

Montgomery Moving Forward: A Decade of Community Engagement and Action

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Introduction

Collective impact is a phrase with which many professionals are familiar. Through collective impact efforts, a group of community members and professionals representing different sectors work together to address an issue and create or promote systemic change.ⁱ Collective impact involves creating a common agenda, monitoring progress using common metrics, supporting and integrating multiple perspectives and capabilities, facilitating interagency collaboration and coordination, and encouraging participation from individuals who are committed to engaging in and championing activities that will increase the likelihood of achieving a shared goal.ⁱⁱ Although all collective impact endeavors share these common core attributes, they differ in how they carry out activities and their level of success.

Montgomery Moving Forward (MMF) was established in 2012 to address multifaceted community challenges in Montgomery County, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, DC. Montgomery County's population slightly exceeds 1 million, with 56 percent of residents identifying as Black (20%), Hispanic (20%), or Asian (16%), and 7 percent of residents living in poverty.ⁱⁱⁱ Of those living in poverty, the highest proportions are White (25%), Hispanic (23%), and Black (22%).^{iv} Prior to MMF's establishment, Montgomery County was lacking formal methods for cross-sector community stakeholders to exchange ideas and strategies and work collaboratively to address common challenges. Advisory group members for Nonprofit Montgomery, a nonprofit organization in Montgomery County, recognized the value in cross-sector collaboration and problem-solving, based on their own efforts to convene local leaders to address shared challenges. At this point the advisory board began developing an initiative to improve local collaboration and coordination (see the section below for more information on Nonprofit Montgomery.)

MMF was built on the collective impact model as the foundation from which leaders in Montgomery County convene to identify priorities to address, based on local needs and the potential to attain systemic change. Specifically, MMF leaders review local data trends to determine which issues they can impact the most through targeted actions. Over the past 10 years, MMF has completed several important actions, including:

- Establishing the first Call to Action (a request for community leader action) to support an actual **workforce development system** and coordinate resources, thereby increasing the pool of qualified staff to meet the demand for skilled employees and contribute to a prosperous local economy.
- Establishing the second Call to Action to advance efforts to support an **early care and education system** through community engagement and legislative action, to promote equity in education and enhance the local talent pipeline.

How has MMF been able to facilitate local leader engagement and create sustainable change? MMF (1) created a structure for stakeholder engagement, (2) created a logic model to visually depict and communicate to external audiences the theory underlying its work, (3) actively engaged (and continues to engage) local legislators to gain buy-in and facilitate development of solution-focused policies, and (4) used (and continues to use) data to measure the extent to which it achieves its goals and continually improves MMF's processes and strategies.

Stakeholder Engagement Structure

As mentioned in the preceding section, MMF is an initiative of Nonprofit Montgomery. Nonprofit Montgomery convenes nonprofit organization leaders to plan and implement information dissemination strategies, with the goal of increasing awareness of member organizations' mission and community advocacy efforts. Nonprofit Montgomery has more than 200 member organizations, and its mission is to strengthen the nonprofit sector in Montgomery County in four key areas: capacity building and network development, advocacy, collective action, and strategic communications. The organization hosts and facilitates training, webinars, workshops, and consultations to strengthen nonprofit organizations' infrastructure, processes, and impact.

MMF is guided by its Leadership Group (LG), which comprises both locally recognized and emerging leaders across public and private sectors in Montgomery County (e.g., chief executive officers, school district superintendent, researchers). Over the past decade of MMF's existence, the number of LG members has ranged from 30 to 40, and all LG members are committed to supporting MMF's efforts to create county-level systemic change. All LG members participate in one of three workgroups:

- Accountability (determines the extent to which MMF is achieving its collective impact goals),
- Issues (identifies the biggest county challenges MMF should help address), and
- Sustainability (develops strategies to continue MMF operations long-term).

The LG's structure has been consistent over time. MMF's LG has a bimonthly meeting schedule, with workgroups meeting more or less often depending on their activities and current priorities. The number of years of LG membership varies widely among members as there are no term limits (e.g., some members recently joined the LG and others have remained on the LG since MMF was established). Typically, new LG members are recruited based on MMF's current needs (e.g., members have expertise related to a new issue that needs addressing or to fill a gap left by a departing LG member) and are often identified through current LG members' recommendations.

