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*Mile High Connects*

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# Integrating Funders Into a Multisector Transit-Equity Collaborative: Lessons From the Field

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Keywords: Collective impact, equity, data, research, community engagement

## Key Points

- This article examines the efforts of Mile High Connects, a collaborative working to ensure that the Denver region's \$7.8 billion transit project benefits low-income communities and communities of color by connecting them to affordable housing, healthy environments, quality education, and good-paying jobs.
- The collaborative, which includes local and national funders that have coalesced around the central issue of transit equity, has adopted a collective-impact model that has at its core two tools to measure and track its work and to show the social-impact outcomes achieved through its initiatives.
- This article describes the collaborative's approach to evaluation, reflects on its initial impacts, offers an assessment of its overall success, and shares with the philanthropic sector lessons learned in working effectively in a cross-sector collaborative.

With the implementation of its \$7.8 billion FasTracks light- and commuter-rail project, the Denver region has the potential to be a national model for equitable transit and community development. The development has also brought displacement and gentrification pressures to the low-income communities and communities of color through which many of the new lines run. It has raised numerous questions about equitable community development when public investment suddenly makes the real estate of entire neighborhoods more valuable, and about equitable transit access as rail development drives changes in bus service in low-income communities, and as fare increases place additional burdens on low-income households.

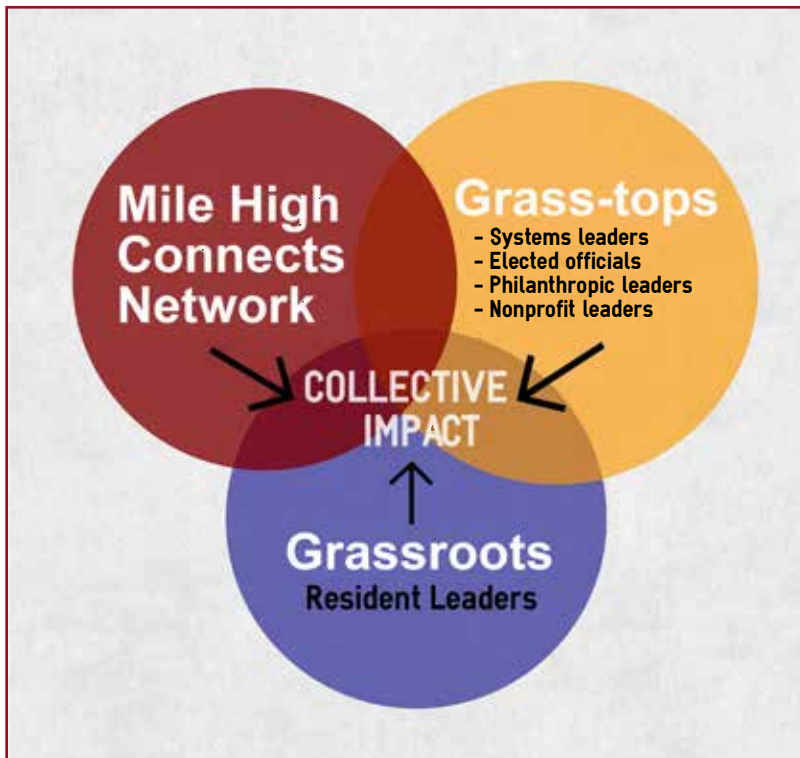
To keep these concerns in the forefront of public and private decision-making throughout the decades-long development process, a collaborative of private, public, and nonprofit organizations came together in 2010–11 to form Mile High Connects (MHC). MHC's mission is ensure that Denver's transit buildout benefits low-income communities and communities of color by connecting them to affordable housing, healthy environments, quality education, and good-paying jobs.

MHC's collaborative table includes local and national funders that have coalesced around the central issue of transit equity. Early in its development, the collaborative adopted a collective-impact approach to its work (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Central to collective impact is data-driven evaluation, including outcome tracking to determine the social impact achieved through the collective approach. For MHC, these

## The Making of a Transit Equity Collaborative

*The Denver region's massive public investment in transit is leveraging an even more massive private investment in the areas around the new stations. No one organization has the capacity or breadth of focus to think about how this development can be done in a sustainable and equitable fashion. If ever an opportunity called for a collaborative cross-sector response, this was it.*

— Thomas A. Gougeon, president, Gates Family Foundation

**FIGURE 1** Illustration of MHC's Collective Impact Model

data tools include a formal process for collecting and analyzing data on indicators of broad, community-level change, and a data dashboard focused on its internal work. In 2014, MHC established its indicators through a lengthy, community-driven process and collected baseline data. The indicators measure progress made on issues such as preserving and creating affordable housing near transit, and increasing the number of jobs available within a half-mile of transit. MHC's data partners will track changes in these indicators against the baseline every three years. MHC has also developed an online dashboard that tracks outputs and outcomes of activities tied to its partners' annual work plans. This dashboard provides an internal feedback loop for partners and helps MHC to make adjustments in its strategy and programming.

