"We Want a Better Community": What We've Learned from Three National Place-Based Initiatives to Change Systems

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Over the last decade, Equal Measure has had the privilege of serving as the learning partner to many innovative place-based systems change initiatives. As we conclude multi-year partnerships with the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Robin Hood Foundation and look back on a decade with the ongoing Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions' Opportunity Youth Forum, we reflect on what we have learned and are still learning from these partnerships about how to affect real change in communities.

Across this work, in conversation with funders, local leaders, and residents across the nation, in rural and urban communities alike, we have heard a consistent message: a desire for transformative, structural solutions that identify and address barriers to success. As one funder said, "*I think almost universally...every partner came back in some way and said, 'We want a better community...if you are telling us you're giving us money and freedom to try and tackle some of this, [what] we actually want to think about is how to improve this community so that people have better outcomes over the long term.*' "

The three initiatives invested in building stronger ecosystems of partners in communities. Residents and local leaders led the way in identifying challenges and shaping solutions, while initiative leadership provided frameworks, cross-site convenings, and learning opportunities that gave cohesion and shared direction to a national strategy. This approach gave grantees and their communities explicit support for thinking bigger and innovating on bold visions and comprehensive local strategies. For many grantees, this was a new and liberating way of working.

Three Long-Term National Initiatives Grounded in Place

Funders of Mobility LABs (Robin Hood Foundation and its funding partners), LEAP (the Annie E. Casey Foundation), and the

Three Place-Based Initiatives

Mobility Learning and Action Bets (Mobility LABs) was a national investment funded by **Robin Hood,** the managing partner, and the Gates Foundation, the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, and Tipping Point Community. The initiative partnered with local organizations in nine communities across the U.S. from 2019–2024 to develop community-driven solutions to sustainably lift families out of poverty.

In 2016, the **Annie E. Casey Foundation** launched **Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP),** a national initiative to help youth and young adults who had been involved in the foster or justice systems, or who had experienced homelessness, succeed in school and work by building and expanding education and employment pathways. From 2019–2024, six organizations across the U.S. were funded to strengthen and scale efforts to expand pathways through partnerships within their local ecosystems.

The Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions (FCS) launched the **Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF)** in 2012, on the recommendations from President Obama's White House Council on Community Solutions. Since then, FCS has mobilized a national movement, convening and supporting more than 40 communities dedicated to improving systems so all young people, including the more than 800,000 opportunity youth in OYF communities, can connect or re-connect to an education or career pathway.

[Opportunity Youth Forum](#) (Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions) all sought systems change solutions that were national in scope but driven by communities. The initiatives were designed to be grounded in and deeply responsive to the needs of each place while connecting to a larger vision of increased economic mobility and well-being. Two of the initiatives, LEAP and OYF, were designed to better connect young people who were systems-involved, experiencing homelessness, or disconnected from school and work with education and career pathways. The third, Mobility LABs, was tailored to improve economic mobility in specific communities that have experienced deep disinvestment. Each initiative funded place-based, cross-sector partnerships over multiple years with a goal of changing policies, practices, and resource flows, and impacting power dynamics, relationships, narratives and mental models to improve overall systems of support.[1]

Agreement that Systems Need Improvement

All three initiatives identified the source of the "problem"—of poverty and disconnection from school and work—as *not* rooted within individuals, but rather within the systems they interact with (education, workforce, justice, human services, etc.). Systems are often fragmented and difficult to navigate, making access to needed resources and services an additional hurdle for individuals and families already managing many challenges. Fragmented systems have a disparate impact on different populations within communities and attention to these disparities was embedded in the initiatives, sometimes explicitly naming the historical and current disparities within communities in the initiatives.

The design of these initiatives acknowledged from the start that systems as they exist mean that connecting young people to education and careers and moving residents of disinvested neighborhoods out of poverty will not be solved by programs and direct services alone. Addressing the root causes of poverty and disconnection requires identifying and making fundamental changes to policies, processes, relationships, and power structures that have created barriers to access and success. All three initiatives took a holistic and systemic approach to change, recognizing that people and communities interact with multiple systems that are often disjointed and misaligned, limiting their ability to meet needs and support long-term well-being.

