

## Network for Southern Economic Mobility

### The Southern Challenge

The South boasts centers of fast growth, technological innovation, and educational excellence. However, set against this economic vitality are the nation's lowest mobility and highest poverty rates. By one calculation, more than 50 percent of Americans living in high poverty neighborhoods, live in the South. The picture for Southern youth and young adults is especially stark: it is harder here than anywhere else in the U.S. for young people in the poorest households to move up the economic ladder as adults. For too many, high poverty schools and low postsecondary attainment, tenuous links with the labor market, the South's historically low investment in human capital, and an overreliance on low-wage, low-skill jobs translate into stalled upward economic mobility. The South's economic competitiveness and social cohesion depend on its capacity to change longstanding cultural and structural inequities that continue to stunt its productivity and its people. We know that mobility changes decisively if a child who is poor gets a postsecondary credential that opens the door to family sustaining wages. Accordingly, the South must create an "Infrastructure of Opportunity"—a system of pathways that connects all young people, irrespective of race, ethnicity, gender, class and geography, to educational credentials and rewarding work.

Many communities have already begun this work. Some have created powerful leadership teams with the clout and insight to influence institutional change and employer practice, galvanizing these leaders behind a strategic vision for education and employment systems. Others have implemented proven strategies to develop talent through career pathways, enriched technical education, apprenticeships, and re-engagement initiatives. Few, however, have built the durable infrastructure needed to connect, systematically and at scale, those young people furthest from opportunity to the most promising sectors for family-supporting employment. It is possible for communities throughout the South to do as they are doing now and never reach those youth and young adults facing the most significant barriers to economic security. In most Southern cities this represents 40 percent of local youth and young adults. It is a profound challenge for every community.

### The Network

MDC is responding to this challenge with the Network for Southern Economic Mobility, a group of Southern communities committed to **increasing upward economic mobility for youth and young adults in the lowest income brackets**. Through on-site coaching, expert programmatic technical assistance, and facilitated peer-learning, the Network is designed to help communities deepen, accelerate, and align strategic investments for systemic change that position these youth and young adults for economic success. Leaders in Network communities **examine how well their existing systems are reaching those young people** facing the most difficult barriers to advancement; **analyze the policies, systems, and culture that impede** their progression; and adapt or build the pathways that connect institutions and social supports, from school to rewarding employment. Communities are learning how others are **implementing structural reforms** in the Southern economic and political context. Our first cohort of cities includes Athens, G.A., Chattanooga, T.N., Greenville, S.C., and Jacksonville, F.L. We will bring additional cities into the Network in 2017.

Each participating city will form a small, imaginative, high-level leadership group that includes individuals who can leverage policy and operational changes in the critical systems that directly affect youth mobility within their community. The design and delivery of the Network's two-year program is done with full collaboration of member cities and includes:

- Customized coaching to tackle deep-seated institutional and cultural practices that create barriers to youth development and upward mobility

- Focused technical assistance and peer-learning related to systems and data analysis, institutional policy reform, innovative program strategies, youth and employer engagement, and funding strategies needed to connect economically disadvantaged youth to postsecondary credentials and rewarding work
- Cross-city knowledge development with expert policy-makers and practitioners in integrated systems and programs proven to help young people

### Expected Outcomes

At the conclusion of the two-year commitment, Network members will have a:

- **detailed systems and data analysis** of those youth in the lowest income brackets and the principal barriers to economic mobility
- powerful, informed **leadership** group, equipped to challenge institutional inequity and implement an **integrated action plan** that fosters a dual-customer system (youth and employers), accelerating youth mobility efforts
- **set of actionable priorities** to build stronger organizations with the culture, skills, and management capacity to refine existing programs, aggregate and realign resources, and spur innovation
- **cross-region peer group** of leaders working together on a cutting edge issue of national significance

### Network Members

Participation in the 2017 cohort will be by a **competitive request for proposals** to ensure Network members are committed to making a sustained investment in increasing youth economic mobility within their cities and have relevant experience to share. Leadership group requirements will enable genuine peer exchange amongst individuals with the power to influence institutional and employer practice. A small number of cities (four to six) will be selected based on the following considerations:

- A small cross-sector, cross-institution **leadership team** fully committed to participating in all Network activities.
- Demonstrated **commitment** of the city to those young people most socially and economically marginalized from education and employment opportunities.
- The presence of industries offering well-paying entry-level and middle-skill **jobs with career potential**
- An existing foundation of proven strategies and **promising programs** on which to build.
- Advanced **knowledge and skills** in a relevant system or program area that can be shared with and are of significant value to other Network members.

Core support for the Network is provided by the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Communities will contribute an **annual participation fee** of \$25,000 to support a portion of on-site technical assistance, coaching visits, and the annual convening. Sites will be responsible for team travel to convenings. A request for proposals will be sent to potential participants in early June. The selection process will be completed by mid-August and the Network will hold a 2017 cohort convening in Fall 2017 in Durham, North Carolina.

### Why MDC?

For nearly 50 years, MDC has helped reform-oriented leaders in the South and the nation design and implement programs and policies that reduce barriers to economic opportunity. Peer learning networks have been a core element of MDC's work to support high-impact practices in postsecondary attainment, regional economic development, and community philanthropy. As a research-driven nonprofit focused on demonstrating and incubating effective practices, we are committed to helping the South become **a region where equity and opportunity prevail**, because society benefits when everyone succeeds. MDC's clients and supporters include major national and regional foundations; local, state, and federal government agencies; and major corporations.

*For more information about the Network for Southern Economic Mobility, please contact Abby Parcell at [aparcell@mdcinc.org](mailto:aparcell@mdcinc.org). For more information about MDC, visit [www.mdcinc.org](http://www.mdcinc.org).*