This article will outline the history, context, and structure of MHC's work as a cross-sector collective-impact collaborative, describe the

collaborative's approach to evaluation, reflect on its initial impacts, and offer an assessment of MHC's overall success.

As the backbone organization working on transit-equity issues in the Denver region, MHC serves as a convener and connector of grassroots groups, which are most directly affected by the transit buildout, and the "grasstops" groups, which typically make most major decisions about land use, community development, service routes, and transit fares, often without the involvement of those most directly affected. (See Figure 1.) MHC's role is to bring considerations of equity to the grasstops by bringing the voice, perspective, and power of the grassroots into the spaces where decisions are made. The collective-impact approach enables MHC to engage expertise and networks from multiple sectors by bringing interdisciplinary partners to its collaborative table, and to move considerations of equity to the forefront through the

engagement of grassroots groups in decisions about the deployment of capital and human resources that have the capacity to bring broad social change to low-income communities and communities of color.

*History of Mile High Connects*

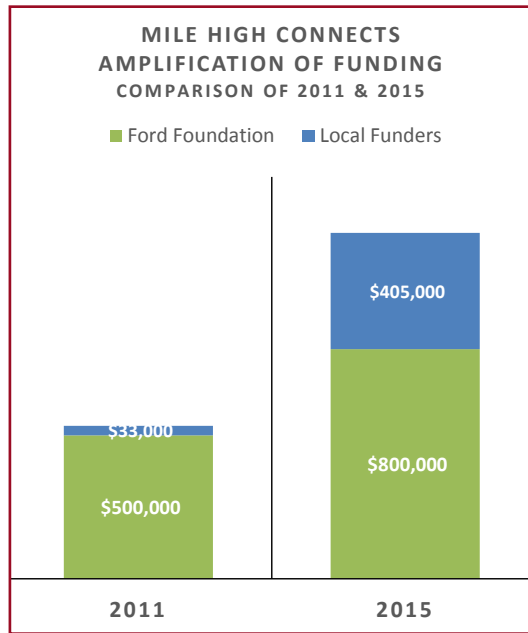
*New transit development puts tremendous pressure on affordable housing near transit sites, but it also presents many other opportunities and challenges. I brought my affordable housing focus to Mile High Connects, but through the collaborative I also learned to recognize transit’s impact on jobs, access to education, and the creation of healthy communities.*

— Melinda Pollack, vice president for transit-oriented development and Denver market leader, Enterprise Community Partners

Many cities across the U.S. are seeing urban cores come back to life and a re-energized interest in living, working, and playing in these communities. This movement also includes large-scale expansions and investments in new and existing transit systems. These trends are introducing a host of new opportunities in these regions, such as transit-oriented development, connectivity to jobs, and reduced reliance on cars. At the same time, investments are creating displacement and gentrification pressures for low-income communities and communities of color, causing individuals and families to move out of the urban core, spurring the deterioration of rich cultural communities and pushing residents farther from jobs and community networks, and severing access to essential support services.

The Denver region’s recent development fits squarely within this pattern. In 2004, Denver’s voters approved FasTracks, a \$7.8 billion transit expansion that is adding 122 miles of rail, 18 miles of bus rapid transit, and enhanced regional bus service. The near-manic development of denser “new urbanist” communities near transit further heightened Denver’s status as a high-demand destination for millennials. As a result, an increasing number of communities are burdened with extremely high costs of living, and

**FIGURE 2** Amplification of Funding



long-established as well as immigrant residents must navigate quickly shifting neighborhood landscapes as they struggle to overcome systemic poverty driven by the accelerating cost of housing and transportation in an environment of low-wage service jobs and stagnant pay. This mix of sharply increasing costs of housing and transportation, low-wage jobs, displacement pressure, lack of access to quality education, and unhealthy physical environments has contributed to significant inequities in communities across the region.

As the FasTracks buildout began to hit its stride as the region emerged from the Great Recession in 2008 and 2009, and the pressure of inequitable development that it spurred grew, four Denver-area nonprofits working on affordable housing, transit-oriented development, and urban land use began to focus on the looming challenges. Neither they nor their funders, however, were working together in any sustained way. It took an invitation from the Ford Foundation, which had independent funding relationships with the four nonprofits, to bring the funders and nonprofits together in the summer of 2010. Ford suggested that local funders get together with

