A **COMMUNITY-DRIVEN** INITIATIVE TO ADVANCE ECONOMIC MOBILITY:
LEARNINGS FROM ROBIN HOOD'S MOBILITY LABs

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EQUAL MEASURE

FINDING
PROMISE

FUELING
CHANGE

**ROBIN HOOD
MOBILITY LABs**
Learning and Action Bets

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Launched in 2019, Mobility Learning and Action Bets ("Mobility LABs") was a national investment funded by Robin Hood, the managing partner, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, Tipping Point Community, and an anonymous donor. The initiative partnered with local organizations in nine communities across the country to develop community-driven solutions to sustainably lift families out of poverty. This report describes the history, evolution, and structure of the initiative, and digs deeper into a key component—community engagement—in order to share learnings and inform future work on community-driven economic mobility efforts.

History, Evolution, and Structure of Mobility LABs

Mobility LABs drew on the work of the U.S. Partnership on Mobility from Poverty and aimed to advance mobility across multiple dimensions—economic success, power and autonomy, and belonging and inclusion among community residents. The two primary goals of the initiative were to develop community-driven solutions to poverty in geographically diverse areas and to change the dominant narratives about poverty. Following a year-long planning phase disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, nine anchor partners implemented mobility projects over four years that engaged community partners and residents with a vision for transformative community change. Anchor partners implemented programs for adults and young people to build skills and meet immediate needs and also focused on leadership development, advocacy and policy, and narrative change.

Community Engagement in Mobility LABs

Community engagement was a strongly held value and strategy embedded in the approaches and activities of all nine of the Mobility LABs partnerships. Mobility LABs 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. During the Mobility LABs planning phase, anchor partners engaged their local communities to develop pilot projects that would reflect residents' interests and needs. Engagement continued throughout the projects as the Mobility LABs partnerships aimed to increase economic success as well as community members' power and autonomy, and sense of belonging and inclusion.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Mobility LABs was developed with an intention toward learning—to ideate, innovate, and learn across different communities in different parts of the country. Throughout the initiative and especially during the final year, initiative leaders and anchor partners reflected on what it takes to authentically engage community and advance economic mobility.

Key Learnings

» Building trust with community members is critical for successful community engagement; building relationships and trust takes time and resources.

» Engaging community requires creating the conditions for resident participation in engagement efforts.

» Despite the significant effort and challenges involved, community engagement is essential for advancing economic mobility.

» Moving communities and residents out of poverty requires a long-term, comprehensive approach.

» More needs to be learned and shared about how the broader field of philanthropy can support their community partners in the development and implementation of community-driven projects.

» A developmental evaluation approach is best suited for understanding emerging community-driven projects.

Mobility LABs anchor partners offered valuable recommendations for funders seeking to advance opportunities for economic mobility in communities experiencing current and historical disinvestment.

Their call to action for the broader philanthropic and public sector funders:

1 Trust your community partners.

2 Engage in unrestricted, long-term funding.

3 Embrace a learning approach.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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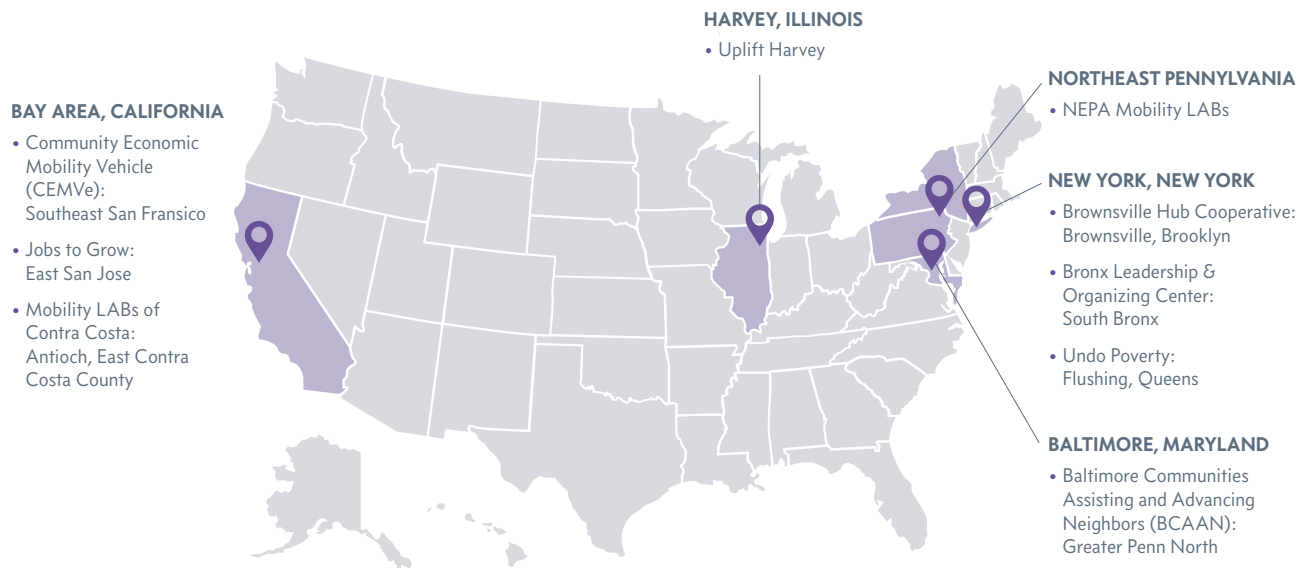Alice Soo-a Choe, *Consultant*
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INTRODUCTION

Launched in 2019, Mobility Learning and Action Bets ("Mobility LABs") was a national investment funded by Robin Hood, the managing partner, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, Tipping Point Community, and an anonymous donor. The initiative partnered with local organizations in nine communities across the country to develop community-driven solutions to sustainably lift families out of poverty (Figure 1). As Mobility LABs comes to a close in 2024, this report describes the history, evolution, and structure of the initiative, and digs deeper into a key component—community engagement—in order to share learnings and inform future work on community-driven economic mobility efforts.

