

Listening to Northern Lake County

The Summer Community Listening Initiative (SCLI) centers the voices of residents, nonprofit partners, and community leaders across northern Lake County.

This work is grounded in lived experience – not just data – to understand how systems, neighborhoods and relationships shape health, well-being, stability, and opportunity in everyday life.

Understanding these experiences helps reveal where systems are working — and where change is needed.



Access to Healthy Food: What We Heard

- ✔ Access is about **time**, not just location
- ✔ Convenience strongly shapes food choices
- ✔ Food assistance doesn't always match daily realities
- ✔ Dignity matters in how food is offered

*“Even when food is available,
it doesn't always fit into real life.”*



Access to Healthy Food: Barriers

Residents and partners identified consistent challenges that make healthy food difficult to access:

- ✔ Limited time to prepare meals
- ✔ Transportation barriers
- ✔ Cost and affordability
- ✔ Unpredictable schedules
- ✔ Limited storage or cooking facilities

*Availability alone
does not equal access.*



Access to Healthy Food: What Works

Residents and organizations are building solutions, such as:

- ✓ Community gardens
- ✓ Cooking workshops and recipe sharing
- ✓ Mobile pantries and delivery options
- ✓ Youth STEM nutrition programs
- ✓ Partnerships with libraries, clinics, and schools

These efforts work best when they are supported consistently and connected across organizations and community partners.

Approaches that align with people's real lives are most effective when:

- ✓ Programs designed around time constraints
- ✓ Convenient pickup or flexible distribution
- ✓ Trusted, community-based locations
- ✓ Combining food access with preparation support
- ✓ Offering culturally-appropriate food options



“Bringing fresh, healthy food to people works - we cannot just expect them to come to us”

Income & Employment: What We Heard

- ✓ Work does not always lead to stability
- ✓ Income volatility creates constant tradeoffs
- ✓ Employment barriers affect health, family life, and well-being

“Philanthropy should view employment and income not just as an economic issue, but as a health intervention.”



Income & Employment: Barriers

Common barriers identified across SCLI conversations include:

- ✓ Low or inconsistent wages
- ✓ Family care challenges (childcare and elder care)
- ✓ Transportation limitations
- ✓ Justice system involvement
- ✓ Losing benefits abruptly when income slightly increases.

“Laws and economic opportunity for a liveable wage are almost nonexistent.”



Income & Employment: What Works

Participants highlighted strategies that support stability over time:

- ✓ Supported pathways to stable employment
- ✓ Fair-chance and inclusive hiring practices
- ✓ Wraparound supports that reflect real life
- ✓ Clear connections between training and jobs

Communities are building pathways:

- ✓ Paid internships and apprenticeships
- ✓ Cross-sector employer partnerships
- ✓ Career exposure in high school
- ✓ Youth work experiences
- ✓ Community-rooted workforce programs

Sustaining these pathways requires coordination across employers, educators, and community organizations.



Community Engagement & Social Support: What We Heard

- ✓ People want systems that connect; Navigating multiple programs is exhausting
- ✓ People want to connect — not just receive services
- ✓ Trust is built through relationships
- ✓ Fear and uncertainty are limiting participation
- ✓ Many want to volunteer and lead

“Lean in, exactly what you’re doing today.

This is awesome.

*Bringing people together, asking good questions,
and investing in immediate and systemic
solutions with minimal administrative burden.”*