"[LEAP] created permission and space [to focus on systems change] ...I don't even think we realized how powerful that actually was for organizations."

—LEAP National TA Provider

Evidence of Change

All three initiatives reported examples of policy, practice, or funding shifts that removed barriers and improved access to education and career pathways for young people and disinvested communities.

LEAP partnerships identified barriers for young people and worked to change processes and practices that were unnecessarily onerous. For example, better coordination and efficiency in sharing vital documents with America's Job Centers led to increased enrollment and faster connection to workforce development services for Los Angeles youth in foster care. Changes to eligibility criteria allowed more youth to access support in California community colleges to increase post-secondary retention and persistence. Policy is strongly tied

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[1] Kania, John, Mark Kramer, and Peter Senge. "The Water of Systems Change." Report, FSG, June 2018.

to funding, and LEAP partnerships reported over $10 million in public and non-public co-investment. Even small changes to policies and how systems operate can have an outsized impact on the many young people who interact with those systems.

Last year, OYF saw public policy change at its highest level in six years, based on collaborative leads' self-assessment of systems changes in their communities. Over half of collaboratives (52%) reported the introduction of new policies addressing opportunity youth needs and barriers in local councils. Over half of collaboratives (52%) also reported that policy changes led to scaling (expanding or deepening) of programs and services for opportunity youth. Collaboratives also reported improvements to pathways such as communication between systems and co-location of services and organizations.

Policy changes across Mobility LABs were more emergent, although significant efforts were made to build residents' community organizing and advocacy skills -- building local capacity to affect change long-term. In one community, organizations and program participants lobbied to increase opportunities and remove unnecessary barriers for entrepreneurship and launching new businesses. Another community took on changing the narrative about who experiences poverty, reinforcing to residents that a broad range of people were eligible for public services and that they were intended to support them in their personal goals.

Three Lessons Learned

As we looked back at our work on these initiatives, three cross-cutting lessons stood out.

Place-based networks, a central strategy for systems change, are both a tool for and a driver of change. All the initiatives were funded to support or develop place-based partnerships or networks of organizations and institutions. Grantee organizations in all three initiatives intentionally developed or strengthened connections to key partners knowing that their organization alone could not accomplish the broader goals of systems and community change.

Place-based networks tailor well-established strategies for improving the overall support ecosystems for vulnerable individuals and families to the unique context of a specific geography. When networks are built around a community's assets, current and historical context, culture, and socio-economic structure, and can leverage the existing relationships between organizations and the populations they serve, these networks can be powerful tools for sustainable structural, relational, and transformative change.

In these initiatives, we saw a blend of enhanced pre-existing collaborations and new partnerships. While all the grantees had experience working with partners in their local ecosystems, these initiatives encouraged collaborating in a new way, with an emphasis on systems change as a goal, rather than programmatic partnerships.

While the networks made possible new and improved outcomes for individuals, they also altered the way grantees pursued their work. As one interviewee said, *"LEAP sort of became a verb, not a noun. It wasn't the name of something. It was a way people worked. There was a lot of sharing going on between and among organizations. There was a lot of co-training going on in the first five years between organizations. 'If this worked with us, it could work with you.'"* Developing a network of local organizations in an intentional way brought fresh perspectives and created a vision of connection to something larger than delivering programs.

While networks were a central strategy for change across all the initiatives, the ways in which the partnerships were developed and supported varied; no one way appeared to be the best predictor of success. For example, many of the over 40 place-based collaboratives that are part of the Opportunity Youth Forum network took a collective impact approach led by a backbone organization and working with multi-sector partners. The OYF collaboratives aimed to build their capacity in leadership, convening, communications, data, and resources to change local systems that impact opportunity youth.

"We're here for community… (we're) really trying to address the gaps in those systems and … create transformative change in current systems; redesign and create new systems that work for our people."

—Aspen OYF

The LEAP partnerships were led by large human service organizations, intermediaries, and a community foundation that connected with different partners in their local ecosystems to better meet the basic needs of systems-involved or unhoused young people, as well as remove barriers and increase access to pathways to education and careers. Partners in each place included child welfare, justice, and/or housing organizations or agencies, workforce development entities, employers, community-based organizations, and government.

