

# 2025 Fellow's Equity Playbook

 **cue**  
CHICAGO UNITED FOR EQUITY

# BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE 2025 CUE FELLOWS



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## 02 Welcome

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- 03 Indigenous Curricula Project**  
Caitlin Arens
- 05 Establishing the Non-Citizen Advisory Board for Chicago Public Schools**  
Marissa Arrez
- 07 Capital Re-Alignment & Community Wealth Building Framework to Improve Black Communities Across Chicago**  
Norman Clark
- 09 Equity in Care: Integrating Mental Health Equity into Chicago’s Entrepreneur Ecosystem**  
Chris Cole
- 11 From Compliance to Co-Governance: Institutionalizing the CPS Equity Framework in District Policy**  
Alejandra Diaz
- 13 Left Out of the Safety Net: Gender-Based Violence, Race, and Equity in Chicago**  
Darci Flynn
- 15 Zoning 101: Building Your Own Community**  
Gary Jimenez
- 17 Procedural Justice Scorecards**  
Sanam Kazi
- 19 Liberatory Arts Project**  
Orion Meadows
- 21 Civics Research Project**  
Maggie O’Keefe
- 23 Catalyzing Student Interest in Civic Careers**  
Kumar Ramanathan
- 25 Cultivating Collaboration: Implementing Co-Governance Frameworks in the City of Chicago’s Food Equity Council**  
Maranda Raskin
- 27 Building Community Pathways to Property Tax Savings**  
Jennifer Sanchez
- 29 Performance Art as an Economic Driver: Reforming the PPA License**  
Sam Thousand
- 31 Co-Designing Anti-Racist Policy**  
Justin Walker
- 33 The Conditions We Deserve: A Blueprint by Black Educators in CPS Emphasizing Lived Experience, Belonging, and Thriving**  
Naomi Wilfred
- 35 Leveraging Survey Findings for Shared Understanding and Action: Highlights from the Financial Health Pulse 2025 Chicago Trends Report**  
Liza Youngling

The CUE Fellowship is an opportunity for racial equity practitioners to come together, learn from each other and from leaders and advocates with deep experience, and to dream together. The last year has been filled with pivotal moments that have impacted racial equity advancements both nationwide and in Chicago. The surge of legal challenges at the local and national levels, militarization of vulnerable communities, attacks on voting rights, and renewed debates over affirmative action have left folks tired and out of breath. On the other hand, the last year has also brought forth hope and resistance, as community-centered movements have stood up against existing systems, highlighting how sustained organizing can bring about lasting change. This energy is reflected in the racial equity projects of the 2025 CUE Fellows.

The 2025 CUE Fellows have completed their year-long collaborative learning journey and are ready to share their projects and ideas with co-conspirators who understand the challenges ahead. This moment's urgency demands a coordinated response: a shared vision for racial equity that mobilizes to address shifting community needs, builds cross-sector partnerships to hold institutions accountable, and invests in co-governance decision-making tables.

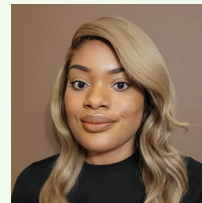
This playbook offers practical strategies, organizing frameworks, and tactical templates shaped by the seventeen Fellows who are daring to push for change. It is designed to help practitioners move from analysis to action—aiming to address systemic inequities in Chicago by advancing co-governance, policy reform, and community-based solutions across education, healthcare, civic engagement, and urban development. Each Fellow proposes actionable frameworks to dismantle institutional barriers and center the lived experiences of impacted communities.

Join us in working toward a thriving Chicago that is responsive and accountable to community needs. This playbook calls us to imagine a different tomorrow: communities leading, power shared equitably, and every resident equipped with the resources and voice to shape their city's future.

In solidarity,

Chicago United for Equity

*From left to right: Jerry L. Hawkins, Executive Director, Sofia Sabatés, Director of Finance and Administration, Rachel Pate, Director of Civic Programming, Christina Córdova-Herrera, Director of Communications and Narrative Strategy, Denee Hill, Communications Manager*



# INDIGENOUS CURRICULA PROJECT

CAITLIN ARENS

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## ORGANIZATION:

Pilot Light

## THE CHALLENGE:

Young people in school often do not learn or experience the stories of the place around them from the perspective of indigenous folx. Chicago, being named after a “smelly onion,” offers an opportunity to inquire about the original stewards of the land and the foodways, cultural traditions, and contemporary narratives that make up our surroundings while offering a standards-aligned toolkit for educators to learn themselves.