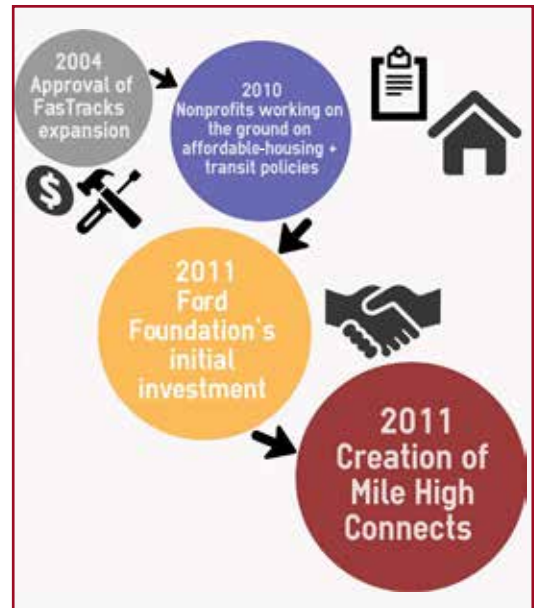
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the nonprofits to discuss what a collaborative focused on regional equity might be able to accomplish. Ford indicated that if the group decided to move forward, it would be willing to provide seed funding in 2011 for planning and organizing such a collaborative. A group of funders and the four nonprofits met throughout the fall and winter of 2010–11 to sketch out the structure and governance of a collective project focused on transit equity, create case-making materials, and develop a planning-grant proposal. Ford provided a \$500,000 seed grant in mid-2011 to support the nonprofits working in the collaborative and to enable the group to hire the Funders Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities, which had helped to launch similar transit-equity collaboratives in the Bay Area and the Twin Cities. The network then staffed the planning process that led to the creation of the collaborative’s governance structure at the end of 2011.

It was at the end of this planning process that the collaborative’s members adopted a formal collective-impact approach, with an independent backbone organization now known as Mile High Connects; a cross-sector membership with defined roles; a formal governance structure; and a focus on data-driven decision-making. The group chose the collective-impact approach because of its recognition during its planning phase that a shared agenda, alignment of efforts and decision-making, and a focus on common outcomes were essential to meet the enormous challenges and opportunities presented to the Denver region by this unprecedented public investment in transit. (See Figure 2.)

With Ford’s guidance and funding and an established governance structure, local funders quickly added their financial support to form a collaborative budget that provided funding to hire a dedicated MHC staff. (See Figure 2.) Just as importantly, as new funders brought their perspectives on the impacts of the transit buildout on the region, the collaborative’s focus expanded from affordable housing and transit to include access to middle-skill jobs, quality education, and healthy communities. This broader focus

**FIGURE 3** Developmental Timeline of Mile High Connects



is reflected in MHC’s current goal of ensuring that Denver’s transit buildout benefits low-income communities and communities of color by connecting them to affordable housing, healthy environments, quality education, and good-paying jobs. In collective-impact terms, MHC serves as the backbone organization: influencing local and regional policies, leveraging and deploying resources, collecting and analyzing data to inform decision-making, and helping residents of low-income communities and communities of color to engage directly in making the decisions that affect their lives. (See Figure 3.)

The cross-sector partners that comprise MHC’s membership are a unique assembly of local and national leaders from philanthropy, affordable-housing finance and policy advocacy, transit advocacy, community development, community engagement and organizing, workforce development, and economic opportunity. It is the first collaborative in Colorado to bring funders, nonprofits, and private-sector actors into a collective-impact project with shared decision-making and pooled funding. (See Figure 4.)

**FIGURE 4** MHC Steering Committee Members

Buck Foundation	FRESC: Good Jobs, Strong Communities	9to5 Colorado
Colorado Health Foundation	Gates Family Foundation	Gary Community Investments/the Piton Foundation
The Colorado Trust	Kaiser Permanente	Rose Community Foundation
Denver Foundation	Natural Resources Defense Council	Urban Land Conservancy
Enterprise Community Partners	New Belgium Family Foundation	U.S. Bank
FirstBank		Wells Fargo
Ford Foundation		

*Role of Funders Within the Collaborative*

*Mile High Connects’ shared governance structure is unique to my experience in philanthropy. Funders and community partners learn from one another and make decisions together about every important element of our work.*

— Patrick Horvath, deputy vice president of programs and director of economic opportunity, The Denver Foundation

- setting MHC’s vision, mission, and strategic plan;
- crafting and approving annual work plans and ensuring accountability for accomplishing approved goals;
- ensuring practices and structures that support equity and inclusiveness within the collaborative and in the collaborative’s strategies and programs; and
- serving as ambassadors and positioning MHC in the community.

Mile High Connects makes decisions about collaborative business through its steering committee, which includes democratic representation from both funders and nonprofits. All of the members share authority for strategic planning, advancing racial equity both within the collaborative and through its work, work planning, and strategic planning; and share accountability for advancing collaborative outcomes. Foundation partners contribute their resources, time, and expertise at the steering committee level, and also work directly on MHC’s strategic activities. Almost all of MHC’s current foundation partners helped to develop the collaborative’s governance structure, and all current funders continue to help refine the its strategies, programs, and operational systems. All 17 MHC partners sit on the steering committee, which serves as the leadership and decision-making body for the collaborative, and each organization has one vote. Among the steering committee’s responsibilities are:

One nonprofit partner and one funder partner serve as co-chairs of the steering committee on a rotating basis, which has helped since its founding to model and advance MHC’s shared power and decision-making structure. The co-chairs also supervise MHC’s executive director and provide overall guidance to the steering committee.

