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:

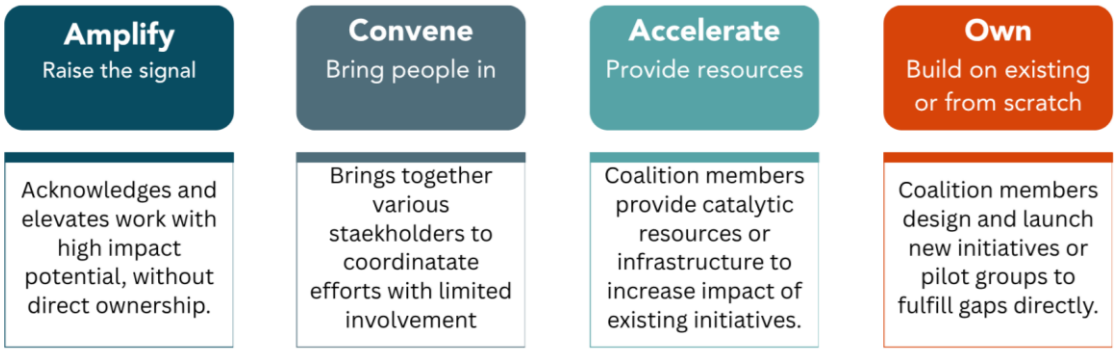
- **Coordination is the unlock** and no single organization or sector can solve the challenge alone.

- 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 – Measuring Mobility and Tracking Outcomes

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 one 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 measuring mobility and tracking outcomes.**

Ambition Overview

Ambition Statement: Establish foundational systems that measure mobility and track outcomes, so Houston possesses a robust mobility measurement ecosystem that informs strategy, investment, and accountability while securely tracking long-term mobility outcomes of residents. The path to upward mobility is an ongoing effort that happens over a lifetime and is impacted by a multitude of conditions and systems a person interacts with. Given the multifaceted nature and complexity of the issue, Houston currently lacks a shared definition of and way to understand whether economic mobility is improving. Additionally, while much learning and research has been done to understand the drivers and conditions that support upward mobility, there is still no surefire way to advance economic mobility at scale and the interventions that are most effectiveness will be dependent on the unique context of a region. At this point, there is no shared infrastructure for the region to continuously evaluate and learn to understand which strategies are making the greatest difference and why. This ambition focuses on creating a common understanding of economic mobility, the ability to measure progress consistently over time, and the infrastructure required for regional evaluation, learning, and accountability to support continuous learning and decision-making.

Why This Ambition Matters

Connection to Economic Mobility and Houston

The problem to solve: Houston lacks a shared definition of economic mobility and a common way to measure whether it is improving, and the data needed to track it sits across systems that rarely connect. As a result, organizations use different goals and measures of success, making it difficult for the region to understand which strategies are advancing mobility, for whom, and where. Shared measurement can strengthen the evidence base for investment and prioritization decisions.

Why it matters for mobility: Upward mobility varies dramatically from one neighborhood to the next, so regions that can see where and for whom mobility is lagging can direct resources where they matter most. Measuring multiple dimensions of mobility also lets the region evaluate each initiative on the outcome it

was designed to move, rather than holding every effort accountable for everything, and builds evidence over time about which investments produce durable gains for which populations. Without shared measurement, promising strategies can't be identified or scaled, and ineffective ones continue unnoticed. By measuring multiple dimensions of economic mobility, the coalition can identify where progress is lagging and better prioritize strategies and investments. Initiatives can then be evaluated against the outcomes they are designed to influence, rather than being held accountable for every dimension of mobility. Over time, this shared approach can build stronger evidence about which investments produce durable mobility gains, for whom, and under what conditions.

Why it matters in Houston: At the 2025 Houston Economic Mobility Summit, more than 150 cross-sector leaders identified the absence of a common definition, shared goals, and consistent measures as a core barrier to progress, and rated North Star metrics with supporting indicators as highly valuable for galvanizing collaboration (4.1 out of 5). Participants favored "a constellation, not a single star": an overarching goal paired with issue-specific indicators, valid, simple, transparent, and able to be broken down by population and place. Houston's recent history underscores the need for shared measurement: as outlined in the Kinder Institute's inaugural Economic Mobility Report, the 2014–2016 oil shock reshaped jobs, wages, and access to opportunity, with effects that continued to influence economic mobility across the region for years afterward.

Vision of Success & Conditions for Progress

Long-term outcome: If this ambition succeeds, Houston will share a clear, trusted picture of economic mobility through North Stars and supporting indicators that every partner understands and is updated regularly and broken down by neighborhood and population so citywide averages don't hide local gaps. All partners across sectors will be able to see where progress is happening and where it isn't, and the coalition will function as a learning system, directing investment toward strategies with evidence of durable mobility gains and adjusting as conditions change.

What it could take to get there:

- **A shared definition of mobility**, agreed upon by partners, that is multidimension (e.g., economic and labor market outcomes, financial stability and wealth, education and skills, health, social connection, etc.) paired with key north and guiding star metrics shaped by community input and used to track regional progress over time.
- **A shared approach to evaluation** that is used to evaluate local initiatives, dependent on the dimension they are meant to impact, so regional partners can better understand what is, or isn't, working in the current ecosystem to then course correct over time and begin scaling initiatives that are effective.
- **Trusted data governance** that includes clear agreements on what data is shared, how residents' privacy and consent are protected, and who decides how data is used.
- **Connected, long-term data** spanning education, workforce, health, benefits, and other systems that is linked over time, so the region can follow progress across life stages rather than in isolated snapshots.
- **A culture of using what's learned** that is built by regularly sharing, and acting on, findings by assisting partners in adjusting strategies based on evidence.

