

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You are listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Earlier this month, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation announced more than \$100 million in new partnerships and investments in economic mobility with the mission of improving the lives of more than 50 million people experiencing poverty in the U.S. Joining me to discuss the new grants is Ryan Rippel, the foundation's director of economic mobility and opportunity. Ryan, thank you for being on the podcast.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

Hi, Ramona. It's great to be with you. Thanks for having me.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Let's start a little bit about what your part of the foundation does. I want to give people the knowledge so as we talk about the grants, we'll see how they get applied and who's going to benefit from them.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

Absolutely. So I work in the US program of the Bill Melinda Gates Foundation. As many of your listeners may know, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has a pretty broad focus around the globe in helping address issues that are barriers to opportunity for the most vulnerable individuals on earth, who are up against enormous odds to have a healthy, full life.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

And in the US, our focus has primarily been US education for the past couple of decades. In 2018, the foundation started a new program area, the Economic Mobility and Opportunity Strategy. Really is an extension of the education work. We know that education is the single most important lever for creating upward mobility, and we also know education is not enough.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

And so the team that I work on and am part of and the partners that we work with are really focused on those barriers in daily life that go beyond education and that are creating really entrenched deep hurdles for the folks you described in your introduction, the 50 million in this country who are below 200% of the federal poverty line, prevent them from having access to opportunity and to upward mobility, which we think of as not just about economic success, but also about belonging and power and autonomy over their life. That's where we are in the organization and that's the work we're trying to do.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You have some numbers that I've seen on the website and I think people feel this, economic mobility really is on the decline. So what are the measurements that you are using when you look at economic mobility? Is it just a good job? Is it being able to pass that wealth along to their children?

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

It's a great question and I think the measures that are important, there's multiple measures that are important because it's such a complicated issue and it reflects what people are going through every day. It's not just a long-term measure, it's a how are you doing today measure too that's important.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

And let me start at the highest level. So one of our key partners, a research and data partner is an economist named Raj Chetty at Harvard University who has an effort called Opportunity Insights. And Raj has put out with his colleagues some really very powerful data that guides us to tell the macro story, which is that for those born in 1940 in this country, the chances that they would do better than their parents over the course of their lifetime was 90%. And for those who were born in the 1980s, which is my generation, I was born in 1982, the chances that I would do better than my parents below 50%. That would suggest a profound set of issues and problems in this country around upward mobility. The escalator just is not moving up for many people.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

That's the big high-level story. We know it plays out differently across communities and across many different, not just places, but many different groups and identities across the country face enormous challenges because of race, because of gender, a whole range of issues. And we also know that it's not just where you're going to be by the time you're 30, it's where you're going to be at the end of the week.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

When we've spoken about the data and the issues in the past, I've been at a couple of conferences and I remember vividly at one we're talking about the data around this and a woman stood up in the back and just shouted at me, "I just need a tank of gas." And that is also really important to keep in mind, especially right now as our country is talking a lot about inflation and how expensive it is to find a place to live, to find food, to support your family in achieving very basic milestones of daily life.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

So our measures have to both be about those long-term structural challenges as well as those day in and day out what does it take to get through the day to the end of the week, because what we've learned very clearly from our work to date is that mobility is not possible if you do not first have a sense of security and stability in daily life. And so we care about the full range of measures that can help guide us both short term and long term in this work.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

We talk at WorkingNation a lot about some of those barriers that you're talking about, including you're right, transportation is a big barrier, childcare, time. Some people who are on the lower end of the financial structure, below poverty, they may even have two, maybe three jobs, but they still can't afford the opportunity to increase their finances. Education is one of those. So what is your strategy to relieve that additional pressure?

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

Our work is organized around really three pillars. And I'll say a little bit about each one, but before I do, let me just go back to the foundation for this, which is our focus population. And we use 200% of the federal poverty line, not as the only measure, but as a really important one because it can be

consistently used because of the available data sources to tell a story of who is facing some of the greatest vulnerability in the country. It is a population of 50 million people. It is disproportionately people of color, individuals who identify as female, but it's a population that is in every corner of our country. It is in urban areas, it is in small towns and mid-sized towns. It is in rural areas. And so it is a challenge that is not isolated to any one community but is present in all of our communities and is therefore a challenge for all of us.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

