships and project infrastructure to achieve more. These developments signaled **increased momentum for economic mobility** in the Mobility LABs communities. The partnerships have made considerable progress in the last two years and are well-positioned to sustain momentum with continued commitment to implementation and sufficient funding.

ECONOMIC SUCCESS

"Economic success captures factors that directly contribute to individuals' and families' material well-being. Those factors fall into four broad categories: income, assets, and income adequacy; employment; skills (human capital); and family demographic circumstances."⁴

Economic success and stability are integral to individual economic mobility, serving as the bedrock for upward advancement. When individuals experience financial stability, marked by family-supporting wages and job security, they gain the capacity to invest in education, acquire new skills, and pursue higher-paying jobs.⁵ Moreover, economic stability acts as a safeguard against financial setbacks, reducing reliance on social services and fostering wealth accumulation, thus paving the way for intergenerational economic progress.⁶

- **Mobility LABs partnerships created opportunities for increased economic success for community residents, primarily through direct services such as job training.** As a cohort, the Mobility LABs partnerships reported much more progress in all areas of education and employment during Year 2 as compared to Year 1.
- **Community residents gained education and employment through access to new opportunities, knowledge, and skill development.**
- **Mobility LABs partnerships removed barriers to education and employment for community members and provided wraparound supports for residents' basic needs to better enable economic mobility.**

² See Appendix A for more information about the Mobility LABs evaluation and methodology.

³ Ellwood, D. T. and Patel, N. G. (January 2018). *Restoring the American Dream: What Would it Take to Dramatically Increase Mobility from Poverty?* U.S. Partnership on Mobility from Poverty.

⁴ Acs, et. al. (April 2018). *Measuring Mobility from Poverty*. US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Marinescu, Ioana, and Jake Rosenfeld. WorkRise (The Urban Institute), 2022. *Worker Power and Economic Mobility: A Landscape Report*.



POWER AND AUTONOMY

"Power is a person's ability to influence their environment, other people, and their own outcomes, and autonomy is a person's ability to act according to their own choices, rather than according to other's decisions."⁷

Power and autonomy are pivotal factors to economic mobility. Individuals endowed with decision-making power and autonomy in their professional and financial realms wield greater influence over their career trajectories, allowing for increased ability to secure better wages and working conditions.⁸ This empowerment extends beyond personal domains to encompass community-level autonomy, where the ability to shape policies and advocate for resources plays a vital role in fostering economic development.⁹

- **Mobility LABs partnerships contributed to increased power and autonomy in the communities to initiate change as their work matured during Year 2.** As a cohort, the Mobility LABs partnerships reported more progress in all areas of leadership and advocacy during Year 2 as compared to Year 1.
- **Engagement in leadership and advocacy training and experiences positioned community residents to be more influential actors in economic mobility efforts.**
- **Collaboration and network development built community capacity and power to advance economic mobility goals.**

SENSE OF BELONGING AND BEING VALUED IN COMMUNITY

"Being valued in community is a person's sense that they belong and are included among family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, other communities, and society. A related concept is social capital, which is a web of relationships that has economic benefits. Being valued in community facilitates access to material and cultural resources..."¹⁰

Belonging and inclusion are integral to economic mobility. Poverty is isolating and stigmatizing; Americans frequently "other" people living in poverty, assuming they are poor because they lack a strong work ethic or are not responsible.^{11,12} High poverty communities, with decades of disinvestment, are cut off from resources and opportunities for mobility. Building social connections across communities fosters opportunities to access high-quality jobs and resources such as nutritious foods and safe environments. Diverse and broad social networks can accelerate economic mobility. Further, feeling valued in community and having strong ties to a community can bolster self-efficacy and community power to make change.

- **Mobility LABs partnerships fostered a sense of belonging among residents.** As a cohort the Mobility LABs partnerships reported improvements from Year 1 to Year 2 – for example, all nine

⁷ Acs, G., Maitreyi, A., Conner, A. L., Markus, H. R., Patel, N. G., Lyons-Padilla, S., & Eberhardt, J. L. (April 2018). *Measuring Mobility from Poverty*. U.S. Partnership on Mobility from Poverty.

