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:

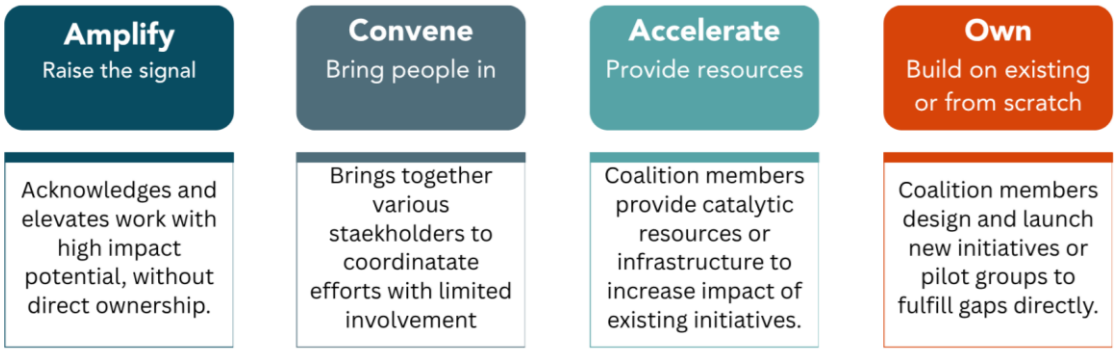
- **Coordination is the unlock** and no single organization or sector can solve the challenge alone.

- 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.

Foundational Systems – Connected Systems

The foundational systems ambition is advanced as two parallel tracks that need to progress together rather than sequentially: 1) measuring mobility and tracking outcomes, and 2) connecting navigational pathways into a seamless experience. Together, these capabilities help the coalition's ambitions function as one connected mobility system, rather than a collection of separate efforts. **This brief focuses on connecting navigational pathways into a seamless experience.**

Ambition Overview

Ambition Statement: Establish foundational systems that connects navigational pathways into one seamless experience that makes it easier for residents to access the support and opportunities that advance economic mobility.

Houston already has many of the tools, platforms, navigators, and systems residents rely on throughout their lives. The core challenge is less about any single missing tool and more about the hand-offs between them. This ambition focuses on creating a more connected experience across those systems, so residents can more easily move through key stages—from early childhood and school through postsecondary education or training, career entry and advancement—while also accessing supports such as basic needs and housing stability. The goal is for residents to experience a more connected system rather than a maze of separate ones.

While the coalition's other ambitions focus on strengthening the conditions people need across their lives and improving transitions between key stages on the path to upward mobility, this ambition focuses on creating seamless pathways across those ambitions and their corresponding systems. Because this work cuts across and strengthens all the coalition's ambitions, rather than focusing on any single work, this work is part of the foundational systems ambition.

Why This Ambition Matters

Connection to Economic Mobility and Houston

The problem to solve: Economic mobility requires coordinated support over time, not isolated interventions. Yet residents often encounter services, programs, institutions, and systems that operate independently from one another, creating fragmented experiences as people move through different stages of life. Consider a single family: one child needs early childhood support, another is moving from high school into postsecondary training, and a parent is pursuing workforce training for a new career, all while the household seeks help meeting basic needs. Each of these supports may sit in a separate system with its own eligibility rules, intake processes, and referral tools, none designed to work together. No one serving the family can see whether a referral led anywhere or whether the person on the other end got what

they needed. As a result, residents face disconnected handoffs and miss out on supports available to them when they need them most.

Why it matters for mobility: People move successfully through major life transitions — early childhood, school years, postsecondary and career entry, and career advancement — when the conditions that support them (stability, social connection, neighborhood opportunity, job quality) are visible, connected, and reinforcing. These conditions span multiple issues including basic needs, housing, education, workforce development, and health, all with corresponding systems that are not connected to one another. No single organization or sector can provide all of these resources on its own. The Urban institute argues that advancing upward mobility requires a systems-change approach because the "upward mobility system includes all the organizations and people whose work or actions impact upward mobility" as well as the relationships between them. Urban Institute further notes that advancing mobility requires aligning "distinct and diverse efforts" to address barriers holistically rather than through isolated solutions. Because residents rely on multiple systems throughout their lives, creating stronger connections between those systems is critical to helping them access the resources and opportunities that support upward mobility.