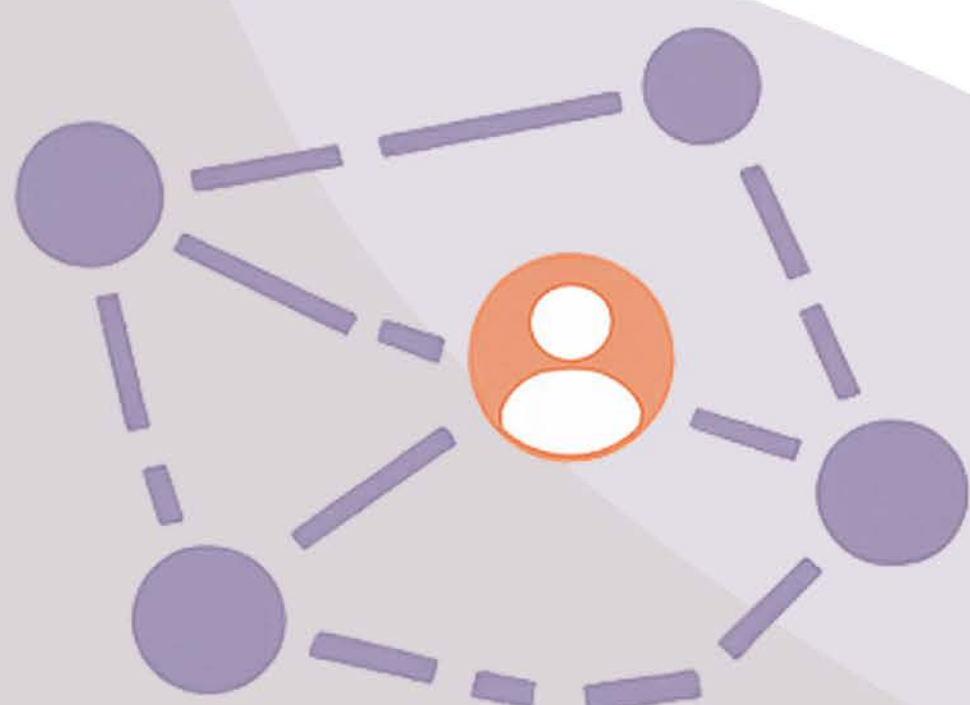
Community Engagement & Social Support: Barriers

Residents described challenges navigating support systems and building community, including:

- ✓ Fragmented services and information
- ✓ Various rules and eligibility requirements
- ✓ Information overload without coordination
- ✓ Repeating the same story across programs
- ✓ Distrust between institutions and communities
- ✓ Burnout among staff and volunteers
- ✓ Fear (immigration, policy changes, safety)

“Families are feeling distrust and fear.”

*“The political climate is trying to force us
back in the closet and litigate us out of existence;
attack our right to exist.”*



Community Engagement & Social Support: What Works

Effective systems are built around people, not programs:

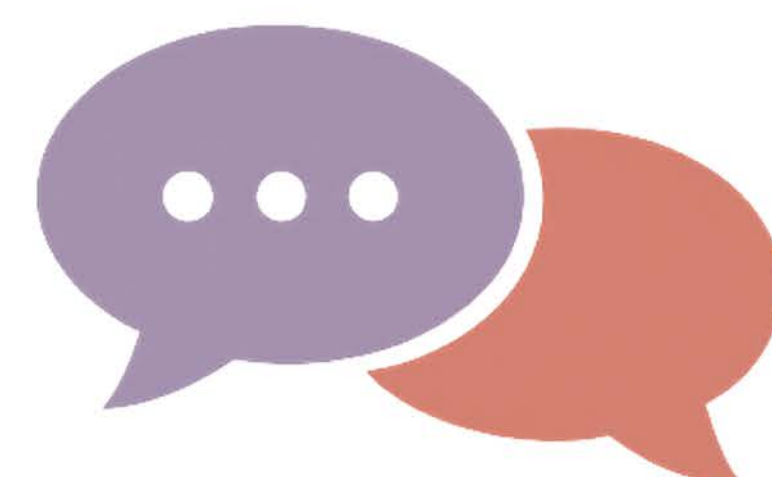
- ✓ Services offered in trusted places
- ✓ Clear navigation and warm referrals
- ✓ Paying people with lived experience for leadership
- ✓ Coordination over competition

Residents and organizations are already building connection and leadership across northern Lake County:

- ✓ Faith communities providing gathering space and mutual support
- ✓ Schools hosting leadership programs and youth summits
- ✓ Volunteer networks stepping in to meet immediate needs
- ✓ Mutual aid and peer support spaces
- ✓ Focus groups and listening sessions shaping local priorities
- ✓ Cross-organizational partnerships sharing resources

Community members emphasized that engagement is strongest when it is rooted in trust, consistency, and shared ownership. These efforts are strongest when organizations, residents, and institutions work together.

