

Introduction & Purpose

The Healthcare Foundation of Northern Lake County (HFNLC) works to improve community health and advance equity across northern Lake County. Through the Summer Community Listening Initiative (SCLI), the Foundation engages residents, community leaders, and nonprofit partners in conversations that center lived experience, elevate community priorities, and inform future strategy.

Building on the inaugural 2024 SCLI, which identified three core areas shaping health and quality of life—access to healthy food, employment and income, and community engagement and social support—the 2025 SCLI shifted from identifying challenges to exploring how change can happen. Conversations focused not only on what residents and organizations are experiencing, but also on what is working, where gaps persist, and how systems can be strengthened through collaboration.

Rather than producing a static needs assessment, SCLI is designed as a learning process that centers community voice and informs philanthropic investment, partnership development, and broader strategies for collaboration and collective impact. The insights in this report guide not only grantmaking decisions, but also how the Foundation convenes partners, engages in community activities, prioritizes learning, and approaches long-term, systems-level change.

Methodology & Approach

The 2025 Summer Community Listening Initiative (SCLI) utilized a mixed-method approach to capture both quantitative and qualitative insights across northern Lake County. Data sources included feedback collected during community outreach events, listening sessions with nonprofit and public-sector leaders, and a dedicated meeting with community members who have lived experience navigating the social service network.

This approach allowed HFNLC to understand not only the prevalence of specific barriers, but also the context in which they occur. These findings are grounded in community voice and lived experience and are intended to inform learning and strategy rather than serve as a statistically representative sample. Lived experience perspectives were intentionally included to deepen interpretation of the data and surface insights that may not appear in traditional surveys or administrative datasets.

Participation and data sources included:

- Four facilitated listening sessions, including:
 - One session focused on Community Engagement and Social Support with 21 participants
 - One session focused on Income and Employment with 28 participants
 - One session focused on Access to Healthy Food with 26 participants

- One dedicated meeting with community members with lived experience, with 15 participants
- Community outreach feedback cards collected at events, including:
 - 103 Income and Employment feedback cards
 - 119 Community Engagement and Social Support feedback cards
 - 144 Access to Healthy Food feedback cards

Access to Healthy Food

Access to healthy food remains one of the most persistent challenges identified through the 2025 Summer Community Listening Initiative (SCLI). Survey respondents most frequently cited cost, lack of knowledge about how to prepare certain foods, food spoilage, transportation barriers, and limited time to cook as obstacles to consistent access.

Community members with lived experience emphasized that availability alone does not equal access. Many shared that even when food assistance is technically available, it often does not align with the realities of daily life. As one participant noted, families are often “running around with multiple jobs & kids afterschool,” leaving little time or energy to prepare meals from scratch. Residents described juggling work, caregiving responsibilities, and unpredictable schedules, reinforcing that convenience and time to prepare food are critical—but often overlooked—factors shaping food access.

These insights were reinforced through Table Talk conversations, where participants emphasized that affordability, transportation, and limited facilities to store or prepare food significantly constrain access, even when food resources exist. Participants noted that without reliable refrigeration, adequate kitchen space, or time to cook, healthy food options remain out of reach for many households. Others described how financial pressures force difficult tradeoffs between basic needs, including “medication vs. food,” underscoring the daily decisions families must make to stretch limited resources.

Nonprofit partners and sector leaders echoed these insights, noting that programs designed around bulk distribution or raw ingredients can unintentionally exclude individuals without consistent schedules, adequate storage, or necessary equipment. Residents also described the stress of food going bad before it can be used, particularly when grocery shopping must be coordinated around pay cycles or limited transportation options.

At the same time, participants also highlighted that food could serve as a powerful connector. Programs that integrate food distribution with cooking education, culturally familiar ingredients, and opportunities to cook or eat together were described as reducing stigma while strengthening community ties. Approaches that bring food directly into community settings—such as schools, community centers, and neighborhood-based programs—were also identified as particularly effective in reducing access barriers.

Approaches that integrate food access with preparation support, community partnerships, and shared spaces were consistently identified as effective in making healthy food more accessible and sustainable. Participants emphasized that solutions are most impactful when they reflect how people actually live, accounting for time constraints, competing priorities, and the need for flexibility in how and when food is accessed.

Employment & Income

Employment and income continue to be central determinants of health and stability across northern Lake County. Survey data identified transportation, childcare, and low or inconsistent wages as the most common barriers to employment. Community leaders echoed these findings, while residents with lived experience provided critical context about how these challenges intersect and compound.

Residents emphasized that unpredictable work schedules, limited childcare options, and long or unreliable commutes make it difficult not only to secure employment, but to sustain it over time. Several described intentionally limiting work hours or declining advancement opportunities in order to maintain access to essential public benefits, highlighting how benefit eligibility thresholds can discourage upward mobility.