FIGURE 1 | MOBILITY LABs COMMUNITIES

HARVEY, ILLINOIS
• Uplift Harvey

NORTHEAST PENNYLVANIA
• NEPA Mobility LABs

BAY AREA, CALIFORNIA
• Community Economic Mobility Vehicle (CEMVe): Southeast San Fransico
• Jobs to Grow: East San Jose
• Mobility LABs of Contra Costa: Antioch, East Contra Costa County

NEW YORK, NEW YORK
• Brownsville Hub Cooperative: Brownsville, Brooklyn
• Bronx Leadership & Organizing Center: South Bronx
• Undo Poverty: Flushing, Queens

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND
• Baltimore Communities Assisting and Advancing Neighbors (BCAAN): Greater Penn North

HISTORY, EVOLUTION, AND STRUCTURE OF MOBILITY LABs

Formation of Mobility LABs (2019)

The framework for Mobility LABs, including a broader definition of mobility from poverty, was drawn from the work of the **U.S. Partnership on Mobility from Poverty**.[1] Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and launched by the Urban Institute in 2016, the U.S. Partnership brought together 24 leading scholars, nonprofit executives, advocates, and policy experts to "develop bold ideas to boost economic and social mobility." The Partnership defined mobility from poverty in an expansive way, not only looking at economic success, but the equally important dimensions of power and autonomy, as well as being valued in community. Their proposed mobility strategies[2] were intended to embody these three principles.

Mobility LABs Framework

Mobility LABs adapted the U.S. Partnership on Mobility from Poverty's three dimensions of mobility from poverty into a framework to guide the Mobility LABs initiative:

- **Economic Success**, which captures the factors that directly contribute to individuals' and families' material well-being such as income, assets, employment, skills (human capital), and family demographic circumstances.

- **Power & Autonomy**, which is a person's ability to influence their environment and act according to their own choices, rather than according to others' decisions.

- **Belonging & Inclusion**, which is a person's sense that they are valued and included among family, friends, co-workers, 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.

Nisha Patel, executive director of the U.S. Partnership on Mobility from Poverty, transitioned the work from the Partnership to Robin Hood, with the goal of putting the Partnership's ideas into action. Robin Hood, along with its funding partners, officially launched Mobility LABs, a $25 million, four-year initiative, in 2019.[3] The two primary goals of the initiative were to 1) develop **community-driven solutions** to poverty in geographically diverse areas and 2) **change the dominant narratives** about poverty. The expanded understanding of mobility from poverty (see Mobility Framework above) was integral to these goals. A secondary aim was to explore the possibilities and potential models for Robin Hood and other funders who are interested in supporting community-driven approaches.

In a blog announcing Robin Hood's new strategic vision in February 2019, Wes Moore, then-CEO of Robin Hood, said:

"We must address the systems, structures, and narratives that hold and keep people back. We must elevate the voices of those closest to the problems as we work towards solutions. We must acknowledge that racism, sexism, homophobia, and prejudice or discrimination in any form are major contributors to poverty that must be addressed and combated in our work. We must support our direct grantmaking with increased capacities to import and export effective interventions and address policies. And we must move in partnership in all that we do, knowing that no one individual, initiative, or organization alone can affect meaningful progress on a problem as complex and pervasive as poverty."

Mobility LABs was described in early framing documents as **"data-driven and heart-led,"** utilizing the work of Dr. Raj Chetty[4] to underscore how mobility has stalled in many communities and elevating the importance of lived experience or proximity in identifying solutions. Robin Hood intentionally staffed the Mobility LABs team with individuals with direct knowledge of communities that have experienced years of disinvestment and resulting poverty.

Mobility LABs was a unique initiative for Robin Hood, as well as for the nine grantees who received planning and implementation grants beginning in fall 2019. For Robin Hood, the explicit focus on community-driven solutions, combined with narrative change and an expanded definition of economic mobility, was a new approach. Mobility LABs differed from Robin Hood's core grantmaking in other ways as well. In contrast to Robin Hood's usual focus on grants to New York City-based organizations, Mobility LABs was a **national grantmaking approach** with multiple funders with ties to different regions around the country. Additionally, Mobility LABs not only funded programs offering direct services, but also larger community change efforts. Because of the variability across grantee type and geography, the initiative was set up to explore new design and evaluation strategies rather than adhering to pre-defined metrics or calculating a return on investment.

Mobility LABs grantees (referred to as "anchor partners") also noted this grant and initiative differed from many of their other grants. Many reported that the projects their teams and community members developed were **truly community-driven**. The largely unrestricted funds allowed them the flexibility and autonomy to be responsive to community ideas. For many, this was radically different from most of their other funding sources.

> *"... it felt like a space where we could really lead to be transparent. 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."*
>
> —*Brownsville Hub Cooperative*

Mobility LABs Planning Phase (2019-2020)

In late summer 2019, Robin Hood and its funding partners awarded nine-month[5], $125,000 planning grants to nine anchor partners to engage their local communities and develop economic mobility pilot projects that would be implemented over three years. The locations of the nine anchor partners were tied to the geographic preferences of the funding partners (see Figures 1 and 2).

▌FIGURE 2 | ANCHOR PARTNERS/INITIATIVE NAMES (LOCATION)

RCF Connects/Comment Studios, formerly Mobility LABs of East Contra Costa (Antioch, CA)

SOMOS Mayfair/Si Se Puede Collective (SSPC)/Jobs to Grow (East San Jose, CA)

Young Community Developers (YCD)/Community Economic Mobility Vehicle (CEMVe) (Southeast San Francisco/ Bayview, CA)

Baltimore Community Foundation (planning phase), Center for Urban Families (implementation)/Baltimore Communities Assisting and Advancing Neighbors (BCAAN) (Baltimore, MD)

Commission on Economic Opportunity/Northeast Pennsylvania (NEPA) Mobility LABs (northeast PA)

Community and Economic Development Association of Cook County (CEDA)/Uplift Harvey (Harvey, IL)

The Bronx Defenders/ Bronx Leadership & Organizing Center (BLOC) (South Bronx, NY)

Chinese-American Planning Council/Undo Poverty: Flushing (Flushing, Queens, NY)

JobsFirstNYC/Brownsville Hub Cooperative (BHC) (Brownsville, Brooklyn, NY)

During the planning phase, anchor partners focused on engaging with community members and building or advancing partnerships with local community-based organizations.

Acknowledging the history of disinvestment and broken promises in these communities, anchor partners approached communities with a disposition toward healing and relationship building, taking the time to engage many individuals and local organizations.

With the goal of developing pilot projects, anchor partners engaged community members in multiple ways to understand their needs and priorities (see more in "Community Engagement" starting on page 13). Anchor partners also used the planning period to engage with a diverse set of organizations and institutions located in the community and which provided direct services to residents. These organizations provided another "ear to the ground" with access to critical knowledge about the needs of different community members experiencing poverty and how to best meet those needs. The relationships with a variety of organizations also built credibility and capacity and created the foundational infrastructure necessary to facilitate implementation of the anchor partners' economic mobility projects.