Funding partners such as foundations and corporate funders are required to contribute at least \$5,000 annually to MHC to be members of the steering committee, while nonprofit partners must devote at least half a full-time equivalent (.5FTE) to directly furthering MHC’s goals. Outside of the significant financial investments they make in the collaborative, funders also contribute human and in-kind capital to MHC. Foundation partners connect MHC to their

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networks, co-invest in grantees, engage in joint community outreach and leadership training of community residents, work with MHC on the grant-review team, and co-lead the internal equity and inclusiveness task force.

Funders are deeply integrated across and within the strategies of MHC. Funders have participated directly in its campaign to improve the affordability of the transit system. At board meetings of the Regional Transportation District (RTD), which builds and operates the Denver region's transit system, funders testified on the critical role affordable transit plays in the lives of low-income people and communities of color, and called on the board to join with MHC in developing an income-based transit pass. When MHC flexed its collective muscle to interrupt bus service cuts to a low-income community of color in West Denver, funders stepped into an activist role and leaned into their grass-tops networks to influence the RTD's decision. Ultimately the RTD restored bus service to the community, connecting residents to jobs, food, and other essential services. These tangible successes illustrate MHC's power and influence and demonstrate that community-led strategies, especially when amplified by funders who are willing to step into advocacy roles, can and do lead to incremental and systemic change.

Funders also play a leadership role in MHC's internal equity and inclusiveness committee, which works to broaden the steering committee's understanding of racism, systemic racism, white privilege, and power. A number of foundation partners are part of this committee, and help with planning steering-committee training opportunities; digging into important, risky, and difficult conversations; and leading the steering committee through its capacity-building process on equity. MHC's equity work also includes a layer that examines the collaborative's organizational practices through an equity lens, including hiring, strategic planning, and organizational and administrative policies. Ultimately this internal focus on equity will help MHC to fortify its external strategies to achieve authentic community engagement, including the incorporation of low-income communities and communities of color in MHC's

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decision-making structures, and will help the collaborative to achieve its systemic-change goals.

### Grant Development and Grantmaking: Leveraging and Investing Resources

*The Mile High Connects grant fund has been a critical resource to help the collaborative expand its network and to take action on important issues of equity in the neighborhoods that are being so deeply affected by the transit buildout.*

— Monica Lyle, program officer, The Colorado Health Foundation

MHC uses its grantmaking as a tool to leverage resources and support transit-equity initiatives across the Denver region. MHC grantmaking takes two forms: directed grants that support MHC's core nonprofit partners who are charged with carrying out the collaborative's substantive work, and responsive grants made pursuant to an open and competitive application process that is meant to engage a much broader group of nonprofits from throughout the Denver region.

*The grant committee includes both steering committee members and community residents from several of the low-income neighborhoods most directly affected by the transit buildout. Community members have built their own capacity to participate in the grantmaking process, and have provided valuable insights that have improved the accessibility of the grant-application process, sharpened the grant committee's equity focus, and brought community perspective into grant decisions.*

#### *Directed Grants*

From the time it received its first grant from the Ford Foundation in 2011, MHC has passed on the majority of the funds it has raised to its core nonprofit partners. Initially all four of the partners received equal grants, but over time it became clear that while certain partners had the capacity to undertake significant portions of the MHC work plan, others, due to staffing constraints or other commitments, could only lead smaller activities.

All of the MHC partners, including the executive director, funders, and nonprofits, worked together to create a more equitable resource-allocation process that aligned resources with work-plan deliverables. Currently, core nonprofit partners determine which activities within the

overall MHC annual work plan they can undertake, and submit a budget to reflect the resources required to carry out this work. Nonprofit partners are then funded based on these annual budgets, which are reviewed and approved by the funder partners. MHC distributes about \$600,000 annually to its core nonprofit partners through its directed-grant process.

#### *Responsive Grants*

MHC distributes resources through an annual competitive process to groups and nonprofits across the Denver region that are working on transit-equity projects. MHC's grant fund committee oversees the responsive-grantmaking process, which involves reviewing grant applications, conducting site visits, revising grant guidelines, and assembling a grant docket that is subject to final approval by the steering committee. The grant committee is chaired by an experienced program officer from one of the funder partners as well as supported by MHC staff. The responsive-grant fund was initially capitalized by a three-year, \$190,000 grant from the Convergence Innovation Fund; it expired in 2015. Responsive grants are currently funded out of MHC's general fundraising.

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The grant fund deepens MHC's community network, enabling the collaborative to discover and partner with nonprofits and groups that are working directly in and with the communities where MHC seeks to have impact. Emerging community groups "discovered" through the grant fund have gone on to receive further funding from other foundation partners. MHC



awards about \$160,000 annually through its responsive-grant process.

This combination of directed and responsive grants has enabled MHC to dive deeply into its core work by making sustained and significant investments in several high-capacity nonprofits, while also engaging a large number of small, nimble, grassroots organizations that are taking action on critical issues of transit equity and community development right in their own neighborhoods.

