

Report - July 2025

5 Ideas to Advance Economic Mobility in NYC Amid Harmful Federal Policies

The first half of 2025 has brought an unprecedented wave of federal attacks on anti-poverty programs—threatening the safety net that millions of New Yorkers rely on and undercutting the city's efforts to expand economic mobility. This report offers five actionable policy ideas for how New York City can lead in this environment, as a part of CUF's second annual NYC Economic Opportunity Summit.

by Jonathan Bowles and Eli Dvorkin

The first half of 2025 has brought an unprecedented wave of federal attacks on anti- poverty programs—threatening the safety net that millions of New Yorkers rely on and undercutting the city's efforts to expand economic mobility. These harmful actions come at a time of staggering inequality in New York, when far too many residents are struggling to make ends meet, and too few low-income New Yorkers are making it into the middle class.

To meet this moment, city and state leaders should respond with bold policies and strategic investments that not only protect the social safety net but also expand the programs that help New Yorkers exit poverty and achieve long-term financial security. This will require more than just restoration and defense—it will take policy innovation, new financing mechanisms, and creative public-private partnerships to fill the gaps left by Washington.

This report offers five actionable policy ideas for how New York City can lead. Released alongside the Center for an Urban Future's second annual NYC Economic Opportunity Summit, it outlines achievable solutions to confront the most serious threats in a generation to economic mobility—and help more New Yorkers move from poverty into the middle class.

1. HELP NEW YORKERS MOVE TO HIGHER-OPPORTUNITY NEIGHBORHOODS BY LEVERAGING CITYFHEPS

New York City's primary housing rental assistance program, CityFHEPS, now serves more than 52,000 households and commands a budget of over $1.1 billion, making it the largest municipal housing voucher program in the country.[1] But while this massive investment is helping thousands of low-income New Yorkers afford rent and exit shelter, it remains largely

untapped as a tool for boosting long-term economic mobility. With the addition of a relatively modest housing navigator program, the city can transform CityFHEPS into a powerful opportunity engine—helping families not only move into stable housing, but into neighborhoods where their children are far more likely to thrive.

Groundbreaking research by Harvard economist Raj Chetty has shown just how profoundly a neighborhood shapes a child's future social and economic trajectory. Where a child grows up—down to the block level—can influence whether they go to college, whether they are incarcerated, and how much they earn as adults. Chetty's team found that every additional year a child spends in a higher-opportunity neighborhood improves their future outcomes.[2]

Even small moves make a major difference. That's because the map of opportunity in New York is a checkerboard, with strikingly different mobility outcomes experienced by residents in close geographic proximity. While high-opportunity neighborhoods are unsurprisingly more common in wealthier areas of the city—and low-opportunity neighborhoods are closely linked to concentrations of poverty—pockets of upward mobility can be found in nearly every community. Often, these opportunity blocks are just a short walk from where families already live.

For example, in several blocks of Brownsville, the average household income at age 35 for children from low-income families is just $18,000—among the lowest in the city. But just six blocks away, near Martin Luther King Jr. Park and a cluster of public schools, those same children go on to earn an average of $31,000. In East Elmhurst, low-income Hispanic children growing up just north of Astoria Boulevard earn an average of $29,000 as adults. But just south of that same boulevard, future earnings climb to $41,000. In parts of East Flatbush, low-income children earn as much as $73,000 as adults—more than twice the earnings of their counterparts just a few blocks away.[3]

Yet today, CityFHEPS does little to guide voucher holders toward these neighborhoods. Most families end up wherever they can find an available unit and a willing landlord—not where children are most likely to flourish. To change this, the mayor and City Council should work together to transform CityFHEPS into a far more effective tool for advancing economic opportunity, drawing lessons from a highly promising pilot program in Seattle that shows how a voucher system can be redesigned to maximize upward mobility.

Seattle's Creating Moves to Opportunity (CMTO) initiative—developed with support from Chetty's Opportunity Insights team—pairs low-income families with trained housing navigators who help them access homes in neighborhoods where the data suggests better economic mobility outcomes over time. These navigators provided customized support: identifying affordable listings, engaging with landlords, covering upfront costs like application fees and security deposits, and walking families through the paperwork. The results were dramatic. Just 15 percent of families in the control group—those who received only a voucher—moved to high-opportunity neighborhoods. But among those who received CMTO's full-service support, that figure jumped to 53 percent. Encouragingly, most of those families remained in their new neighborhoods long after their initial leases ended.[4]

Follow-up research tested which elements of the program made the biggest difference. Personalized, one-on-one support proved far more effective than information or financial assistance alone. Families who worked closely with navigators were significantly more likely to move to higher-opportunity neighborhoods, with the most intensive support producing five times the impact of lighter-touch interventions.