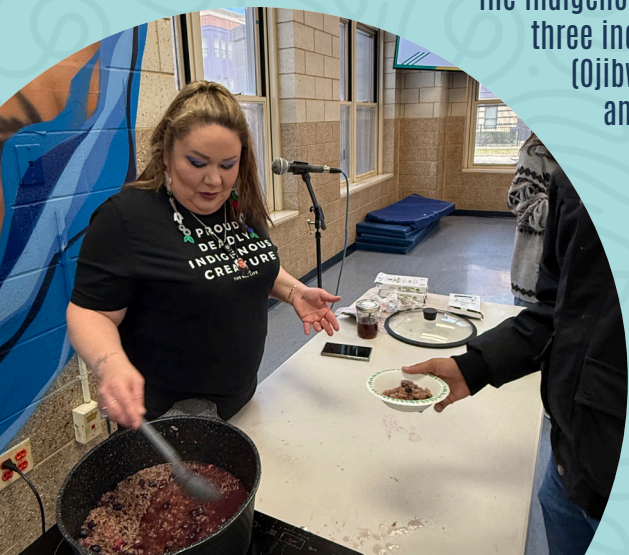
“I think it’s important for people to understand the land in which they are living on for the next four years and they can do that through so many different ways including this class. Food sovereignty is part of why indigenous people are still around, and it’s something that needs to be shared so that Our culture does not go unseen.”

- Northwestern Global Health 390 student,  
enrolled Cherokee member

## PROJECT SUMMARY:

In 2023, Governor Pritzker signed HB1633 into law, mandating instruction on Native American history in schools across Illinois. Currently, while Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has an office to support this work, no place-based curricula exist as a resource for educators. This poses an opportunity to center indigenous voices and stories by co-creating a series of unit plans around food - a universally important aspect of indigenous history and culture, both past, present, and future, with Pilot Light’s 15 years of experience leading teacher professional development in CPS.

The Indigenous Curricula Project is a multi-year project co-designed by women of three indigenous communities - Jessica Walks First (Menominee), Kim McIver (Ojibwe) and Gina Roxas (Prairie Band Potawatomi), PreK-12 educators, and indigenous youth and elders collaborating to build out a series of interdisciplinary unit plans tied to indigenous foodways and the four seasons in the Chicagoland area. Units will go through CPS’s curricula review process (which Pilot Light has engaged in) and include experiential learning opportunities and videos for students to meet indigenous growers and elders. Notably, units will be free to access on Pilot Light’s Food Education Center, are scaffolded by grade, and aligned to social studies, Pilot Light’s Food Education Standards and Learning for Justice Standards. These lessons will not only build a foundation for teachers to learn about the genocide and forced resettlement of indigenous students to



residential schools, while exploring how students, teachers, and communities can actively give back to the original stewards of the land they are learning on, and build food sovereignty for tribal communities often ignored in classroom settings. The curricula will go through multiple feedback loops (including elders, a youth advisory group, and teacher pilots), and content was partially developed in a Global Health class with undergraduate students at Northwestern in Fall 2025. with the goal to be a tool that can be adapted over time as it is piloted and refined in CPS classrooms.

By leading the nation in these efforts, Pilot Light hopes to bring this model of co-design and ownership to other communities and regions within Turtle Island over the next 10 years.

#### **NEXT STEPS:**

Next up is building the curricula and resources with the selected teachers (Summer - Winter 2026) and going through the peer-review process with teachers, elders, and the indigenous women (Spring - Summer 2027). Summer 2027 will open up additional opportunities for teachers to make edits and begin planning to pilot the lessons in Fall 2027 while going through the curricula review process with CPS and additional feedback in early 2028. By 2029, the goal is to publish the curricula publicly for use and alignment in CPS classrooms (and beyond)!

#### **ADDITIONAL MATERIALS AND RESOURCES:**

This work is evolving. To stay up to date and learn more, email me at [caitlin@pilotlightchefs.org](mailto:caitlin@pilotlightchefs.org).



Caitlin leads the Food Education Fellowship and the Agriculture-based Feeding Futures Fellowship, including professional development and evaluation, and works alongside teachers to develop partnerships within their school and local communities. She's passionate about advocating for food sovereignty, food justice, and food waste/rescue, and believes building capacity within and between individuals is key to a more equitable and sustainable food future.

She holds a B.S. from Cornell's Hotel School, an AOS from The Culinary Institute of America, and was a 22-23 LEAFS Fellow (Mercy for Animals). When she's not canning a seasonal item, you can find her playing guitar, gathering around a table with friends and family, or outside and camping with her dog, Carrigain, and her partner, Sam.

# ESTABLISHING THE NON-CITIZEN ADVISORY BOARD FOR CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

MARISSA ARREZ

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## ORGANIZATION:

City of Chicago - Mayor's Office of Immigrant, Migrant, and Refugee Rights

## THE CHALLENGE:

At this moment, CPS does not have a mechanism for people to advocate on behalf of non-citizen students. The City of Chicago began to undertake setting up the NCAB, but during this time Operation Midway Blitz began. During the "operation", the federal government sued the City for its data on the CityKey Program, requesting personally identifiable information for community members, and lost. As a result, the City wanted to take extra precautions to protect people who would be appointed to this board.