### Current Work Plan Priorities

MHC's core work plan for the last two years has focused on two broad transit-equity issues and four main topical areas within these issues.

#### *Transit-Oriented Development: Affordable Housing and Community Facilities*

Gentrification and displacement issues, coupled with the affordable-housing crisis, continue to affect low-income communities in metro Denver. MHC is developing an anti-gentrification and anti-displacement platform that includes creating and preserving affordable housing and community facilities, and developing a renters' rights platform focused particularly on areas surrounding transit. MHC is also researching a strategy to preserve manufactured-housing communities that are at risk of displacement. MHC and its partners are working to increase and align financial resources for affordable housing and community facilities. By interrupting the gentrification and displacement pressures on low-income communities gaining access to new transit lines, and by preserving and developing affordable housing near transit, MHC seeks to support equitable community development and foster healthy, vibrant communities that have room for everyone.

#### *Transit-Oriented Development: Business, Local Workforce, and Middle-Skill Jobs*

Low-income individuals and families need access to good-paying jobs and job supports such as child care if they are to have economic security and mobility. MHC works to link residents to

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### *Accessible Transit: Affordable Fares and Meaningful Service Routes*

Affordable transit and meaningful service routes are two critical elements of a transit system that works for low-income families and transit-reliant individuals. Through its Affordable Fares Task Force, MHC successfully implemented an affordable-fares campaign that has engaged the Regional Transit District in a research effort to create a fare structure offering a 50 percent reduced fare for those living at or below 150 percent of the poverty level. MHC also supports resident-led efforts to preserve or reinstate service routes in low-income communities and communities of color. MHC works with the RTD to improve the district's stakeholder-input process on service routes, and advocates for the organization to strengthen its overall service route-change process. Increasing transit access for the low-income individuals and families who need it the most will create real pathways to opportunity and open up doors to good-paying jobs and education.

### *Accessible Transit: First- and Last-Mile Connections*

Even the least expensive and most efficient public transit is useless if people cannot easily reach it from their homes or workplaces. The connections between initial and final destinations, known as first- and last-mile connections (FLMC), are critical elements of transit equity. Unfortunately, jurisdictions across the Denver region have varying definitions of FLMC, lack sustainable funding streams for the infrastructure needed to better connect residents to transit, and lack appropriate tools to track funding that is allocated to these projects. This can often lead to incomplete or deteriorating sidewalks and other safety issues, particularly for low-income communities. MHC has researched and shared recommendations with elected officials in identified geographies to initiate a regional discussion on FLMC. By using a racial and economic lens, MHC assesses how equitable the funding and support is for FLMC projects. By the end of 2016, MHC will produce a white paper that will provide a model describing the return on investment on FLMC. MHC is also helping residents

engage in leadership training to advocate for FLMC solutions at the local level.

### **Advancing Systemic Change**

*Mile High Connects was founded on data and relies on data to guide its decision-making. We need to be able to demonstrate clearly to community members and policymakers how transit decisions affect access to opportunity for the Denver region's low-income communities and communities of color.*

— Matt Barry, vice president for strategic assessment, Gary Community Investments/The Piton Foundation

### *Evaluation and Research*

MHC's foundation partners are thought leaders on data and evaluation and have contributed their data-analysis skills to further the collaborative's learning and evaluation. Gary Community Investments/The Piton Foundation (GCI) is the foremost data expert in the Denver philanthropic community. GCI seeks to create a culture in which data are used to solve pressing social issues, and is an integral partner with MHC in its data and evaluation work.

To start building the case for the importance of equitable development, MHC initiated deep research on the relationship between transit and accessing education, middle-skill jobs, health institutions, housing, and education, as well as on the role safe and effective first/last mile connections play in transit accessibility, especially in low-income neighborhoods. The outcomes and recommendations of this research have determined the strategic direction of the collaborative, and have supported MHC in experimenting with and building knowledge about promising practices in this emerging field at the local and national levels.

With GCI's creative thinking and expertise, MHC created the Denver Regional Equity Atlas (2012), a data tool that uses the transit system as a base from which to tell the stories of the stark disparities in access to opportunity throughout the Denver region. The atlas links data on such areas as chronic disease, income level, educational attainment, location of affordable

housing, high- and low-performing schools, and the location of health care institutions. The atlas is an online, interactive tool used by planners, public health officials, nonprofits, and elected officials for case-making on an array of social issues and policies.

By working with research experts in the field, MHC has produced a number of papers, reports, and tools anchored in its transit-equity priority areas. MHC uses both qualitative and quantitative data to inform its case-making, further its policy-advocacy efforts, and lift up the experiences of low-income communities and communities of color. Community residents' experiences are incorporated through qualitative data-collection methods. This approach is critical for MHC to understand and convey to others the experiences of those most affected by the transit build-out in low-income communities.