Why it matters in Houston: Houston already has a wealth of separate systems serving different parts of a resident's life — career-navigation tools, nonprofit case-management platforms, public workforce systems, and education data systems among them — but little shared ability to exchange information or present residents with one connected experience. When the coalition asked attendees at its inaugural Economic Mobility Summit what the region most needed, one answer was as consistent as any other: a way to connect fragmented efforts into one seamless pathway for residents, alongside a shared framework to align action across sectors. Additionally, through 12 community voice sessions the coalition conducted to gather feedback from 400+ residents, it was shared that referrals can become dead ends and that even when they receive resources, they are often referred elsewhere, given incomplete information, or fall through the cracks where there is not a follow through after initial contact. Without a way to create a seamless pathway across these supports and systems, these individuals are left to navigate fragmented, complex systems on their own.

Vision of Success & Conditions for Progress

Long-term outcome: Any Houstonian can navigate a connected system of supports, services, and opportunities that helps advance their upward mobility, no matter which door (basic needs, housing, early childhood, education, or workforce) they enter through first. This outcome sits alongside Kinder Institute's parallel measurement-and-tracking outcome: a mobility-measurement ecosystem that lets the coalition know whether this connected system is working. As with the coalition's other ambitions, the opportunity here is not to build something entirely new, but to connect, strengthen, and evolve the navigation capacity that already exists into something shared, scalable, and able to keep working as the region's needs change.

What it could take to get there: Connecting people to resources and supports takes several linked pieces, building on Kinder Institute's parallel measurement and data-governance foundation. Potential conditions may include:

- **Connect existing navigation tools**, so a hand-off between organizations is a closed-loop, meaning both the sending and receiving organization can see what happened, rather than a one-way referral into the dark.
- **Agree on the minimum information systems need to exchange** (e.g., referral status, consent, and outcome), so independently owned platforms can connect without duplicating each other's work.

- **Build toward a connected resident experience** that spans life stages, from early-childhood and K–12 supports through postsecondary training and career entry and advancement, so residents don't have to rediscover the system at every transition.
- **Maintain this infrastructure over time** through an ongoing backbone function, rather than treating it as a one-time technology build.

Existing assets to build on: Houston already has much of what this track needs: nonprofit-led case-management and navigation models that connect residents to wraparound supports; career-exploration and workforce-navigation tools that help learners and job seekers understand their options; a public workforce system — led regionally by the Gulf Coast Workforce Board — and its own data infrastructure; and K–12 and postsecondary education data systems, including the education and career-readiness data Good Reason Houston already connects. Tools like a resident-facing navigation platform and a career-exploration platform — Ready Set Next, for example — already solve different pieces of this puzzle today. The opportunity is in connecting them, not building either further in isolation.

New capacity likely needed: a referral and consent standard that lets independently owned case-management and navigation systems exchange the minimum information needed for closed-loop hand-offs; and an ongoing backbone function that can maintain this connective infrastructure over time, rather than standing it up once and letting it lapse. Sustaining that backbone will also take dedicated funder alignment — an area where the Greater Houston Community Foundation's philanthropic-coordination role will be especially valuable.

Coalition Role

Why Is This Suited for Collective Action?

Coalition role: Own. Unlike ambitions where the coalition's role is to accelerate or amplify work already underway elsewhere, this ambition calls for building the connective navigation infrastructure directly, because a connected, closed-loop resident experience does not yet exist anywhere in the region, and no single pillar-specific organization is positioned to create it on behalf of the broader ecosystem.

Coalition value-add: Connecting people to resources and supports is, by nature, not something one organization can deliver alone: nonprofit navigators — United Way of Greater Houston, for example — hold trusted relationships and day-to-day case data but no shared standard for exchanging it with other systems; and no single existing platform is built to connect basic needs, housing, early-childhood, education, and workforce systems into one resident-facing experience. The coalition's role is to Own the shared regional capability—setting direction, aligning partners, establishing common standards, and ensuring sustained stewardship—while implementation may sit with one or more existing partners.

