A Foundation for Systems Change

Lessons from the Network for Southern Economic Mobility

December 2019
For more than 50 years MDC has brought together foundations, nonprofits, and leaders from government, business and the grassroots to illuminate data that highlight deeply rooted Southern challenges and help them find systemic, community solutions. Our approach uses research, consensus-building, and programs that connect education, employment, and economic security to help communities foster prosperity by creating an “infrastructure of opportunity”—the aligned systems and supports that can boost everyone, particularly those who’ve been left behind, to higher rungs on the economic ladder. Since 1996, MDC’s landmark State of the South reports have shaped the economic agenda of the region, shining a spotlight on historic trends, deep-rooted inequities, and solutions that offer rural and urban communities a path forward. Read our past reports at [www.stateofthesouth.org](http://www.stateofthesouth.org). Learn more about MDC at [www.mdcinc.org](http://www.mdcinc.org).

For more information about the Network for Southern Economic Mobility, contact us at info@mdcinc.org.
Introduction

“Not that long ago, nobody knew what ‘economic mobility’ was. Now, as a result of the leadership of the Benwood Foundation and MDC, it is becoming part of the Chattanooga lexicon.” When David Steele, Director of Civic Engagement as the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga joined Chattanooga, Tennessee’s, Network for Southern Economic Mobility (NSEM) team, he was professionally and personally committed to making Chattanooga a place where opportunity isn’t constrained by Zip Code, race, or socioeconomic status. Steele is still a voice for the NSEM message: improving economic mobility in the South requires that we stop focusing on how individuals can beat the odds, but instead change the odds for more individuals. A more prosperous present and a bright future for the South requires changing the current situation for youth and young adults wherever they are starting from—and that requires acknowledging historical inequities and embracing an inclusive narrative of success that can drive new policies, practices, and patterns of investment. After a three-year pilot with seven Southeastern cities, the Network has tested our assumptions about what it takes to change odds and refined our thinking about what is required for local action at the system level.

The Network for Southern Economic Mobility was a response to MDC’s 2014 State of the South report, Building an Infrastructure of Opportunity, which examined Opportunity Insights data that revealed stalled mobility across the region. A select group of Southern communities committed to increasing upward economic mobility for youth and young adults in the lowest income brackets. Through on-site coaching, programmatic technical assistance, and facilitated peer-learning, selected communities developed strategies to position youth and young adults who are furthest from opportunity for economic success. The first cohort of Network communities—Athens, GA, Chattanooga, TN, Greenville, SC, and Jacksonville, FL, joined in 2016. A second cohort joined in November 2017: Little Rock, AR, Savannah, GA, and Spartanburg, SC. Rather than programmatic elements, the focus was deliberately on the infrastructure and necessary systems change to shift economic mobility outcomes in the South. NSEM cities took on this challenge in a difficult political context, but state and federal gridlock opened doors for more creativity and action locally.
Guiding Assumptions

The Network for Southern Mobility was guided by four assumptions about stalled economic mobility in the South:

1. **Uncovering root causes is crucial**: The odds of upward economic mobility are worst for those born in the South; historical and continuing patterns of discrimination and disinvestment in the South make stalled mobility particularly intractable in our region—and make addressing those patterns a fundamental equity issue for the region.

2. **Talent development is a key place to intervene**: Improving Southern mobility patterns requires restructuring the systems that connect economically stranded young people to postsecondary credentials, family-sustaining wages, and economic security.

3. **Change local systems to change local outcomes**: Different outcomes require leadership that can inspire culture shifts and realignment of policies, practices, and resources that expand access to opportunities.

4. **Community work is better together**: It is important to approach the challenge of stalled economic mobility with intellectual honesty and willingness to act; network convening and coaching support were designed to create a safe place for communities to learn from each other and uncover unsuspected and uncomfortable truths.

**Uncovering root causes is crucial**

On the right is the *New York Times* visualization of Harvard University’s Opportunity Insights data that sparked so much conversation throughout the region and the Network. There are hardly any Southern communities where a child born in poverty has more than a 6 percent chance of moving to the upper income quintile as an adult. In Network communities, 31 to 39 percent are expected to remain in the lowest bracket. These results are all influenced by and implicated in a history of racial discrimination, with structural racism in every institution of the talent development system. Keeping a racial equity analysis at the center of the Network helps us focus on changing the behavior of systems and structures, not individual youth and young adults.
Talent development is a key place to intervene

Youth and employers are the dual customers of this system. Grounded in longitudinal research on educational attainment and upward mobility from Pew Charitable Trust, NSEM’s central hypothesis is that improving the connections in the talent development system—foundational education, postsecondary credential, and careers with living wages and advancement potential—will provide people with the education and wages they need to weather personal setbacks or broader economic downturns and contribute to civic and community vitality.

