



2025 Urban Agenda Annual Report

From Commitment to Coordinated Action



SUCCESS

Economic Mobility

Policies

Power Dynamics

Mental Models

Programs

Economic Mobility Barriers

Inequitable Systems

Misaligned Incentives

Outdated Rules

Deeply Held Assumptions

Urban Agenda Annual Report: 2025 in Review

From Commitment to Coordinated Action

Executive Summary

The winter of 2025–2026 brought repeated disruptions from snow, ice, and cold—an apt parallel to a metaphor that has come to define the Urban Agenda’s work over the past year: **the iceberg**.

Like an iceberg, the most entrenched barriers to economic mobility—inequitable systems, misaligned incentives, outdated rules, and deeply held assumptions—exist largely beneath the surface. Achieving sustainable change requires more than visible programs. It requires confronting the policies, power dynamics, and mental models that perpetuate wide disparities in economic well-being among Black and Brown residents of Cleveland and Cuyahoga County.

Launched in January 2025, the Urban Agenda represents a broad, cross-sector commitment to do exactly that. The Urban Agenda champions collective action in pursuit of three economic mobility goals: improving factors that contribute to stark differences in income, wealth, and poverty among Black and Brown populations of Cleveland and Cuyahoga County. Although the hard work of the Urban Agenda is directed at changing ingrained practices and deep-rooted systems that perpetuate racial and ethnic disparities, the hope is that raising prospects for disadvantaged communities of Cleveland and Cuyahoga County will, in turn, create opportunity and spark renewed economic vibrancy for the region overall.

Over the past year, the Urban Agenda initiative has moved deliberately from alignment and shared understanding toward coordinated strategy design and early implementation planning across three focus areas important to improving economic mobility:



Homeownership



Workforce Preparedness



Business Ownership

As backbone organization for the Urban Agenda initiative, PolicyBridge has spent a busy year setting the table for the deep work of building relationships, developing a shared vision, and fostering a commitment to accountability that is necessary to change and improve systems. PolicyBridge has convened cross-sector partners; launched a shared Community Dashboard to track progress; facilitated design charrettes and Subject Matter Expert Action Teams; and supported partners in moving from reflection to action.

This year marks a critical inflection point. The Urban Agenda is no longer simply diagnosing disparities—it is building the structures, commitments, and shared accountability needed to translate insight into measurable action.

“We can’t grow to be a great region on a great lake if we don’t have everyone participating.”

- **Baiju Shah**, Greater Cleveland Partnership

Launching the Urban Agenda: Alignment Becomes Commitment

From Commitment to Coordinated Action



In January 2025, leaders from government, business, philanthropy, higher education, and community-serving organizations gathered at Greater Cleveland Partnership to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) committing to the Urban Agenda's economic mobility goals and collective impact framework.



The MOU is non-binding, but its significance lies in shared intent: a commitment to work differently - together.

The signing marked the public launch of a collective effort built over years of gatherings and discussions directed at developing relationships, trust, and consensus among the assembled Community Partners. While organizations across the region have long worked on economic mobility or factors that contribute to it, the Urban Agenda has laid out a formal structure for shared responsibility, alignment, and accountability. The Urban Agenda has also created broad goals that can help guide the work of the Community Partners as they pursue the distinct missions of their organizations. Community Partner organizations have begun aligning internal initiatives with Urban Agenda priorities. They have also participated in design and implementation teams or sent representatives whose work best aligns with the specific topics addressed.

“Today PolicyBridge and the Urban Agenda are one of our closest partners in really bringing everyone to the table... to now tackle these complex issues.”
- **Lillian Kuri**, Cleveland Foundation

Those signing the MOU at the beginning of 2025 included:

 CITY OF CLEVELAND Mayor Justin M. Bibb	 Blaine Griffin President of City Council	 Chris Ronayne Cuyahoga County Executive	 Dale Miller President of County Council	 Baiju Shah President and CEO
 Lillian Kuri President and CEO	 Tony Richardson President and CEO	 Sharon Sobol Jordan President and CEO	 Tania Menesse President and CEO	 Dr. Jill A. Gordon Dean
 Dr. Eric Kaler President	 Dr. Michael Baston President	 Marsha Mockabee President and CEO	PROJECT ADVISOR Stephanie Howse-Jones Councilwoman Ward 7	

Throughout 2025, Community Partner organizations met quarterly to share progress, surface challenges, and explore collaboration opportunities. Sessions focused on mental models, benefits cliffs, entrepreneurship supports, and institutional practices that shape access and opportunity. A goal of 2026 will be to develop a protocol for identifying and inviting key organizations whose insights and reach would be valuable in expanding the work of the Urban Agenda.