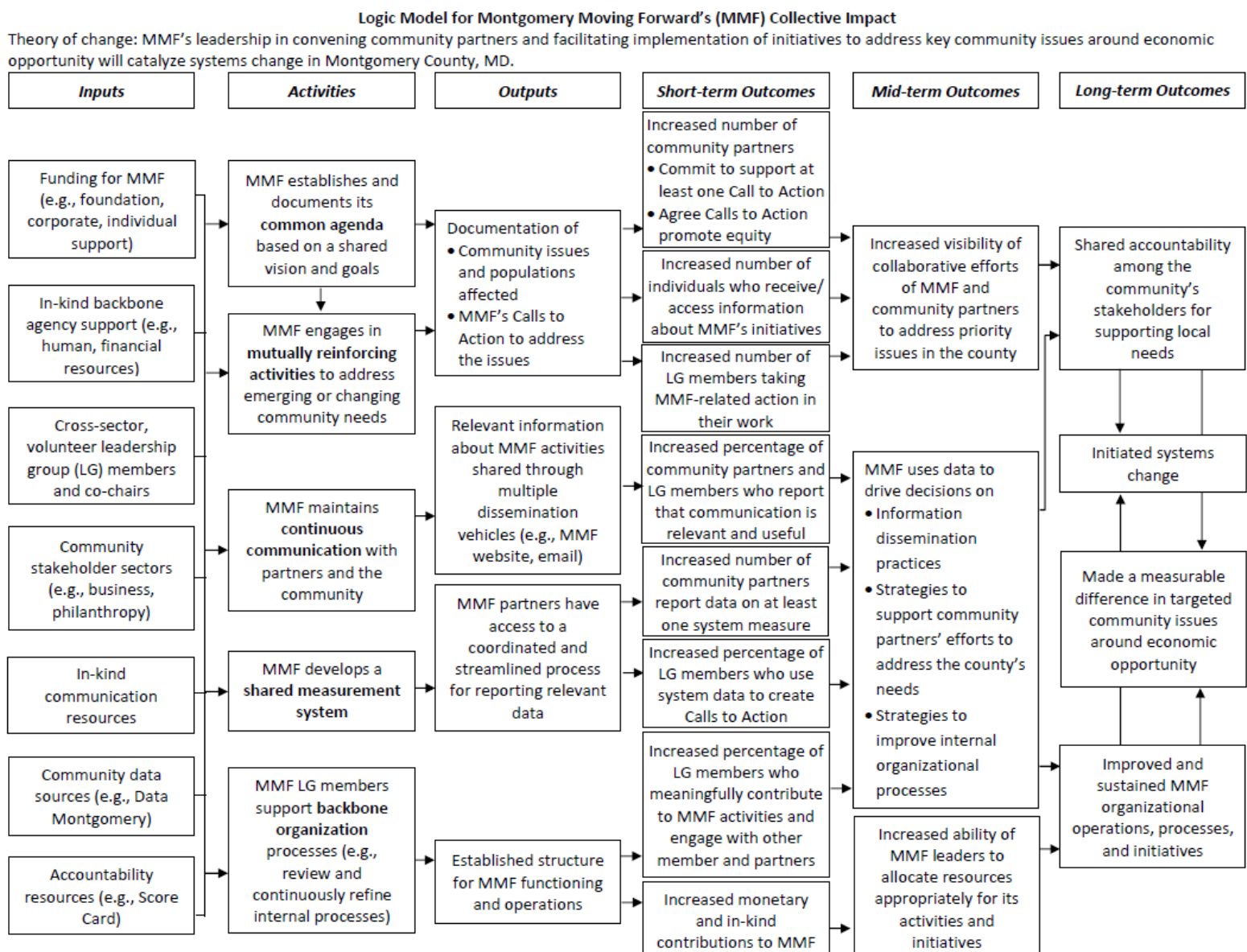
Over the past few years MMF leadership has taken steps to increase diversity among LG members, recognizing that there was inadequate involvement from individuals who are affected by community change efforts. These individuals are equally as important as those who help drive the efforts, and they are collaborative partners who are diverse in terms of age, race, and ethnicity, in addition to community sector represented. MMF leaders engage with targeted community leaders one-on-one to facilitate buy-in and highlight alignment between the local leader's knowledge or expertise and MMF's goals and objectives.

MMF benefits from having representation from Nonprofit Montgomery on the LG. Nonprofit Montgomery representatives, including its Executive Director and members of its Board of Directors, engage in a range of activities that include participating in the MMF LG, facilitating LG and other MMF-related meetings, informing fundraising efforts, and leading efforts to increase the visibility of MMF and its activities and galvanize the community to promote action. The success of the collective group of collaborative partners is contingent on not only having the right group of diverse leaders at the table, but also on ensuring that the partners make meaningful contributions to collaborative activities. As the backbone organization, Nonprofit Montgomery provides orientation for all new LG members to ensure members have a thorough understanding of MMF's goals and mission, as well as how LG members' complementary expertise can help develop actionable solutions to Montgomery County's challenges.