Residents described how employment, income, and access to public benefits are closely interconnected, often creating difficult tradeoffs. Participants highlighted that low wages, job instability, and limited access to benefits can leave individuals and families navigating complex decisions about how to balance work and financial security. As one participant noted, employment challenges are often accompanied by “low income and losing jobs, losing benefits like Medicaid or Medicare,” underscoring how even small changes in income or employment status can disrupt access to essential supports. These dynamics can make it difficult for individuals to pursue increased hours, new opportunities, or long-term advancement without risking the loss of healthcare, food assistance, or other critical resources, reinforcing cycles of instability rather than upward mobility.

Justice system involvement was also identified by residents as a significant barrier to employment. Participants shared that past involvement with the criminal justice system—regardless of how long ago it occurred—can restrict access to job opportunities, limit advancement, and contribute to long periods of underemployment. Residents described encountering automatic disqualifications during hiring processes, lack of clarity about their rights, and few pathways to reenter the workforce in a meaningful way.

Justice-impacted participants described unnecessary barriers to accessing work in specific industries or fields and advocated for policy change to open up more employment opportunities, and ultimately economic stability.

Participants emphasized that justice-involved individuals often face multiple overlapping barriers, including transportation challenges, gaps in work history, limited access to training, and stigma within hiring systems. These barriers were described as structural rather than individual, reinforcing the need for coordinated, equity-centered responses.

Community partners highlighted workforce development efforts that are most effective when they directly address these realities. Participants pointed to the importance of inclusive hiring practices, employer partnerships willing to consider justice-involved applicants, and workforce pathways that pair job placement with wraparound support such as mentorship, financial education, and legal or reentry services.

Residents emphasized that employment programs are most effective when they lead to stable, predictable schedules and living-wage jobs. They expressed a desire for clear, coordinated pathways that connect education, training, and employment—particularly for individuals navigating reentry or rebuilding their work histories.

One Table Talk participant described an impactful program offered in their community, “My municipality (Grayslake) offers some economic incentives for new business, it allows the “average person” to open a business here in some cases.” While another highlighted a pathway program stating, “the Give Me Ten program has created a way for high school students and small businesses to connect.” The Give Me TEN program is designed as an entry point into work-based learning, helping students begin building connections with local industries and employers. Several participants also mentioned College of Lake County (CLC) programs, particularly at the Tech Campus, as well as opportunities to expand paid training, internships, and apprenticeships. Other organizations that were mentioned as community assets are the Job Center of Lake County and the Community Works.

These employment and income challenges do not exist in isolation. They directly influence how—and whether—residents are able to engage with services, participate in community life, and build the relationships that support long-term stability and well-being.

Community Engagement & Social Support

Strong support systems and community connections were consistently identified as essential to improving health and well-being. Community members with lived experience shared that navigating services can feel overwhelming, particularly when information is fragmented or constantly changing. Even when programs exist, knowing where to start—or whom to trust—can be a barrier.

Participants consistently emphasized that trust is built through consistency and familiarity. Residents are more likely to engage when services are delivered by recognizable organizations, led by people they know, and offered in accessible, community-based locations such as schools, libraries, churches, and neighborhood centers.

One Table Talk participant lamented, “In the current political moment we are living in, it can feel hard to connect people together as there is so much polarization.” Other participants offered solutions such as creating “brave and safe spaces” for groups which are marginalized or under attack.

Community leaders noted that limited staff capacity, time, and funding make sustained outreach and coordination difficult. As a result, engagement efforts are often one-time or crisis-driven rather than ongoing. Residents described this inconsistency as frustrating and expressed a desire for regular, predictable opportunities to connect.

Participants across SCLI conversations called for shared infrastructure to support engagement, including centralized resource lists, shared communication platforms, volunteer pipelines, and regular community tables. Residents emphasized that these systems should be designed with community input to ensure they are easy to navigate and responsive to real needs.

Across these experiences, a consistent theme emerges while individual programs and services play an important role, the way they are connected—or disconnected—ultimately shapes how residents experience support.

Collaboration as a Driver of Community Impact

Across the 2025 Summer Community Listening Initiative (SCLI), collaboration consistently emerged as a defining factor in whether systems feel accessible, effective, and responsive to residents. Across sectors, participants emphasized that northern Lake County is home to many committed organizations doing meaningful work, yet residents often experience these efforts as disconnected. This fragmentation creates unnecessary barriers, particularly for individuals navigating multiple needs at once.

Community members with lived experience described moving between programs with different eligibility requirements, schedules, and points of contact, often needing to repeat their stories and manage inconsistent information. This lack of coordination was described as exhausting and discouraging, especially for those balancing employment, caregiving, transportation challenges, or reentry into the workforce.

Table Talk participants discussed at length current collaborations, coordination efforts, and the need to strengthen them. One participant described how they provide “whole person holistic support for students and families to ensure access to educational resources.” Another participant recommended to “engage leadership through a win-win approach, asset mapping, resource sharing, and collective impact models.” Through these approaches, coordination efforts can improve, making the client resource navigation experience more seamless and effective.