On April 11, 2025, more than 300 community members attended a sold-out **City Club of Cleveland forum** on the Urban Agenda. The panel brought together civic leaders representing government, business, philanthropy, and community institutions. The panel consisted of County Executive Chris Ronayne; Baiju Shah, president and chief executive of Greater Cleveland Partnership; Sharon Sobol Jordan, president and CEO of the United Way of Greater Cleveland, and Brian Hall, founding member and longtime leader of the Presidents' Council. Randell McShepard, chairman and co-founder of PolicyBridge, moderated the panel. A video of the full discussion is available at the City Club website, <https://www.cityclub.org/forums/2025/04/11/an-urban-agenda-for-cleveland>

"We felt that the missing piece was a collective effort that brought all the players to the table—where we could learn from each other and hold each other accountable."

- **Randell McShepard**, PolicyBridge

Panelists emphasized that, while the region has no shortage of initiatives, progress has often been fragmented. The Urban Agenda tries to address this alignment problem by focusing on shared strategy, shared measurement, and collective accountability.

"We work together all the time, but I think getting aligned around what we're aiming for and understanding how it really is about how people get ahead financially ... is really important."

- **Sharon Sobol Jordan**, United Way of Greater Cleveland

County Executive Chris Ronayne described Cuyahoga County as a "tale of two counties," underscoring the urgency of addressing disparities in income, wealth, and opportunity—particularly in the urban core.

The Community Dashboard: Shared Measurement for Shared Accountability

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One of the Urban Agenda's earliest and most critical actions was the creation and public launch of the Community Dashboard on Economic Mobility (pbua.net). The Dashboard serves as the Urban Agenda's shared tracking and accountability framework, ensuring that the initiative remains focused on measurable population-level outcomes rather than isolated programmatic activity.



The Dashboard is the Urban Agenda's accountability engine—keeping the work focused on population-level outcomes rather than isolated programs.

The Dashboard was publicly introduced during the April 2025 City Club forum and uses 2022 as a baseline year. Drawing primarily from American Community Survey data and other regional data sources, the Dashboard tracks disparities in income, wealth accumulation, and poverty rates among Black, Hispanic/Latino, and White households across Cleveland and Cuyahoga County.

In addition to tracking outcome indicators, the Dashboard monitors key drivers that influence economic mobility, including employment, education, digital access, homeownership, business ownership, and family stability.

"We've got to have measures that we will hold to, No. 1. No. 2, we've got to look at the problem where it lies and not look at the results of the problem. ... You can look at the fish, or you can look at the water, and we need to look at the water and have a real commitment to fix the water."

- **Brian Hall**, Presidents' Council

The Dashboard establishes a shared evidence base, helps to align partner strategies, and enables transparent tracking of progress over time.

Engaging the Community: Design Charrettes

From Commitment to Coordinated Action

To ground strategy development in lived experience and practitioner insight, PolicyBridge convened a series of design charrettes focused on homeownership, workforce preparedness, and business ownership.

Across four sessions, nearly 100 residents, practitioners, policy experts, and institutional leaders participated in structured dialogue designed to surface systemic barriers and opportunities for coordinated intervention.

The charrettes were designed not to generate programs, but to diagnose systems.



Participants identified systemic challenges across all three focus areas, including:

- Insufficient affordable housing supply and inequitable lending practices
- Fragmented workforce pipelines and benefits cliffs
- Barriers to business growth driven by procurement practices and limited access to capital

A final synthesis charrette guided participants through a Self-Reflection to Action exercise, asking them to examine how their own organizational policies and practices may unintentionally reinforce barriers—and what realistic changes they could commit to over the next 12 to 24 months. These commitments reflect the importance of individual accountability alongside systemic change. Responses included:

- Share data openly with partners and the community to drive transparency.
- Demystify resources and clarify the breadth of available support for residents.
- Use individual voice and small power to advocate for change where possible.
- Solicit more community participation in Urban Agenda activities and related initiatives.
- Re-evaluate organizational policies and procedures to avoid perpetuating inequities.