Logic Model

MMF created a logic model to show its collective impact activities and goals, and to visually depict the theory underlying how and why certain changes are expected to occur (see Exhibit 1). Pathways of interconnected components begin with the inputs, or resources, that support and are integral to executing MMF activities. Subsequent columns in the logic model show major activities MMF carries out, as well as resulting outputs or deliverables from the activities. Finally, components in the short-, mid-, and long-term outcomes columns represent the immediate, gradual, and systemic changes that are expected to occur as a result of MMF's activities. MMF has used the logic model to build shared understanding among its members of the work being conducted and the initiative's goals. MMF leaders have also used the logic model as a tool for communicating to community stakeholders outside of MMF the importance of its activities, as well as to garner interest in future collaboration.

Exhibit 1. MMF logic model



Local Legislator Engagement

MMF's collective impact efforts rely heavily on LG members' commitment, expertise, and decision-making abilities as local leaders to move its initiatives forward. Another critical element of MMF's success is its ability to engage local leaders who can help create institutional change in more formal ways. For example, in 2014, MMF convened local leaders in a cross-sector symposium to discuss workforce development in Montgomery County. MMF subsequently released a Call to Action that summarized the challenges, included recommended action steps and strategies to address the challenges, and outlined data on the county's workforce.^v Over 100 community leaders endorsed MMF's central recommendation to have one structure guiding workforce development countywide. The new structure would cultivate a pipeline of skilled workers who are able to fill open positions in local businesses, subsequently boosting the local economy and enhancing the community. The result was the Montgomery County Executive declaring in 2015 a plan to revamp workforce development in the county, followed by County Council approval of legislation to establish WorkSource Montgomery, Inc. This initiative was one of the first wide-ranging systems in the county to link economic and workforce development.^{vi}

Beginning in 2016, to build on the success of the first Call to Action on workforce development, MMF convened cross-sector leaders in a series of events to discuss early care and education (ECE) in Montgomery County. MMF held a symposium to facilitate conversations about the issue, conducted a series of meetings with invited experts who discussed topics such as how to build a strong ECE system, and conducted site visits to ECE programs in the county to observe their structure and operations. Following the site visits, an early childhood researcher moderated a discussion with community leaders to synthesize the information, which ultimately led to MMF's second Call to Action for ECE in 2018. MMF hosted a community symposium to discuss a plan of action to achieve the ECE goals outlined in the Call to Action. Community engagement to raise awareness of issues related to ECE led to MMF's partnership with local employers and childcare experts to develop the Early Care and Education Toolkit.^{vii} The toolkit provides tools and resources for employers and parents of young children, to minimize the challenges working parents often face—ensuring their young children receive optimal care as they actively contribute to the workforce. MMF leaders initially had difficulty getting buy-in from the business community for the second (ECE) Call to Action. However, local business leaders expressed strong support for the toolkit, which led to their buy-in of activities related to the ECE Call to Action.

MMF continued its advocacy efforts to increase awareness of ECE-related issues, and to increase buy-in and further action by a larger sector of the community. For example, in 2020, MMF established the ECE Workforce Advocacy Coalition. This was in response to the challenges families faced at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic when childcare providers had to follow public health guidelines that forced their businesses to close. The coalition, composed of over 50 representatives from the DC metropolitan area, convened to promote ECE workforce priorities at a critical time. Subsequently, MMF led a town hall meeting and symposium, with participants ranging from childcare providers to county government representatives, to discuss its proposal for a public-private ECE coordinating entity. If approved, the entity would operate through a nonprofit organization to increase equitable access to high-quality and affordable early care and education programming throughout the county. For example, the coordinating entity would be expected to determine the availability of supportive services (e.g., childcare) for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and make recommendations for increasing enrollment in appropriate programs (e.g., conduct family engagement activities).