"I think COVID really ruined our ability to build deeply for a while. In the Bronx, we were really hit hard. A lot of our members didn't have the option of staying home because they were essential workers … [and] getting paid really low [wages]. [Workers] also became ill and [we] lost a lot of folks. And we took a lot of time just checking in on people."

—Bronx Leadership & Organizing Center
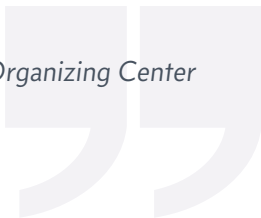
"For Flushing, Queens, the planning phase was a really good opportunity to set up some form of structure when it came to trying to properly collect and then incorporate feedback from a lot of different kinds of stakeholders, in addition to community members, which are of course going to always be the priority. Also, folks like other partners or co-granted organizations. And when I say setting up an infrastructure, I don't … simply mean having good standing monthly meetings. I also mean … building trust across the different collaborators."

—Undo Poverty: Flushing

The planning phase was significantly disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Shortly after the Mobility LABs kickoff convening in New York City in February 2020, anchor partners were forced to quickly change plans and shift to addressing the immediate needs and crises in their communities arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. As social distancing requirements and shelter-in-place orders emerged across the country, anchor partners, who had deep roots in their communities, had to pivot, quickly adopting virtual communication within their organizations and with their partners, redesigning engagement strategies with their communities, and in many cases, responding directly to the emerging needs of their communities.

> "The planning stage, connecting to the community went well
> for us … it gave people a voice that hadn't had a voice before.
> That was really, I'm going to say life-changing
> for a lot of our residents."
>
> —Uplift Harvey

Mobility LABs responded with two rounds of additional funding focused on emergency relief and capacity (e.g., new technology to enable virtual programming and community engagement, personnel support, increased data management assistance, etc.) and extended the planning phase through the end of 2020. Notably, despite the significant disruptions caused by the pandemic, all nine anchor partners continued to engage with Mobility LABs and move the work forward.
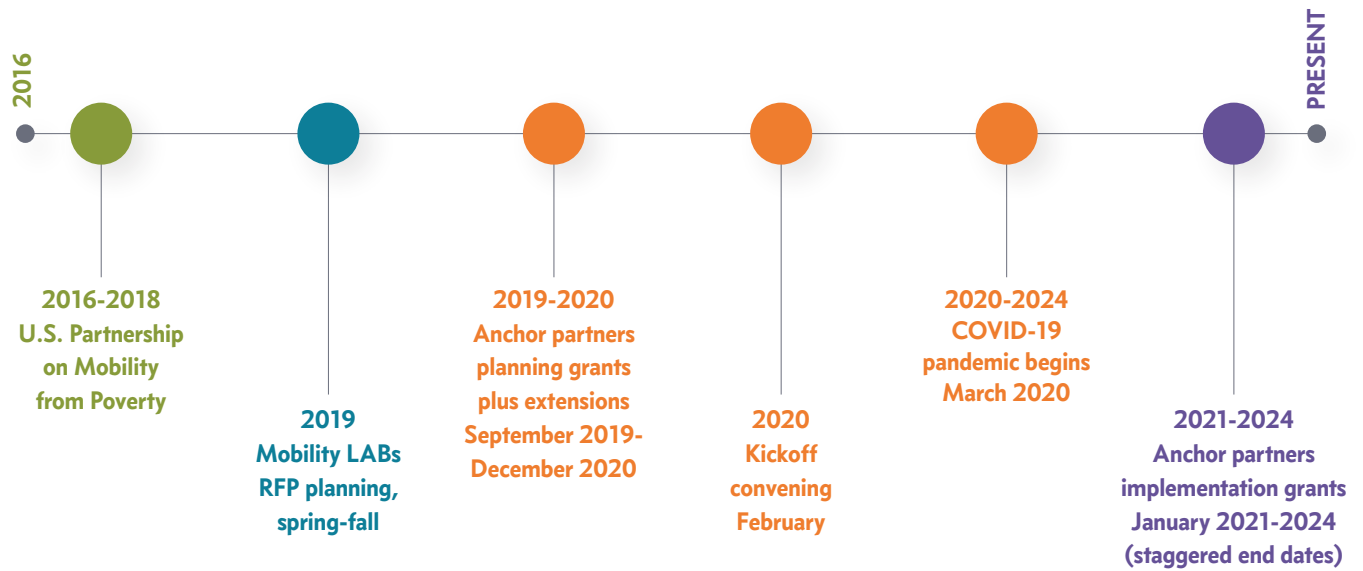
Mobility LABs Technical Assistance Providers

Anchor partners had access to several technical assistance providers, primarily during the early part of the Mobility LABs planning phase. Robin Hood program officers also provided ongoing support to their grantees.

- Opportunity Agenda: identified narratives about poverty across the five regions.

- Opportunity Insights: provided anchor partners with local data and analysis on economic conditions and opportunities.

- Blue Ridge Labs: supported anchor partners in human-centered design approaches and community engagement strategies and practices, including surveys and focus groups.

- Robin Hood Management Acceleration Team: supported anchor partners with organizational capacity needs and challenges.

- Equal Measure: supported anchor partners in the development of logic models, linking strategies to short- and long-term outcomes or changes they hoped to achieve (fall 2021).

- Indwell Collaborative: facilitated a community of practice with discussions of partnerships, narrative change, and overall initiative reflections (2022-2023).

FIGURE 3 | MOBILITY LABs TIMELINE

2016

2016-2018
U.S. Partnership on Mobility from Poverty

2019
Mobility LABs RFP planning, spring-fall

2019-2020
Anchor partners planning grants plus extensions September 2019- December 2020

2020
Kickoff convening February

2020-2024
COVID-19 pandemic begins March 2020

2021-2024
Anchor partners implementation grants January 2021-2024 (staggered end dates)

PRESENT

Mobility LABs Implementation Phase (2021-2024)

Anchor partners began implementation of their pilot projects, developed during the planning phase through community-driven approaches, in early 2021. Each of the nine projects received $1.58 million to implement mobility projects over the next three to four years. The funding was initially set to equal amounts per year; Robin Hood later pivoted to allow more flexibility in the distribution of funding across years. The implementation projects included:[6]

- **Educational and workforce development programs** for youth and adults, including job training and entrepreneurship programs that increased the likelihood of economic success.

- Providing **wraparound supports**, removing barriers to accessing services and meeting basic needs to make residents more likely to achieve their education and workforce goals to increase economic mobility.

- Opportunities to build and use **leadership, advocacy, and organizing** skills through workshops, trainings, and civic engagement opportunities (e.g., advocacy days) that positioned community residents to be influential actors in economic mobility efforts.