**Community engagement is not only about programs.
It is about people organizing, leading, and supporting one another.**

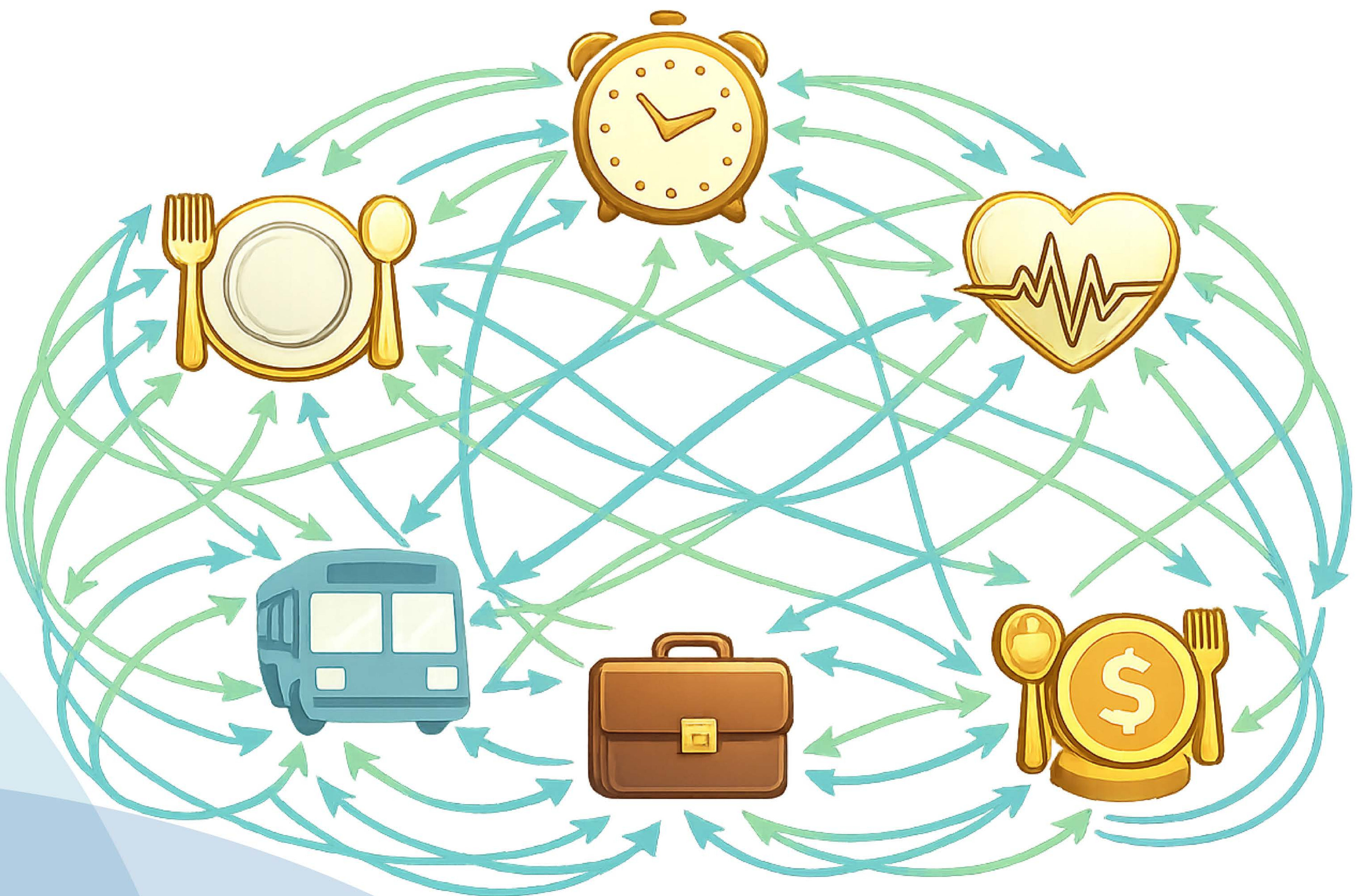


Barriers Are Connected

Challenges don't exist in silos.