MHC's research reports have informed and supported its key strategies, built the field, and advanced equity in critical settings related to MHC's priority areas. *Connecting Housing, Transportation + Education to Expand Opportunity*, its 2013 report with the Center for Cities and Schools (2013), was the anchor for a national convening on the importance of transportation to educational opportunity and success. MHC, Enterprise Community Partners, the Center for Cities and Schools, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and National Housing Conference hosted a gathering with national and local stakeholders to talk about the nexus of housing, transportation, and education. *Left at the Station*, a report released by MHC's organizing partner 9to5 Colorado (2014), raised up resident concerns about the lack of transit accessibility in several low-income communities as a result of the opening of a light-rail line on Denver's west side. Residents identified the cost of transit, station safety, and service cuts as key barriers to transit access. The report was the foundation for MHC's Affordable Fares campaign, which now includes over 100 organizations from throughout the Denver region that have joined MHC's Affordable Fares Task Force to advocate for an income-based pass.

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MHC and GCI recently released *2015 Community Facility Scan: Opportunities for Community-Benefit Commercial Development at Transit in Metro Denver* (Devenport, 2015). The scan looks at 12 station areas in MHC's prioritized geographies and the community benefits they may have to offer to the surrounding neighborhoods if commercial development around the stations is managed with a focus on community-serving facilities. The report outlines recommendations in the areas of health equity, employment, and education, and includes a story-mapping tool.

#### *Long-Term Indicators*

As a collective-impact collaborative, MHC saw as one of its most important data projects the creation of a set of indicators that would help it track its own progress in advancing its key outcomes. GCI contributed its data expertise to help MHC develop long-term indicators to measure community change related to transit-equity strategies. The process of identifying, sorting, prioritizing, and selecting the right data indicators was complex and required a significant investment of time from the members of the

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steering committee. Partners spent time talking through each potential indicator by answering questions such as: How would this particular indicator reveal information about the increase in affordable housing near transit? What types of data sources are available to measure and articulate the health impacts of equitable, transit-oriented development? What indicators can spur policy advocacy at the local and state levels?

Collaborative members struggled to distinguish between shorter-term outputs, which are easier to measure and to link to resource inputs, and longer-term outcomes, for which a causal link to MHC's activities could not be fairly drawn. Ultimately, because MHC's mission is focused on increasing equity and access to opportunity in communities affected by the transit build-out, the collaborative partners chose to hold themselves accountable to measuring MHC's effect on broad indicators of community-level change in MHC's core work areas. MHC chose indicators tied to reliable data sources to ensure dependability of the information. The baseline data set was collected for 2014, and MHC will update the data and report to the community every three years on how these data have changed. These indicators serve as a yardstick to measure the work of MHC. (See Figure 5.) The long-term indicators aim to measure how MHC has generated increases in:

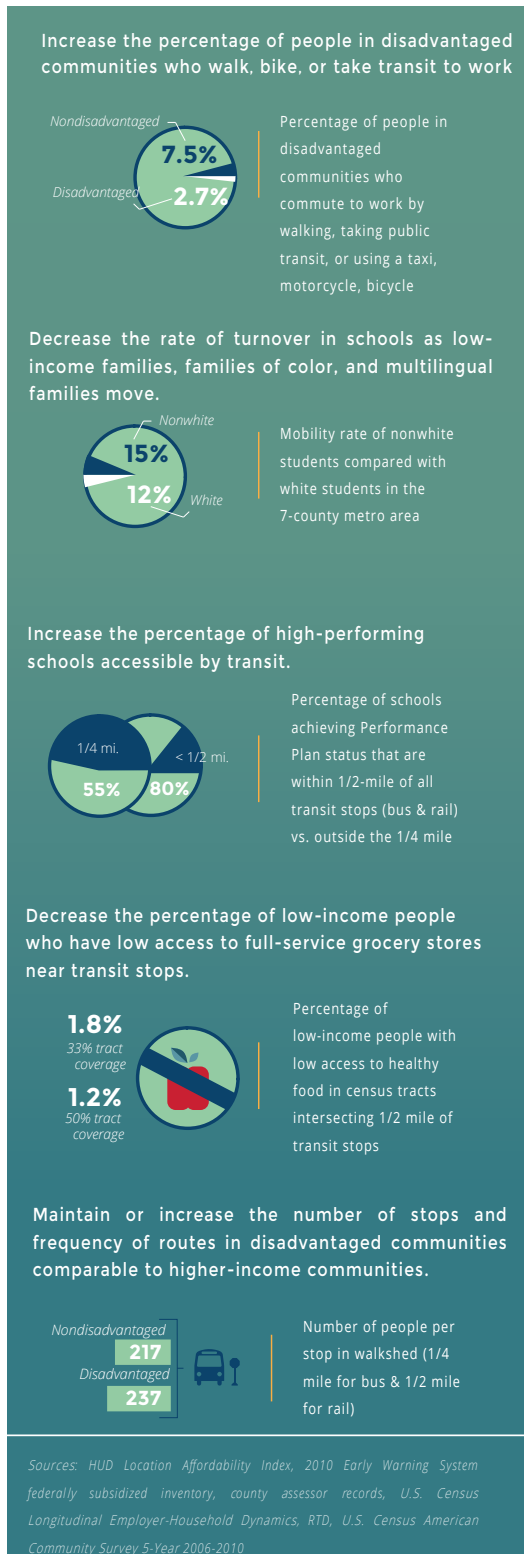
- the number of people moving out of poverty,
- positive health outcomes for low-income communities and communities of color,
- quality educational opportunities, and
- opportunities for low-income people and people of color to live in economically vibrant, integrated communities.