As the CityFHEPS budget surpasses $1.1 billion annually—and with costs projected to rise further—New York City faces hard choices about how to sustain the program in the years ahead. While vouchers are cheaper than shelter in the short term, they become more expensive over time.[5] That makes it all the more important to maximize the impact of every dollar the city is already spending. At the same time, extended shelter stays do significant harm to families, and long-term use of unguided vouchers may do little to improve long-term economic outcomes.[6]

A pilot modeled after Seattle's Creating Moves to Opportunity (CMTO) initiative offers one of the most promising ways to

change this—by helping more families move to neighborhoods where their children are significantly more likely to thrive. The cost of a CMTO-style intervention is modest: about $2,660 per family in Seattle, or just 2 percent of the average voucher payment over seven years. If these investments help families and their children take steps toward long-term financial security, the payoff could be significant: more New Yorkers moving out of poverty, and fewer households needing ongoing housing subsidies.

Now is the time for New York City to build on this model. With the mayor and City Council already investing more than $1.1 billion in CityFHEPS, the foundation is in place. But to ensure this investment is also producing long-term opportunity gains, the city should pilot a CMTO-style program that layers in robust, one-on-one housing navigation and evaluates the impact of moves to higher-opportunity blocks over time. Based on Seattle's approach, a pilot could support 2,500 families at a cost of only $6.5 million—just a tiny fraction of the voucher budget.

To make this work at scale, the city should invest in training and supporting the case managers already working at nonprofit Homebase providers across the five boroughs—while also leaving the door open to recruiting a new corps of dedicated housing mobility navigators. Homebase case managers are on the front lines of helping residents at risk of homelessness access the CityFHEPS program, but they often lack the tools, training, and capacity to guide families toward higher-opportunity neighborhoods. With targeted mobility-focused training, access to data tools like Opportunity Insights' interactive Opportunity Atlas map, more manageable caseloads, and clear reporting requirements, these existing staff could play a much greater role in advancing economic mobility. At the same time, launching a dedicated pilot with specialized navigators could provide a concrete test of impact while informing broader improvements to the voucher system.

To help fund the pilot, the city could pursue a philanthropic match from foundations focused on economic mobility. Another option would be to explore a small assessment on new market-rate housing developments—such as a linkage fee model, which other cities have successfully implemented to fund affordable housing. In addition, the city should take a closer look at how administrative and programmatic dollars are currently being spent within the Department of Social Services and the Human Resources Administration. With greater transparency and targeted efficiencies, it may be possible to repurpose a small share of existing funds to support an expanded corps of trained housing navigators. The pilot should be rigorously evaluated for its return on investment, with support from NYC Opportunity and research partners like Opportunity Insights.

To be clear, this strategy is just one piece of a broader economic mobility agenda. City leaders should also invest in making more neighborhoods places of opportunity—by expanding access to high-quality early childhood education, upgrading local parks and libraries, investing in community schools, and ensuring that more mixed-income housing is built. But right now, no strategy offers more potential for transformative, long-term impact at a relatively modest cost than adapting CityFHEPS to support moves to higher-opportunity neighborhoods.

CityFHEPS is already a lifeline for tens of thousands of New Yorkers. With the right supports, it could become one of the city's most powerful levers for generating economic mobility.

2. HELP MORE WORKING ADULTS RE-ENROLL AT CUNY BY ELIMINATING UNPAID BALANCES UNDER $1,000—FUNDED BY ALLOWING A MODEST AMOUNT OF INFILL HOUSING ON CUNY CAMPUSES

In the three years since the CUNY Reconnect program was created, more than 47,000 mostly low-income working adults across New York City have re-enrolled at CUNY. Clearly, many New Yorkers understand that one of the surest paths to upward mobility involves earning a college credential—even if it means returning to school as an adult after leaving college without a degree the first time around.

