

# Catalyst for Change – Derek Mitchell Takes Helm at LEADS



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photography Kevin Harkins

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How do you solve the thorniest problems that have beset gateway cities for decades? These communities have historically driven innovation and are where first-generation people arrived, among them the job creators and entrepreneurs. Now, these same places face struggling downtown economies, systemic racism, and a decreasing tax base. “I’ve always felt that gateway cities ... are really microcosms of America,” says Derek Mitchell. He says they are a petri dish for solving bigger problems, including

issues of inclusivity in leadership and negotiating an economic infrastructure built for an earlier era.

It's difficult problems like these that led Mitchell to serve as executive director of the [Lawrence Partnership](#) when it was founded in 2014. The Partnership is a Lawrence-based civic development organization with involvement from the private and public sectors. Before coming to the Partnership, his work included stints at two prominent Lowell nonprofits, [UTECH](#) and the [International Institute of New England](#).

In June, Mitchell assumed the role of president of LEADS, where he works alongside co-executive director Pam Hallagan. The program (LEADS is an acronym for Leaders Engaged and Activated to Drive System-wide Change) was first piloted as a collaboration with the Lawrence Partnership and staff and faculty from the Harvard Business School. According to Mitchell, LEADS is a "platform for changemaking" that finds ways to get local leaders working together to solve today's most pressing issues.



Mitchell has been tasked with helping to run the program in the Merrimack Valley and immediate surrounding area. Ultimately, he would like to see the program expand across the state and beyond.

At LEADS, high-level, diverse, and cross-sectional leaders are recruited through a nomination process to participate in one of the program's cohorts. The first two cohorts from Lawrence, Haverhill and Lowell included 100 members. The cohort groups participate in a 10-month high intensity fellowship. Upon graduation, they enter the LEADS network, an alumni program that continues the work of collaborate leadership and community change-making.

"We culminate the program by generating actionable project teams made up of participants that are working on priority issues in the community," Mitchell says. The cohort members have created initiatives to address downtown revitalization, food security, racial equity, affordable housing and more. LEADS has independently raised over \$50,000 to seed some of the project teams that have emerged from its programming.

LEADS is not an emerging leadership program, but recruits individuals who already have established themselves as leaders within their communities. LEADS incorporates diversity into its recruitment process. Currently, its program is majority-minority and majority-female. Of this process, Mitchell says, "It does not happen by accident, but the outcome is you get the right people in the room."

In one project by the first cohort in Lawrence, participants developed the idea of a downtown revitalization project. Although the nature of the effort evolved over time, according to Mitchell, they "worked together and developed many connections, so we now see millions of dollars of new investments from inside and outside to make an incredible generational transformation."

By September, the third Lawrence, Lowell and Haverhill cohort of 64 participants will be up and running. It includes nonprofit, business and faith leaders and will be the final group in the Merrimack Valley before LEADS expands to other regions.

*To learn more about the program, please visit [LeadsMA.org](https://LeadsMA.org).*