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:

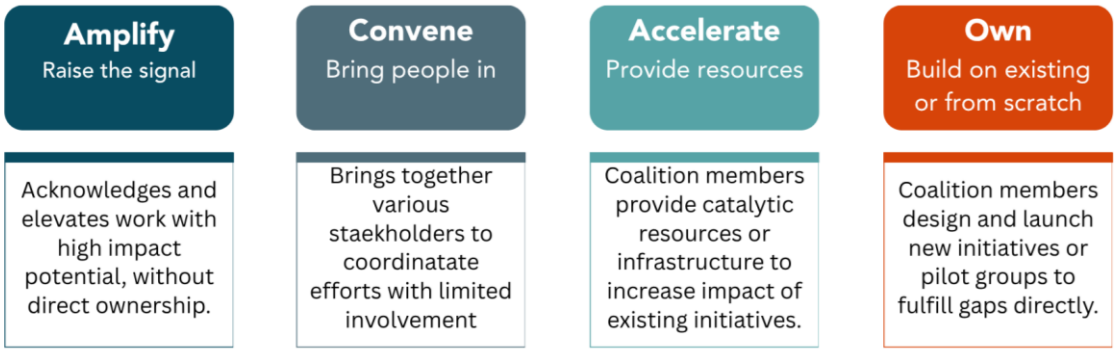
- **Coordination is the unlock** and no single organization or sector can solve the challenge alone.

- 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.

Industry-Aligned Talent Pipelines

Ambition Overview

Ambition Statement: Build industry-aligned talent pipelines with employer co-design so Houston has scalable, adaptive education-to-employment pathways aligned to labor-market demand that lead to family-sustaining careers. This ambition is about making sure that when Houston employers need workers and Houston residents need family-sustaining jobs, the systems connecting them actually work together: employers define the skills and roles they need, training providers build toward those roles, and individuals get clear pathways from career awareness through training into hiring and advancement. This ambition is focused on the alignment between employers and talent-development systems, rather than on job placement alone. This ambition builds on the coalition's PK–12 and postsecondary systems ambition by supporting the transition from postsecondary education into the workforce.

Why This Ambition Matters

Connection to Economic Mobility and Houston

The problem to solve: Houston's workforce assets—employers, community colleges, nonprofit training providers, and workforce intermediaries—do not yet operate through a shared strategy or accountability structure connecting labor demand to training, hiring, and advancement. As a result, individuals encounter a maze of disconnected pathways with limited access to information on which skills and credentials the labor market demands and will lead to quality careers and advancement opportunities, while employers struggle to know whether the talent pipeline is producing the workers with the skills they need.

Why it matters for mobility: Economic mobility depends not only on educational attainment, but also whether residents can translate their skills and credentials into quality jobs that offer pathways to advancement and family-sustaining wages. Individuals can move into higher-wage careers when they can see a clear line between their own skills and interests, the training or credential that builds on them, and an employer-validated path to entry and advancement. Evaluations of sector-focused training, which aligns training with employer-defined roles and pairs it with support services, show persistent earnings gains of 12-34%, driven by increasing employment in higher-wage occupations rather than simply increasing employment overall[1]. On the flip side, wage mobility stalls when training is disconnected from employer-defined roles and validated skills, or when navigation and work-based learning are missing.

[1] Lawrence F. Katz et al., "Why Do Sectoral Employment Programs Work? Lessons from WorkAdvance," *Journal of Labor Economics* 40, no. S1 (2022): https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/717932.

Why it matters in Houston: The Houston Metropolitan Statistical Area ranked third in job growth among the 20 most populous U.S. metros between 2005 and 2025[2] but just 20% of the graduating class of 2017 reached a living wage[3] by their mid-20s[4]. At the same time, employers describe persistent difficulty finding qualified candidates even as many residents lack clear pathways to family-sustaining careers — a mismatch the region's existing sourcing and referral tools have not closed. Greater Houston Partnership's membership alone already represents roughly 20% of Greater Houston employment, illustrating the scale of employer relationships available to align, but not yet connected into one coordinated pipeline. At the coalition's inaugural summit, convening more than 150 cross-sector leaders, they shared that credentials alone do not guarantee mobility, noting that Houston imports much of the talent for its high-potential jobs rather than developing it locally, and attendees called for closer alignment among schools, training providers, and employers so residents can turn learning into good jobs and advancement. Coalition community voice sessions with more than 400 residents offered input that mirrored the long-term goal this ambition aims to achieve at a system level with participants sharing they frequently struggled to identify available opportunities, understand career pathways, and determine which credentials could lead to employment going on to say that progress was most likely when a trusted person or organization provided both reliable information and hands-on guidance.