Change local systems to change local outcomes

Improved talent development outcomes—and, ultimately, economic mobility outcomes—require action at the intersection of leadership, systems, and culture. Leaders must act to close the gap between current reality and the desired future. The institutions that make up the talent development system—and those ecosystem factors—are part of systems that are perfectly designed to get the results they produce. When evaluating where to invest time and action, it’s important to remember that community habits, attitudes, and values influence the appetite for change and shape individual and system behavior. These foundational NSEM principles are reinforced by FSG’s recent articulation of the conditions required for systems change (in blue in diagram).^{2}

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2 Kania, John, Mark Kramer, and Peter Senge. (June 2018) The Water of Systems Change. FSG.
Community work is better together

The NSEM pilot was a learning lab and offered a period of discovery for peer cities with similar histories and experiences to test place-based practices that have potential to change the narrative about access to opportunity and economic mobility in the region. NSEM teams are examining how well their existing systems are reaching those young people facing the most difficult barriers to advancement; analyzing the policies, systems, and culture that impede their progression; and adapting or building the pathways that connect institutions and social supports, from school to rewarding employment. They will learn how others are implementing structural reforms in the Southern historical, economic, and political context they share. The relationships and capacity developed within the cities and across the Network can be a foundation for continued improvement in local outcomes and establish lighthouse communities for the South.

Building the foundation

What the data revealed about the lack of mobility for Southerners in persistent poverty created a sense of urgency among Network members. With team members from multiple sectors—from local government to philanthropy to higher education to employers—the expectations about what was possible and how and when to act varied, but there was an eagerness to make demonstrable strides before the urgency faded. But complex issues like stalled economic mobility as a result of centuries of structural racism and exploitative economics do not have a cause and effect relationship when it comes to solutions. Rather than deploying some “proven best practice,” each community had to grapple with the ambiguity of their own local context and probe their way to what could create momentum within that context.

In addition to these guiding assumptions about the environment that NSEM would operate in, MDC also believed cities with community partnership experience would have the coordination capacity and existing relationships to form and sustain an engaged leadership team, able to make progress with supports like virtual monthly coaching contact and two annual site visits. So, NSEM had this central tension: an urgent issue, but work that requires a depth of understanding and relationships that are not acquired quickly, and an initiative structure that provided coaching, technical assistance, and peer connections—but not a significant infusion of financial resources or staff capacity. That tension was felt in the experiences and expectations of Network members, funders, and MDC staff. The structure and activities are described in the figure on the next page.
THE NSEM APPROACH

Application and Selection: sites responded to an RFP, detailing community partnership capacity, potential leadership team members, and potential focus areas. Selected sites committed to an annual participation fee, complementing Network support from philanthropic partners.

Kickoff Convening
Cohort 1: Oct 2016
Cohort 2: Nov 2017
Explore NSEM framing of economic mobility and talent development system, meet MDC staff & coaches

Year 1
Team Formation
Data Analysis
System Analysis
Engagement

Year 2
Identify priorities
Engagement
Roles & responsibilities

Network Convenings
Peer-learning, experts, team time
All-Network Multi-Day Events
• Chattanooga 2017
• Spartanburg/Greenville 2018
• Savannah 2019

Topical Day-Long Events
• Atlanta 2018
• Nashville 2019
• Charlotte 2019

Coaching and technical assistance: each site was assigned a two-person coaching team to support team facilitation, agenda setting, analysis, and troubleshooting; coaches conducted two annual site visits, in addition to virtual support via conference call and email

Webinars and conference calls: MDC hosted webinars that featured national and regional practitioners, as well as highlighting work in NSEM cities; peer-learning calls focused on trouble-shooting among site leads from across the Network.

Communities can organize this kind of complex work, but when the focus is on systems and culture change, it will take longer than expected. There is a period of formation, gathering a team to examine the community narrative and analyze the current system and outcomes. That analysis and new framing can activate leadership across sectors to work differently and set the stage for systemic change. Those efforts will likely come up against structures and individuals that resist working differently. Shifting the culture will require trust and boldness, but with a new narrative and analysis, those leaders—throughout a community and its institutions—can move to strategic implementation of new policies and practices that have potential to bring about different outcomes. Here is what the process was like for NSEM communities:
The formation step took longer than expected; every community culture is different, so the momentum will come from somewhere different—it might be philanthropy, it might be youth-led research, it might be transportation challenges. Everyone wants to get to the tangible changes in institutional and community practice and policy that generate measurable improvements for people and cities. But creating something positive to measure requires the often invisible work of relationship-building and case-making. **The upward trajectory of the NSEM teams began with the intangibles: building the team and learning how to trust and work together; finding the capacity to analyze outcome data and community history; figuring out how much analysis is enough to support action; and establishing relationships that will make implementation of public activities possible.** NSEM members have made progress, putting in time and resources—but in the first two years, there were not a lot of press releases or dashboards to update. **But this is the real work. Fundamental change—and changes that stick—is not possible without changing the mental models underneath the structures.** After these heroic and sometimes invisible efforts, NSEM teams have more leaders who have an equity lens, understand mobility challenges, and are taking steps to realign resources, take public positions, and change institutional policy.
Formation: Changing the Narrative