- Mobilizing **narrative and policy changes** including changing perceptions about what poverty looks like and lobbying for specific policies to benefit program participants and emerging entrepreneurs.

- Building and maintaining **partnerships or collaborations** to build community capacity and power to advance mobility work over the long-term.

Anchor partners approached economic mobility and implemented projects in their communities with a **vision of transformative community change**, rather than focusing solely on programmatic solutions. While all anchor partners implemented programs for adults and/or young people to build skills and meet immediate needs, they were equally focused on leadership development, advocacy and policy, and narrative change. The 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 taking this approach, anchor partners focused on building place-based multi-organizational partnerships, recognizing that building relationships and infrastructure was critical to achieving broader community change (see "How Partnerships Facilitate Economic Mobility" on page 12). Some Mobility LABs anchor partners had established partnerships from the start. Undo Poverty: Flushing responded to the initial RFP as a partnership of six core organizations, and Jobs to Grow in East San Jose was already operating as a collective of five organizations called the Si Se Puede Collective. Others had a variety of existing relationships in their local communities and established new ones as their mobility projects took shape.

All anchor partners collaborated with other local community-based organizations that provided services and programs designed to remove barriers to economic advancement (such as legal aid, housing, food banks) and improve skills (such as job training, and leadership and advocacy skills). Many anchor partners also worked closely with other cross-sector partners such as postsecondary education institutions, government agencies, research and evaluation firms, media, and local businesses and employers. For example, Community Board 16, a city government agency, served as a steering committee member in the Brownsville Hub Cooperative. NEPA partnered with postsecondary institutions to implement its Parent Pathways program and with local employers to help improve job retention and economic stability.[7]

"I think when we got [to] implementation, because we didn't prescribe a particular issue or evidence-based model for people to follow, and we said that we're letting you go out and identify ... I think almost universally, what partners identified was not an individual problem. Every partner came back in some way and said, 'We want a better community.' That is what people were starting to say. So, now we're in a position where we're not even funding grants to start a college graduate program. Because what they're saying is, 'This problem is bigger than these individual things. And if you are telling us you're giving us money and freedom to try to 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.'"

—Robin Hood staff
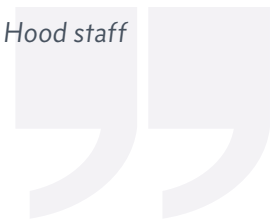
How Partnerships Facilitate Economic Mobility

Working with cross-sector partners with complementary and diverse skills, experience, and expertise widens the reach of the work and its impact on economic mobility by:

- **Serving more residents and meeting diverse needs.**
  Depending on their location, services, size, and history, organizations often have deep ties to, and trusting relationships with, particular segments of a community. When these organizations work together, it enhances residents' access to programs and services. Partnerships developed shared calendars and referral systems, using "warm handoffs" to connect residents from one organization to another. Trusted relationships with one organization and its staff facilitated connections to partner organizations.

- **Addressing broader systems issues.**
  Some partnerships included advocacy and leadership training organizations and provided residents with opportunities to interact with policymakers. Other partnerships participated in advocacy campaigns for specific legislation. For example, Jobs to Grow partners and participants lobbied for bills to increase opportunities and remove barriers for entrepreneurship in childcare and the food industry in Santa Clara County. The Brownsville Hub Cooperative (BHC) directly informed NYC Mayor Adams' "Blueprint for Community Safety," which used BHC as a model for partnership and community investment in neighborhoods with high unemployment rates. Undo Poverty: Flushing partnered with a nonprofit media firm to develop a narrative change campaign to shift perceptions about what poverty looks like, reduce stigma, and connect residents to support. Partnerships not only facilitated resident connections to a variety of direct services and programs but also tackled root causes of poverty such as harmful policies, narratives, and mindsets, which must also be addressed to achieve community-wide economic mobility.

Throughout the implementation of the Mobility LABs projects, **anchor partners continued to engage community residents** in a variety of ways. Building on existing relationships as well as on the intentional engagement that occurred during the planning phase, community members served on advisory boards and were hired as program managers, community advocates, and community navigators, working closely with residents and serving as liaisons. Community members also participated in project activities including programming, advocacy efforts, and narrative change campaigns (see more in next section, "Community Engagement in Mobility LABs").

Robin Hood encouraged **cross-cohort learning** through a series of virtual convenings in 2021-2022 and a community of practice facilitated by Indwell Collaborative in 2022-2023. Over the course of six sessions, anchor partners shared and learned from each other on the topics of partnership building, narrative change, and initiative reflections. Partners appreciated these opportunities, and some wished there were more places to share and learn about each other's work.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN MOBILITY LABs

Community engagement was a strongly held value and strategy embedded in the approaches and activities of all nine of the Mobility LABs partnerships. From its inception, one of the primary goals of Mobility LABs was to support the development and implementation of community-driven solutions to poverty in geographically diverse regions of the country. Mobility LABs 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. The approach contrasts with more traditional "top-down" grantmaking that can exclude the perspectives of those most impacted by poverty. During the Mobility LABs planning phase, anchor partners engaged their local communities to develop pilot projects that would reflect residents' interests and needs. Engagement continued throughout the projects as the Mobility LABs partnerships aimed to increase economic success as well as community members' power and autonomy, and sense of belonging and inclusion.

The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership

The CDC defines community engagement as the "process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people."[8] Mobility LABs partnerships focused on engaging residents within a geographic area—often a neighborhood or zip code —to elevate their experiences in the development of innovative solutions to poverty. Many frameworks aim to capture the range of community engagement forms and practices, including the *Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership* (Figure 4), designed by Facilitating Power.[9] The framework builds on other frameworks of community engagement, including the Ladder of Citizen Participation[10] and the Public Participation Spectrum.[11]

The *Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership* acknowledges that many communities have been currently and historically marginalized in decision-making processes, and it articulates a developmental process to strengthen and transform local democracies. The Spectrum provides a framework for situating the work of Mobility LABs in the process of creating place-based community-driven solutions to poverty.

The Spectrum includes five developmental stages starting with informing, consulting, and involving communities and moving toward community collaboration and governance.[12] A community-driven initiative moves beyond gathering input from the community (*tokenization*) and instead ensures community needs and assets are integrated into the process (*voice*) and builds the community's leadership capacity to make decisions (*delegated power*). According to the framework, deferring to community fosters democratic participation and equity through community-driven decision-making that results in *community ownership*.

