

Benchmarking Local Governments' Information Sources for Economic Mobility Work

Findings from Spring 2025 National Survey of Local Government Decision-makers

December 2025

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About CivicPulse

CivicPulse is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization dedicated to enhancing local and state government in the US by conducting representative surveys of public officials, producing actionable research, and facilitating practitioner-researcher dialogue.

About MGT

MGT is a national social impact and technology consulting firm serving state, local, and education government (SLED) clients. For more than 50 years, we have partnered with school systems, state agencies, nonprofits, and foundations to drive operational excellence, strengthen infrastructure, and improve outcomes for students and communities. Our solutions address mission-critical priorities including technology and cybersecurity, human capital, operations, and financial strategy.

Our team specializes in conducting systemwide assessments, developing strategic implementation roadmaps, and guiding education organizations through complex modernization initiatives. As trusted advisors, we combine diagnostic rigor, technology expertise, and change management strategies to help clients identify root causes, cocreate solutions, and implement lasting, systematic change. Our approach builds resilience, fosters sustainable growth, and advances our commitment to impact communities for good.

More Information

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Executive Summary

Across America, local government leaders make decisions that can impact the economic mobility of their communities and residents. This can take shape in a variety of ways, ranging from workforce and economic development to providing social services and affordable housing. Improving economic mobility in communities can lead to richer quality of life for residents, particularly those experiencing greater need.

In April 2025, CivicPulse partnered with MGT to survey both local elected officials and civil service leaders who work on economic mobility-related projects. We then conducted ten follow-up interviews. This short report aims to illuminate where local decision-makers find information to support their economic mobility work, as well as where gaps remain. Below is a summary of the key findings.

Finding 1. Local Decision-makers Rely Heavily on In-House Data Analysis. To assess economic mobility in their own communities, local decision-makers most often rely on their own government staff (77%). Reliance on professional associations (47%), consulting firms (44%), and local higher education extension services (43%) is also common—but to a significantly lesser extent.

Finding 2. Localized Networks Are Key Sources of Ideas. When seeking ideas for program improvements or new projects, local decision-makers most often turn to organizations and peers in nearby communities, communities of similar size, and colleagues in similar roles. Their top five sources are: peer governments (70%), state/local chapters of national associations (64%), peer word of mouth (56%), community colleague word of mouth (52%), and community/regional foundations (50%).

Finding 3. Larger Cities Participate More in National Networks. Local decision-makers serving larger municipalities, townships, and counties are more likely to participate in national information networks. For example, 69% of decision-makers in larger communities (>100k residents) turn to national professional associations/conferences, compared to 55% in mid-sized communities (25-100k) and only 31% in small communities (<25k).

Finding 4. A Few National Organizations Stand Out. Out of 34 specific national organizations, local decision-makers most frequently said they reference the Urban Land Institute (55%) for economic mobility ideas. This was followed by the National League of Cities (47%), the American Planning Association (45%), and Brookings Institution (43%).

Finding #1: Local Decision-makers Rely Heavily on In-House Data Analysis

Local government staff are at the forefront of analyzing data and providing evidence on economic mobility for local decision-makers. While several other sources, like professional associations (47%) and consulting firms (44%), are used by a large minority of leaders, local staff expertise (77%) is significantly more widespread (Table 1).

Local decision-makers rely heavily on their own government staff for analysis of economic mobility data (77%).

Several factors may explain why decision-makers turn to local staff most often. First, these government workers live in or near the communities they serve, giving them unique access to on-the-ground networks and knowledge. A Commissioner for a mid-sized county in Alabama pointed out, “Ideas should come from the community to the economic base, not the other way around.”

Table 1. Leading sources of economic mobility data for local decision-makers

Data source	Rank order	% of respondents
Own local government staff	1	77%
Professional association(s)	2	47%
Consulting firm(s)	3	44%
Local university, college, or university extension service(s)	4	43%
Community foundation(s)	5	37%
Other nonprofit(s)	6	32%
Regional university extension service(s)	7	22%
Think tank(s)	8	14%
National foundation(s)	9	14%

Note: This table shows the rank order and percentage of respondents who selected each of the respective response options. Results come from an April 2025 survey of 1,022 local elected officials and civil service leaders responding to the question “Which do you rely on to help analyze data or provide evidence about economic mobility, if any? Select all that apply.”