“We haven’t seen systems change, but it’s a huge win when we can have a Rotary program dedicated to race and economic mobility; we have to open that door to begin the systems change.”

—Mary Thomas, Spartanburg

The foundational work, though distinct in each community, involved changing conversations about opportunity and success to include economic mobility, changing who was in those conversations, and taking steps to identify actions within systems to create a more hospitable environment for actions to improve access and opportunity that sets more people up for upward mobility and economic security.

Bryan Stevenson of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) has made narrative change central to EJI’s work, encouraging a reckoning with the history of lynching to begin a reckoning with injustices in the criminal justice system. Stevenson holds that changing outcomes rests on changing narrative because if the dominant narrative about success doesn’t include the desired outcomes, the reforms will not take hold. And changing narratives requires challenging history because you cannot have a new world unless you tell the truth about the old world that brought us where we are. For NSEM cities, this means changing prevailing assumptions about who can be successful and what success looks like and then finding venues where a more inclusive narrative can be introduced. A pre-condition for narrative change is collecting, interrogating, and contextualizing quantitative and qualitative data about the current situation.

A History Timeline

MDC’s approach to framing community data within historical context begins with an examination of a community’s past and present. MDC facilitates a historical timeline activity that illuminates structural inequities within a community’s own systems. Particularly in the South, we begin by addressing the cultural and legal legacies of slavery—Jim Crow laws and low-wage work, for example—that often go undiscussed. The historical perspective is enriched by guidance on data collection and analysis of the talent development system that considers race, gender, and socio-economic status, and local considerations that might include residential segregation, composition of K-12 schools, family structure, part-time/full-time status of postsecondary students, veteran status, and other identities and experiences that influence access to opportunity and progress along a path to educational attainment and economic security. The activity encourages conversations about the gap between a community’s myths and vision, making visible the systemic inequities and institutional behaviors that perpetuate the status quo. Participants gain knowledge, skill, and the will to analyze these historic barriers to equity, a key part of generating
commitment to applying new solutions through collaborative action that lead to deep cultural and systemic change.

When the Athens, GA, NSEM coaches facilitated the history timeline activity, many community members and leaders attended and contributed their experiences. Lemuel LaRoche, a member of the local NSEM team, executive director of Chess & Community and lecturer in the social work program at University of Georgia said, “[The timeline] helped me see how culture and history is viewed differently. Some see a person as a victor while that same person can be seen as the oppressor by others in the same community... It helped me see that Athens has some deep racial wounds that many are not ready to talk about.” The timeline activity brought to light how differently the same person or event can be remembered by different communities within the city: “It got really heated at times. The city manager and a community leader who has since been elected to the commission were there. They realized they had two different understandings of the city, culture, and history.”

For the Athens’ team, the timeline sparked deeper conversation on some key areas and accelerated action where work was already underway. One such community conversation was a need for deeper community engagement by the area Chamber of Commerce. The new president of the Chamber of Commerce has since increased the Chamber’s community outreach, support of youth programming, and partnership with other community organizations.

As a transplant to the area, Lemuel appreciated the timeline for helping him learn about the history of Athens and how that history continues to resonate in current city life and community discussions. He has since incorporated the lessons learned from the timeline and other NSEM activities in his courses as an instructor for social workers in the Masters in Social Work program at the University of Georgia.

Across the Network, having a common language and story to tell gave Network members more confidence about the message. Not only did Network members report that they increased their own knowledge about economic mobility, racial equity, and related topics, but they also saw an increase in the number of people, organizations, and diversity of life experiences involved in the conversations. These activities both broadened the reach and improved the quality of the discussion about economic mobility and what was possible for young people in NSEM communities.

Chattanooga sought ways to infuse an equity and economic mobility agenda into existing collective impact and leadership development efforts, from Chattanooga 2.0 (a cradle-through-career education initiative) to Leadership Chattanooga (a Chamber-sponsored program) to the Urban League’s Inclusion by Design initiative. The presentations and conversations were informed by the NSEM team’s data analysis that uncovered key barriers to economic mobility in Chattanooga, including a low percentage of jobs (33 percent) that pay an area family-supporting wage of $20/hour or higher, a disparate number of African American youth (1 in 10) who were referred to the juvenile justice system over the past three years, and a high percentage (15 percent) of youth aged 16-24 who were not working or in school. The work has increased attention and
action in local philanthropy, the community college, and local government, including Mayor Andy Berke’s economic mobility-focused 2019 State of the City address and subsequent support for a city-wide economic mobility strategy.