FIGURE 4 | THE SPECTRUM OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

THE SPECTRUM OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TO OWNERSHIP

Facilitating Power

STANCE TOWARDS COMMUNITY	IGNORE	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	DEFER TO
	0	1	2	3	4	5
IMPACT	Marginalization	Placation	Tokenization	Voice	Delegated Power	Community Ownership
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT GOALS	Deny access to decision-making processes	Provide the community with relevant information	Gather input from the community	Ensure community needs and assets are integrated into process & inform planning	Ensure community capacity to play a leadership role in implementation of decisions	Foster democratic participation and equity through community-driven decision-making. Bridge divide between community & governance.
MESSAGE TO COMMUNITY	*Your voice, needs & interests do not matter*	*We will keep you informed*	*We care what you think*	*You are making us think, (and therefore act) differently about the issue*	*Your leadership and expertise are critical to how we address the issue*	*It's time to unlock collective power and capacity for transformative solutions*
ACTIVITIES	Closed door meeting Misinformation Systematic	Fact sheets Open Houses Presentations Billboards Videos	Public Comment Focus Groups Community Forums Surveys	Community organizing & advocacy House meetings Interactive workshops Polling Community forums	MOUs with Community-based organizations Community organizing Citizen advisory committees Open Planning Forums with Citizen Polling	Community-driven planning Consensus building Participatory action research Participatory budgeting Cooperatives

Credit: Facilitating Power, https://www.facilitatingpower.com/spectrum_of_community_engagement_to_ownership

Community Engagement in Mobility LABs Along the Spectrum

The *Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership* is a useful tool for understanding how the anchor partners engaged residents to learn about their needs and priorities and to develop projects to meet those needs, and where they were able to deepen their engagement to approach community ownership.

Beginning with the planning phase and throughout the implementation of projects, all nine anchor partners intentionally consulted and involved community members to design and refine their mobility projects (phases 2-3 in the Spectrum). The Mobility LABs planning phase (2019-2020) was designed for anchor partners to work deeply in their communities to develop pilot mobility projects that addressed the needs and priorities of community members.

During the planning phase, anchor partners used a variety of mechanisms such as listening sessions, surveys, and one-on-one conversations, to hear directly from residents and gather input, especially from those experiencing poverty. For example, Uplift Harvey, Undo Poverty: Flushing, and the Brownsville Hub Cooperative engaged residents through community-wide convenings and focus groups to learn more about residents' perceptions and experiences with poverty and to brainstorm solutions to mobility challenges. Multiple anchor partners also distributed surveys among community members to understand needs, priorities, and barriers to services and resources.

> *"It was just so important to understand these individual experiences…*
> *[that] may inform their [residents'] outlook on life, their physical and mental*
> *health, stress, and overall well-being … in order to understand Flushing as*
> *a community in general."*
>
> —*Undo Poverty: Flushing*

Through these activities, 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. Through these various engagement practices, anchor partners were able to test engagement strategies and best practices specific to their community context, including cultural and language needs.

Broad and deep community engagement and conversations informed both the design and implementation of pilot projects across all the anchor partners. For example, after extensive outreach and engagement, Young Community Developers (YCD) proposed the Community Economic Mobility Vehicle (CEMVe). The CEMVe goes directly into San Francisco neighborhoods that have long been transportation and service deserts and meets residents where they are to connect them with relevant resources. Uplift Harvey focused on programming for young people in the community who felt unheard and disengaged due to a lack of opportunities during after school hours. Inspired by what residents shared in listening sessions, Undo Poverty: Flushing developed a narrative change campaign to challenge the stigma of poverty and associated reluctance to access local resources.

Partnerships sought ongoing input from community members throughout the implementation of the Mobility LABs projects to ensure that the projects were meeting their needs. Surveys, needs assessments, and trackers were deployed to gather feedback about services and monitor progress on economic mobility. For example, NEPA administered ongoing surveys for their programs to incorporate the feedback into the program design and to assess the programs' impact.

During the implementation phase, many Mobility LABs partners moved to *collaborate* (phase 4 in the Spectrum) with community members in a variety of ways. Many of the anchor partners were familiar with grassroots organizing strategies and had a strong disposition towards organizing to make change. Coming out of the planning phase, community members were energized to play an active role in the initiatives and residents began to lead projects related to key issues in their neighborhoods, moving the initiative's efforts towards phases 4 and 5 of the Spectrum, *collaborate* and *defer to*.

To truly *collaborate* with community members in the implementation phase, Mobility LABs partners prioritized residents' participation in leadership training and advocacy events, supported residents' knowledge about organizing, and worked to cultivate their advocacy and leadership skills. Training included workshops or sessions on topics such as communicating with local leaders, facilitation skills, community organizing, and interacting with local government officials. Some partnerships provided opportunities for community members to practice these skills such as attending and speaking at city council meetings or state advocacy days or organizing friends, family, and neighbors around an issue. The leadership and advocacy trainings and experiences positioned community members to be influential leaders in economic mobility efforts.

. . . .

"It's inspiring to see folks from your community succeeding and trying to help the community. 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."

—*Mobility LABS of East Contra Costa*

In addition to building capacity and preparing residents for community leadership roles, many of the partnerships *collaborated* with community residents by hiring them in key staffing positions. For example, partnerships hired residents as program managers, community outreach leaders and coordinators, community advocates, and community navigators. These staff worked closely with residents and served as crucial liaisons to organizational leaders, informing partnerships' leadership about the day-to-day experiences of the communities. In Mayfair (Jobs to Grow project) the community navigators supported cohort participants and advocated for resources they needed to be successful, such as additional scholarships for their business expenses.

In Hunter's Point, San Francisco (CEMVe project), community advocates led the intake process and connected residents to different programs and service options.

A few partnerships started to shift to ways of working where they *deferred to* community members (phase 5 in the Spectrum). *Deferring to* community members goes beyond collaboration and requires giving community members control over every aspect of the work. Some projects, like Undo Poverty: Flushing, BCAAN, BLOC, and the Brownsville Hub Cooperative, developed community advisory groups that provided ongoing feedback and input on project activities. Some advisory group members engaged in leadership development training and began to lead participatory budgeting and grantmaking, deepening their engagement and moving the efforts toward phase 5 of the Spectrum, *defer to*. For example, Baltimore Communities Assisting and Advancing Neighbors (BCAAN) decided to subgrant a portion of their funds to smaller local nonprofit organizations. Through the Community Advisory Council, residents helped create the application and then reviewed and scored applications along with BCAAN staff. Resident scores were given a bit more "weight" to *defer to* their lived expertise. Similarly, BLOC's community advisory council members had the authority to guide initiatives and veto coalition decisions. By deferring to the council, BLOC ensured that residents had control over aspects of key initiatives, including the planning and execution of the Housing Forum and Youth Leadership Day.