Vision of Success & Conditions for Progress

Long-term outcome: Our vision is for Houston to help residents maximize career and income potential while providing the workforce that companies need to grow and thrive. This will be accomplished by having scalable, adaptive education-to-employment pathways aligned to labor-market demand and leading to family-sustaining careers. More people move into, and advance in, family-sustaining work; employers gain more reliable access to validated talent; and the region has a reusable, scalable pathway model rather than a one-time program. Rather than building something new from scratch, the opportunity is to take Houston's existing employer relationships, training providers, and navigation tools and evolve them into a system that is scalable and repeatable — one that keeps working as demand, occupations, and technology change over time.

What it could take to get there: Employer co-designed talent pipelines that adjust to changing labor-market demands and lead to family-sustaining careers will likely depend on a connected chain of conditions rather than a single intervention:

- Design the approach working across employers, community colleges, nonprofit training providers, and workforce intermediaries to identify high-opportunity occupations and pathways using factors such as employer demand, family-sustaining wages, advancement potential, accessibility to residents, training capacity, and employer readiness—prioritizing opportunities where strong demand intersects with meaningful potential for upward mobility.
- Schools and training providers shape programs and credentials around those employer-defined skills for the identified priority occupations, so what people learn maps directly to what employers are hiring for, leading to learning and skills-building that directly translates into high-opportunity occupations.

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[2] Greater Houston Partnership, *Houston Facts 2026: Your Guide to Data on the Houston Region*, https://wpb.houston.org/app/uploads/2026/07/Houston-Facts-2026_Digital.pdf.

[3] Living wage defined as $42,158 annual for a single-earner household with no dependents in Harris County.

[4] Good Reason Houston, *Building the Future Workforce: Connecting Pre-K-12 Experiences to Workforce Success in Texas*, https://goodreasonhouston.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/GoodReasonHouston_Postsecondary_Report_January2025.pdf.

- Public, philanthropic, and employer funding braids together towards these training programs providing the identified skills that lead to employment in priority occupations allowing them to scale work so supply can meet demand.
- A coordinated system that helps people find and follow the right path from secondary education to postsecondary education and into the workforce and advancement through a seamless pathway across these systems of shared advising, pairing technology with human navigators, to understand which pathways fit their interests and how to move from school to training to work.

Existing assets to build on: Houston already has much of the infrastructure this pipeline needs across employers, community colleges, nonprofit training providers, and workforce intermediaries such as: robust data to understand the changing workforce and labor-market demands; a broad employer network willing to define in-demand skills and roles; growing regional data and research capacity; a public workforce system connecting job seekers to services; community colleges and other credentialing institutions offering CTE, dual-credit pathways, postsecondary promise models, employer-led workforce efforts and apprenticeships; and tools that help people explore careers and understand pathways; trusted human navigation models run by nonprofit partners. State policy and funding also increasingly reinforce these goals: HB 3 (K–12 college, career and military readiness incentives) and HB 8 (outcomes-based community college funding, including FAST dual-credit support) create stronger incentives across PK–12 and community colleges around readiness, dual credit, transfer, credentials of value, and workforce outcomes. Federal resources, including Perkins V (federal funding for career and technical education in high schools and colleges), as well as significant employer, philanthropic, and workforce investments, provide additional infrastructure to build on.

The opportunity is therefore not simply to add more programs or funding, but to better connect and leverage existing assets around the talent pathways that provide the skills and training required for placement, and advancement, in high-opportunity occupations that are scaled across education and workforce systems through shared advising, shared credentialing infrastructure, and shared work-based learning infrastructure. Key gaps to create the foundation to connect these disparate systems may include a shared, governed way to exchange data across the region's existing navigation, training, and employment tools so hand-offs are closed-loop rather than one-off; agreed criteria and data for identifying priority occupations and pathways; documented employer commitments that extend beyond advisory input into implementation ownership; and a shared evaluation structure to understand which training programs place people in priority occupations with high-wage growth.

Coalition Role

Why Is This Suited for Collective Action?

Coalition role: Accelerate. This ambition is suited to coalition members providing catalytic resources, capacity, and infrastructure to increase the impact of initiatives that already exist—for example, career-navigation and exploration tools, employer networks, and training partnerships—rather than the coalition convening new relationships from scratch or directly owning service delivery.

Coalition value-add: No single partner can build this pipeline alone: an organization with deep employer relationships doesn't deliver direct training or navigation services; nonprofit partners with strong resident trust and navigation experience (i.e., United Way of Greater Houston) don't hold employer demand signals or labor-market data; and training providers, such as community colleges, and the public workforce system (i.e., Gulf Coast Workforce Board) hold training capacity and data but need employer-validated demand to know where to build. The coalition's role is to fund and coordinate the shared analytical and

technical capacity that connects these partners around a common set of priority pathways, and to help carry the resulting commitments into a resourced next phase of work.