⁸ Marinescu, Ioana, and Jake Rosenfeld. WorkRise (The Urban Institute), 2022, *Worker Power and Economic Mobility: A Landscape Report*.

⁹ Acs, G., Maitreyi, A., Conner, A. L., Markus, H. R., Patel, N. G., Lyons-Padilla, S., & Eberhardt, J. L. (April 2018). *Measuring Mobility from Poverty*. U.S. Partnership on Mobility from Poverty.

¹⁰ Acs, G., et al. 2018. *Measuring Mobility from Poverty*.

¹¹ Stewart, Miriam J., 2009. *Poverty, Sense of Belonging and Experiences of Social Isolation*, *Journal of Poverty*, 13:2, 173 — 195

¹² Patel, N. et al. 2018. *Restoring the American Dream*



anchor partners reported some or significant progress in increasing community trust in Year 2, compared to six partners in Year 1.

- **Building on the foundational relationships established in Year 1, the partnerships focused on cultivating a sense of community among residents, following the Mobility LABs ethos of “those closest to the problem are closest to the solution.”**
- **Across the nine communities, the Mobility LABs partnerships fostered belonging among residents in two ways: elevating resident leadership and centering community priorities in decision-making.**
 - **Elevating resident leadership.** Community members took on leadership and decision-making, demonstrating the value partnerships placed on their perspectives and experiences.
 - **Centering community priorities in decision-making.** Listening to residents and elevating their perspectives formally and informally fostered trust and made residents feel valued in the work.

Emerging Areas: Narrative Change and Policy Change

Changing narratives and local policy are both indicators of structural change, shifts in the broader social, economic, and political context in which the Mobility LABs partnerships operate.¹³ As the partnerships matured over the past year, many increased their focus on structural change by implementing strategies to 1) **change narratives about poverty** and 2) **to influence local policy to improve economic mobility in their communities**. Narrative change strategies aimed to shift mindsets of community residents, organizations, and local leaders about the causes of and solutions to poverty. The strategies intended to humanize the experiences of residents living in poverty and socialize different solutions. Policy advocacy strategies recognized that local, programmatic efforts alone cannot fundamentally improve economic mobility; changes in local, state, and federal laws and regulations are needed.¹⁴ The partnerships’ attention to narratives and policy signal their commitment to addressing the root causes of poverty.

Mobility LABs partnerships made strides in crafting new narratives about poverty and influencing local policy to reduce the prevalence of poverty in their communities. As a cohort, the Mobility LABs anchor partners reported much more progress in creating new narratives during Year 2 as compared to Year 1. Anchor partners reported modest progress with local policy change.

NARRATIVE CHANGE

“A narrative reflects a shared interpretation of how the world works. Narrative change rests on the premise that reality is socially constructed through narrative, and that in order to bring about change in the world we need to pay attention to the ways in which this takes place.”¹⁵

¹³ Equal Measure (2023). *Mending the Path: The Central Role of Intermediaries in Building Equitable Pathways from Education to Work*. <https://www.equalmeasure.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Equitable-Pathways-BEP-Report-Mending-the-Path-6-5-2023.pdf>

¹⁴ Kania, J., Kramer, M., & Senge, P. (2018). *The Water of Systems Change*. https://www.fsg.org/resource/water_of_systems_change

¹⁵ <https://narrativeinitiative.org/blog/narrative-change-a-working-definition-and-related-terms/>



Narrative change is pivotal for economic mobility, influencing societal attitudes and policy decisions. Prevailing narratives often blame individuals in poverty, portray them as helpless victims, or rely on exceptional "rags to riches" stories.¹⁶ Shifting these narratives to emphasize diverse potential and contributions fosters inclusive opportunities, breaks down systemic barriers, and supports equitable access to resources, ultimately enhancing economic mobility for all.¹⁷ Changing narratives around poverty and mobility includes elevating the stories of those who live in poverty to connect to their humanity and dignity, and to better understand the structural forces that shape poverty.¹⁸

Mobility LABs partnerships increased community awareness about the symptoms, underlying causes, and solutions to poverty.