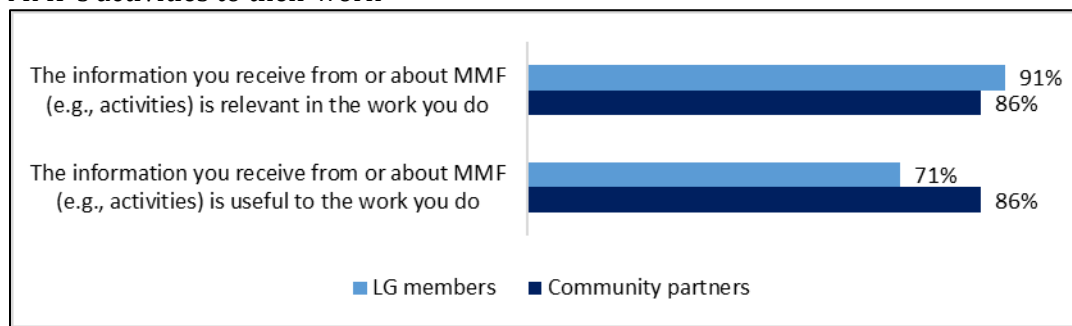
MMF's consistent engagement with the community and local government representatives to gain buy-in and facilitate action led to legislation by the Montgomery County Council, through Bill 42-21, to create the Early Care and Education Coordinating Entity.^{viii} This public-private partnership will make recommendations to build a real ECE system for ensuring that working parents in the county, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, have equal access to high-quality early childhood education programs for their children—to help close opportunity gaps, ensure today's workers can fully participate in the workforce, and build tomorrow's talent pipeline.

Data-driven Decision-making

MMF's Accountability workgroup developed performance measures that are aligned with the logic model and tenets of collective impact. There are currently 10 performance measures—2 for each of the 5 principles of collective impact: common agenda (e.g., number of community partners who support MMF Calls to Action); continuous communication (e.g., percentage of LG members who report communication among members is useful); mutually reinforcing activities (e.g., percentage of LG members who took action for an MMF effort); shared measurement system (e.g., number of community partners that share data); and backbone organization (e.g., total dollars raised). How does MMF measure progress toward achieving its goals? Over the past decade MMF engaged in informal activities to measure progress toward achieving its goals (e.g., administration of a brief questionnaire following LG meetings). In 2022 the Accountability Workgroup developed and administered surveys to better understand the strengths and gaps of MMF's collective impact activities from the perspectives of community partners and MMF's LG.

Overall, the results align with the accomplishments described in earlier sections of this article. For example, most LG members who completed a survey (n=35)^{ix} reported that they used their professional expertise to help MMF achieve its goals (77%), and they reported having opportunities to meaningfully contribute to MMF activities (80%) and engage with other LG members and partners (74%). All community partners who completed a survey (n=22) reported they supported at least one MMF Call to Action. Over 80 percent of the community partners reported they are somewhat likely or very likely to support a new MMF Call to Action. Although the response rate for the community partner survey was low (36%), the survey results are promising, nonetheless. Partner survey results suggest that respondents' previous experience with MMF action planning and engagement strategies makes them likely to partner with MMF again to advance future Calls to Action. Respondents represent different sectors of the community (e.g., businesses, nonprofit organizations, government, philanthropy) and nearly 90 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that MMF's activities are relevant (86%) and useful (86%) to their work (see Figure 1).

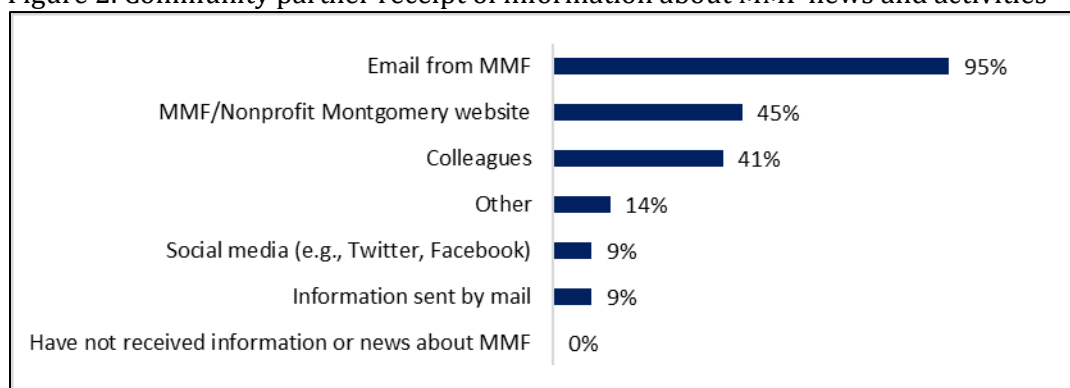
Figure 1. LG and community members' level of agreement about the usefulness and relevance of MMF's activities to their work



Note: LG members: n=34, community partners: n=22

Additionally, all community partners who completed a survey reported that they received information from MMF through one of its many information dissemination vehicles (no respondents indicated that they did not receive MMF-related information) (see Figure 2). They received information about MMF news and activities most often through email messages from MMF; by visiting the MMF's web pages, which are accessed through Nonprofit Montgomery's website; and through word-of-mouth by colleagues. MMF leaders have acknowledged that although MMF has a presence on social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook), there is only a minimal amount of activity. Survey results confirm that MMF may want to increase its activity on social media platforms, as many people use them as primary sources of information. Only 9 percent of community partners who completed a survey reported that they received MMF-related information from social media.