That focus population is the foundation for the strategy we've built. And the first pillar is what we call make lives better now, which is this very idea we've been talking about of what do you need today to make it? And a big area of focus for us has been around the safety net. Billions of dollars in the federal safety net are left on the table every year for individuals who are eligible for those benefits but can't access them because of bureaucratic long, difficult processes. We've seen through our partners that some application processes are more than a thousand questions long, and it can take you months of being approved and then not approved and then reapplying before you get access. And many people aren't able to follow through that process for the very points you made. They have very complicated lives and time is of the essence.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

So where we're really focused with our partners is how do you make some of those processes much more efficient, much more equitable to unlock those resources that are otherwise going unused? So that's first and foremost.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

Second is around work. As you mentioned, a lot of people do not have the ability to go back and get a post-secondary credential or a college degree as important as that is in this labor market, and yet they can be skilled through lots of different routes, through on-the-job training or other work experience. And how do we make sure that those higher-skilled, high-skilled, but workers who are not earning wages that can create mobility for them have access to good jobs, to employers who will pay good wages and create pathways up the ladder for them? And that's a second big priority for us in this make lives better now work.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

Then beyond that, we're looking at the institutions that play a really important role in shaping daily life. And two in particular are a focus to us. One small and medium businesses. They are the employer of the vast majority of our focus population. They will be connected to a small and medium business. And we want to support those small and medium businesses, those employers, in developing good jobs. And we know a good job is about more than just wages. It's about power and autonomy in your job. It's about predictable schedules. It's about paid time off. It's about support for childcare. It's a whole range of things, and it's about a future, a pathway up in that job. So how do we help small and medium businesses create good jobs that can create uplift is a big priority.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

The second are local governments. They sit across many of the systems that affect daily life and many of those actors are stretched thin in terms of time and resources to know what works and how to

implement those ideas. And so we are really investing in a set of networks to help local governments get access to tools and insights that can help them prioritize these issues and help our focus population.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

And then the third area is work that we want to do to try and bring the field together. We work in a very siloed, fragmented field around economic mobility, and many of us are working in ways that could be even more powerful if we could join forces and align on some bigger higher-level goals. And so part of our strategy is really finding those partnerships that can help us look up and look out over the long term to build even greater impact for the future.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So you just announced earlier this month, this \$100 million in new partnerships and investments toward that strategy. Share some of the details on who you're working with and where that money's going.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

Thank you for that question. So this marks the single largest year of grant-making in our strategy of over \$100 million in investments. And there's more on the way in future years. In 2022, the Gates Foundation committed \$460 million over four years to our work, and this is the first year of that new budget and the first set of investments.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

This is an approach we're taking now, which is really trying to build some deeper longer-term partnerships. And so we have a set of anchor partners who are receiving larger grants with a lot more autonomy and control over those resources. These organizations are much closer to the work and to the issues and the focus population than we are. And we seek to really empower them in a way where we're aligned on a vision for impact. But they are doing the work day in and day out and have with these resources the ability to fulfill their organization's mission.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

So across this group is a range of really compelling efforts. One, we have three organizations, Prosperity Now, Family and Workers Fund, and the Pacific Community Ventures working together on a good job strategy for small and medium businesses. How do we help those small businesses have tools about the practices that create uplift in jobs, but also how do they have the resources to implement them? And that set of three organizations has built a very powerful partnership that is at the heart of our anchor work.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

Another organization, Opportunity at Work, is focused on a population it calls STARS, which is an acronym that stands for those skilled through alternative routes. So they don't have a post-secondary credential, but they do have skills and high-valued skills, but they have a lot of barriers to accessing employers right now to get those skills to register in the labor market. And Opportunity at Work is building really a platform to help facilitate with greater efficiency and equity connections between those workers and employers.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

Family and Workers Fund is also a key partner for us on accessing the safety net, and they're working across many different dimensions to help states really improve their access and entry points to the safety net programs that are so critical for daily life.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

That's a few of the organizations that are part of this. Two others I will also just mention though that are really critical for our local government work. One is Results for America, which is building a network of local governments that can use tools to better prioritize our focus population. And the Urban Institute has built a framework of metrics around economic mobility to help guide those local governments in making decisions and tracking progress.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

And so all of that together really reflects a very powerful set of organizations that will now work in an aligned way with us and with our support to achieve this impact.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That brings up a lot of questions to me. The small and medium businesses, a lot of these in these communities where maybe it's a vulnerable population, some of those have trouble getting access to capital so they can start their companies, build their companies and then hire on more people. Is part of the strategy there to try to help connect that capital?