The Greenville NSEM team went to Rotary Club meetings, but they also went to the dinner table to change the conversation about economic mobility and to include more people in that conversation. Team members organized community dinners, sharing meals together and with young people in Greenville, to learn firsthand about the challenges they face and the aspirations they have. These dinners were formative for team members, building trust, changing perspectives, and contributing to their personal commitment to the work.

Little Rock hosted community meetings in the months immediately following the 2017 kickoff; from the more than 80 participants, they established a core planning team of more than 20 people from a variety of leadership and on-the-ground organizations. The next step was establishing working groups to “widen the circle” and learn from local experience about high school, postsecondary, and employment issues as well as conducting a data analysis and identifying best practices. Now, dozens more have been introduced to NSEM frameworks and economic mobility has become a focus of mayoral priorities and other talent development system efforts.
SOMETHING NEW IN Spartanburg, the process of changing the narrative began like this:

The Spartanburg Community Indicators Project, which includes some of the Spartanburg NSEM team, commissions the Spartanburg Racial Equity Index report from the Metropolitan Studies Institute at the University of South Carolina-Upstate. The report was released in August 2018 and presented many times over the next year to different community groups, leaders, and grassroots organizers.

Over the next two years, 80 people from city government, local philanthropy, the faith community, and CBOs participate in Racial Equity Institute trainings, with more trainings scheduled.

Spartanburg becomes the first city in South Carolina to join the Government Alliance on Race and Equity

NSEM team members make presentations about racial equity and economic mobility to City Council, Rotary Club, and other civic organizations. Spartanburg City Council reviews the pay scale for all City employees. Wages for three City employees are adjusted in order to have all employees earn a self-sufficient wage.

In April 2019, Spartanburg Faith Summit on Child Poverty gathers more than 100 people to examine and take action on local data. State senator reaches out to NSEM team member to learn more about the community's work on poverty, economic mobility, and racial equity. In October 2019, Spartanburg's NSEM team holds a community-wide luncheon to bring education, awareness, and action toward changing the odds of economic mobility among community members, leaders, and influencers of the City of Spartanburg.

Assistant City Manager Mitch Kennedy is a key player in establishing and maintaining the momentum of these conversations. “There are new platforms to discuss the work,” he says, and an increased likelihood that this more honest look at the current context will lead to economic mobility strategies that are founded in an inclusive definition of opportunity.
Activating Leadership

We are becoming champions of trust.
—Phyllis Martin, Jacksonville

Changing the conversation and creating the new narrative means including different voices in the conversation and bringing different voices to conversations that are already happening. There are voices that have been speaking about these barriers to economic mobility in NSEM communities for decades, but they are not always voices that have power within institutions. And people with institutional power have been talking to and about these barriers for those same decades, but they do not often have credibility among the communities who are facing the barriers—often barriers set up by those institutional voices and power brokers.

The leadership teams in each NSEM city were unique, with different approaches to organizing and convening a local core group to learn and act together. Internal relationship building was crucial, as well as the individual core team members’ ability to draw on or develop relationships throughout the community to expand the reach of the work and connect to other advocates and resources. NSEM communities were encouraged to assemble a team that collectively held a complement of assets: from credibility within relevant demographic groups, networks, and institutions to creative thought leadership to see new connections and generate new ideas to positional authority to move ideas onto official agendas and generate action within key institutions. Also important was to have team members with lived experience that helped ground analyses in the reality of current, local context of youth and young adults experiencing limited prospects for economic mobility. Two crucial early goals of core teams were to 1) build a convening table from which a new complement of leaders could act together and 2) to include more people at that table than may have participated in such efforts in the past.

Four teams were hosted by local philanthropic organizations (Chattanooga, Greenville, Jacksonville, Spartanburg); these foundations had existing convening ability and flexibility of resources with internal staff or external consulting support to hold the thread of activity between team meetings, site visits, and Network convenings. They acted as backbone organizations in many respects, setting the table for ongoing work and conversations. However, they still had to balance providing resources for the work and being part of the work—and making that clear to their communities, both in partnership and as a funder of other work. Three teams organized through an informal partnership of city government, K-12 system, Chamber of Commerce, small business, and community-based organizations with a mission that is closely aligned with Network goals (Athens, Little Rock, and Savannah). There was shared financial investment (for the annual participation fee, for example), but there also were challenges to sustaining momentum without a central convener to manage communications and coordinate activity. In some cases, teams realized they had committed team members, but not the right positional authority to advance in the way and pace they had hoped. NSEM communities had a wide range of collaborative or community partnership work in place: from community vision efforts to declared collective impact
Most people will stay in the center of their influence, and that’s when they become gatekeepers—because they want to be comfortable. If you’re not willing to be uncomfortable, you won’t be an effective change agent.