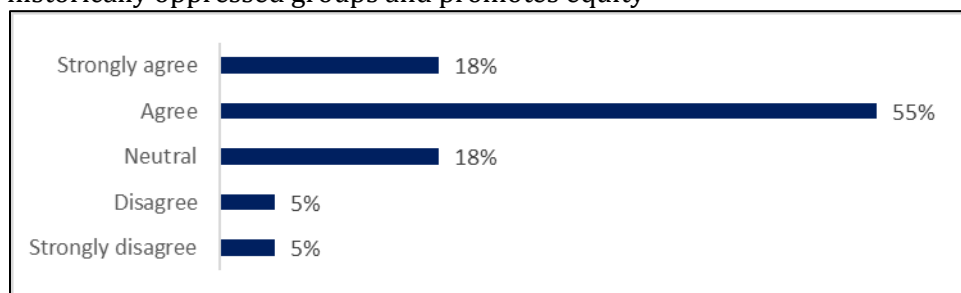
Figure 2. Community partner receipt of information about MMF news and activities



Note: n=22

Nearly three-quarters (73%) of community partners surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that MMF's activities focus on underserved community members and the promotion of equitable policies and practices (see Figure 3). MMF's overarching goal is to address intricate community challenges in Montgomery County, Maryland, home to a diverse population of residents who should have equal access to high-quality childcare, employment opportunities, and other necessities. It is critical that MMF not only prioritizes equity and inclusion in its work, but also continually monitors the extent to which members of the community *perceive* that MMF prioritizes equity and inclusion. In future community partner surveys, if the level of agreement on these topics declines, MMF should consider conducting action planning to identify strategies for ensuring Calls to Action include equity-related considerations and adjust messaging emphasizing *how* action planning addresses the needs of underserved populations.

Figure 3. Community partner perceptions of the extent to which MMF prioritizes marginalized and historically oppressed groups and promotes equity



Note: n=22

MMF LG members participated in focus groups to discuss the survey results and identify, for each performance measure: (1) factors that contributed to positive results (e.g., MMF's reputation); (2) factors that limited the level of success on the measure (e.g., MMF leadership changes); (3) partners who can help advance MMF's work on future issues (e.g., community members directly affected by an issue); (4) processes or practices that have been proven to be successful (e.g., newsletters sent to target audiences at regular intervals); (5) strategies for success (e.g., documentation of MMF and Nonprofit Montgomery roles in the collective impact space); and (6) action steps to improve results (e.g., hire a dedicated communications expert). Through participation in the focus groups, MMF LG members demonstrated their commitment to exploring the strengths and gaps in their efforts and, more importantly, planning action steps to continue conducting community engagement activities that work well and make adjustments where necessary.

Conclusion

Over the past 10 years, MMF has successfully created systemic change through its leadership structure, creation of a theory of action to explicate *how* MMF's actions are expected to lead to key outcomes, engagement with local policymakers leading to enactment of local legislation, and data-driven decision-making processes. MMF owes its success over the past decade in no small part to guidance from dedicated Nonprofit Montgomery staff and LG members who champion the work. In addition to the obvious need to continually seek and obtain funding, collective impact efforts require not only meaningful participation from cross-sector leaders, but also steadfast advocacy and persistence to move issues from ideas to action.

ⁱ Collective Impact Forum. (n.d.). *What is collective impact?* <https://collectiveimpactforum.org/what-is-collective-impact/>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ United States Census. (n.d.). *Quick facts: Montgomery County, Maryland*.

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/montgomerycountymaryland>

^{iv} DataUSA. (n.d.). *Montgomery County, MD*. <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/montgomery-county-md/#housing>

^v Montgomery Moving Forward. (2014). *Call to action: Fueling our future with skilled workers and good jobs*.

<https://www.nonprofitmoco.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/MMF-Call-to-Action.pdf>

^{vi} WorkSource Montgomery. (n.d.). <https://worksourcemontgomery.com/>

^{vii} The Early Care and Education Toolkit for Employers. (n.d.). <http://ecetoolkit.org/>

^{viii} Montgomery County Council. (2022). *Bill 42-21, child care – early care and education coordinating entity – established*.

https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/council/Resources/Files/agenda/col/2022/20220215/20220215_10D.pdf

^{ix} The response rate for the LG survey was 90 percent.