

Request for Proposals

Enhancing Young Adults' Economic Mobility through Social Capital

Dates	Action
January 9, 2026	RFP Opens
April 17, 2026	Round 1 Applications Due at 12 pm (noon) EST
June 30, 2026	Round 1 Funding Status Notification
July 15, 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Round 1 Funds Issued• Round 2 Applications Due at 12 pm (noon) EST
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Introduction to the Richard King Mellon Foundation

Since 1947, the [Richard King Mellon Foundation](#) (Foundation) has funded visionaries with bold ideas to advance prosperity in Southwestern Pennsylvania and environmental conservation across the United States. The Foundation's 2024 year-end net assets were \$3.1 billion, and its Trustees in 2024 disbursed more than \$155 million in grants and program-related investments.

The Foundation focuses its funding on six program areas: Conservation; Economic Development; Economic Mobility; Health & Well-Being; Organizational Effectiveness; and Social-Impact Investments. All six programs invest in transformative, evidence-informed solutions that align with the Foundation's mission and contribute to positive change.

Economic Mobility Program

The [Economic Mobility program](#) serves children and young adults from birth to age 24 who reside in low-income households in Allegheny or Westmoreland counties. The program addresses the problem that children in lower-income households have less access to opportunities that contribute to economic mobility in adulthood. Also, community-level factors create obstacles that impede some children's pathways to economic mobility.

The Foundation organizes its Economic Mobility program into four investment areas: Educational Attainment; Future of Work; Supportive Living Environments; and Places of Opportunity. Collectively, these four investment areas describe the Foundation's approach to addressing the problem of limited economic mobility for children who reside in low-income households.

Background for the Request for Proposals

Social Capital

Social capital can be understood as “a web of relationships that help young people reach their life and career goals” (“Social Capital”). A growing body of research indicates that social capital influences the likelihood of a young person’s success in education, securing employment, and attaining upward economic mobility in adulthood.

Table 1: Types of Social Capital

Type	Definition	Sample Benefit
Bonding	“connections within a group or community characterised by high levels of similarity in demographic characteristics, attitudes, and available information and resources” (Claridge)	Help such as childcare or financial assistance; feeling loved and a sense of belonging
Bridging	Relationships “between social groups, social class, race, religion or other important sociodemographic or socioeconomic characteristics (Claridge)	Strategies for succeeding in a new education setting; awareness of higher-paying job openings
Linking	“Relationships between persons across levels of hierarchy and power” (Kim et al.) that “facilitate the flow of services and assistance” (Kyne and Aldrich 5)	Access to public resources for a community project

Places where there is more cross-class social capital increase the likelihood of youth economic mobility.

Researcher Raj Chetty studies a wide variety of places, ranging from high schools to entire cities or counties. In his research, he examines how the characteristics of a place - such as its median household income or the share of single parent households - affect the lifetime economic mobility of young people who grow up there (Chetty et al. *Social Capital I*). Chetty’s research has also demonstrated the importance of a specific place-based attribute: the presence of social capital that spans socioeconomic status (SES). Chetty et al. find that “[c]hildren who grow up in communities with more economic connectedness (cross-class interaction) are much more likely to rise up out of poverty” (*Social Capital and Economic Mobility*, 1).



Chetty's research highlights that while an individual child or family may have few personal cross-SES relationships, being in places where many others do have cross-SES relationships increases the likelihood of upward economic mobility for all children when they become adults.

Chetty et al. also sought to understand why some places have higher levels of cross-SES interactions, particularly among young people. They identified two factors that account for almost all of the social disconnection between people with lower and higher SES. Richard V. Reeves and Coura Fall summarized these factors as follows:

- “lack of exposure to people of a different background (and particularly of lower-SES people to higher-SES people)
- “‘friending bias,’ which means that even when there are people of different backgrounds around, friendships remain strongly class-based”

In “*Social Capital II: Determinants of Economic Connectedness*,” Chetty et al. write that “even if all...groups were perfectly integrated by socioeconomic status, half of the social disconnection between people with low and high socioeconomic status would persist because of friending bias within groups.”

As a result of their focus on places, Chetty et al. home in on solutions that are “more likely to be driven by institutional, policy-relevant factors than individual-level variation” (*Social Capital I*). In *Social Capital II*, Chetty et al. discuss three promising types of interventions that address the characteristics of a place, including who is in that place and how design influences exposure and friending:

- A) “**Changes in group size and tracking**” (Chetty et al. *Social Capital II*)
For example, a high school changed from tracking students based on academic focus area and curriculum to grouping them into smaller intentionally diverse house communities (Chetty et al. *Social Capital II*).
- B) “**Restructuring of space...**” (Chetty et al. *Social Capital II*)
For example, a university conducted a social norms campaign, providing students with “information about their peers’ self-reported empathy (for example, ‘95% of undergraduate students are likely to help others who are feeling down’)” (Pei et al.) and behavioral nudges that “encouraged students to take small social risks to help build social connections ... The results showed that these intervention methods significantly ... increased social risk taking and led to more friendships in the months following the intervention.” (Pei et al.)
- C) “**New domains for interaction**” (Chetty et al. *Social Capital II*)
For example, a fitness center “began a program to increase cross-SES connections by recruiting personal trainers from lower-SES backgrounds to coach their more affluent clients.” (Chetty et al. *Social Capital II*)



Individual youth benefit when they can access and mobilize personal social capital.