– Otis Johnson, former Mayor of Savannah, GA and MDC Board Chair Emeritus

Data analysis, infographics, spreadsheets, and dashboards make it tempting to externalize the system; people turn “the system” into something that can be observed without seeing how they are part of that system and perpetuate the system’s status quo. That nearsightedness might make it harder to get perspective and to make choices about tradeoffs, but it also means that individuals have influence in particular spheres. Part of the foundational work that supports effective implementation is changing the behavior of systems and system actors—either personal actions or influencing the actions of other people—and in turn, changing policies and practices that affect upward economic mobility.

**Something new in Jacksonville**

In Jacksonville, moving from engagement to inclusion to empowerment meant reflecting regularly on their success and failures in the efforts to effectively engage and co-design with neighborhood and cross-sector leaders. After one particularly successful and well-attended community forum, the NSEM team scheduled a follow-up work group. While planning for this follow-up work group, Jacksonville NSEM team members who had relationships with neighborhood leaders offered advice, informed by those connections, about how to maintain momentum and further engage interested community members. Despite the advice, the NSEM team, composed of seasoned cross-sector leaders, took another route. This resulted in a poorly attended work group meeting and the humbling introduction to two early lessons: 1) to listen to the advice of neighborhood leaders and 2) the importance of including and empowering neighborhood leadership.

Jacksonville’s NSEM efforts are now focused on leadership development in order to empower neighborhood leaders and increase those leaders’ influence in other community-change efforts. Jacksonville plans to create a community leadership table for neighborhood leaders to discuss barriers to employment and economic mobility and take action. They have hired a community engagement specialist to take an “on location” approach to building relationships and engaging leaders in the neighborhoods where efforts are focused.
The Jacksonville team has emphasized the importance of community empowerment over engagement and inclusion. They believe a focus on empowerment will maximize the impact of their work and will better develop adept community leaders who are able to create change for their neighborhoods. Of the working relationships among Network partners, Phyllis Martin, former head of Community Impact and Strategic Investments, United Way of Northeast Florida (UWNEFL), said “we are becoming champions of trust” and noted that Jacksonville is better positioned to act after dedicating time to address underlying issues and define what “trust” means for them.

The Jacksonville team is also changing the way they engage with institutional partners. After reflecting on their successes and challenges, the team is assembling a smaller cohort of organizations and leaders to do pre-planning, leadership development, and analysis of the community context before engaging with a wider array of cross-sector leaders. In addition to the community leadership table, the team is considering convening similar tables for nonprofit organizations and employers. Elizabeth Lufrano, Community Impact Manager of UWNEFL, says this subset of three groups “is focused on shared leadership, co-creation and co-designing systemic and programmatic solutions to mobility barriers.”
Implementing: Fundamental Capacities

The successes and challenges of the first three years of the Network illustrate the efficacy and the elusiveness of these fundamental capacities of collaborative work:

- Framing issues using shared language
- Assessing and communicating about readiness, current outcomes, and desired goals
- Establishing trusting relationships, within teams and with external partners

Shared language

**REPEITION WORKS**
The message of stalled mobility in the South—and the implications for our youth and young adults—has been a good entry point to garner attention and action across a wide spectrum of audiences within the NSEM communities. The undeniable structural issue illustrated by the Opportunity Insights data and map have opened up conversations in community history timeline activities, team meetings, and community events about the structural racism and historic disinvestment that makes the map so arresting. Network members found that repetition of that message led to shared language, sometimes showing up in unexpected meetings or by way of unexpected advocates. That shared language builds confidence to speak and share in venues that might have previously felt inhospitable. As Jen Singeisen, former executive director of Step Up Savannah said, “Common language is a sign [of narrative change]; when we start to see and hear it, see it in the newspaper, we don’t have to explain it because we all know what it is.”