This effort to shift thinking—from diagnosing external problems to accepting internal accountability—has become a defining feature of the Urban Agenda’s ongoing approach.

Insights gathered during the charrettes were synthesized into a framework designed to move participants from awareness to accountability. This framework created a structured accountability mechanism that now informs Action Team strategy design and implementation planning.

Subject Matter Expert Action Teams: Designing Systems Change

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Building on charrette insights, the Urban Agenda convened **Subject Matter Expert Action Teams** consisting of approximately 25–30 participants with direct knowledge of local contexts, real-time dynamics, and lived experiences that go beyond the broad strokes of challenges sketched by population-level measures. The Community Dashboard helps make clear the need for change and monitors progress toward achieving goals, but the Subject Matter Expert Action Teams are those with the knowledge of where to apply pressure within systems to bring about meaningful and lasting results.

These are not advisory committees. They are working implementation teams.



Action Teams bring together organizations closest to the system to prioritize drivers, align metrics, map ecosystem roles, and design coordinated implementation strategies. Rather than functioning as advisory groups, the Subject Matter Expert Action Teams serve as working implementation design teams responsible for developing and testing collaborative strategies across institutions to move beyond disconnected interventions to collective impact.

The first Subject Matter Expert Action Team was convened around the focus area of homeownership. Participants engaged in a process of ecosystem-building that sought to strengthen alignment among organizations working closest to the housing system and identify opportunities to reduce fragmentation and improve service delivery. Here, too, participants were guided through a Self-Reflection to Action exercise, asking them to examine how their own organizational policies and practices may serve to reinforce barriers—and what realistic changes they could commit to over the next 12 to 24 months.

These homeownership sessions served as a primary proof of concept for coordinated systems change. A similar process will be used to engage with and guide subject matter experts in the areas of workforce preparedness and business ownership.

PolicyBridge at 20: A Moment of Convergence

From Commitment to Coordinated Action



The Urban Agenda's first year coincided with PolicyBridge's 20th anniversary, underscoring how decades of research, convening, and advocacy culminated in this collective effort. The anniversary celebration also made the case for why PolicyBridge is uniquely positioned to serve as backbone for the Urban Agenda. However, it is important to note that the Urban Agenda is not a PolicyBridge initiative; it is a shared undertaking that will succeed based on the actions and engagement of its partners and the broader community.

"This work isn't about resources—it's about alignment."

- **Lillian Kuri**, Cleveland Foundation

The anniversary celebration reinforced the Urban Agenda's core message: sustainable change requires long-term commitment, shared accountability, and coordinated action.

"Real actions that can be measured over time."

- **Greg Brown**, PolicyBridge

Where the Urban Agenda Is Headed Next

The transition from alignment and system diagnosis to coordinated action design and implementation planning marks a critical milestone in the Urban Agenda's lifecycle.

Over the coming year, the initiative will:

- Advance homeownership implementation strategies.
- Expand Action Teams to workforce preparedness and business ownership.
- Secure 12- to 24-month institutional commitments tied to shared metrics.
- Continue strengthening relationships, collaborations, and accountability.
- Convene community engagement, systems strategy and shared measurement committees to expand the reach of and response to Urban Agenda activities.

Work is already under way on an action framework to better understand and address complex barriers to housing and homeownership. Drawing on the expertise of partners and thought leaders in the field, we have worked to develop a predictive model to assess differences in homeownership rates across Cleveland and Cuyahoga County. The Urban Agenda has chosen homeownership as an area of focus because it is a key driver of wealth building. Subject Matter Experts in local housing dynamics identified lack of affordable housing stock, mortgage lending deficiencies, historic neighborhood disinvestment, and financial stress on households as primary barriers to homeownership locally. The Urban Agenda predictive model incorporates measures of these factors to help guide interventions, strengthen advocacy, align action, and track progress toward increasing homeownership rates in Cleveland and Cuyahoga County. Concurrently, the Urban Agenda team has engaged systems modelers at Case Western Reserve University's Center for Community Health Integration to map the local housing ecosystem, create visual representation of components and interactions, and prioritize action plans. Similar steps will be taken over the coming year to model and map local dynamics of workforce and business development and prioritize opportunities to guide and improve the collective action of Urban Agenda Community Partners and other engaged organizations.

"This is how systems change happens - together, and over time."