

EMAN ADVANCED COHORT

CFLeads Economic Mobility Action Network Case Study

Weaving a stronger social safety net in Alexandria, Virginia

This historic city of 160,000 people across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C. is best known as a tourist town. It's also an increasingly diverse place, where half of all children have a foreign-born parent and nearly one-third of people above age five speak a language other than English at home.



Leaders in Alexandria are asking questions and listening to residents' answers about what it means to "have enough" to thrive in the face of high costs of living—and about what keeps them in the city. With an experimental spirit, Alexandrians are working toward a day when everyone has the support they need to sleep at night without worries, put healthy food on the table, leave a legacy, and retire comfortably. A day when everyone in Alexandria feels at home.

Led by the community foundation [ACT for Alexandria](#), the city was part of [CFLeads](#)' Economic Mobility Action Network (EMAN) Advanced Cohort in 2024–2025.

CFLeads

Community Foundations
Leading Change



COMMUNITY FOUNDATION:

ACT for Alexandria

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES USED:

Shaping public policy and marshalling resources

SUMMARY:

Leaders in a historic city near Washington, D.C., are asking questions and listening to residents' answers about what it means to "have enough" to thrive in the face of high costs of living.



“We want the city to identify and invest in solutions that can break the cycle of poverty. We hope that by listening to and engaging residents with lived experience, we can provide insights and accountability for a systemic, holistic approach.”

Heather Peeler

President and CEO, ACT for Alexandria

The Vision

We envision a future when everyone in Alexandria feels that they have enough of everything they need to live their lives without having to worry, and more than that, they have enough to have freedom,” says Julie Mullen, the city’s Economic Mobility Program Officer.

The Strategy

ACT for Alexandria is centering community voices, mobilizing partners—from City Hall to the business and nonprofit communities to the city’s school district—and investing in people most affected by inequities. These steps, the Foundation believes, will create greater collective wellbeing in the city.

The EMAN Challenge

When Alexandria joined the EMAN Advanced cohort, the team aimed to build a coalition of Alexandrians who would help lead and guide the city’s work to expand opportunities for low-income Alexandrians and break cycles of financial crisis. Participating in the cohort allowed them to test—and refine—this approach.

How ACT for Alexandria Is Leveraging a Community Leadership Approach

ACT for Alexandria is **shaping public policy**. In 2025, the Virginia General Assembly extended and expanded a pilot eviction diversion program, authorizing \$3.45 million in funding for local programs. The new law created an opening for local action, and ACT seized the opportunity. The Foundation is working with the local court system and the city’s Offices of Housing and Community Services to explore plans for a pilot eviction diversion program in Alexandria. The program will reflect statewide best practices, be shaped by community input, and address the multifaceted needs of Alexandria families facing eviction.

ACT is also **marshalling resources** from private and public sources. The Foundation has submitted grant proposals to PNC, Bank of America, and Wells Fargo to support various aspects of its initiatives to advance the economic well-being of Alexandrians, including the eviction diversion program. Challenges in the funding landscape include funders’ focus on supporting direct service providers, rather than intermediaries like ACT, and 2025’s seismic changes in federal funding programs.



CONSIDER THIS:

What statewide legislation could provide an opening for you and your partners to launch a new pilot or initiative to help families deal with barriers to achieving financial well-being?

The Partners

Among the cross-sector partners in Alexandria's work to advance economic mobility are the city's [Department of Community and Human Services](#)—including its Center for Economic Support and the Offices of Race and Social Equity, Performance Analytics, and Housing—and Alexandria nonprofits. Planning for the eviction diversion pilot is an opportunity to bring together local eviction court judges, the Offices of Housing and Community Services, landlords, tenants, emergency financial providers (mostly faith-based organizations), and legal nonprofits.

The Journey

“Through EMAN, we tested approaches such as community circles and pulse checks to better engage residents experiencing financial stress,” says Brandi Yee, ACT for Alexandria’s Chief Program Officer.