Second, the availability of tailored data tools may make other resources seem too general. Where capacity permits, local staff have built data structures that are responsive to their community’s specific needs. As a Housing and Community

Development Officer in a large Texas city explained, “Our data team manages our affordable housing inventory and our external communications through the affordable housing online search tool, and internal communications to improve processes.”

But not all local departments or governments have the ability to set up internal economic mobility datasets, so they turn to other sources. A planning director in a mid-sized municipality in Wisconsin explained, “We don't have particularly good data or disaggregated data for different demographic groups. So, we try to use the federal data or state data as it exists and just recognize that it's incomplete and probably old. We often have to go directly to local service providers.”

Finding #2: Localized Networks Are Key Sources of Ideas

The top five sources that local decision-makers turn to for economic mobility ideas reflect the importance of sourcing from individuals and organizations with similar experiences or insights. Most frequently, local decision-makers get economic mobility ideas from peer governments (70%), state or local chapters of national associations (64%), peers in similar positions (56%), colleagues in their communities (52%), and community or regional foundations (50%) (Table 2).

Table 2. Types of sources local decision-makers use to find ideas related to economic mobility

Source	Rank order	% of respondents
Peer towns, cities, or counties	1	70%
State or local networks or chapters of national associations	2	64%
Word of mouth from my peers in a similar position	3	56%
Word of mouth from colleagues within the community	4	52%
Community and regional foundations	5	50%
National professional associations and conferences	6	47%
Topic-focused peer groups, networks, or network chapters	7	34%
Universities	8	32%
Social media	9	31%
Think tanks / policy research institutes	10	29%
National foundations	11	19%

Note: This table shows the rank order and percentage of respondents who selected each of the respective response options. Results come from an April 2025 survey of 1,022 local elected officials and civil service leaders responding to the question “What sources do you use to find out about ways to address economic mobility? Select all that apply.”

Networks based on geographic region, community similarities, and shared job function form the basis of sourcing ideas related to economic mobility.

Some decision-makers took the time to explain why they turn to these localized networks more frequently. As a Planning Director for a large city in Utah put it, they “Mainly use them to learn more about issues and different approaches others have used to try to find something that matches the local need and available resources.”

In addition to finding ideas that match local needs and resources, decision-makers also turn to localized networks for help with navigating regional restrictions. An Assistant City Manager from a mid-sized California city offered the example of food truck regulation, “It’s so heavily regulated by state law that we are looking within California. We did some research and found out who are the cities who are making progress in this arena, who have passed interesting ordinances or done interesting programs, and reached out to them.”

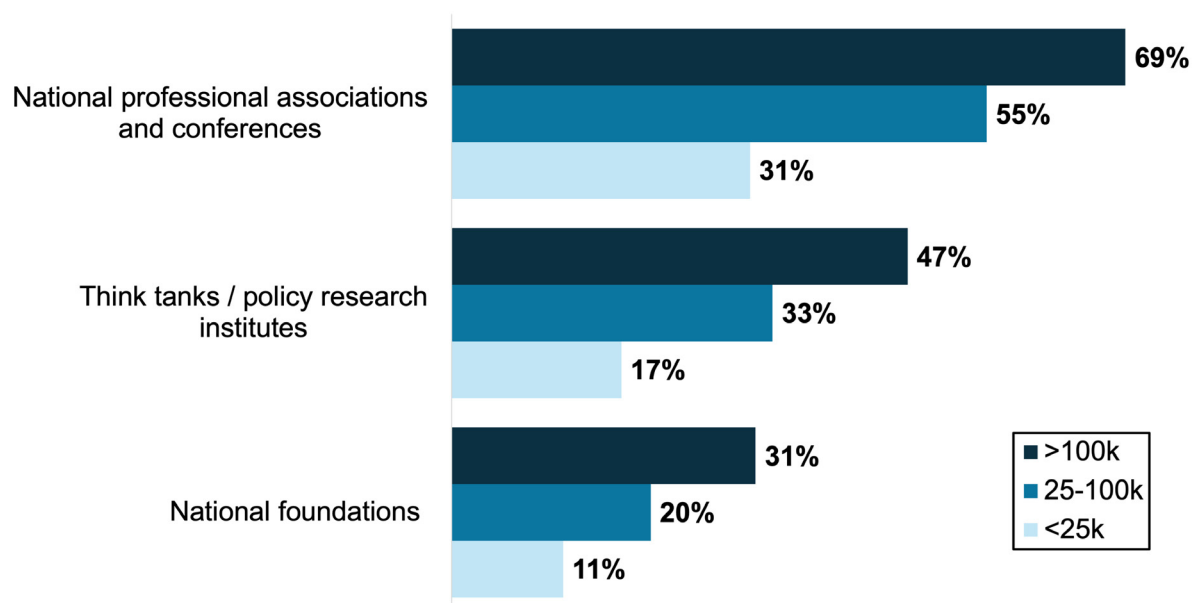
National sources also provide support to local economic mobility decision-makers. Most notably, 47% of local decision-makers said they turn to national professional associations/conferences—ranking this source sixth, just behind the array of top localized networks. However, the ranking of this source also underscores the importance of localized networks: professional associations and conferences provide opportunities for building and expanding peer networks.