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

Very much so, in a number of ways. One is around just access to loans for many of these small businesses through organizations like CDFI, institutions that provide lower-cost capital to small businesses to implement some of these practices. But a second important element of this is through public procurement processes. There are millions, billions of dollars, in fact, available to local governments, state governments to spend to procure services for different programs, public programs, and they can use those dollars to hire small and medium businesses and to attach those dollars to a requirement that there be a real measure of good jobs in those organizations is another way to make those resources available.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

So access to capital is key. Small and medium businesses do not have a lot of capacity or margin to try things, and I think that's what's important to stress in this is our strategy is not asking them to be philanthropic. This has to work for their bottom line. It has to be sustainable. And we're putting a lot of effort and energy into understanding what practices they are able to implement in an affordable way, but also create real returns for them because of lower turnover in workers and other benefits that can accrue to the company as well, to the employer as well.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think one of the things that we come across a lot that we are seeing is sometimes the people who need the help don't know the help is there. And I wonder how do we better connect those people who need it with the help that's in their community?

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

I think it is at the heart of a very fundamental challenge that our work seeks to address. When we've talked to people around the country about how they've moved out of poverty and up the ladder, when we've looked at the evidence around what works, there is this kind of common theme. It takes on many different forms, but there's a common element to it of a navigator, a connector, someone, something, some resource that can help you at a critical fork in the road, a critical life moment make the connection to something that will actually help you get to the next thing.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

And that's a big part of how we think about this. How does this play out not just in one issue domain or vertical. We don't have a housing strategy or just a transportation strategy or just a criminal justice strategy. We're trying to look across the life course of individuals and those key forks in the road where that connection, that moment of navigation could be hugely impactful for long-term opportunity as well as short-term security.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

And so I think the answer to your question is that there are many answers to that question, that there are many things we must do in those key moments to help increase access to those resources. It may be that it is for a benefits program innovating how that process works and how easy it is for you to get on your phone and via an app unlock an application process that otherwise might cause you to be on the phone with a call center for days or weeks on end. But it might also be that technology in the future plays an even more critical role in balancing this out because it can predict or recommend things to you that you maybe didn't even know existed that are out there and available and otherwise going unused.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

And we're looking at all of those types of navigators as well as really the traditional approaches of a person who knows and is in a job where they are connecting across individuals facing these needs and making sure they have the best information and insight. Local governments are a great example of that. We need them to know what tools are out there. And not just that, what other places have tried and what's worked and who they can call to help them implement it in their community. A very practical kind of supports to get much of this to happen.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

This decline in economic mobility has been going on for a while as we discussed at the beginning. What would you like to see as your five-year goal for these initiatives? What would be success for you?

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

Well, in each of the areas that we invest with our partners, we've aligned on a set of measures that we believe are signs of momentum. And so there's an answer to that in a very specific sense with each of those partnerships. And I won't go into all the details of that, but it's a feeling of momentum that we all agree on to suggest we can keep building and keep going and things are actually translating not just in a conceptual way, but there's actually a tangible difference in someone's life that we can see out in the world. And that's hugely important.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

On things like access to benefits, we're tracking the dollars we unlock, we're tracking the number of individuals that we can reach. We're doing that on jobs. On the good jobs piece, it's not just that there's a white paper that says clearly what a good job is. It's that there's actually people who have now access to a set of benefits or resources or paid time off that actually lead to greater mobility. So it's very pragmatic, practical exists in the world and daily life is really important to us.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

But I would just take a step up from that to say for us collectively across this work in five years, we really seek to be part of a movement that's galvanizing a lot of actors and a lot of funders to work in more coordinated ways to move the needle on these issues. This is no time to rest. This is a critical moment in the course of history for our country and my children and my generation and what's going to be true 10, 20, 30 years from now. And we have to be at work at it in new ways, in bolder ways, and in more collaborative ways.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

And in five years, I'd like for us to be able to look and see that we have a set of partners that are wide-reaching, wide-ranging in the scope of what they're doing and that there's momentum around that work to suggest we can keep going and that we may be onto something, that we may be in a position collectively to turn the tide on this very troubling trend in America.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Ryan, we share that goal here at WorkingNation and I wish you and everyone involved success in the coming year, the new year, and the years to come. So thank you very much.

Ryan Rippel, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Director of Economic Mobility and Opportunity:

Thank you, Ramona. Great to be with you. Thanks for your work.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking with Ryan Rippel, the director of economic mobility and opportunity for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.