Houston Economic Mobility Coalition | Shared Ambitions

From Shared Concern to Collective Action

The Houston Economic Mobility Coalition grew out of a regional conversation about what it would take to improve economic mobility at scale. At the inaugural Economic Mobility Summit in October 2025, cross-sector leaders identified the need for shared direction, common measures, stronger coordination, connected pathways for residents, and sustained infrastructure to support collective action.

In January 2026, partners committed to forming a coalition; in March, they established a three-year MOU; and in May 2026, the second Summit provided an opportunity for broader stakeholders to inform the coalition's emerging vision, mission, framework, and regional measurement approach. Since then, partners have been translating that shared direction into action by defining a set of shared ambitions. Ambitions are broad, long-term, system-level goals that define what the coalition seeks to make meaningfully different for Houston and its residents. These ambitions are meant to be direction-setting, not final strategies. The Summit and future engagements are opportunities to test, sharpen, and help shape what each ambition should mean in practice.

A Shared Direction

VISION:

A Houston where all people thrive, no matter where they start.

MISSION:

Uniting Houston's communities to drive actions that help every Houstonian reach their full potential.

The coalition's framework recognizes that upward mobility is shaped by interconnected systems and conditions across **basic needs, housing, education, jobs and health**, as well as connected people and communities and policy. **Ambitions** translate this framework into broad, long-term system goals for collective action.

Where the Coalition Adds Unique Value

The coalition is not intended to replace existing organizations, programs, or leadership. Its value is greatest where progress depends on multiple institutions and sectors acting together. The coalition prioritizes ambitions where:

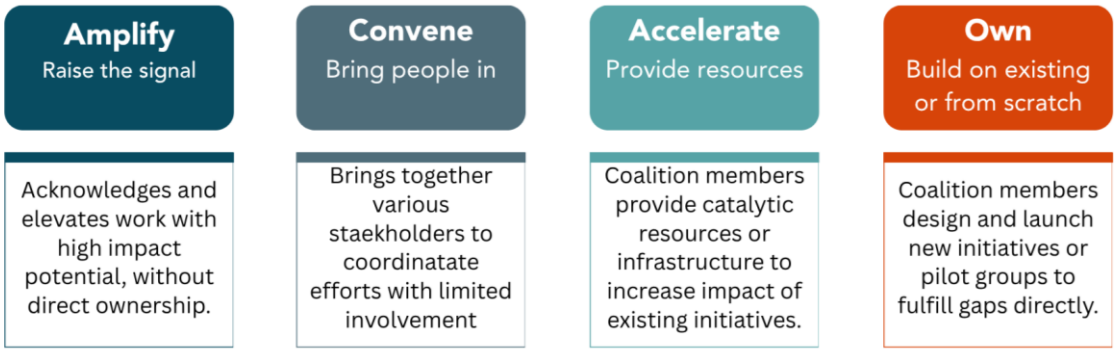
- **Coordination is the unlock** and no single organization or sector can solve the challenge alone.

- There is **potential for impact at scale** across a significant share of Houston residents.
- The opportunity is **grounded in evidence** and learning.
- Houston can **build on and strengthen existing assets** rather than create new ones.
- Progress can create **catalytic ripple effects** across multiple mobility pathways or conditions.

Across the portfolio, the coalition also seeks to span the systems shaping mobility, balance long-term systems change with near-term momentum, and concentrate coalition capacity where it can add the greatest value.

The Coalition's Role Varies by Ambition

The coalition plays a different role depending on what it can uniquely contribute:



These roles reflect the **depth and type of coalition involvement**, not the importance of an ambition. Across the current ambitions, the coalition plays each of these roles based on where it can add the most value within the current landscape.

Ambition Leadership

Each ambition has an Ambition Lead, a representative who stewards progress toward the shared goal. Ambition Leads guide the process to define strategy, coordinate across initiative teams and other ambitions, and are accountable for moving the ambition forward. Leading an ambition does not mean solving it alone. Initiative teams, coalition partners, residents, practitioners, and other subject-matter experts are essential to shaping and carrying out the work.