LOCAL POLICY CHANGE

Local policy change refers to changing the "government, institutional, and organizational rules, regulations, and priorities that guide the entity's own and others' actions."¹⁹

Policy change, particularly at state and federal level, is crucial for large-scale economic mobility; policy is a powerful tool for redressing systemic exploitation in labor, housing, and financial markets. Passing and implementing new policies to strengthen workers' rights, improve housing affordability, and dismantle discriminatory practices, are essential for sustainably alleviating poverty and facilitating economic mobility.²⁰

Two partnerships, Si Se Puede Collective in East San Jose, CA (SSPC) and the Brownsville Hub Cooperative in Brooklyn, NY (BHC), reported significant progress in local policy change aligned with their Mobility LABs projects.

Sustaining Mobility LABs Work

As Mobility LABs draws to a close (most grants end in mid-2024), anchor partners are considering ways to sustain their work and leverage the valuable lessons learned and achievements attained.

Encouraging economic mobility in communities challenged by disinvestment and discrimination is complex, long-term work; it requires simultaneously addressing the immediate needs of residents as well as drawing attention to the root causes of poverty to drive long-term structural change.

- **Sustaining the partnerships:** While many partners believed their partnerships would continue in some form because of the meaningful relationships that had been established, most partners noted that sustaining ongoing partnership efforts requires dedicated staff and resources.
- **Sustaining community engagement:** Dedicated staff and resources are needed to authentically engage community residents. Anchor partners are wary of contributing to the

¹⁶ Ellwood, D.T. and Patel, N.G. January 2018. Restoring the American Dream: What Would It Take to Dramatically Increase Mobility from Poverty?

¹⁷ From [Talking-about-poverty.pdf \(frameworksinstitute.org\)](https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/talking-about-poverty.pdf)

¹⁸ Ellwood, D. T. and Patel, N. G. (January 2018). *Restoring the American Dream: What Would it Take to Dramatically Increase Mobility from Poverty?* U.S. Partnership on Mobility from Poverty.

¹⁹ Kania, J., Kramer, M. and Senge, P. June 2018. The Waters of Systems Change. FSG. https://www.fsg.org/resource/water_of_systems_change/

²⁰ Desmond, M. (2023, March 9). *Why Poverty Persists in America*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/09/magazine/poverty-by-america-matthew-desmond.html>



cycle of mistrust, false promises, and disappointment which may further harm the work of advancing mobility from poverty.

- **Future work:** Even as they look for ways to sustain some or all of the projects from Mobility LABs, anchor partners are also looking to embark on or expand ambitious work to address the structural causes of poverty in their communities, such as narrative change and advocating for policy changes.

Considerations

We ask **Robin Hood and the other Mobility LABs funders to consider ways to continue to support the work these nine communities have started** as we know that achieving economic mobility is long-term complex work. We will not see community-wide changes in family income, stability, and wealth in the short-term because the deep systemic factors holding families back from economic mobility were long in the making and won't be solved by a few years of funding. It will take considerable time and effort to make inroads and begin to dismantle these structures at the local, state, and national levels.

The Mobility LABs partnerships have started transformational work. In addition to meeting the immediate needs of community residents, we see evidence the partnerships are beginning to address the structures in their communities that keep people in poverty. They are building community power through partnerships with local organizations and residents, building organizational and advocacy skills, and starting to change narratives and policies. Time, experimentation, and adaptation are needed to devise and refine new ways of working that center and empower residents in the effort to develop new strategies and solutions. The communities need continued funding and other types of support (training, technical assistance) to achieve ambitious outcomes.