

Building a State Coalition for Public Spending Based on Shared Mobility Goals

This spotlight is part of a [series](#) summarizing six “build & learn” pilots launched in 2024 to explore how field building could take shape in different settings and impact domains. Developed with trusted field partners, the pilots focused on bringing actors together to spur efforts that would have otherwise not emerged or been slow to develop. They were designed to catalyze meaningful impact while generating insight to inform a broader field-building strategy.

THE CHALLENGE

The federal government has disbursed an unprecedented amount of funding in the past several years, but in many states across the country substantial funds remain unallocated. For example, Tennessee has spent just 10.5 percent of the \$3.7 billion it received in federal recovery funds in 2021 (*The Tennessean*, July 25, 2024).

These federal resources could support transformative investments in economic development, infrastructure, and energy, advancing the well-being of people and communities and alleviating long-standing inequities. However, in some states, these potentially catalytic dollars remain in limbo. Leaders advancing economic mobility across Tennessee note that lawmakers have not been sufficiently responsive to the priorities of the communities that could benefit most. At the same time, these leaders have yet to develop the shared narrative and agenda-setting mechanisms necessary to advocate effectively with their state government.

“ We talked about the challenges with the politics of Tennessee. Because of that, it’s difficult to address these issues. A lot is delegated to faith-based organizations and nonprofits...there is no systemic approach for how to navigate services in rural counties versus urban areas. But there is a governor election coming up, so there is an opportunity moving forward.

—Dr. Jamiya Stokes, TN SCORE

Strong statewide coalitions of organizations driving economic mobility could consistently advocate for public resources to be allocated according to a shared vision, amplifying the priorities and perspectives of long under-served people and communities.

THE GOAL

This build & learn pilot aspires to facilitate relationship building among Tennessee-based organizations and other key stakeholders to establish a foundation for long-term collaboration and coordinated efforts on economic mobility, as well as build capacity for organizations to respond effectively to emerging shifts in funding and policy priorities.

THE FIRST STEP

The [steering committee](#) approved an initial investment of \$250,000 to help Tennessee-based organizations focused on economic mobility align their priorities for the use of unobligated American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) resources. These funds were deployed to

- **prepare a memo to Bill Lee, the governor of Tennessee, and other public officials** providing focus areas for consideration for ARPA funds allocation;
- **host a convening of multisector stakeholders** who have been co-creating a statewide vision for cradle-to-career civic infrastructure; and
- **facilitate skill development and relationship building for organizations across Tennessee**, so they can be more responsive to local communities.

PARTNERS

Seeding Success, a place-based catalyst for systems-level change, is the lead partner organization for this pilot. It seeks to advance the social and economic mobility of all children in Shelby County, Tennessee, by improving the way institutions, community organizations, policies, and resources work together.

Steering committee member Josh Davis (StriveTogether) shaped and stewarded this pilot. John Bazley and Sana Mohamed from Dalberg Advisors provided planning and logistical support. Sarah Beth Gehl (Southern Economic Advancement Project) provided research support on ARPA.

“ *Where the more specific cradle-to-career framework is the lead, the upward mobility framework serves as the larger structure. This is especially relevant when considering the need for flexibility over the next few years, particularly during the next administration. The ability to tie this to new funding sources we hadn't previously considered will be critically important to our success. We also discussed the importance of selecting the right leverage points. In some cases, pushing at the federal level sets us up to fail and compete with each other. However, if we can advocate at the federal level for more subgrantees, it will help lift all boats. In certain cases, though, the focus needs to be hyperlocal, addressing policies within a specific city.*

—Shane Garner, Partners for Rural Impact

LESSONS LEARNED

This build & learn pilot project has supported the launch of a coalition of Tennessee-based organizations driving economic mobility that can consistently advocate for public resources to be allocated according to a shared economic mobility vision. The following lessons emerged:

- Organizations across the cradle-to-career continuum in Tennessee have an opportunity to **align on shared priorities and develop a collective vision** that strengthens advocacy efforts.
- Facilitated discussions on field-wide challenges and solutions **enable organizations to develop stronger relationships and coordinate more effectively**, providing opportunities for collective action on legislative priorities.
- **An intermediary can play a critical role by creating spaces for collaboration**, offering tools and resources to unify efforts, and looping in national partners who bring expertise, resources, and broader policy influence. This ensures that state-level efforts are informed by national best practices and connected to broader advocacy movements.

These insights can inform similar efforts in other states, offering a model for building coalitions that drive economic mobility outcomes at the state level.

“ *When I think of success, it's that this coalition is consulted by legislators [in Tennessee] and is seen as a trusted group for input.*

—Keri Randolph, Chattanooga 2.0

LOOKING AHEAD

StriveTogether is exploring the possibility of assigning one or more of its staff members to help sustain this emergent coalition, so its members can collaboratively **advocate for public resources to be allocated according to a shared economic mobility vision**. If successful, this coalition and the strategies it develops will offer a model for replication in other states where the priorities of people and communities experiencing poverty are neglected by public decisionmakers.