**Examples of shifting system behavior**

- Learning about the complexities of economic mobility & the talent development system shifted conversations from programmatic “tweaks” to examining system forces.
- NSEM message gained traction as team members were promoted to leadership positions in key institutions.
- A city changed engagement and promotion practices for workforce programs, taking opportunities into the neighborhood vs. requesting participants come to city offices
- Personal learning has increased confidence of some individuals to advocate for this work within their own sphere of influence

**CONTEXT IS REQUIRED**
While the mantra of changing the odds instead of beating the odds is a useful tagline, keeping the focus on systems and structures is challenging, especially when community culture—and human nature—is to back away from uncomfortable conversations and return to narratives about individual ethic and the deserving poor. “Economic mobility is easy to grasp and has a common sense ring, but you need the context of community history and larger national history. You can’t
separate them; [context] creates an opportunity for buy-in at a deeper level so there can be ownership,” says Bo Drake, Vice President, Economic and Workforce Development, at Chattanooga State Community College. Systems change is complex, and this way of thinking does not always come naturally to community leaders and organizations. Helping people conceptualize how to influence deeply rooted and systemic problems requires clear definitions and frameworks, as well as time spent getting comfortable examining and explaining the issues. Quantitative data provide some of the context for systems change, but only tell part of the story; analysis of the arresting map and outcome figures needs to be conducted with people who have lived experience in the system gaps. Such analysis necessitates an acknowledgement of economic inequity and structural racism that are part of community culture and institutions.

Without a systems lens, planning often yields to the temptation of new programs, instead of changing the behavior of system actors. A program focus is also tempting in a culture that wants “quick wins” to justify further investment. Sites are finding their way through these competing messages, trying to have patience with the pace of system change, but not becoming complacent about system inequities. Little Rock’s intentional “widening the circle” work groups, Savannah’s involvement of young people in data gathering and analysis, and Chattanooga’s inclusion of economic mobility on the public agenda are all ways that teams are working to respond to community culture and act in ways that can change it for good.

**Trusting relationships**

Relationship building and shifting the community narrative to include an economic mobility focus is crucial and takes time, especially when previous initiatives may not have an equity focus or be taking system-level action. Relationship building is complicated by local power dynamics and political climate as it relates to agenda setting. It is difficult to manage self-interest and shared, common goals. In some cases, having related community-wide work already underway made it difficult to find a role for the NSEM team because of committed resources (human and financial) or to sustain momentum because of overlapping team membership. Sites sometimes struggled to maintain a focus on the talent development system given so many ecosystem factors that complicate and demand attention. In other communities, well connected core team members were able to link new and existing efforts, infusing work already underway with the economic mobility message.
SEQUENCE AND TIMING OF ENGAGEMENT.
Figuring out the sequence of when and how and to what end of engagement and inclusion has been some of the messiest and some of the most rewarding work of the pilot Network endeavor—especially when it comes to the dual customers of the talent development system: employers and young people. The South’s low-wage/low-quality job economy, paired with legacy systems that have been built to enable it, have made employer engagement problematic for some Network cities. There is limited infrastructure for engagement and employers are not accustomed to focusing on long-term issues vs solving a short-term (low-wage) supply problem. NSEM teams are working to move beyond the traditional employer advisory group; shifting from engagement for the sake of altruism requires a concrete ask and benefit to employers. Employers must be brought on at the right time for the role they play. Sites found some champions in local Chambers but are still working to develop roles for employers that engage their expertise and energy—balanced with the pace of systems change. In some cases, the invitations were sent too early—there was excitement, but not enough immediate activity to keep employer attention. In another example, Jacksonville provided training for local human resource professionals on hiring practices that take equity and economic mobility challenges into consideration, a concrete opportunity to influence behaviors of individual system actors who have influence over key talent development system functions.

SOMETHING NEW IN SAVANNAH
Trust and credibility reinforce each other, whether it is with young people, employers or coaches. There is a need to be more deliberate about designing local and Network-wide activities in ways that are attractive to youth that also make space for them to contribute in meaningful ways. Members of the Savannah NSEM team are working together to build relationships, learn from young people, and provide skill-building opportunities all at the same time.

Are you ready for systems change?

- Communities are at varying stages of readiness to take on systems change. Through the NSEM pilot we have learned that it is important to be clear about local readiness for the work at hand. Also, once sites are selected, a formal front-end readiness assessment could be useful.
- Ensuring that the local work is properly staffed is key to success; local coordination takes real time and a person who understands equity and inclusion.
- A discussion surrounding what cities should expect and consider early on, including potential obstacles, a review of existing power dynamics, and communication patterns with scenarios from previous cohorts could be useful to future cohorts and the ongoing Network.
Led by Deep Center in partnership with Step Up Savannah and a team at the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of Georgia led by Dr. Kevin Burke, NSEM team members are supporting youth-led participatory action research to better understand the systems that create barriers to thriving for youth of color in Savannah. In this process, youth lead the research process that centers the expertise and lived experience of Savannah youth. For Deep Center and Step Up Savannah, organizations with representation on the NSEM Savannah team, the youth participatory action research is an example of the intersection of an organization’s work and the NSEM initiative and how they can support and influence one another.