About These Ambition Briefs

The following ambition briefs are intended to establish a **shared starting point.** Together, they describe what the coalition is working toward, why each ambition matters for economic mobility in Houston, what progress could require, a starting list of the assets already available to build upon, and the coalition's potential role. As the work advances, specific strategies and initiatives will continue to be shaped with the organizations, practitioners, residents, and communities closest to each system.

Access to Basic Needs

Ambition Overview

Ambition Statement: Increase access to coordinated public benefits, basic-needs, and transportation so residents can stabilize, persist in education or work, and begin advancing toward economic mobility. This ambition is about making sure that when Houston residents need help to meet basic needs in a crisis, the systems meant to support them work together, are easy to reach and use, and are resourced to match the scale of need. When residents are struggling to cover food, housing, utilities, health care, transportation, or other essential monthly expenses, it is difficult to pursue education or training, maintain work, build savings, or plan for the future; when residents can reliably meet their basic needs, they gain the stability to focus on longer-term financial health and opportunity. Housing supply and childcare are addressed through other coalition ambitions while this ambition serves as the foundation that individuals need to build a pathway from crisis support to economic mobility. Additionally, this ambition is closely connected to the coalition's connected systems ambition, which seeks to establish a foundational system to connect residents to resources, utilizing existing closed-loop referral and data-exchange infrastructure that lets basic needs providers hand residents off to one another, and to education, workforce, and housing supports.

Why This Ambition Matters

Connection to Economic Mobility and Houston

The problem to solve: Basic-needs instability can interrupt employment, education, training, savings, and advancement. Too many Houston-area families struggle to reliably meet essential needs while the systems designed to help can be fragmented, difficult to access, or insufficient to meet their circumstances. Residents may face gaps in affordability, eligibility, transportation, information, and follow-through across multiple systems. The result is eroded trust and persistent instability that can consume the time, attention, and resources needed to pursue education, training, work, savings, and long-term financial progress. Well-designed safety-net supports can stabilize families long enough to sustain participation in those mobility pathways.

Why it matters for mobility: Stability is a foundation for economic mobility, and the evidence shows that how support is designed matters as much as whether it exists with supports working best when they are

connected[1], delivered in ways that work for people[2,3], and are sufficient to meet the scope of the need[4]. Conversely, when support is fragmented, difficult to access, or insufficient, immediate needs keep pulling families back into crisis, putting mobility out of reach even when programs exist.

Why it matters in Houston: Financial instability in Houston is widespread and interconnected, pointing to a solution that must be significantly resourced to match the need and interconnected. In the Houston region, about half of households do not have the income to consistently cover the cost of their basic needs[5] and two in five households experiencing food insecurity. Transportation is a particular strain in Houston with households spending nearly 20% of their budgets on transportation, above the national average, with more than 90% of that going to vehicles[6]. Residents in the coalition's community voice sessions described referrals that became dead ends, leaving them to manage complex systems on their own and eroding trust in the supports meant to help, and not having sufficient transportation options as barriers to stable employment.

Vision of Success & Conditions for Progress

Long-term outcome: If this ambition succeeds, more Houston-area residents will consistently meet their essential needs, remain engaged in education or work, and ultimately rely less on crisis assistance. Residents would experience public benefits, basic needs supports, and transportation as one coordinated foundation rather than a maze of separate systems because supports work together, are simple to find, apply for and keep, and are resourced to match the scale of need. Progress should be assessed through household outcomes with more residents consistently meeting essential needs, remaining engaged in work or education, and experiencing fewer disruptions that derail progress toward financial stability.

What could it take to get there: Progress will likely depend on strengthening several system-level conditions.