Regardless of where youth live or attend school, their personal bonding, bridging, and linking social capital can help them to achieve important milestones on the path to upward economic mobility. “Research shows that social capital is linked with young people experiencing more positive educational experiences, accessing networks and opportunities, and strengthening their social identities (Freeland Fisher, 2019; Holland et al. 2007; Philp et al. 2020). Additionally, researchers have found a positive association between young people’s social capital and their educational attainment and intrinsically rewarding careers (Gowdy & Spencer, 2021; McDonald & Lambert, 2014; Mishra, 2020)” (Van Steenis et al. 77).

Many youth-serving organizations provide access to social capital as part of their programs. Coaching by program staff, mentoring by near-peers, or teaching curriculum about professional networking are all methods of providing young people with access to social capital.

Several researchers highlight that while access to social capital is beneficial, young people need to mobilize their social capital in order to achieve their goals. “Mobilization refers to the process through which young people use their social capital to activate their networks and relationships for support and access to resources (Lin, 2001; Small, 2021)” (Van Steenis et al. 77). Van Steenis et al. describe four ways that young people mobilize their social capital:

A) “**Youth-Driven:** Social capital is mobilized autonomously without the aid of an organization and/or network connection. Rather a young person independently decides to tap into their network” (79).
For example “[a] young person reaches out to a peer, teacher and/or mentor to inquire about job opportunities” (79).

B) “**Connection-Driven:** Social capital is mobilized with the support of a network connection within the organization. This may include a program staff member or a program peer” (79).
For example, “[a] program peer reaches out to let a young person know about a job opportunity that just arose” (79).

C) “**Organization-Connected:** Organizations provide structures and/or supports that facilitate young people’s social-capital mobilization. In this case, the organization is not directly mobilizing social capital on behalf of the young person, but is doing so indirectly by providing structures and resources that a young person can choose to use” (79).



For example, “[a] young person reaches out to someone by using an email template or script that is provided to them by the organization” (79).

D) “**Organization-Driven:** Organizations mobilize young people’s social capital on their behalf through mandates, incentives, and partnerships. This type of mobilization occurs when an organization acts as the primary driver of young people’s social-capital mobilization” (79)

For example, “[a]n organization offers a young person a connection to an internship opportunity that they otherwise wouldn’t have access to” (79).

Goals of the Request for Proposals

The Foundation is inviting organizations to apply to a competitive Request for Proposals (RFP) to incorporate findings and practices from social-capital research into youth-serving programs, with the long-term goal of bolstering young people’s economic mobility in adulthood.

The goals of this RFP are to:

- support the development and implementation of organizational interventions that increase cross-SES relationships in locations where young people spend time.
- increase young people’s personal social capital and their ability to mobilize this social capital so that they can achieve near-term goals and increase the likelihood of economic mobility in adulthood.

This RFP shines a spotlight on one outcome pursued by the [Economic Mobility](#) program. **The Foundation continues to accept applications to advance other Economic Mobility program outcomes via the [General Application](#) for Nonprofit and Public Sector Organizations.**

Funding Policies

The Foundation’s general eligibility criteria and funding policies apply to the RFP. Nonprofit and public-sector organizations may apply. Public-sector organizations include entities such as school districts or departments of human services. Please [review the Foundation’s FAQs](#) for more detail about the Foundation’s funding policies.

Funding Range

The Foundation expects to fund successful applications in the range of \$150,000-\$500,000 for 12–18-month projects. The funds awarded would vary based on factors such as the complexity of the proposed project, the number of collaborators, and the type of support requested (Planning and Innovation, Implementation, or Scalability). If an application is truly exceptional, the Foundation may consider providing funding beyond this range. Successful grants may be invited to apply for follow-on funding or additional capacity-building opportunities at the conclusion of the grant.

What the Foundation Will Not Fund through this RFP

- General Operating Support
- Endowments
- Advocacy or political causes or events
- Existing deficits or retroactive funding
- Event sponsorships
- Student scholarships
- Capital projects or capital campaigns

Application Timeline

Funding is expected to be awarded in two rounds during 2026.

- Round 1: Applications submitted in Round 1 may be presented to the Foundation's Board of Trustees for funding consideration in June 2026.
- Round 2: Applications submitted in Round 2 may be submitted to the Foundation's Board of Trustees for funding consideration in September 2026.

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Inquiries

Please reach out to Lynne Ventress, lventress@rkmf.org, with questions.

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