To enhance their systems analysis and work toward strategy development while centering on youth of color and their experiences, members of the Savannah NSEM team sought funding to examine issues including school discipline and juvenile justice by engaging in youth participatory action research.

Ten high school and college-aged youth leaders from Deep Center’s Youth Leadership Team, adult leaders from Deep Center, and a team from the Department of Language and Literacy at UGA formed the Action Research Team.

The researchers determined that food insecurity, criminal justice (and juvenile justice in particular), poverty, and media representations of minoritized communities are of most concern.

The youth of the Action Research Team have conducted research through three youth summits with Savannah youth to confirm or redirect the areas of focus determined by the youth team. Their research has informed Deep Center’s first policy report Our Stories Are the Evidence: Youth Powered Policy Recommendations for a more Equitable Savannah.

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3 Hadley, Heidi, William Wright, Kevin J. Burke. “No, we should do it”: Youth training youth in activists research methods. Deep Center, Step Up Savannah, University of Georgia College of Education. 2019.
During the Spring 2019 Network convening in Savannah, NSEM teams considered what they learned about changing narratives and changing the behavior and practices of institutions or system actors (including their own), even in small ways. In addition to the three fundamental capacities explored above, here are some of the themes that emerged from the discussion:

- Keeping the impact of structural racism and inequities at the center of the discussion on economic mobility and creating shared language for these terms and related concepts is required for the work to take root in a meaningful way that addresses disparities in access and outcomes.

- Building cross-sector and cross-community connections is key to increasing economic mobility for low-income youth and young adults. Teams pointed to how they created more space for regular meetings and time together, expanded the number and diversity of people and organizations in the conversation, and increased engagement and empowerment of affected communities so they can contribute in more meaningful ways to community efforts. These relationships built momentum and led to more authentic community engagement and stronger coalitions. Connecting in this way increased their ability to engage in trusting and honest conversations about the issues influenced by stalled economic mobility in their community. For the work to progress, members said that even more engagement is needed to continue to build trust within the NSEM teams and with youth, businesses, philanthropies, and community-based organizations.

- Network members expressed the need for increased capacity for long-term sustainability. Needs included resources for affected communities to lead this work through community engagement and empowerment, dedicated staffing to coordinate the work (and resources to cover related costs), identifying additional champions and allies, and opportunities and resources to increase the individual and collective ability and knowledge of team members and their affiliated organizations to engage in this work.

- Coaching and technical assistance have been powerful tools to advance this process. Both require a unique blend of content and process expertise—and finding the right fit between coach and community is not always easy. It can take some time for cities and support providers to figure out how to work together. Coaching can be crucial for team formation; technical assistance can fill gaps when it comes to data analysis or implementation questions. Both provide guidance on how to assess local fit of promising practices and models, while supporting teams to resist the urge to look for a “silver bullet” to replicate.
Truth-telling

What does [mobility] mean ideally and what is the reality? Why are things the way they are?
—Jen Singeisen, Savannah

The formation phase—with data analysis and community history timelines—exposed the necessity of some truth-telling; as is often the case, there was an assumption that there was a problem with the people—the youth and young adults—but what was revealed was a problem with the system. While NSEM communities and teams had longtime advocates for youth in every sector, there was still work to be done to the system as a challenge, instead of seeing the young people as a deficit.

Network cities grappled with how to acknowledge this history and act in a way that propels all its people forward. As Mary Thomas, Chief Operating Officer of the Spartanburg County Community Foundation said, “This is about getting the community to face the truth.” Many people have worked for years within the talent development system, in the surrounding ecosystem, and with young people on the margins, investing time and resources and, while there has been progress, conditions have not changed significantly. Mitch Kennedy, Assistant City Manager of Spartanburg, put it this way: “People have good intentions and we’re still not accomplishing what we’re trying to accomplish.”