- **Reliable access to essential supports:** Residents can consistently access food, transportation, public benefits, health care, and other essential supports before instability becomes crisis. Supports should be easy to find, apply for, and maintain, including during evenings, weekends, or in areas where transportation and service availability create additional barriers.
- **Better-connected systems and navigation:** Basic-needs partners align around clearer roles and more coordinated pathways so residents can enter through trusted organizations, receive warm handoffs, and experience follow-through rather than dead-end referrals. This may include stronger integration across benefits, food assistance, education, workforce, health, transportation, and other supports.

---

[1]Stepleton, K., Gebrekristos, S., Rau, L. Morrison, C., Richman, R. & Kirby, G. (2025). Supporting coordinated benefits delivery to foster whole family approaches: Developing and piloting a toolkit for state and local agencies. Alexandia, VA: MEF Associates.

[2] Bergman, Peter, Raj Chetty, Stefanie DeLuca, Nathaniel Hendren, Lawrence F. Katz, and Christopher Palmer. 2024. "Creating Moves to Opportunity: Experimental Evidence on Barriers to Neighborhood Choice." American Economic Review 114 (5): 1281–1337. https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20200407.

[3] Finkelstein, Amy, and Matthew J. Notowidigdo. 2019. "Take-Up and Targeting: Experimental Evidence from SNAP." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 134 (3): 1505–56. https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjz013.

[4]Hoynes, Hilary, Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, and Douglas Almond. 2016. "Long-Run Impacts of Childhood Access to the Safety Net." *American Economic Review* 106 (4): 903–34. https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20130375.

[5] A 2025 Kinder Institute for Urban Research survey snapshot found that 39% of Houston and Harris County households were food insecure. Kinder Institute's 2025 Kinder Houston Area Survey found that 45% of Harris County residents are unable to come up with $400 to pay for an unexpected emergency. United for ALICE estimates that across Greater Houston 14% of households live below the federal poverty threshold and another 26% were experiencing ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) together representing nearly a million households struggling to make ends meet.

[6]U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Consumer Expenditures in the Houston Metropolitan Area — 2023-24," January 2026, https://www.bls.gov/regions/southwest/news-release/2026/consumerexpenditures_houston_20260105.htm.

- **Resources and capacity sufficient to meet need:** Progress will require sustained resources to strengthen what works, close persistent access gaps, expand effective models, and build navigation or service capacity where current supports do not match the scale of need. This includes understanding the current investment landscape, identifying gaps, and determining where existing resources can be better aligned or where additional investment is required.

- **Aligned policy, funding, and accountability:** Public, philanthropic, and community partners align funding and policy around shared stability and mobility outcomes, with clearer accountability for addressing system-level barriers. This may include issues such as benefits cliffs, where increases in earnings can trigger sharp losses in public benefits and undermine family stability, as well as opportunities to braid funding and use shared measures to understand whether supports are helping residents remain engaged in work or education and progress toward greater financial stability.

Existing assets to build on: Houston already has substantial infrastructure across places residents trust and routinely use, including 211 Texas United Way HELPLINE, Integrated Client Journey, Houston Food Bank's network of more than 1,600 community partners, Houston Food Bank referral pathways, and Food for Change partnerships in education, workforce, and health settings. Food for Change Food Scholarship partnerships, including Houston City College and San Jacinto College, demonstrate how consistent food access can be embedded where participants are already pursuing credentials, training, and employment pathways. For transportation, there are assets like METRO and LINK Houston that we can build on and look at opportunities to amplify the work that they do, as well as, look for opportunities to address gaps in transportation needs. Rather than treating these efforts as a simple asset list, the coalition seeks to convene basic needs partners to explore how current assets can be integrated more fully and determine what opportunities and gaps exist that need to be addressed. One pilot that will be explored is to connect Food Scholarship, SNAP integration, Integrated Client Journey, and referral-pathway work as a learning agenda to test shared screening and goal setting, warm handoffs, enrollment, referral-status reporting, outcome feedback, and partner accountability before broader investment and scale.