Finding #3: Larger Cities Participate More in National Networks

Despite the prominence of more localized networks for sourcing ideas related to economic mobility, local decision-makers still rely on national ones as well (Table 2). Leaders who do turn to these sources are more likely to be serving larger communities (>100k residents). This trend holds true across three types of national organizations: professional associations and conferences, think tanks and policy research institutes, and national foundations (Figure 1).

When local decision-makers turn to national networks for economic mobility ideas, they’re more likely to be serving larger populations.

Figure 1. Local decision-makers' use of national organizations for sourcing economic mobility ideas, by population size



Note: This figure shows the percentage of respondents, segmented by population size, who selected each of the respective response options. Results come from an April 2025 survey of 1,022 local elected officials and civil service leaders responding to the question “What sources do you use to find out about ways to address economic mobility? Select all that apply.”

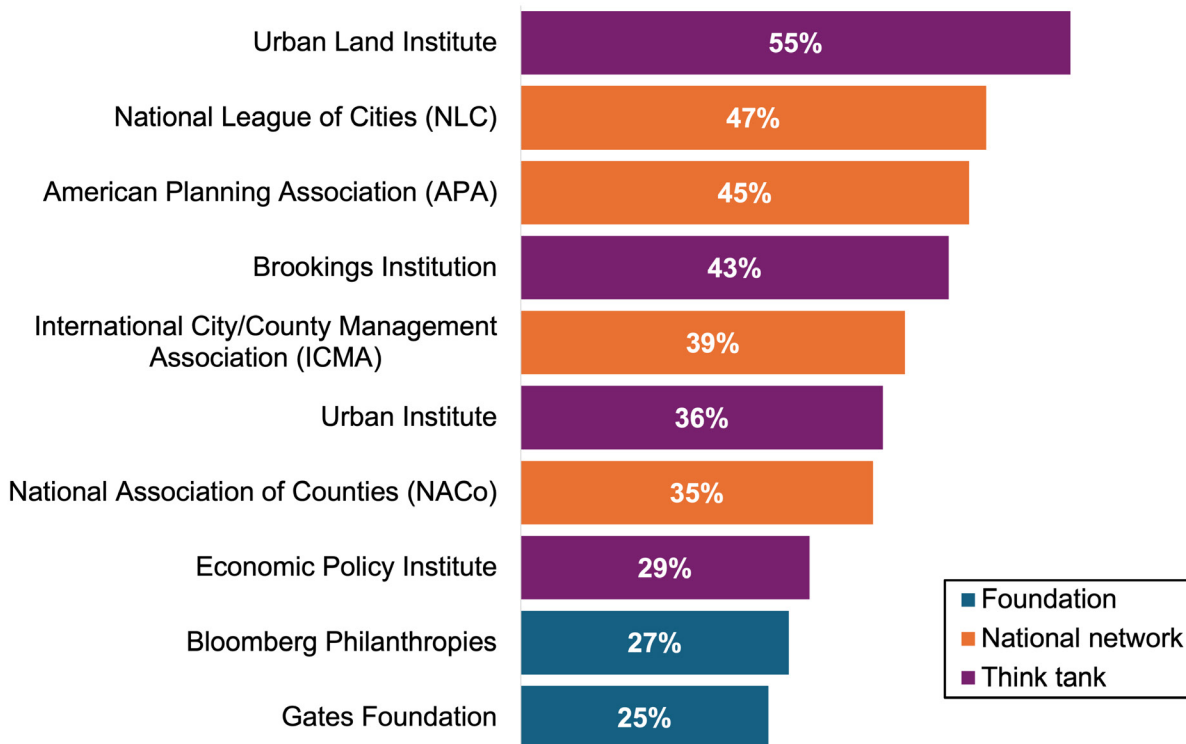
Local governments serving mid-sized (25-100k residents) and small communities (<25k) are less likely to turn to national resources. Whereas localized networks can develop naturally through preexisting relationships, making use of national resources—especially national professional associations—requires staff dedicated to attending such events and building relationships with other communities across the country. Mid-sized and small communities are less likely to have staff dedicated to economic mobility in this way. A planning manager for a mid-sized city in California explained, “Most smaller city governments are not equipped to take on major challenges such as economic mobility. We simply don't have the staffing or the resources.” A planning and zoning director for a mid-sized city in Indiana put it another way, “We wear a lot of hats, including economic mobility ones—it just isn't in our job title, so there's a lot of improvisation that happens.”