Time, transportation, income, food access, and system navigation intersect and compound.

- ✓ When one system fails, others feel it.
- ✓ Solutions must reflect this reality.
- ✓ Addressing these challenges requires coordination across sectors.



Collaboration Is the Strategy

What Communities Need

- ✓ Connected services
- ✓ Clear, consistent information
- ✓ Trusted relationships over time
- ✓ Support for Grassroots leadership

What Collaboration Enables

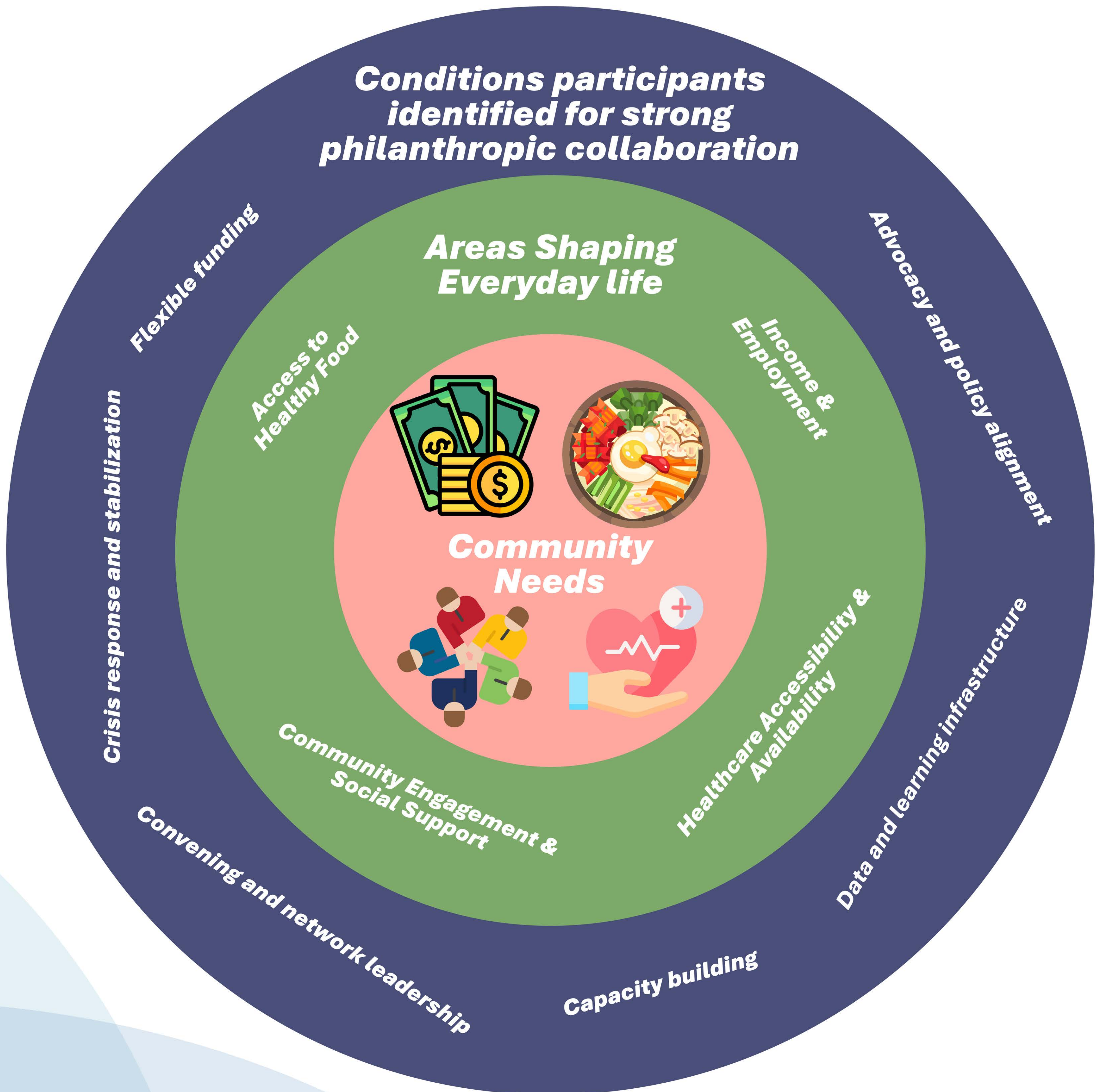
- ✓ Coordinated outreach
- ✓ Volunteer Coordination
- ✓ Reduced duplication
- ✓ Reduced burden on residents
- ✓ Multi-year stability
- ✓ Shared tools and infrastructure