New capacity likely needed: a shared, consent-based way to exchange referral status and outcomes across partners, so handoffs are closed-loop rather than dead ends; more navigation and case management capacity to help residents apply for, enroll in, and renew benefits; transportation solutions where transit service does not reach residents' needs, such as evenings, weekends, and underserved areas; and shared measurement of household stability outcomes, along with resources directed to where public supports fall short of the scale of need.

Coalition Role

Why Is This Suited for Collective Action?

Coalition role: Convene. By bringing together public agencies, nonprofits, education and workforce partners, transportation systems, philanthropy, and community leaders to better understand where residents encounter barriers and where coordinated action could improve access and stability. Houston already has significant navigation, referral, and basic needs infrastructure.

Coalition value-add: The coalition can help connect learning across these efforts, clarify gaps and complementary roles, elevate resident and provider experience, and identify opportunities for stronger alignment, shared accountability, policy change, or investment. To help residents achieve the ultimate goal of this ambition, a change in how systems work and how systems align across sectors—work no single institution can accomplish alone—would be required to strengthen a more integrated regional approach that enables stabilization and mobility.

Strategic Fit:

Coalition Criterion	Why This Ambition Meets It
Coordination is the Unlock	What specifically cannot be solved by one institution/sector/ system alone? Benefits agencies, food and basic-needs providers, transportation systems, and navigation partners each serve part of a resident's needs, but no single organization can address the full set of barriers families face. Some gaps reflect disconnected systems—such as dead-end referrals, repeated intake, and unclaimed benefits—while others reflect insufficient capacity or resources. Coordinated action can help partners better connect what already exists, identify where capacity gaps remain, and align investment toward addressing them.
Potential for Impact at Scale	How many people/systems could ultimately be affected? This work has the potential to have a direct impact on the 1M+ households in the Greater Houston area that are struggling to make ends meet.
Evidence-Informed	What gives us confidence that this can affect mobility? Local and national evidence suggests that trusted access points, coordinated benefits and referral systems, and supports integrated with health, education, and workforce pathways can improve access and household stability. Houston also has local models—including BUILD Health, Food Scholarship, and existing navigation and referral efforts—to learn from. The specific combination of approaches that most effectively improves longer-term economic mobility will still require testing and evaluation.
Catalytic / Ripple Effects	What broader mobility outcomes could improve if we get this right? Greater household stability can support sustained employment, education, training, health, and financial progress, strengthening the effectiveness of the coalition's other mobility ambitions.
Builds on Existing Assets	What can Houston connect, strengthen, scale, or leverage? Through the coalition's work, we can connect strong nonprofit, educational, and workforce systems to increase access to opportunity and drive policy change.

Timeline

Years 1–3: Test and Align
Use existing Food for Change, Integrated Client Journey, SNAP integration, and Houston Food Bank referral pilots to test shared intake and goal setting, warm handoffs, referral statuses, consent, data sharing, transportation connections, and outcome measures. Align partners around approaches that demonstrate stronger connection, completion, sustained participation, and household stability. And examine and begin addressing the root causes of economic instability.

Years 3–5: Integrate and Scale a Shared Pathway
Build interoperability, shared governance, and clear partner accountability across benefits, basic-needs supports, transportation, education, health, and workforce systems. Scale coordinated access infrastructure so residents can move across supports without restarting and partners can see whether referrals result in access, sustained engagement, and improved stability.

Years 5+: Sustain System Change and Mobility Outcomes
More Houston families can consistently meet essential needs, withstand emergencies, and remain engaged in education or work ultimately achieving greater stability and mobility. The region sustains a coordinated basic-needs system with shared accountability and evidence of which pathways improve household stability, allowing successful approaches to scale and reinforcing a longer-term path toward economic mobility. Improvements in systems that impact economic mobility are evidence through policy change.

What's Next:

How Others Can Help Shape the Work

Ambition Lead	United Way of Greater Houston
Coalition Role	Convene
Sign Up for the Next Engagement Opportunity	