Existing assets to build on: Houston has strong research and data infrastructure, including the Kinder Institute's Center for Economic Mobility, the Houston Education Research Consortium, and the Greater Houston Community Panel, Texas's statewide education-to-workforce data through its education research

centers, national tools such as the Opportunity Atlas and Urban Institute's Upward Mobility Framework, and partner data systems through United Way of Greater Houston's Integrated Client Journey.

Opportunities to connect and align: aligning existing regional indicators and research around one shared framework; linking partner data that already exists across education, workforce, and service systems; and connecting each coalition ambition's measures to the shared dimensions so all efforts roll up to the North Stars.

New capacity likely needed: data governance and data-sharing agreements across institutions; secure infrastructure to link data over time; new data collection where key dimensions, such as social connection, aren't measured today; and sustained analytic and evaluation capacity to support initiatives across the coalition.

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 track calls for putting together a proposed approach for the north and guiding stars and a shared evaluation approach, establishing the data governance, and building the infrastructure needed to track outcomes across systems. The Kinder Institute's Center for Economic Mobility serves as technical and ambition lead.

Coalition value-add: Complete and accurate measurement and tracking must occur collectively. Multidimensional measures come from various sources and therefore require collective alignment, access, and cooperation. Dimensions such as economic and labor market outcomes, financial stability and wealth, education and skills, health, social connections, and neighborhood conditions, all require collective cooperation across sectors for the best available data, especially if new data collection is needed.

In subsequent years, collective action will be required, not only for place-based and initiative-level evaluation, but also for implementing what we learn. The Kinder Institute cannot implement findings and must rely on others in the coalition and the broader community to apply research findings. Collective action ensures that these learnings are implemented continuously over the years until we reach our vision and then maintain it.

Strategic Fit:

Coalition Criterion	Why This Ambition Meets It
Coordination is the Unlock	Mobility measures come from many sources and sectors, so defining, accessing, and linking them requires collective agreement and cooperation that no single organization can secure alone.
Potential for Impact at Scale	The system would provide a region-wide view of mobility across Greater Houston, while enabling more targeted longitudinal tracking of participants and pathways where appropriate.

Evidence-Informed	Measurement itself does not create mobility; it improves targeting, learning, accountability, and the ability to identify what is working.
Catalytic / Ripple Effects	Every other ambition depends on shared measures, from readiness in the PK–12 and talent pipeline ambitions to household stability in the basic needs ambition. Getting this right makes all of them more effective and accountable.
Builds on Existing Assets	It builds on the Kinder Institute's research centers and panel data, Understanding Houston, statewide education-to-workforce data, and partner data systems.

Why a Priority Now

Measurement must begin before the coalition's core work scales. Baselines need to be established now to track progress later; without them, the region won't be able to show whether its efforts made a difference. Every other ambition brief already relies on shared measurement to define success, so early progress here unlocks progress everywhere else. Baselines will also help secure funding and build community buy-in, and the Kinder Institute's first Economic Mobility Report, scheduled for November 2026, offers a timely moment to launch a shared conversation about how Houston defines and measures mobility.

Progress & Learning to Date

Progress to date: The 2025 Houston Economic Mobility Summit established strong support for a shared framework built around North Star metrics and supporting indicators, as well as clear criteria for selecting them. Since then, the coalition formally launched in March 2026 and aligned on measuring mobility and tracking outcomes as a shared priority. The Kinder Institute has developed the inaugural Economic Mobility report in three parts: Part 1 examines how the 2014-2016 oil shock shaped Houston's current mobility; Part 2 defines the dimensions of mobility and their measures; and Part 3 outlines the design of a learning framework to guide measurement and evaluation over time.

Key learning so far: The work to date reinforces that economic mobility cannot be understood through a single measure. Mobility spans multiple stages of life and dimensions of wellbeing, and what gets measured can shape where attention and resources flow. A small set of North Star metrics can create a shared picture of regional progress, but those measures need to be selected carefully so they are reliable, valid, responsive to change, transparent, and broad enough that no single sector can move them on its own. Just as importantly, headline measures need supporting indicators that help explain what is happening beneath them and guard against mistaking movement in a single metric for broader progress.

Timeline and How Others Can Help Shape the Work:

During years 1-2, KIUR will develop a multidimensional concept of economic mobility along with corresponding measures. With input from the coalition and others, KIUR will propose a North Star goal that is strong, clear, and actionable. The North Star goal will reflect overall progress in economic mobility, not just a single pathway. It will be interpretable across different types of initiatives, and it will allow for disaggregation by population and place, so that citywide averages do not obscure neighborhood-level variation. KIUR will establish alignment on a shared evaluation approach, and it will establish data governance and begin building the infrastructure needed to track outcomes across systems.

During years 3-5, KIUR will expand our shared data infrastructure and connect longitudinal data systems to support continuous learning, decision-making, and understanding of participant progress over time. Analyses will diagnose where progress is and is not happening across the various dimensions of economic mobility, and these analyses will guide the coalition's priorities. Analyses will also assess whether specific programs or investments are producing results.

Beyond year 5, Houston will possess a robust mobility measurement ecosystem that informs strategy, investment, and accountability while securely tracking long-term mobility outcomes of residents.
The Kinder Institute will need regular input from the coalition and other community partners. Initially, we will need input regarding the North Star goal and the dimensions of economic mobility that will be tracked. In subsequent years, we will need input on the initiative-level evaluations with the most potential impact on economic mobility, which will also be informed by the research literature and similar economic mobility efforts elsewhere. We will also need input on the most effective ways to implement findings. We will seek regular input from coalition meetings, summits, one-on-one meetings with stakeholders, and surveys.

What's Next:

How Others Can Help Shape the Work

Ambition Lead	Kinder Institute for Urban Research
Coalition Role	Own
Sign Up for the Next Engagement Opportunity	