But there is an opportunity to help tens of thousands more New Yorkers re-enroll at CUNY and achieve the economic

benefits that come with a college degree. Indeed, more than 630,000 New York City residents between the ages of 25 and 64 have some college credits but left before crossing the college finish line.[7] Many working adults across the five boroughs would like to re-enroll at CUNY but are blocked from doing so because they owe the university money. Financial challenges are the most common reason CUNY students leave college in the first place, and many withdraw with unpaid balances they cannot afford to repay.

This challenge can even prevent current CUNY students from continuing their education. For instance, in 2024 alone, more than 15,000 enrolled students finished the semester with an unpaid balance, preventing them from registering for the following term. Most of these students owe $2,000 or less.[8] Our research shows that even much smaller debts—as little as $250—can be a major barrier to reenrollment.[9]

As Rochelle Sinclair, executive director of college success nonprofit OneGoal told us: “You cannot re-enroll unless you pay off the $250 from this class that you dropped. Some of that seems insignificant, but that’s an incredible burden for many of our New Yorkers in terms of making a decision about whether they’re going to persist in their post-secondary path.”

To help more New Yorkers return to CUNY and complete their credentials, city and state leaders should partner on a CUNY Fresh Start initiative that would clear an unpaid balance of up to $1,000 for CUNY students who started but have not completed their degree. Clearing this hurdle to college completion will help a lot more New Yorkers springboard into the middle class. Indeed, even though recent progress with skills-based hiring has created new pathways to economic success, a post-secondary education still brings massive economic benefits. New York City residents with bachelor’s degrees earn, on average, $1.6 million more over their lifetime than people with only a high school education.[10] And more than two-thirds of annual job openings expected in the coming years will require at least some college education.

Establishing CUNY Fresh Start would not require a massive new investment. Just $10 million in funding, for example, could help eliminate outstanding balances for 10,000 New Yorkers with an average unpaid debt of $1,000. But with CUNY facing its own significant fiscal challenges, the university should not be expected to fund this new economic mobility program on its own.

City and state leaders should provide the funding needed to launch CUNY Fresh Start. One promising option is to establish a new revenue stream directly tied to CUNY by permitting a modest amount of infill housing across the university’s 25 campuses. Many CUNY campuses abut residential neighborhoods and include surface parking lots and underutilized parcels that could be redeveloped for housing. In fact, six campuses are larger than 40 acres, and collectively, CUNY controls more than 80 acres of parking lots.[11] Unlocking the development rights for even a handful of these sites could generate new revenue to fund Fresh Start—and potentially expand other evidence-based college and career success programs—while also contributing to the city’s efforts to address the affordable housing crisis.

3. SCALE EFFECTIVE TRAINING PROGRAMS BY CREATING AN NYC CAREER IMPACT BOND

To get on the path to stable, family-sustaining jobs, many more working-age New Yorkers will need access to high-quality career training programs with proven outcomes. That need is poised to surge as artificial intelligence and automation reshape the labor market. But for this to happen, the city will need to fix a fundamental shortcoming in its workforce development system: New York’s most effective training programs typically serve only a few dozen to a few hundred people each year, and the nonprofits that run them find it highly challenging to scale up—not just because public funding is limited, but because the current funding model is not designed to support outcomes-based growth.

The system makes it difficult for training providers to access flexible, upfront capital, which is essential for expanding programs that work. With steep budget deficits looming and federal workforce funding at risk, simply allocating more city

dollars may not be an option. Changing this will require bold action to create a new stream of sustainable funding targeted at expanding the most effective programs—and designed to help meet far more of the city's unmet demand for career training.

The scale of the need is daunting. Today, more than one million working-age New Yorkers are struggling with unemployment or underemployment—including over 556,000 full-time workers earning minimum wage, 208,000 part-time workers who want full-time work, 185,000 unemployed individuals, and more than 111,000 college graduates working in low-wage jobs that don't require a degree.[12]

Looking ahead, the challenge will only grow. Studies suggest that AI and automation could replace at least 30 percent of all hours worked across the U.S. economy by 2030, disrupting major employment sectors like retail, transportation, food service, customer support, and administrative work.[13] That means tens of thousands of New Yorkers will need to train, reskill, or upskill to avoid displacement and remain competitive in the labor market.