Getting residents' input through these discussion groups—which were designed with three grassroots organizations—and brief surveys helped the city build trust and gave the Foundation and its partners insights into residents' needs and aspirations. The Foundation and the city began to see clearly that residents preferred to be involved when their input was most needed, without having to join a formal coalition.

“EMAN deepened our commitment to making sure we’re centering community in everything we do,” Yee says. “It also underscored the importance of nurturing relationships with local city government and nonprofits.”

Peer coaching and one-on-one interactions with other cohort members clarified for the team that every community is addressing barriers to economic mobility in their own ways—and that Alexandria's approach must be tailor-made.

“Often, we hear from people that the road to economic stability leads out of Alexandria,” Mullen says. “Let’s help people build wealth, buy houses, build a future for their families, so Alexandrians start to say, ‘I have a future here. My kids have a bright future here.’”

Wins So Far

- Alexandria participated in [Urban Institute’s 2023–2024 Mobility Action Network Community of Practice](#), an experience that sparked partners’ commitment to engaging community members and their interest in continuing their work through the EMAN cohort.
- The city used American Rescue Plan Act funding to support a guaranteed income pilot project called [ARISE](#) (Alexandria Recurring Income for Success and Equity). A randomized controlled trial of the project adds to the evidence base about the ways local guaranteed income programs build financial stability for families.
- In 2024, ACT launched its [Youth Career and Technical Education and Employment Working Group](#)—which includes employers, city and school leaders, nonprofit leaders, donors, youth, and parents—to explore how to ensure all youth are on a pathway to future economic success. Now ACT and the Working Group are developing a blueprint for action.

“ACT is challenging the city to make bold, sustained commitments that will strengthen nonprofits, stabilize families, and expand pathways to economic mobility.”

Brandi Yee
Chief Program Officer
ACT for Alexandria

What’s Next

ACT is using part of its EMAN grant to advocate for the City of Alexandria to increase its investment in Alexandria’s human services ecosystem, especially in the face of reductions in the federal workforce and 2025’s long government shutdown.

The Foundation and its partners will refine their use of data and resident stories to make the case for investment, cultivate champions across sectors, and advocate at public meetings and through communications campaigns.



CONSIDER THIS:

What strategies could you use to involve community members in your economic mobility work?

Why Economic Mobility Matters



No matter where you live or what background you come from, we all want—and deserve—to build a better future for ourselves, our families, and our neighbors.

But not everyone in every community has the same access to quality education, good life-sustaining jobs, housing they can afford in the places they want to live, a safe environment, and civic participation and justice.

“True economic mobility comes when communities work together to remove barriers and create pathways for people to succeed. The EMAN community foundations and their partners are showing how local leadership, collaboration, and trust can create lasting change for everyone.”

Mary L. Thomas
President and CEO, CFLeads

CFLeads utilizes [Urban Institute's three-part definition](#) and defines economic mobility as the ability of people to improve their economic status, have power and autonomy over their lives, and be engaged in and valued by their community.

To communities, economic mobility means that people are able to put food on the table and have more time to spend with their kids or doing things they love. It means kids have good education options, and adults can build generational wealth through buying a home, leave a legacy, and retire comfortably. It means people feel at home in their community, can find good jobs there, and have the power to shape a brighter future for everyone who lives there.

Economic mobility means people have enough, however they define it.

CFLeads Economic Mobility Action Network (EMAN)

Community foundations catalyze change and are trusted place-based partners who work across the nonprofit, public, and private sectors to create thriving communities where all people can prosper.

In that spirit, from September 2024 to October 2025, CFLeads brought together 19 communities to learn from each other as they worked to boost economic mobility over the long term.

The 19 community foundations represented in EMAN are leading the way toward economic mobility by engaging residents, sharing data, working across sectors, marshalling resources, and shaping public policy.

How will YOU advance economic mobility in your community?

Start your journey by learning more about [CFLeads' work on this issue](#) and exploring economic mobility resources from Urban Institute, Results for America, and Opportunity Insights.