#### *Dashboard*

To capture the developmental growth and learning of the collaborative, MHC uses an online dashboard to track strategies and activities. MHC captures tangible outputs of its partners' work, such as the number of doors knocked on and community meetings held, or movement toward establishing a permanent revenue source for affordable housing. The dashboard ties partner efforts to the long-term indicators and tracks the progress toward these indicators. For example, the dashboard documents the specific activities that MHC's core partners undertake to preserve affordable housing near transit, and these activities support and further MHC's progress toward one of its long-term indicators of success, which is the preservation of 90 percent of existing affordable housing near transit.

GCI also engineered MHC's internal dashboard for work-plan reporting. It helps MHC's executive director maintain accountability for the annual work plans developed and implemented by nonprofit partners. The dashboard is used in place of typical grant reports. Instead of composing long narratives describing what they accomplished, nonprofit partners enter real-time numbers on the outputs they achieved in a given time. The online dashboard tracks the outputs and outcomes of the activities described in the annual work plans on a regular basis, which informs the partners' work and provides feedback that can be used to adjust and strengthen partners' efforts. The dashboard allows MHC to gain understanding on issues such as where movement is being made toward a specific policy, what capital resources have been identified to invest in equitable community development, and what can be done differently on the community level to engage residents in decision-making.

**FIGURE 5** Long-Term Indicators



The dashboard produces reports and illustrates the progress on each nonprofit partner’s activities, and can provide comparisons across nonprofit partners. (See Figure 6.) Foundation partners find the tool useful in understanding how their investment is performing and if it is moving the needle on acute social issues. The dashboard was implemented in 2015, and nonprofit partners enter information each quarter on progress made on activities. Nonprofit partners have had mixed reactions to the tool. It can help them to be mindful about their progress toward meeting the goals in their annual work plan, see environmental opportunities and challenges for moving their work forward, and recalibrate their work to more closely match their activities to the pace of policy change in Colorado’s “policy light” environment. The dashboard’s stark “yes/no” entry format, however, does not allow partners to tell nuanced stories about efforts along a continuum that have not yet achieved their intended result. MHC continues to refine and improve the dashboard to ensure it accurately captures the learning and accomplishments of its partners.

### Learning Community: Building the Field of Collective Impact Through Philanthropy

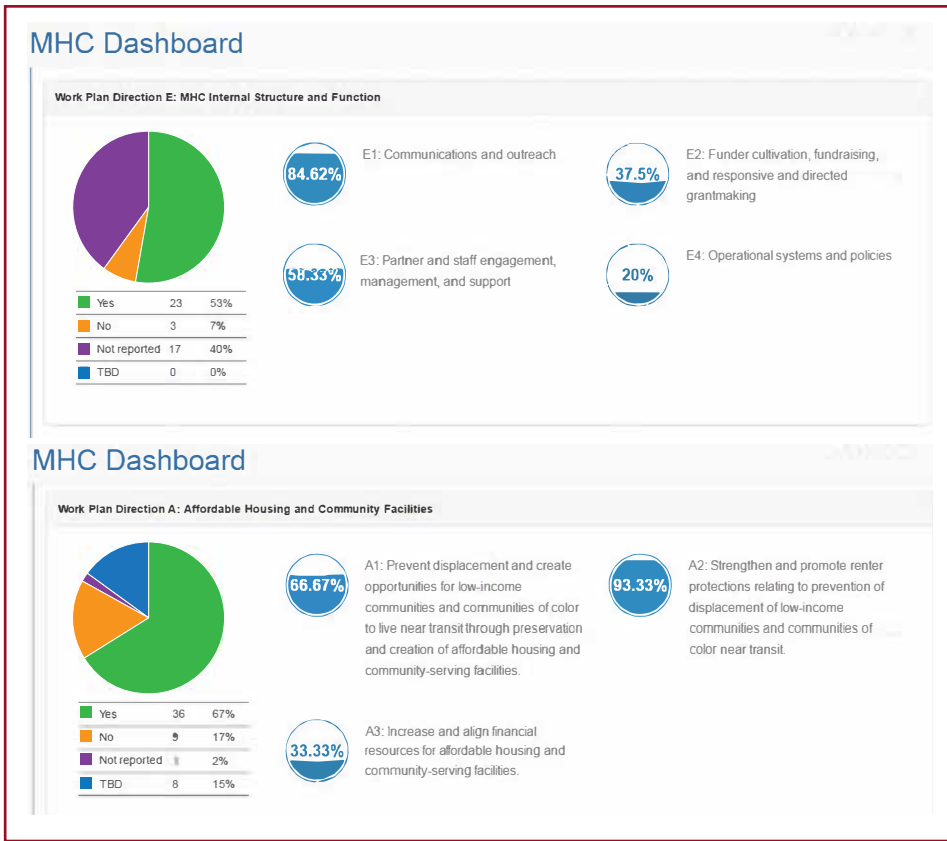
*This work has brought us into new and deeply satisfying relationships with our fellow funders and our nonprofit partners. We have invested far more than grant dollars in Mile High Connects, and have advanced our own learning about the power and possibility of collaborative cross-sector work.*