Strategic Fit:

Coalition Criterion	Why This Ambition Meets It
Coordination is the Unlock	A connected resident experience only works if every pillar, and the organizations within it, participates in the hand-off. No single organization can decide referral standards or a connected resident experience on behalf of the whole ecosystem.

Potential for Impact at Scale	Because integrated navigation underlies every other ambition and pillar, improvements compound across basic needs, housing, early childhood, education pathways, and talent pipelines — touching any Houstonian who engages with any part of the system, not just one pathway.
Evidence-Informed	Resident and partner input consistently identifies fragmented navigation and disconnected handoffs as barriers. Existing integrated navigation models provide promising evidence, while the specific regional approach proposed for Houston will require testing and evaluation.
Catalytic / Ripple Effects	A stronger navigation backbone can increase the reach and effectiveness of the coalition's other ambitions by making it easier for residents to move across systems and access relevant supports and opportunities.
Builds on Existing Assets	Rather than inventing new navigation infrastructure from scratch, this track connects and extends existing case-management, career-navigation, and education and workforce systems already operating across the region.

Why a Priority Now

- **Every other ambition needs it:** as Talent Pipelines, PK–12 to College & Career Pathways, and the coalition's other ambitions move from planning into action, each will need the same underlying capacity — closed-loop referrals and data exchange. Early coordination can reduce the risk that each ambition develops duplicative navigation, referral, or data infrastructure independently.
- **Kinder's parallel measurement work is already in motion:** regional partners have already identified north star and guiding star metrics as essential for the region to align institutions and sectors around a shared vision of economic mobility for the Houston region.
- **A concrete planning opportunity:** one current example is a foundation-supported regional planning effort now underway that is explicitly assessing the region's current data systems, interoperability constraints, and governance needs as part of a broader workforce-pathways planning process — work that can directly seed this ambition's data and navigation foundation.
- **Community demand is already validated:** residents and partner organizations have each named fragmented navigation and the absence of shared measurement among the region's top barriers, giving this ambition a mandate grounded in what people are already saying they need.

Progress & Learning to Date

Progress to date: As one concrete example of this track in motion, a current regional planning effort — supported in part by a foundation grant — is assessing the region's existing data systems, interoperability constraints, and technology and governance needs as part of a broader workforce-pathways planning process, producing an early current-state systems map that can inform how navigation tools connect to one another. In parallel, Kinder Institute has begun the work to propose a set of north and guiding star metrics to the community, giving this track a shared definition of the progress it is ultimately meant to support.

Key learning so far: the core challenge is less about any single missing tool and more about the hand-off between tools: the region has strong individual navigation and case-management systems, but few of them are designed to tell each other what happened next.

Work underway: testing integrated-navigation approaches with a small number of partner organizations to learn what a closed-loop referral looks like in practice.

Open questions: which navigation approach(es) to test first, and with which partner organizations; and how closely our referral and consent practices need to mirror the data-governance model Kinder Institute is working on.

Timeline

Years 1-2: Test and Connect
Identify a small set of partner organizations across two or three pillars (for example, basic needs navigation and workforce navigation) and test what a closed-loop referral actually looks like in practice. Agree on the minimum information systems need to exchange, including referral status, consent, and outcome, so pilot partners can connect without duplicating each other's work. Early testing will surface what a shared referral and consent standard needs to include before it is asked to scale.

Years 3-5: Demonstrate and Expand
Expand integrated navigation models to additional partner organizations and additional pillars, building toward a connected resident experience that spans life stages, from early childhood and K-12 supports through postsecondary training and career entry and advancement. Stand up the ongoing backbone function needed to maintain these connections over time. Align referral and consent practices with the data governance model Kinder Institute is finalizing for the coalition as a whole.

Years 5+: Sustain and Adapt
Any Houstonian can navigate a connected system of supports, services, and opportunities that helps advance their upward mobility, no matter which door (basic needs, housing, early childhood, education, or workforce) they enter through first. Closed-loop referrals are routine practice across partner organizations rather than a pilot, and the backbone function keeps the system current as new tools, partners, and resident needs emerge.

What's Next:

How Others Can Help Shape the Work

Ambition Lead	Greater Houston Partnership, with United Way of Greater Houston
Coalition Role	Own
Sign Up for the Next Engagement Opportunity	