The Mobility LABs grantees ("anchor partners") were in New York and California, with additional sites in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Illinois, and took a range of approaches to partnerships. Some anchor partners were leading existing coalitions, and others developed formal collaboratives as part of the initiative. Others had informal connections to organizations in their ecosystem that they tapped for particular goals.

Communities—both residents and initiative grantees/organizational leaders—are eager to take a systems change approach. And when community members are authentically engaged, especially when they design, lead, or co-lead the work, strategies become more relevant, adaptive, and credible. Across all the initiatives, community members were looking for more than services, although services are still vital. They wanted broad, transformative change.

Anchor partners in Mobility LABs reported their approach was based on what they heard from community members about the need to change the systems, institutions, policies, processes, and false narratives that were keeping their communities in poverty. In addition to implementing programs for adults and young people to build skills and meet immediate needs, Mobility LAB anchor partners focused equally on leadership development, advocacy and policy, and narrative change.

The OYF network is comprised of a diverse group of collaboratives in urban, rural, and tribal areas across the U.S. In 2024, nearly three-quarters of OYF collaboratives reported aiming for "comprehensive change" in their communities, looking to improve multiple outcomes for all opportunity youth (and prevent other young people from becoming opportunity youth) rather than focusing on a single sector or program.

Additionally, all three initiatives reflected the ethos that those closest to the problem were closest to the solution. In other words, those with lived experience with poverty or being unhoused, or disconnected from school, or involved in foster care or justice systems, should inform and guide solutions for economic mobility and overall well-being.

A central goal for the Mobility LABs initiative was to develop community-driven solutions to poverty in geographically diverse areas. The initiative was designed to be "heart-led" and to center the perspectives of people experiencing poverty, resulting in projects rooted in and reflective of community resident priorities. Community members participated in listening sessions and surveys, served on advisory boards, and were hired as program managers, community advocates, and community navigators. Through this engagement, anchor partners deepened their understanding of and connections to their communities and residents, their needs and priorities, and the complexity of poverty in residents' lives. Engagement activities were also used as opportunities to build relationships and trust, and to share and connect residents to information and resources. Ultimately, broad and deep community engagement and conversations informed both the design and implementation of pilot projects across all Mobility LABs anchor partners.

"...it felt like a space where we could really lead...we weren't told what we had to create. And we were able to give youth and community members real autonomy in a way that other grants didn't allow us...that was what was really exciting about this funding."

—Robin Hood Mobility LABs

In the LEAP and OYF initiatives, local organizations (backbones, partners) strongly valued and regularly engaged with young people. Youth engagement and leadership was a core element of LEAP, and youth-led change is a core value for OYF—both necessary for achieving long-term change. In LEAP, young people described how their input and feedback was used to improve programs and services. In one example, a young person's experience of disjointed programming in a large human services organization led to changes in internal referrals and processes. Young people shared their stories and lived experience with policymakers and systems leaders, such as on a panel with NYC's Administration for Children's Services, to inform the policies and practices for making foster care placements.

In the OYF network, 2024 saw most collaboratives (89%) reporting at least some evidence that young people were actively involved in the work of their collaborative and nearly all (92%) reported they informed the decisions that were made. Nearly 90 percent of collaboratives reported at least some evidence that opportunity youth's recommendations were solicited to inform program and pathway design, and that recommendations were integrated. Similarly, 88 percent reported that there was ongoing and embedded inclusion of youth voice and perspectives in developing, monitoring, and refining pathway systems, supports, and policies.