Strategic Fit:

Coalition Criterion	Why This Ambition Meets It
Coordination is the Unlock	No single institution can connect employer demand to training capacity to navigation and hiring on its own. An organization with strong employer relationships doesn't by itself deliver training or navigation services; nonprofit partners with trusted resident relationships and navigation experience, don't typically hold employer demand signals; and training providers—community colleges, for example—and the public workforce system hold capacity and data but need employer-validated demand to know what to build toward. This is a multi-institution hand-off problem by design.
Potential for Impact at Scale	By combining technology with the richness of existing human assets and organizations, a new scalable approach could reach far more residents seeking entry into, or advancement in, a family-sustaining career—against a backdrop where roughly 43% of Greater Houston households are below the poverty line or ALICE[5].
Evidence-Informed	Grounded in years of regional navigation and workforce-service outcomes data, results from career-exploration tools already in market, national evidence that apprenticeship completers earn roughly $300,000 more over their careers than non-completers[6], and a shared system hypothesis: that pairing employer-validated skills and advancement steps with human navigation and closed-loop data exchange improves employment and wage outcomes.
Catalytic / Ripple Effects	Getting employer-validated, navigated pathways right strengthens outcomes the coalition's other ambitions depend on—PK-12 to college and career pathway design, the coalition's foundational-systems ambition (shared data infrastructure), and overall progress toward the coalition's North Star metrics
Builds on Existing Assets	Connects and strengthens the region's employer networks, career-exploration and navigation tools, public workforce system, and training and credentialing partners rather than standing up a new, stand-alone program.

[5] United for Alice, "The State of ALICE in Texas", https://www.unitedforalice.org/county-reports/texas.

[6] Debbie Reed, Albert Yung-Hsu Liu, Rebecca Kleinman, Annalisa Mastri, Davin Reed, Samin Sattar, and Jessica Ziegler, *An Effective Assessment and Cost-Benefit Analysis of Registered Apprenticeship in 10 States,* *https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ETA/publications/ETAOP_2012_10.pdf*.

Why a Priority Now

- **A current planning opportunity:** GHP and UWGH secured a $250,000 planning grant directly around this ambition, with a funded three-month strategic planning phase running through December 2026, and the stated opportunity for Houston to be considered for millions in implementation funding beginning in early 2027.
- **Partner alignment already in place:** Houston's employer, education, and workforce partners are already organized and engaged around this work, with an active employer network already supportive of the direction of this effort.
- **Public funding can follow the evidence:** by identifying which training providers and programs best connect people to high-opportunity occupations, this work could help direct existing government workforce-training dollars toward those results, rather than spreading investment evenly across options.
- **Work already in motion:** career-exploration tools, including Ready Set Next, United Way's Integrated Client Journey, and others, are already being used with real people and partner organizations, and outside research and technical partners have been engaged to assess the region's current data and systems landscape.
- **Opportunity to unlock other ambitions:** this work will also produce a shared view of the region's current data and systems landscape that can inform the coalition's foundational connected systems ambition, and pathway/occupation findings that can inform where Good Reason Houston focuses its own advising and credential work under the PK–12-to-college ambition.

Progress & Learning to Date

Progress to date: As one active step toward this ambition, GHP and UWGH have been leading a strategic planning process this fall, supported in part by a foundation planning grant, to map out exactly this kind of connected system. Since the summer, this work has stood up cross-sector working groups focused on priority occupations and pathways, the region's data and technology landscape, and resident and employer voice; engaged outside research and technical partners to assess current labor-market data and systems; and begun testing early pilot concepts for feedback from residents, employers, and partner organizations. Ready Set Next's early pilot—now testing with a cohort of partner organizations and users—is providing real, in-market insight into the career-awareness and exploration piece of the pathway.

Key learning so far: a core challenge is a regional coordination failure. Early learning suggests the core challenge is a regional coordination failure more than a shortage of programs. Houston already has substantial labor-market data, training capacity, employer relationships, and navigation infrastructure; what is still needed is stronger alignment through a shared strategy, accountability structure, and data exchange, while addressing targeted capacity gaps where they exist.

Work underway: finalizing which occupations and pathways to prioritize, with employer input on skills, roles, and hiring needs; and testing a small set of candidate pilot models—for example, an end-to-end pathway connecting navigation, training, and hiring; a closer data connection across existing navigation and referral tools; and an employer commitment model around skills-based hiring and advancement—against resident, employer, and system feasibility. A full draft of this planning work is expected by early November, with a final version by the end of 2026.

Open questions: which one or two occupations or pathways to prioritize first; what data-sharing and governance model partners can commit to; and what specific employer commitments (hiring, work-based learning, advancement, data-sharing) can be explored as this planning phase concludes.

Timeline

Years 1-2: Co-design priority talent pathways with employers, educators, and workforce partners; expand work-based learning models and piloting and refining the system approach needed to scale.

Years 3-5: Scale employer-designed pathways across schools, training providers, and employers with shared advising, credentials, and work-based learning infrastructure.

Years 5+: Houston has durable, adaptive education-to-employment pathways aligned to labor market demand and leading to family-sustaining careers.

What's Next:

How Others Can Help Shape the Work

Ambition Lead	Greater Houston Partnership, with Gulf Coast Workforce Board
Coalition Role	Accelerate
Sign Up for the Next Engagement Opportunity	