

Voices for Economic Opportunity

Grand Challenges

September 2019

Over the past few years, our team at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has been travelling to communities across the U.S. to meet with people where they live to learn about economic mobility and opportunity from their perspectives. We hoped that what they shared would help us work effectively alongside the many successful organizations that have spent years fighting for more opportunity for more Americans. We heard them clearly when they spoke about the deeply rooted, entangled challenges that make these issues so complex. There are no silver bullet solutions for communities suffering the effects of deindustrialization and no easy fix for structural racism.

One important theme of those conversations was the huge gap between longstanding assumptions about poverty and the reality of millions of Americans' lives. These ingrained but inaccurate assumptions, we heard over and over again, lead to a misdiagnosis of the problem, which in turn generates ineffective and inadequate solutions.

This call for ideas is designed to support individuals and organizations interested in contributing to the long-term work of correcting mistaken assumptions and improving understanding of poverty through the actual stories of those that experience poverty – in a way that represents the core factors and challenges. This is a first step for us. We look forward to building ongoing collaborations with activists, organizers, and other committed partners to address the range of priorities they have laid out.

OVERVIEW

We're seeking creative, compelling ideas from individuals and organizations from all sectors in the U.S. to elevate diverse voices and broaden the national conversation about poverty and economic mobility. Anyone with a great concept is welcome to apply for a \$100,000 grant to develop their idea.

BACKGROUND

In May 2018, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation embarked on a new \$158-million program in U.S. Economic Mobility and Opportunity which seeks to increase the number and diversity of actors working in coordination to address barriers to economic mobility. Myths and misconceptions about poverty are one of the most stubborn of these barriers. Since our announcement, we've seen a groundswell of interest in challenging existing ideas about who experiences poverty, bringing to light the contributions they offer to American society, and highlighting the structural and historic barriers they face including race, gender, and geography (among other factors).

In collaboration with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Raikes Foundation, we seek to build on the understanding of poverty gleaned from the [U.S. Partnership on Mobility from Poverty](#) initiative and to combat inaccurate assumptions about

poverty, deservingness, income, and wealth gaps that are widespread and harmful. Each of these funders will bring to this collaboration their unique expertise and experience working to address inequity in the United States. Moving from prevailing stories rooted in misconceptions and stereotypes to ones rooted in shared values, history, systemic solutions, equity, and human dignity is a crucial step in dramatically increasing economic mobility.

We recognize there is a vigorous debate about how to equitably close economic gaps and create equitable opportunity and mobility for more Americans. Many voices across the country are already immersed in this conversation. Yet too many voices are still being left out.

CHALLENGE

The goal of this challenge is to elevate diverse voices that can help broaden the conversation about the issues inhibiting economic mobility and generate deeper awareness and actionable understanding. Most Americans believe it is right to help others, so that they may have the opportunity to live healthy and productive lives. Yet skepticism exists about the efficacy of anti-poverty programs in the U.S. and deep-seated stereotypes remain about people experiencing poverty and who deserves to rise out of it. Many community practitioners and social movement leaders in the U.S. are already working to address this challenge. Still, there is a need for new ways of bringing personal stories to life to help others better understand why people fall into or remain hindered by barriers that impede their ability to advance and what the obstacles to building and maintaining economic security are. **We seek proposals for creative, scalable, strategic new ways to generate awareness of the structural and historic barriers to economic mobility; to communicate that poverty is not just something that happens to other people and everyone is deserving of the chance to move out of it; and to change the predominant misconceptions about poverty in a way that creates the conditions for effective programs and policies to be adopted by the public and private sectors.**

WHAT WE ARE LOOKING FOR

We will give highest priority to proposals that:

- Highlight barriers to economic mobility as well as the impact of biases, intersectionality, and ideas around deservingness related to race, gender, ethnicity, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, age, physical and mental health, ability, and geography
- Highlight the voices of individuals experiencing poverty
- Highlight ideas for distributing these perspectives

We seek to fund a portfolio of projects that:

- Shift the conversation from one that stigmatizes to one that demonstrates “this could be someone I know and value,” signifying that we all have a common interest in expanding economic mobility and dignity
- Move from a depiction of individuals as victims to protagonists with agency who are deserving of opportunity
- Change from a sole focus on lack of money to money, power, agency, and dignity

- Pivot from characterizations of personal failures and deficits to the ongoing importance of individual and collective responsibility and a general consensus that the status quo undermines American democracy and society
- Creatively use citizen voice and data to support communications in a way that generates a deeper understanding of structural and historic barriers to mobility
- Provide insight into workable solutions for overcoming intersecting stereotypes and deep seeded values of deservingness that generate biases based on race, gender, ethnicity, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, age, physical and mental health, ability, and geography
- Engage partners with diverse expertise and types of resources

A few of the many **types of concepts** we will consider include (but are not limited to):

- Integrating lessons learned from past or present poverty-alleviation programs, both successes and failures
- Engaging a range of voices that highlights the causes and consequences of poverty and identifies key windows of opportunity for the most effective change
- Incorporating technology, digital platform, or social network ideas with demonstrated value in enhancing dissemination in support of positive social change

We will not consider funding for:

- Projects centered entirely around donations made by individuals
- Projects focused on emergency relief or crisis response
- Academic research without a clear objective to solve a public understanding problem
- Initiatives limited to specific organizations
- Projects earmarking foundation funds for lobbying activity (e.g., attempts to influence legislation or legislative action) or efforts to influence political campaigns for public office
- Projects focused outside of the United States

HOW WE WILL EVALUATE PROPOSALS

Proposals will be reviewed against the following criteria:

- **Responsiveness to the challenge:** Does the proposal address the challenges described above? Please note the types of projects above that will not be funded.
- **Innovative approach:** Does the idea address the defined problem in an uncommon way or provide a creative approach to the problem outlined? Does the proposal describe how the project varies from current approaches, or offers new premises or hypotheses to test?
- **Likelihood of success:** Does the proposal include a clear and realistic rationale for success?
- **Defined target audience(s):** Does the approach leverage insights about a specific target audience(s) and design content that is most likely to move them?
- **Efficient use of channels:** Does the concept include technology and/or digital platforms currently being used at scale? Does the proposal seek to utilize existing infrastructure in communities?

- **Collaborative design:** Does the concept include plans for engaging a set of partners? Does the idea involve individuals or organizations with different skill sets coming together?
- **Emphasis on lived experience:** Does the concept help the broader U.S. public connect with people experiencing poverty and advance the agency of those experiencing poverty?

ABOUT OUR COLLABORATION

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has collaborated with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Raikes Foundation to issue this call for proposals in its Grand Challenges Program. Subject to internal approval processes, the foundations anticipate funding successful proposals, and we hope other philanthropies will join us along the way.