Finding #4: A Few National Organizations Stand Out

To better understand exactly who local decision-makers consult nationally, we asked them to tell us about their experiences with 34 specific national organizations. We learned that local decision-makers most frequently turn to the Urban Land Institute (55%), the National League of Cities (47%), the American Planning Association (45%), and Brookings Institution (43%) for economic mobility ideas and support (Figure 2).

When it comes to national organizations, most local decision-makers turn to the Urban Land Institute (55%).

Figure 2. Top national providers of economic mobility ideas and support, according to local decision-makers



Note: This figure shows the percentage of respondents who selected each of the respective response options to three different but matching survey questions. It displays only the top 10 out of a total list of 34 national organizations. Results come from an April 2025 survey of 1,022 local elected officials and civil service leaders, responding to the following questions: “Which **foundations** do you look to for ideas or support about economic mobility? Select all that apply.” “Which of these **national networks** do you turn to for ideas and support? Select all that apply.” “Which **think tanks and policy research institutes** do you look to for ideas or support about economic mobility? Select all that apply.”

Local leaders use economic mobility resources from national organizations in a variety of ways. Some leaders use these resources for work on specific projects, like a Mayor representing a small city in Iowa who reported, “When working to create the case for why it is critical and essential to install buried fiberoptic broadband, I relied on many of the organizations to help build awareness and to gather their marketing, research, and communications connections and networks.”

Other leaders have enjoyed participating in the networking opportunities that national organizations can provide. For example, a Community Development Director for a small city in California said, “We were part of two cohorts, one with NLC and one with ICMA. I personally only was involved in the ICMA cohort, and it was great—really helpful to hear about what other cities are doing and problem solve together.”

National organizations also support local leaders through professional development opportunities for staff. A Planning Manager for a mid-sized city in California shared, "We have used studies and publications from APA and ICMA and the California branch of the National League of Cities to educate staff and better understand issues."

Discussion & Conclusion

Local decision-makers turn to a variety of sources for data and insights related to economic mobility. While the manner in which this is done varies by local government and depends on its particular priorities and internal expertise, most local governments rely heavily on their own staff and localized information networks. While this information environment offers flexibility based on local circumstances, this also presents a risk that some local governments will miss out on innovative programs and policy ideas not on their radar.

National networks do play an important role as well, especially for decision-makers in governments serving larger communities (>100k residents). National organizations like the Urban Land Institute, National League of Cities, and American Planning Association do so by fostering ongoing relationships and networking spaces while producing content that helps local leaders implement specific projects. There may be opportunities for these organizations to deliver more value for smaller local governments through the curation of content that works around the fact that these local governments often lack dedicated economic mobility staff and their decision-makers frequently wear "many hats."