— Anne Garcia, chief financial and operating officer, Rose Community Foundation

Collective impact holds great promise for accelerating systems change for low-income communities and communities of color. Foundations are central actors in the collective space and leverage more than capital resources; they serve as thought leaders, lend their expertise, and remove barriers to create bridges to underresourced communities. Convening cross-sector leaders and maintaining sustainable partnerships takes time, and MHC has learned many lessons about

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**FIGURE 6** Dashboard Snapshots



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how to work effectively in a cross-sector collaborative. (See Table 1.)

Many of these promising practices can be applied by foundations participating in cross-sector relationships. These lessons offer insights on creative ways to assemble capital — both financial and human — to develop a long-term vision for systems-level change on social issues. The importance of patience, both with the process and in the provision of capital, cannot be stressed enough if foundations are to be successful partners in effecting long-term and sustainable change. MHC’s partners began to strategize about the collaborative almost seven years ago, and created its governing structure six years ago. Almost all of its original funding partners are still members, and many have increased their funding. Compared to the typical restlessness of funders, who are

prone to call it quits and move on if they do not see the results they anticipated in three years or less, cross-sector collective-impact collaboratives take sustained and patient investment. This is all the more true when those most directly affected by the issue the funders are seeking to resolve are invited to participate in decision-making. The process of leadership development, the need to adjust schedules and to work outside of typical relationships and settings, and the time it takes to break down barriers of mistrust all require a willingness to take the long view.

When viewing MHC through the human-development lens, the collaborative is entering into its adolescence. Leaders from around the region look to MHC for its knowledge on transit-equity issues and for its ability to assemble resources. Funders have learned firsthand the power of

**TABLE 1** Lessons Learned & Promising Practices

<i>Trust building</i>	Trust is an anchor for collaborative relationships and takes time to build.
<i>Power shifting</i>	Partners need to be willing to give up some of their power so that decision-making on capital and human resource allocation can be shared.
<i>Commitment to equity</i>	Understanding equity (race, class, and other issues) is imperative for leading and supporting community-driven strategies and outcomes.
<i>Resident engagement</i>	Partners need to take the lead from community residents, as they are the experts on solutions for their communities.
<i>Risk taking and flexibility</i>	Partners need to be able to take risks and experiment. Collective impact projects may not always generate the results that were aimed at in the planning phase, requiring agility and nimbleness to recalibrate.
<i>Patience</i>	Funder partners should commit to providing patient capital to realize systems change.
<i>Healthy tension</i>	Partners should lean into a level of discomfort to spur their learning.
<i>Leveraging grassroots and grassroots</i>	Partners should leverage their networks and power at the grassroots to drive and deepen the work with and on behalf of low-income communities and communities of color, the grassroots.
<i>Data and evaluation</i>	Data and evaluation methodologies, qualitative and quantitative, should be implemented to measure internal progress and developmental evolution as well as external outputs and outcomes.

community advocacy. Growing our collective muscle has taken time and been a part of building out the collective-impact model. Funders have played an integral role in this space and served as thought leaders on strategies to further the work. The diverse partners of MHC have deepened their relationships with one another and have effected demonstrable social change on transit-equity issues. Collaborative outcomes include the restoration and preservation of service routes in low-income communities; improved relationships with the RTD, which now serves as a partner on the creation of an income-based transit-pass program; and assembly of capital to acquire and preserve affordable housing near transit.

*When we talk about homes, we are not just talking about shelter. Homes are foundations for families. It is where our dreams flourish.*

— Yolanda Begay, 9to5 Colorado outreach worker

MHC is excited about the next five years. It has just embarked on a campaign to address the severe gentrification and displacement occurring across the Denver region, informed by surveys of low-income renters conducted by one of MHC's organizing partners. The campaign has gained momentum as nonprofit leaders, low-income residents, and elected officials have grown increasingly concerned about the rising tide of inequity in Denver's housing market. MHC will also forge ahead with its Affordable Fares campaign, with the aim of implementing an income-based pass within the next two years. Other efforts over the next year will lead the collaborative into its next strategic-planning process, which will include an increased integration of equity across the entire organization, from the inside out. The strategic-planning process in 2017 will result in the road map for the next several years of MHC's collective work.

The momentum generated thus far with and on behalf of low-income communities and communities of color is promising, and MHC looks forward to contributing its learning to the philanthropic sector to showcase how collective impact, with its challenges and nuances, can lead to lasting systemic change.

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