The Network presents an opportunity for cities to see a big picture regionally that enables them to act locally. Through the Network, cities had access to research, framing, practitioners, and peers that help them gain perspective on their own history, context, and infrastructure. That allowed them to craft strategies that are more inclusive, that acknowledge history, and then address the systemic inequities created by that history to change the mental models and thus, the polices, practices and structures that impede economic mobility for youth and young adults in the lowest income brackets—and disproportionately, communities of color. Current outcomes took a long time to create and they will take a long time to change, but Network cities are taking steps to accelerate that progress. The formation work is paying off and, though every city is not at the same stage, communities are finding traction and a base for action:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Athens</th>
<th>Little Rock</th>
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<td>NSEM efforts in Athens have been a crucial part of a $4 million “prosperity package” approved as part of the city-county budget for 2019-2020. Commissioners and NSEM team members are a part of ongoing conversations on how to allocate these funds to address poverty and stalled mobility in Athens.</td>
<td>The Little Rock NSEM team has engaged hundreds of key stakeholders and community members in community meetings and working groups. The team is in ongoing conversations with local initiatives to discuss how to mutually reinforce each other’s work to sustain efforts to increase economic mobility.</td>
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<td>Chattanooga</td>
<td>Spartanburg</td>
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<td>The Mayor of Chattanooga has lifted up improving economic mobility in his 2019 State of the City address. The city is assembling a team that will build on the NSEM efforts to develop specific practice and policy changes that address key factors that impede economic mobility for Chattagnoogans.</td>
<td>In Spartanburg, the NSEM team will focus their efforts on two-generation, system-level changes that can improve outcomes for single female householders in the city’s highest poverty neighborhoods. To support the work, more than 80 team members and community partners have participated in Racial Equity Institute training to better understand the structural issues facing communities of color.</td>
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<td>Greenville</td>
<td>Savannah</td>
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<td>Greenville’s team-building, data analysis, and community engagement led to an examination of local and state policies to determine ten areas that were facilitating or impeding economic mobility for youth and young adults in Greenville. They capped their pilot efforts with a community summit in Fall 2018.</td>
<td>The Savannah team is committed to youth-centered conversations and policy co-creation. In addition to the youth participatory action research led by the Deep Center’s Action Research Team, they are building on the foundation of related community health and juvenile justice efforts that hold promise for system-level shifts.</td>
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<td>Jacksonville</td>
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<td>The Jacksonville NSEM partners have raised funds to support a community engagement position in their focus neighborhoods. This is a part of a growing strategy to develop neighborhood leadership that will empower more inclusive involvement in systems-level work intended to create sustainable, positive improvement in economic mobility outcomes in Jacksonville.</td>
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Looking Ahead

For NSEM cities, narrative change was an entry point for systems change. Often “advocacy” is defined as partisan political change; in the Network for Southern Economic Mobility, advocacy is this work of changing the conversation and who is in the conversation. Across institutions and experiences, team members have helped people make new connections and see the urgency of embracing a different mindset about opportunity. Advocating for a new narrative about who is successful and how to support success in the South will remain a critical part of the next phase of the Network. Informed by the reflection and insight of a Network Advisory group with leaders from all seven communities, the NSEM value proposition builds on what we learned from testing our assumptions about what can be done locally to change upward economic mobility prospects for all Southerners:

A LEARNING & ACTION NETWORK
The South needs dramatically different patterns of upward economic mobility if it is to be a place where widespread prosperity is possible. Connecting economically stranded youth and young adults to postsecondary credentials that can unlock entry to family-sustaining employment and career advancement is critical to improving individual economic security and civic and economic health now and for the future. After its first three years, the Network for Southern Economic Mobility (NSEM) is learning what it takes to improve long-term economic mobility outcomes. Changing economic mobility outcomes rests on changing prevailing assumptions about what makes youth and young adults successful. Understanding history and examining data are key first steps, along with identifying progress points that demonstrate what is possible. The Network is a vehicle for regional peer-learning that inspires local action. Cities learn about the root causes that keep stalled mobility in place, as well as gaining exposure to promising practices that can be adapted and applied in their own communities. In an ongoing Network, MDC and member cities will:

- **Examine** community history and current outcomes to lift up how racial and economic inequities shape the mindsets, policies, and practices of individuals and institutions
- **Advocate** in their communities and the region for policies and practices that support equitable access to educational and employment opportunities
- **Learn** together and **build relationships** within their communities and across the region
- **Hold each other accountable** on their commitments to change the upward economic mobility odds for young people
With this support, Network cities can communicate a local economic mobility imperative; solve common challenges with peers; learn about and adopt new strategies and policies that have been tested by peer cities; and develop relationships with regional and national practitioners and philanthropic investors. These formative activities during the pilot have activated local leadership and set up Network cities for strategic next steps, including:

- Targeted, two-generation engagement of neighborhoods with low economic mobility prospects
- Elected officials setting aside resources for new municipal and institutional policies and practices focused on specific factors that influence long-term economic mobility odds
- Elevating, engaging, and supporting community leaders with expertise and relationship with youth and young adults—and their families—who are most affected by stalled mobility so that policy and practice are guided by their voice and experience

MDC also is looking ahead to engaging more Southern cities that are ready to take on similar challenges, incorporating these lessons learned into a new cohort designed to support accelerated adoption of NSEM principles and practices. Sustaining and expanding NSEM efforts will build support for a Southern equity agenda and increase local capacity for action, moving from pilot efforts to peer-driven advocacy at a time when more national attention to economic mobility has the potential to draw additional support to the efforts to improve outcomes across the region.