Looking ahead to 2026, the economic mobility information environment presents significant challenges. Through both survey responses and follow-up interviews, local leaders shared concerns over outdated or incomplete national data. Furthermore, there is a great deal of uncertainty about the future of state and federal opportunities for funding support. Local decision-makers shared anxiety about not being sure where to look for the most up-to-date information in this evolving landscape. Information providers going forward will need to be clear about where changes should be anticipated and stay up to date with changes coming from federal and state governments.

Appendix: Survey Description

The survey was conducted from April 29 to June 5, 2025, through email invitations directing respondents to an online questionnaire. CivicPulse constructed the sampling frame from a continuously updated database of local government leaders in all municipalities, counties, and townships serving populations of 1,000 or more. Records are verified quarterly through phone calls to the respective governments. To enhance coverage, CivicPulse supplemented this frame with a custom search for additional decision-makers relevant to economic mobility in local governments serving populations of 25,000 or more. The resulting respondent pool reflects a range of government types and leadership positions, as described below.

Respondents represented three main types of positions within local government: Elected Policymakers (e.g., mayors, council members, county legislators), Appointed Executives (e.g., city/county managers and deputy managers), and Civil Service Leaders (e.g., department directors, division directors, program managers).

The resulting respondent pool reflects a range of government types (Table A1), leadership positions (Table A2), and population sizes (Table A3).

Table A1. Distribution of respondents by government type

Government type	Number of respondents
County	286
Municipality	586
Township	150
Total	1022

Table A2. Distribution of respondents by position

Position	Number of respondents
Elected Policymaker	447
Appointed Executive	111
Civil Service Leader	464
Total	1022

Table A3. Distribution of respondents by population size

Population size	Number of respondents
Small (<25k)	450
Mid-sized (25k - 100k)	368
Large (>100k)	204
Total	1022

Appendix: Questionnaire

Below are the selection of questions from the full questionnaire that were used for this analysis:

1. Which do you rely on to help analyze data or provide evidence about economic mobility, if any? *Select all that apply.*

Response options: Our local government staff; Local university, college, or university extension service(s); Regional university extension service(s); Professional association(s); Consulting firm(s); Think tank(s); Community foundation(s); National foundation(s); Other nonprofit(s); Other (please specify); None of the above

2. What sources do you use to find out about ways to address economic mobility? *Select all that apply.*

Response options: National professional associations and conferences; State or local networks or chapters of national associations; Topic-focused peer groups, networks, or network chapters; Universities; Think tanks / policy research institutes; National foundations; Community and regional foundations; Word of mouth from colleagues within the community; Word of mouth from my peers in a similar position; Peer towns, cities or counties; Social media; Other (please specify); None of the above

3. Which foundations do you look to for ideas or support about economic mobility? *Select all that apply.*

Response options: Gates Foundation; Bloomberg Philanthropies; Kresge Foundation; Ballmer Group; Ford Foundation; Annie E. Casey Foundation; Blue Meridian Partners; Kellogg Foundation; JP Morgan Chase Philanthropy;

James Irvine Foundation; Walton Family Foundation; Local community foundation;
Other (please specify); None of the above

4. Which think tanks and policy research institutes do you look to for ideas or support about economic mobility? *Select all that apply.*

Response options: Brookings Institution; Urban Institute; Aspen Institute; Manhattan Institute; Economic Policy Institute; Urban Land Institute; RAND Corporation; New America; American Enterprise Institute; Cato Institute; Other (please specify); None of the above

5. Which of these national networks do you turn to for ideas and support? *Select all that apply.*

Response options: National Association of Counties (NACo); National League of Cities (NLC); US Conference of Mayors (USCM); Results for America (RFA); African American Mayors Association (AAMA); National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO); International City/County Management Association (ICMA); American Planning Association (APA); Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE); National Association of Regional Councils (NARC); Local Progress; National Congress of American Indians (NCAI); Asian American Government Executives Network (AAGEN); None of the above