Another example of *deferring to* community is to hire and/or engage members of the community with relevant lived experience to lead project work. Mobility LABs of East Contra Costa and Brownsville Hub Cooperative both demonstrated this through hiring people with diverse experiences, such as homelessness, parenting, and organizing, who knew their communities deeply and wanted to make a difference. These decisions provided a direct avenue for these individuals to build trust, signaling sincere commitment to the project and the community. This high level of trust led to transformative solutions such as Mobility LABs of East Contra Costa's guaranteed income project (see following page). Other partnerships, like SSPC, began to position themselves for deeper engagement by exploring options such as worker-owned cooperatives.

EAST CONTRA COSTA'S GUARANTEED INCOME PROJECT

Mobility LABs of East Contra Costa implemented adult and youth leadership cohorts and one-on-one coaching aimed at building the skills, confidence, and leadership of Antioch residents to be change agents in their own communities. When a member of the community with lived experience with poverty took on the leadership position, the approach shifted to "action teams," where residents in the leadership cohorts discussed and identified ideas and solutions to drive economic mobility. The team of residents and staff landed on Guaranteed Income (GI) as a transformative solution they felt was a viable option for sustainably moving residents out of poverty.

Although they initially faced hesitation from some stakeholders about taking on such an ambitious project, the group has moved forward in several ways. They first decided to build awareness about what GI is and dispel common misconceptions and narratives, developing a virtual space to share information and create new narratives. The Mobility LABs team joined a county-wide guaranteed income working group and co-hosted focus groups and listening sessions about GI to increase awareness. They found that East Contra Costa residents strongly support guaranteed income as *"an immediate lifeline toward a sense of freedom, security, and agency, while acknowledging that the concept might be one of the tools in addressing a systemic problem."*[13]

Building on the findings of the county working group, the team launched the Coco Go Big Guaranteed Income Pilot in January 2024 with 20 Antioch adult residents receiving $400 per month and 10 Antioch transitional youth residents receiving $200 per month for six months.

> *"We wanted to be able to sit at the table at the county when they're starting to talk about how can we best implement guaranteed income in our county and be able to bring real data, real stories, and real insights on how to best implement guaranteed income in our county … none of that would've happened if RCF hadn't decided to put community members at the helm of this program."*
>
> —Mobility LABs of East Contra Costa

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Mobility LABs was developed with an intention toward learning—to ideate, innovate, and learn across different communities in different parts of the country. Throughout the initiative and especially during the final year, initiative leaders and anchor partners reflected on what it takes to authentically engage community and advance economic mobility.

Key Learnings

» **Building trust with community members is critical for successful community engagement; building relationships and trust takes time and resources.**

Communities experiencing disinvestment commonly distrust new initiatives and new funding opportunities; residents have seen many programs and resources come and go without achieving real change. The anchor partners were already considered trusted members of the community, but they worked to further build trust by being visible at community events and working with other trusted organizations in the community. This in-person engagement involves significant work, resources, and staff with experience facilitating engagement with a variety of community members. Mobility LABs intentionally included a planning phase in the initiative to account for the time needed to build both the necessary relationships and structures and extended it when the pandemic curtailed many engagement efforts.

» **Engaging community requires creating the conditions for resident participation in engagement efforts.**

It can be challenging to engage community members experiencing poverty when many are in day-to-day survival mode. Community members did not always have the time or energy to participate in, let alone lead, economic mobility efforts. Anchor partners and lead collaborators tried to address this by providing a combination of stipends/incentives, transportation assistance, food, and childcare to support residents' participation in activities and in providing input and feedback on project design and implementation. In communities with large immigrant populations, partnerships provided interpretation services for attendees who did not speak English, sometimes accommodating up to six languages. Mobility LABs projects aimed to meet residents where they were.

» **Despite the significant effort and challenges involved, community engagement is essential for advancing economic mobility.**

Community engagement encourages institutional and organizational leaders to make decisions about program design and delivery informed by those most impacted. Without community engagement, projects are less likely to adequately meet the needs of residents and therefore are less likely to achieve intended economic mobility outcomes. A lack of community engagement breeds distrust and a lack of support for initiatives, which sets them up to fail. Quite simply, to solve a problem as entrenched and complex as poverty, funders, policymakers, and institutional and organizational leaders must engage those who are closest to the problem and who understand it best in order to develop and implement effective, equitable, and sustainable solutions. Deep community engagement (i.e., *collaborate*, phase 4 of the Spectrum, and *defer to*, phase 5 of the Spectrum), mitigates the risks for innovative bets if the community itself is at the helm. The Mobility LABs initiative was designed to center community engagement in the development and implementation of economic mobility solutions.

» **Moving communities and residents out of poverty requires a long-term comprehensive approach.**
Sustained economic mobility out of poverty needs an approach that transforms communities through changes to policies, structures, and narratives, as well as the provision of programs and direct services to build skills and meet the immediate needs of residents. The Mobility LABs team at Robin Hood worked with InCommon Insight to write research briefs on the history of each of the nine communities. The briefs explicate the intentional and racist practices over many years that resulted in intergenerational poverty and a lack of opportunities for economic mobility in these communities. Poverty was purposely "designed" in these communities to the detriment of some (primarily people of color) and the benefit of others. Reversing harm and redesigning communities to achieve economic mobility for its members, including building power and autonomy and inclusion and belonging, requires an equally purposeful and comprehensive approach, led by the communities themselves.

» **More needs to be learned and shared about how the broader field of philanthropy can support their community partners in the development and implementation of community-driven projects.**
Community transformation work is much more complex and "messy" than implementing a set program or intervention with a clear structure or curriculum and distinct outcomes. As trust-based philanthropic practices and systems and community change approaches expand throughout the sector, philanthropic partners need to continue to learn how to best support these different kinds of grantmaking such as balancing flexibility with structure and identifying technical assistance needs. Innovative projects can be challenging to implement within traditional structures of grantmaking and metrics of progress, but adaptations can be made as we learn more about effective practices.

» **A developmental evaluation approach is best suited for understanding emerging community-driven projects.**
Our evaluation took a primarily developmental and process approach to understand and document how the nine anchor partners were engaging local communities and building organizational partnerships, while also tracking progress in the three dimensions of mobility from poverty: economic success, power and autonomy, and belonging and inclusion. Broadening the dimensions of mobility from poverty beyond just economic success was highly resonant with anchor partners, but those dimensions proved challenging to measure. Partners had different capacities and collected different kinds of data, depending on their goals and projects, which can be difficult for evaluators to "roll up" into overarching findings without losing the nuance of the local work.