Community partners acknowledged that collaboration is frequently constrained by limited staff capacity, short-term funding, and the absence of shared infrastructure. Organizations are often focused on sustaining individual programs and meeting grant requirements, leaving little room to coordinate with peers—even when serving overlapping populations. As a result, collaboration tends to be episodic, emerging around specific initiatives or crises rather than functioning as an ongoing way of working.

SCLI findings made clear that when collaboration is supported, it becomes a powerful mechanism for improving both resident experience and organizational effectiveness. Participants highlighted the value of shared tools—such as centralized resource lists, community asset maps, and warm referral systems—that reduce duplication and make it easier for residents to find support. The Find Food IL map was frequently cited as a strong example of how shared infrastructure can simplify access and support coordination, with many participants expressing interest in expanding similar models to include employment, training, and community engagement resources.

Collaboration was also discussed as a way to strengthen capacity across organizations. Many leaders shared that they have willing volunteers and strong community interest but lack the systems needed to train, coordinate, and retain support effectively. Ideas such as shared volunteer pipelines, cross-training, and coordinated outreach were raised as practical ways to extend reach without overburdening individual organizations.

Trust and consistency surfaced as central themes throughout these discussions. Residents emphasized that collaboration is most effective when it strengthens—not replaces—relationships with familiar organizations. Services delivered through trusted partners, in accessible community-based settings, were seen as more approachable and more likely to result in sustained engagement. Participants stressed that collaboration should reinforce local presence and continuity rather than introduce additional layers of complexity.

Assets that were highlighted by Table Talk participants included volunteers and Community Health Workers (CHWs) who are familiar, trusted, and credible messengers which community members can rely upon. These dedicated individuals can help increase access to much needed health and human services for those who otherwise might not feel comfortable accessing them.

Participants also underscored that collaboration requires intentional investment. Flexible, multi-year funding was repeatedly cited as a critical enabler, allowing organizations to plan together, share resources, and invest in coordination rather than competing for limited dollars. Support for backbone roles, shared infrastructure, and cross-organizational learning was seen as essential to sustaining collaboration over time.

Residents and leaders alike emphasized that collaboration should be shaped by lived experience. Paying community members for their time, expertise, and leadership within collaborative efforts was identified as a best practice that improves relevance,

accountability, and trust. When residents are involved in designing and guiding collaborative systems, those systems are more likely to reflect real needs and reduce barriers.

Together, these insights point toward collaboration not as an add-on, but as a core strategy for advancing equity and long-term well-being. When organizations are supported to align efforts, share tools, and learn together—grounded in lived experience—residents encounter systems that feel more coherent, humane, and navigable. By investing in collaboration as a way of working, philanthropy and partners can help strengthen a connected ecosystem of support across northern Lake County, one that better reflects how people live and what they need to thrive.

Implications for HFNLC

The insights shared through the Summer Community Listening Initiative—and reflected throughout this report—point to clear opportunities for how systems, partners, and philanthropy can better align with how people experience daily life.

Strengthen shared tools that make systems easier to navigate

Across conversations, participants emphasized the need for clearer, more connected systems. Tools such as centralized resource lists, shared referral pathways, and coordinated communication platforms can reduce confusion and make it easier for residents to find and access support.

Invest in collaboration as a way of working—not an add-on

Participants consistently described collaboration as essential to improving outcomes, yet it is difficult to sustain without dedicated support. Investing in coordination roles, shared infrastructure, and ongoing partnership spaces can help move collaboration from episodic to embedded.

Provide flexible, sustained funding that supports real coordination

Short-term, program-specific funding was identified as a barrier to meaningful collaboration. Flexible, multi-year funding allows organizations to align efforts, build trust, and respond to evolving community needs.

Center lived experience in shaping solutions

Residents emphasized that systems work best when they are informed by those who navigate them. Compensating and engaging people with lived experience as partners in design, decision-making, and implementation strengthens relevance and trust.

Design approaches that reflect how people actually live

Across all topic areas, participants highlighted the importance of time, flexibility, and predictability. Systems and programs that account for work schedules, caregiving

responsibilities, and transportation realities are more accessible and more likely to succeed.

Conclusion

The 2025 Summer Community Listening Initiative underscores a clear and consistent message: improving health and well-being across northern Lake County requires systems that reflect how people actually live. Across conversations about food access, income and employment, and social support and community engagement, residents and partners emphasized that barriers are interconnected, structural, and often compounded by time constraints, limited flexibility, and fragmented services.

Collaboration emerged as a defining strategy for moving from isolated efforts to collective impact. When organizations are supported to coordinate, share infrastructure, and align outreach, residents experience systems that are more navigable and humane. These collaborative approaches are most successful when they are sustained over time, grounded in trusted relationships, and shaped by community leadership.

For philanthropy, the opportunity lies in investing beyond individual programs and toward the conditions that make systems work: shared tools, coordination, flexible funding, and compensation for lived expertise. By prioritizing collaboration as a way of working—and centering community voice throughout—HFNL and its partners can help strengthen a connected ecosystem of support that advances equity, stability, and long-term health across northern Lake County.