At the same time, New York's most effective training programs are meeting just a fraction of the need. Pursuit and The Knowledge House, two tech-focused nonprofits serving primarily low-income New Yorkers, each serve fewer than 200 participants annually despite strong records of helping graduates land career-track tech jobs. Per Scholas, one of the city's largest and best-known tech training providers, serves fewer than 1,000 participants per year. Building Skills NY, which connects New Yorkers with construction jobs, reaches under 400 people annually. Brooklyn Networks, a cable installation program for low-income New Yorkers, serves about 66 participants each year. Similar figures hold true for other highly effective but underfunded programs—such as culinary training for justice-involved individuals and credentialing programs for immigrants with nursing experience—underscoring the widespread mismatch between program success and funding capacity.

These high-quality programs are typically intensive, multi-week, full-time commitments that cost between $8,000 and $12,000 per participant—while charging nothing in tuition.
At the same time, the largest public funding stream, the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), maxesout at less than $2,000 per person. The result is a system in which the most effective programs are often the most financially constrained and nonprofits end up competing with one another for limited philanthropic funding.

Expanding successful skills-building programs in the coming years will require new financing mechanisms that can scale with demand at a time when public dollars are likely to be in short supply. To meet this moment, New York City should launch a Career Impact Bond—a revolving, outcomes-based fund that can mobilize public, private, and philanthropic capital to scale up effective training programs. The city can follow the lead of New Jersey, which launched the nation's first Pay It Forward program in 2022 with support from the NJ CEO Council, the New Jersey State Office of Innovation, and the national nonprofit Social Finance.[14]

The fund is designed to help fill New Jersey's talent gaps—delivering the trained talent that the state's employers need—while providing low-income residents with access to high-quality, tuition-free training in fields like nursing, radiologic technology, HVAC, welding, and cybersecurity. As of 2025, the NJ Career Impact Bond has enrolled more than 370 learners—77 percent of whom do not have a four-year degree and 75 percent of whom are people of color. Participants receive zero-interest loans to cover tuition and living expenses, along with monthly stipends ranging from $325 to $500. Graduates who secure jobs earning over $50,000 begin making income-based repayments that are recycled back into the fund to support future participants. Programs have already
helped students earn associate degrees in nursing and credentials in HVAC and cybersecurity, with emergency support funds helping students stay on track through financial or personal hardships.[15]

Several other cities and states are adapting this model. Massachusetts has created a Climate Careers Fund to upskill workers for jobs in the green economy. San Diego is using a pay-it-forward approach to expand the pipeline of licensed behavioral health clinicians. And in San Antonio, participants in a city-funded internship program are matched with employers who agree to repay into the internship fund if they hire the intern full-time.

In New York, a few organizations are already experimenting with pay-it-forward approaches. Pursuit, a tech training nonprofit in Queens, uses an income-based repayment model to finance its training at no upfront cost to participants. Graduates earn more than $85,000 annually on average and default rates have been low. Inspired by this model, lawmakers in Albany have introduced the Good Jobs Guarantee Act, which would create a statewide workforce training fund built on a public-private financing model. Participants would not be charged any upfront tuition and would only begin making repayments if they secure a job paying more than $50,000 annually. Crucially, the legislation includes a $100 million state-backed "guarantor fund" that functions as a loan loss reserve, helping to reduce risk for investors and enabling private capital to flow into workforce development at greater scale.[16]

But the mayor does not need to wait for Albany to act. Now is the time for New York City to embrace and scale this promising model. The mayor should work with the City Council to seed a $25 million NYC Career Impact Bond fund, and secure a private match from major corporations, foundations, and impact investors. The city already has the infrastructure needed to engage the private sector, from the New York Jobs CEO Council to the Partnership for New York City and other influential business and trade associations, as well as a robust network of social impact investors. Nonprofit training providers that can demonstrate strong outcomes and a measurable return on investment should be eligible to participate, alongside public institutions like CUNY.

At a time when federal funding cuts are poised to create massive budget pressures on both the city and state, a public-private Career Impact Bond offers a powerful way to generate new and recurring dollars to finance economic mobility—while mobilizing private capital to help meet New York's growing workforce development needs.