"Working with community is complex and requires a lot of support and investment that doesn't often exist in the way that it needs to."

—*Robin Hood staff*
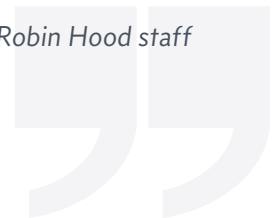
Call to Action for Philanthropic and Public Funders

During our end-of-initiative focus groups with Mobility LABs anchor partners and the partners they worked with to implement their Mobility LABs projects over the past five years, they offered valuable **recommendations for funders** (private and public) seeking to advance opportunities for economic mobility in communities experiencing current and historical disinvestment.

1 **Trust your community partners.**
Trust that community residents and community-based organizations intimately understand the challenges in their communities and can offer solutions.[14] Embrace the perspective that those closest to the problem are closest to the solution.[15] Mobility LABs partners strongly valued and appreciated the centrality of community engagement in this initiative as a way to better understand poverty in their communities and to use that understanding to try out new solutions.

2 **Engage in unrestricted, long-term funding.**
Deep social issues like intergenerational poverty require comprehensive solutions. Partners talked about the challenges of not being able to sustain programs and initiatives beyond a couple of years, and of community residents losing trust in providers when programs, initiatives, and investments come and go. Partners also described the importance of flexibility of funding and the need to be able to quickly shift as community circumstances change. Engaging community members and building partnerships to develop and test new community-driven solutions to poverty is long-term work. Mobility LABs partners appreciated the flexibility in the funds to be more creative and try out new solutions to address the root causes of poverty in their communities.

3 **Embrace a learning approach.**
Partners stressed the importance of ongoing learning and iterating, which is also tied to flexibility—the need to sometimes change course based on learnings. Partners want the space to be creative and to sometimes fail. Poverty has not been solved yet, and there is a need for bold ideas and experimenting with new approaches. Partners also value collaboration and peer learning, sharing successes and challenges, as well as connections to key stakeholders within funders' networks—practices that funders can build into their initiatives.

"I think that there is an incredible need and importance of allowing for flexibility, allowing for more time, allowing for money that people can rely on that they don't have to compete for year to year, because that really disrupts a cycle of progress."

—*Robin Hood staff*

APPENDIX

About the Evaluation

Equal Measure conducted a cohort-level evaluation from 2019-2024, gathering data from the nine anchor partners, their community partners, and participants to understand Mobility LABs as an initiative. We conducted annual qualitative interviews from 2020-2023 with anchor partners, their partners, and community residents and a survey of anchor partners in 2022 and 2023. In spring 2024, we conducted seven topical focus groups with anchor partners and their key partners, as well as interviews with four Robin Hood Mobility LABs leaders and program officers, to reflect on the initiative as a whole and the key learnings. These reflections, as well as learnings from prior years, informed the development of this report.

To read the previous evaluation reports, go to:
https://www.equalmeasure.org/robin-hood-mobility-labs/

About the Mobility LABs Projects

LOCATION	SUMMARY
EAST CONTRA COSTA, CA	The activities of **Mobility LABs of East Contra Costa** (now called Comment Studios), led by RCF Connects, included: • Three **leadership training cohorts** of 130 adult and youth participants over two years that helped develop skills such as personal finance and budgeting. • **Individual coaching sessions**, where 28 residents worked on leadership goals for how they wanted to show up for themselves or in their community, eventually leading some to attend city council meetings and to advocate for community changes. • **Co-chairing East Contra Costa County Basic Guaranteed Income Working Group**; facilitating County discussion of the benefits of Guaranteed Income; and hosting focus groups to listen and learn about ideas and concerns from the community. • **Guaranteed Income micro pilot**, a six-month program that provides cash gifts of $400 per month to 20 adult residents of Antioch and $200 per month to 10 transitional age youth residing in Antioch who have been in the foster care system.
EAST SAN JOSE, CA	The **Si Se Puede Collective**, a collaboration of five organizations, implemented Jobs to Grow, which included: • Two **entrepreneurship cohorts** of 123 participants over two years that included workshops on how to start a business and on the food and childcare industries, which boosted participant confidence in their ability to operate their own businesses. • Support with **career pathways** for graduates such as needed licenses, loans, etc. • **Community navigators**, residents who received training to provide case management and referral services to cohort participants. They also helped to co-facilitate, plan, and evaluate the program. • **Advocacy activities**, such as advocating for legislation that would permit entrepreneurs to cook and sell food from their homes. • **Other forms of collective action**, such as attending mayoral forums, meeting with county officials, and providing testimonials.

LOCATION	SUMMARY
BAYVIEW, CA	**Young Community Developers** partnered with other organizations and worked with Bayview to build meaningful relationships and connect residents to services and resources. Their project, called the Community Economic Mobility Vehicle (CEMVe), included: • **Travel by the mobile unit** to two neighborhoods multiple times each week to provide programming and support community building. • **Workshops** that were co-hosted with partners who provide trainings to residents on topics like financial literacy, health and wellness, and job and career readiness. • A **Community Advocate** who connected 973 residents to resources, such as employment and educational opportunities, through "warm handoffs" to partner organizations. • **Leadership opportunities** for residents through the CEMVe, for instance, participating in YCD's food distribution efforts, which helped establish a cohort of residents who are interested in making changes in their community and advocating for themselves.
BALTIMORE, MD	The **Baltimore Community Foundation** partnered with the **Center for Urban Families** to launch a pilot project designed to address mobility gaps in the Penn North neighborhood by creating a network of community organizations that would provide targeted interventions and offer leadership trainings and opportunities to residents. The project, called Baltimore Communities Assisting and Advancing Neighbors (BCAAN) included: • A **job readiness program** that increased residents' ability to secure and sustain a job with a living wage. • **Advocacy workshops** that covered various topics, such as interacting with local government and communicating across generations, which led to greater civic participation. • A multipart **leadership program** for residents, which culminated in a community-supported projects and a year of service. • A **resident advisory council** made up of community members who provided feedback on BCAAN activities and developed a community grantmaking process. • **Collaborative work groups** within the network of community organizations that facilitated progress in specific areas: narrative change, health and nutrition, and neighborhood empowerment.