In our qualitative work, youth engagement emerged as a key approach across OYF. Longer-standing collaboratives, in particular, reported youth integration into the management of programming and youth leaders co-designing structural change strategies. [2]

All three initiatives invested in community and youth leadership and reported evidence of rising confidence, visibility, and leadership skills as a result – contributing to the sustainability of the work over the long term. Growing skills within communities is critical for long-term sustainability. Many Mobility LABs projects included opportunities for residents to build and use leadership, advocacy, and organizing skills through workshops, trainings, and civic engagement opportunities (e.g., advocacy days) that positioned

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[2] See Mapping the Diversity of OYF Collaboratives: A Guide to Understanding the OYF Network

community residents to be influential actors in mobility efforts. Anchor partners reported improved community advocacy and leadership skills and increased civic engagement, confidence, and self-efficacy over the course of the initiative.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation invested in youth leadership among LEAP participants through a national fellowship program and selected grantee organizations for LEAP with strong capacity to engage young people. The national fellowship program built on the strategies and work of the local LEAP partnerships. LEAP Youth Fellows strengthened their leadership and advocacy skills, shaping how LEAP was implemented in their local communities, and building personal and professional networks. Youth Fellows also had the opportunity to design and lead "passion projects"—projects that addressed issues in their communities that Fellows cared deeply about such as homelessness, addiction, and neighborhood beautification.[3] Some LEAP partnerships developed ways to scaffold opportunities and create career pathways within their own organizations for young people as they transitioned from participant to young adult leader. Hiring young people as paid staff provided them with access to professional development, leadership development, and experience on their resumes for future job opportunities.

"There's nothing more inspirational than seeing folks from your community making positive change in your community; it's not the same as somebody coming outside from your community and bringing their big dollars."

—Robin Hood Mobility LABs

In OYF, youth leadership has been integral to the work of Aspen's Forum for Community Solutions. They implement youth leadership across the network through a variety of strategies, including their support of Opportunity Youth United, a youth-led advocacy organization; co-hosting biannual youth summits; providing paid youth leadership positions on the Leadership Council; and engaging youth in understanding and assessing youth well-being. In a few collaboratives, youth led or co-led the collaborative, holding influential positions in the decision-making structure and driving collaborative strategies.

"It's the youth, letting them make decisions for themselves and giving them the tools and the resources they need to build their own foundations and that it's okay to do things differently because we've been doing the same thing for so long…"

—Aspen OYF

Conclusion: Strategies for Evaluation of Place-Based Systems Change Initiatives

Evaluating initiatives with multiple, sometimes dozens of place-based networks, in diverse settings, all implementing a wide range of strategies towards high-level systems change goals, presented a challenge – how could we best evaluate and learn amid this diverse work? Below we share some of the guiding strategies for learning within systems change initiatives we have gathered from our partnerships in this work.

While efforts and contexts may be diverse, make sure to use and reinforce an initiative's existing organizing concepts in designing evaluations. This might be a theory of change, core elements, or key

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[3] For more information on passion projects, see: Fueling Passion Through Project-Based Learning | Rise 360

concepts that cut across diverse projects and help us "roll up" findings into unified learnings. For example, Mobility LABs defined mobility using three concepts: economic success, power and autonomy, and belonging and inclusion. While all the community-driven projects looked quite different, we grounded our evaluation of progress across the initiative in these three overarching concepts.

Use mixed-methods evaluations to maximize learning. Our evaluations of all three initiatives took a mixed-methods approach, sometimes leaning more heavily on qualitative methods and sometimes more heavily on quantitative methods. The LEAP and Mobility LABs initiatives were much more developmental, with emerging community-driven projects that aligned with qualitative approaches including interviews and focus groups. However, surveys provided a degree of standardization that was helpful even in these developmental initiatives. The OYF evaluation uses an annual assessment of four collaborative capacities and seven systems changes to quantitatively evaluate network and collaborative level changes. Aligned with the theory of change, we have also analyzed the statistical relationship between capacity and systems change. These findings were greatly enhanced by qualitative data, such as a deep dive with a sample of collaboratives to understand collaboratives' identities and approaches to addressing root causes.

Prioritize learning over accountability. Systems change strategies are complex and context-dependent; they often don't have clear boundaries like programmatic interventions do. Our role as evaluators was to aim to understand and help make sense of the strategies, signs of progress, and accelerators and barriers so that communities can continue to tweak and improve this work.

You can learn more about our evaluations of these three initiatives through the links below:

Lessons from LEAP: Creating Opportunity for Systems-Involved Youth

Robin Hood Mobility LABs – Equal Measure

Learnings from a Decade with the Aspen Institute Opportunity Youth Forum

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