4. EXPAND ACCESS TO WELL-PAYING JOBS BY REPLICATING THE NYC JOBS CEO COUNCIL MODEL FOR NEW YORK'S NEXT 100 LARGEST EMPLOYERS

New York City is home to tens of thousands of growing businesses that are hiring for good jobs every day—from healthcare and education to finance and tech. Many of these companies offer roles with advancement potential, good wages, and full-time hours. But far too few are connected to the city's talent development infrastructure, limiting how many New Yorkers from lower-income backgrounds can access these opportunities.

To expand economic mobility and meet the demands of the city's labor market, the next mayor should launch a major new effort to recruit 100 more significant employers into partnerships designed to hire low-income New Yorkers into quality jobs.

The New York Jobs CEO Council has shown that this model works: in 2023 alone, its roughly 30 member companies—including JPMorgan Chase, Amazon, and Accenture—hired more than 10,000 low-income New Yorkers into jobs paying $69,000 or more.[17] These outcomes were the result of a deliberate strategy to partner with CUNY, career development providers, and apprenticeship programs—connecting New Yorkers to opportunities in high-growth sectors. Now is the time to expand this model by helping the next 100 large and mid-sized employers—from fast-growing startups to established firms—plug into the city's talent infrastructure and join the effort to expand economic mobility.

While many of New York's very largest employers are among its most prolific job creators, the city's other large and mid-sized companies are also significant contributors to net job growth. Since 2021, city firms with between 50 and 500 employees have added more than 140,000 new jobs.[18] But these companies are generally much less likely to be actively engaged with the city's talent development programs that are serving low-income New Yorkers.

At the same time, many of the city's strongest talent development organizations—those with high job placement rates, wage gains, and employer satisfaction—face challenges in scaling not because of funding alone, but because it's difficult to aggregate demand from employers. A coordinated effort to engage 100 more of the city's largest companies can help unlock and pool that demand—and enable more graduates of CUNY colleges and career training programs to move into well-paying jobs.

To achieve this, the city should launch a new initiative to recruit 100 more leading New York City companies to partner on efforts to hire low-income New Yorkers into good jobs. The next mayor should lead the charge, conveying to employers the enormous benefits of plugging in to existing education and training infrastructure, while making it easier for CEOs of smaller companies to get involved. This could take the form of a new public-private partnership, or an effort to help scale up the work of an existing intermediary. And it could leverage other employer-facing intermediaries, including industry and trade associations, the five borough-based chambers of commerce, and the Workforce Development Board.

Participating employers would be asked to commit to clear, measurable goals—such as hiring a set number of low-income or underrepresented New Yorkers, partnering with CUNY and nonprofit career training providers, and tracking outcomes. In return, the city can offer access to customized training grants, connections to vetted talent pipelines, and technical assistance through an employer intermediary—as well as highly visible public recognition.

To support participating companies, the city should also expand high-quality, employer-connected training models. That includes scaling apprenticeships in high-growth sectors like tech. It also means continuing to build out employer partnerships at CUNY through the Inclusive Economy Initiative and other efforts to align degree programs with in-demand career paths.

And at a time when the city faces enormous fiscal challenges—including looming federal funding cuts and ongoing budget gaps—New York's leaders will need to double down on public-private partnerships to drive progress on economic mobility. By bringing the next 100 employers into the fold, the city can build on what's already working and extend opportunity to thousands more low-income New Yorkers—connecting them to good jobs across a broader swath of the city's economy.

5. PROVIDE FREE OMNY CARDS FOR CUNY STUDENTS AND WORKFORCE TRAINING PARTICIPANTS, FUNDED WITH NEW REVENUE FROM STREET PARKING

Now more than ever, the path to the middle class in New York requires a college credential or the completion of a sector-specific workforce training program. But each year thousands of New Yorkers drop out of CUNY or fail to complete a training program. This isn't usually because they cannot afford tuition. In fact, more than two-thirds of in-state CUNY undergraduates attend tuition-free thanks to Pell and TAP, and most workforce training programs are free. Instead, non-tuition expenses often make it financially impossible to persist. While many are derailed by child care costs or sudden medical bills, a surprising number are tripped up by something as basic as the cost of an OMNY card.

Affluent New Yorkers may take this everyday expense for granted, but this cost can be debilitating for the mostly low-income New Yorkers attending CUNY—over half of whom live below the poverty line—or for those enrolled in career training programs that often run from six weeks to a year and require full-time attendance.