LOCATION	SUMMARY
NORTHEAST PENNSYLVANIA	**NEPA Mobility LABs** project, anchored by the Commission on Economic Opportunity, developed a four-pronged programmatic approach to advancing economic mobility in Northeast Pennsylvania through multisector partnerships. The project approaches included: • **Parent Pathways:** An alliance of educational and service organizations to support parents through educational and career pathways. Project components include a centralized referral system and direct services as part of wraparound support provided to parents who are pursuing training, certifications, or credentials. • **Employer Partners:** Two regional employers received support: one through an evaluative cost-benefit analysis of an employee transportation assistance program, and the other through an exploratory analysis of employee needs. • **NEPA Mobility Tracker:** A poverty-focused longitudinal survey designed to understand poverty in five NEPA counties (Lackawanna, Luzerne, Susquehanna, Wayne, and Wyoming). • **Advocacy Academy:** In 2023-2024, partners began the process of identifying policy issues in preparation for mobilizing the community for needed change.
HARVEY, IL	The **Community and Economic Development Association of Cook County (CEDA)** partnered with several individual and organizational partners to develop the Uplift Harvey project. The project implemented three youth development programs, engaging high school students in activities such as: • **Leadership and advocacy projects**, which empowered participants to design projects focused on improvements to their community. • **Career pathways programming**, which helped students discover, explore, and deepen knowledge about their career interests while gaining skills in related topics like resume writing. • **Youth employment** (summer jobs and internships), which enabled students to make money while learning about various career paths.

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LOCATION	SUMMARY
SOUTH BRONX, NYC	**Bronx Defenders**, in collaboration with two co-lead partners (New Settlement and East Side House Settlement), led strategies to leverage grassroots organizing to increase leadership and develop advocacy campaigns in the Bronx. The triad, known collectively as the Bronx Leadership & Organizing Center (BLOC), were able to develop: • A **Community Advisory Council**—a leadership council that trained Bronx residents to engage in advocacy initiatives. • An **improved referral system**, which also served as a conduit for engaging community members in organizing opportunities. • **Community-led advocacy events**, such as the Housing Forum, Youth Leadership Day, and participatory budgeting sessions, which engaged community residents in civic engagement initiatives that fostered greater community participation in local decision making. • A **Job Fair** that served 100 residents, primarily youth ages 16-24.
FLUSHING, QUEENS, NYC	The **Chinese-American Planning Council** partnered with five community-based organizations—The Child Center of NY, Asian Americans for Equality, Queens Public Library, MinKwon Center for Community Action, and RIVER FUND—in Flushing, a predominantly Asian immigrant community in NYC, to pilot a project to move residents out of poverty. That project, called Undo Poverty: Flushing, included: • **A narrative change project** to generate conversations about what poverty looks like and to reduce the stigma around poverty in Flushing by rebranding the collaborative, placing flyers and billboards in the community, and producing a documentary highlighting local residents entitled *The Cost of Living*. • **Resource mapping**, which enhanced the referral system of the partnership and connected 1,500 community members to resources. • **Advocacy activities** involving the civic participation of community members in events such as the Poor People's Campaign and State Advocacy Day. • A **workforce readiness pilot** that built key job skills and work experience among residents. • A **Community Advisory Group** made up of residents who met regularly to provide feedback and lead work related to key issues. • A **Partner Advisory Group** made up of cross-sector stakeholders representing community members that informed the collaborative's strategy and helped carry out project activities.

LOCATION	SUMMARY
BROWNSVILLE, BROOKLYN, NYC	The **Brownsville Hub Cooperative** in Brooklyn, NY (BHC) is a community-based hub anchored by JobsFirstNYC, which steers the cooperative with four Brownsville-based organizations: Central Brooklyn EDC, Brownsville Community Justice Center, Community Board 16, and Youth Design Center. The Cooperative was designed to serve as an incubator that develops and facilitates solutions to economic mobility while also being a space for workforce development programs, youth design programs, community investment, and advocacy. Collectively, the cooperative has: • Developed a **BHC website** to increase awareness and knowledge of community resources. • **Facilitated monthly in-person community gatherings** called "Brownsville Meet-ups," to encourage healing, belonging, learning, and leadership for community residents. The monthly meet-ups are run by members of four working group committees: access, self-sufficiency, ownership, and youth. • **Provided a variety of workforce training for** community residents to receive job-related certifications such as the OSHA 30- and 10-hour Site Safety Certifications and National Center for Construction Education and Research certification. • **Sponsored 26 episodes of** *The Brownsville Minute* to inform community members of opportunities in Brownsville.

ENDNOTES

1. Ellwood and Patel, The US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty, https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/us-partnership-mobility-poverty.

2. Ellwood and Patel, Restoring the American Dream, https://ui-mobilitypartnership-static.s3.amazonaws.com/live/node/706.html. The Partnership also contributed to a report on mobility from poverty using the three constructs: Acs, et al. Measuring Mobility from Poverty, https://ui-mobilitypartnership-static.s3.amazonaws.com/live/publications/measuring-mobility-poverty.html.

3. Robin Hood, Mobility Learning and Action Bets (Mobility LABs), https://robinhood.org/programs/mobility-labs/.

4. See Opportunity Insights: https://opportunityinsights.org/.

5. Planning grants were extended to 12 months and then 15 months due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

6. See Appendix for more details about the nine Mobility LABs projects. See also the Year 2 evaluation report for more details on outcomes and areas of progress: Mobility LABs Evaluation Reports.

7. For more information on partnership structures and processes, see the Year 1 evaluation report: Year 1 Learning and Evaluation Report.

8. CDC/ATSDR Committee on Community Engagement. 1997. *Principles of Community Engagement (1st ed.)*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

9. Facilitating Power, Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership, https://www.facilitatingpower.com/spectrum_of_community_engagement_to_ownership.

10. Organizing Engagement, Ladder of Citizen Participation, https://organizingengagement.org/models/ladder-of-citizen-participation/.

11. Organizing Engagement, Spectrum of Public Participation, https://organizingengagement.org/models/spectrum-of-public-participation/.

12. Ignoring community and the resulting marginalization is a zero on the Spectrum.

13. Community Financial Resources, Building Economic Well-Being for Thriving Communities: The Case for a Guaranteed Income Pilot in Contra Costa County, https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/60c88977-1073-4068-bdde-6ea317a51a69/Guaranteed%20Income%20Pilot%20Report-lowres-rgb.pdf.

14. The Trust-Based Philanthropy Project, https://www.trustbasedphilanthropy.org/.

15. The Appeal, Those Closest to the Problem are Closest to the Solution, https://theappeal.org/those-closest-to-the-problem-are-closest-to-the-solution-555e04317b79/.