When collaboration is grounded in lived experience, systems become more humane, connected, and responsive.



What participants said philanthropy can do to strengthen collaboration

Across Table Talks and community listening sessions, participants described the conditions that allow collaboration to succeed.



Participants consistently described philanthropic collaboration as something that must be supported intentionally—through trust, alignment, and sustained investment in community capacity.

Centering Black Community Voices

During this listening session, community members spoke clearly about their experiences, priorities, and hopes for change.

Quotes from African American Convening in Waukegan:

“Growing up in Waukegan, I was exposed to various programs and opportunities, However I never felt like I was included or that I was welcome to participate in most of the programs I participated in. I tried to engage but I was the only black person there.”

“They (donors and helpers) need to understand and adjust their actions to meet the intent of what is/what should be helpful to the community to create lasting impact and meaningful change. Limit the mindset and actions of being a (white) savior. Cultural competency and community engagement, intent versus action.”

“They (donors and helpers) need to understand that this issue is not a quick fix, and time and money will be needed to see the change we need.”

“Talk with more community members to get more insight, COME TO THE COMMUNITY!”

“I believe the voices, authentic voices, of members of the community speak up with intent to empower and educate the community, and keep them informed”.

“Many people feel that people of color (African Americans) do not always have the same opportunities without having to go through extra hoops and are often times shut down.”

“There are limited or hard to find six figure jobs (in Lake County). You must travel to Chicago or have a connection.”

“Donors need to understand that it is imperative not only to listen or hear what members in the community are saying, but if they are going to help, say with funding for example, they should cater to what the community needs and not where donors believe their help should go.”

“Wellness is the first thing we have to be well emotionally, mentally, and spiritually, taking care of mental health, providing resources, for people to get well in schools, in the community libraries having access to nutritional foods to support wellness, having wellness classes on calendars for people to have access to we definitely need funding to support wellness programs.”

Centering Black, Brown, Immigrant, and LGBTQ+ Communities

Across Table Talks, partners shared these reflections on their experiences and priorities for change.

“In my opinion we need...upstream solutions to fix the broken systems. The immediate need is a grocery store in North Chicago, investigate Community Development Financing Institutions (CDFIs)!”

“Being boots on the ground, seeing firsthand what is impacting our communities in order to provide culturally-sensitive resources.”

“Funding connection within Black and Brown communities.”

“Challenges for youth and adults to pursue college, especially advanced degrees which will disproportionately impact people of color.”

“We need community-rooted folklore programs, understand the realities of poverty, childcare, and immigration status.”

“Less people are applying for public benefits. They’re scared of being targets for deportation.”

“Having bilingual marketing materials, and Spanish-speaking staff who are not tokenized but are passionate about the mission.”

“Having Latino, Spanish-speaking staff, and being in a safe space for Latino individuals in need.”

“Latinos are looking for information more than ever. Education on different topics like health access, legal advice, higher education and volunteer programs.”

“A challenge is engaging Spanish-speaking individuals in recovery related services.”

“More funding restrictions, LGBTQ+ people already are disproportionately with the poorest, high percentage on Medicaid.”

“Overwhelmingly, systemic discrimination is the single largest underlying challenge in LGBTQ+ communities.”