The challenge of affording public transit came up more than any other single barrier in our research about the leading non-

tuition causes of leaving CUNY without a degree. Many of the same low-income students enrolled at CUNY benefited from a free OMNY card when attending public high schools across the five boroughs. But while those financial strains don't typically go away between 12th grade and their first year of college, that crucial support falls away.

CUNY's ASAP and ACE programs, which provide unlimited OMNY cards to students, are boosting graduation rates by nearly 40 percent. But today, most CUNY students don't receive any transportation support.

The barriers are similar for participants of workforce training programs. Our research shows that fewer than 1 in 3 nonprofit workforce development organizations are able to provide any transit subsidies, even as the majority report that the cost of transportation is a key barrier to enrollment and persistence.

Providing a free, unlimited OMNY card to every CUNY undergraduate and participants in evidence-based career training programs would help accelerate progress toward credentials and careers—making it more likely that students complete their programs, secure employment, and achieve economic independence.

To help pay for this crucial support, New York will need bold ideas that generate new revenue. One of the most promising opportunities is to start charging for a share of the more than three million street parking spaces the city currently gives away for free, and direct a portion of that revenue to provide free OMNY cards for CUNY students and New Yorkers in workforce training.

New York City has more than 12,000 miles of curb, encompassing over 3 million street parking spaces. But just 80,000 of those spaces are metered—fewer than 2.5 percent.[19] That's a costly missed opportunity. The city's current parking meter program generates about $258 million in parking meter revenue annually, a figure that is essentially flat over the past decade after adjusting for inflation.[20] But if the city were to meter just 25 percent of existing free street parking spaces—focused on the city's commercial corridors and major avenues—it could generate at least $1.21 billion in additional annual revenue.[21]

The mayor should act swiftly to expand the city's parking meter program as a key source of new revenue in a challenging time. And the mayor should commit a small portion of that revenue to a simple but powerful support that can dramatically improve economic outcomes for thousands of New Yorkers: providing a free unlimited OMNY card to New Yorkers pursuing higher education and workforce training.

The cost of this proposal would require only a fraction of the potential revenue from an expansion of paid street parking. Assuming $1,768 per OMNY card per year (based on the $34 weekly fare cap), the total annual cost to provide a free unlimited OMNY card to all 209,000 CUNY undergraduates would be approximately $260.8 million. Adding 30,000 workforce training participants for an average of 16 weeks per year would require an additional $15.36 million.

In all, the total cost would be just over $275 million per year—or less than one-quarter of the revenue from an expanded parking meter program. The rest of the revenue could be dedicated to street-level improvements, from making dangerous intersections safer and creating new plazas to investing in electric vehicle infrastructure and expanding outdoor dining and open streets programs.

Paid parking would generate significant benefits beyond new revenue, with little downside. While many drivers would understandably prefer the status quo, New Yorkers who own cars earn, on average, twice as much as non-car-owning households, and paying for parking is already an accepted fact of life for car owners.[22] At the same time, evidence from other cities has shown additional advantages. For instance, spots with metered parking turn over more frequently and parking search times drop precipitously, making it easier for customers to find parking. Drivers save time and local businesses benefit from increased availability of spots. And greenhouse gas emissions decline, as drivers spend less time circling and idling.[23]

Together, these actions would advance multiple goals: more equitable access to economic opportunity, a well-managed curb that works better for everyone, and a powerful new revenue source for a city in need of long-term fiscal solutions. By

reserving a portion of this new revenue to fund free OMNY cards for low-income CUNY students and workforce training participants, the city can make a catalytic investment in economic mobility—ensuring that more New Yorkers pursuing education can get where they need to go, and get ahead.

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5 Ideas to Advance Economic Mobility in NYC Amid Harmful Federal Policies is a publication of the Center for an Urban Future. Written by Jonathan Bowles and Eli Dvorkin. Additional research by Zamira Frost, Lina Mazioui, Julia Ross, and Samuel Weidman.

Center for an Urban Future (CUF) is a leading New York City-based think tank that generates smart and sustainable public policies to reduce inequality, increase economic mobility, and grow the economy.

CUF receives general operating support from **The Clark Foundation** and the **Altman Foundation**. We are also grateful for support from **Fisher Brothers Foundation** for the Center for an Urban Future's Middle Class Jobs Project, and ongoing support from a number of other philanthropic funders.

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