"How do we create ways to advocate for non-citizen students in Chicago Public Schools?"

- Marissa Arrez

## PROJECT SUMMARY:

In 2021, the Illinois State General Assembly passed a bill to establish an elected school board for Chicago Public Schools. In that bill, it contained a section (Sec.34-18.68.(b)) to establish a mayoral-appointed Non-Citizen Advisory Board (NCAB) to the CPS Elected School Board. The purpose of the NCAB would be to advise the CPS Elected Board on, but not limited to the following issues:

- Appropriate ways to create an equitable and inclusive learning environment for non-citizen students;
- Strengthening student, parent, and guardian privacy and confidentiality in school-related issues;
- Establishing appropriate communication methods between the district and non-citizen students to maximize interactions between the student's school, parents, and guardians;
- Ensuring principals and other district leaders learn and disseminate information on resources available to non-citizen students and their families;
- Developing appropriate methods by which non-citizen students are encouraged and supported to continue their education at an institution of higher education; and
- Providing the perspective of non-citizen families and students who are affected by Board actions, governance, policies, and procedures.

The goal of the CUE project is to establish the Non-Citizen Advisory Board for the Chicago Public School Elected School Board so that non-citizen families and community members would be able to have their voices heard to advocate for non-citizen students. The City is currently exploring different options to add additional layers of protection; some of those considerations would be the option for virtual/hybrid meetings to mitigate the risk of people going to and from school during times of high ICE/CBP presence.

#### **NEXT STEPS:**

The City, in partnership with state legislators and the intergovernmental affairs team, is exploring ways to add layers of protection for individuals attending meetings in person. The application will be distributed to community partners, and the review committee will be convened to ensure adequate representation across the city and among the different CPS school districts, as well as a diverse background of individuals. Then the final step is to narrow down a list of nominees for the board and present those names to the Mayor for appointment.

#### **ADDITIONAL MATERIALS AND RESOURCES:**

Find additional information and learn more by visiting:

- Illinois General Assembly website (ilga.gov) - Public Act 102-0177 (Bill Language)
- Chicago Public Schools Elected School Board
- Community Commission for Public Safety and Accountability Non-Citizen Advisory Board

Marissa was born and raised in the City of Chicago. She is the daughter of immigrant parents from Mexico. She is passionate about breaking down systemic barriers that continue to create hurdles for communities of color that have been largely disenfranchised and disinvested in.

Marissa is currently the First Deputy for the Mayor's Office of Immigrant, Migrant, and Refugee Rights, where she oversees community partnerships to increase access to resources for neighborhoods across the City of Chicago. She has had the unique experience of working on both sides of the legislature, having served as the Chief of Staff for a State Representative and for a State Senator.

During her duration, she handled community development, policy creation and community engagement. When she is not pushing to amplify the voices of communities of color, Marissa can be found curling up with her dog Anakin and watching a good docuseries!



# CAPITAL RE-ALIGNMENT & COMMUNITY WEALTH BUILDING FRAMEWORK TO IMPROVE BLACK COMMUNITIES ACROSS CHICAGO

NORMAN CLARK

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## ORGANIZATION:

Chicago African Americans in Philanthropy

## THE CHALLENGE:

While many philanthropic institutions pursue racial equity through grantmaking, endowments, and other financial resources—often 10-20 times larger than their annual grantmaking budgets—they frequently remain disconnected from those goals. This project helps foundations align grantmaking and investment strategies to address and reckon with historic underinvestment in Black communities, strengthening long-term impact, institutional coherence, and community trust.

“With more than \$167 billion sitting in Chicago’s foundation endowments, the question isn’t capacity, it’s will! These resources could transform outcomes in Black communities if deployed intentionally.”

- Norman E. Clark

## PROJECT SUMMARY:

The CAAIP Capital Realignment Strategy and Community Wealth Building Framework is an initiative designed to support Chicago-based philanthropic institutions in aligning their full capital stack—including grantmaking, investment strategies, and endowment assets—with racial equity goals and long-term community wealth-building outcomes.

For generations, Black communities across Chicago have faced systemic underinvestment in housing, entrepreneurship, health, arts, and infrastructure. While philanthropy has increasingly embraced racial equity through grantmaking, the much larger pool of capital held within institutional endowments often remains disconnected from these goals. This framework seeks to bridge that gap by helping institutions examine how their full financial resources—not just annual grant budgets—can contribute to stronger, more equitable communities.

At its core, the framework begins with institutional reflection and analysis. Participating foundations review historical funding patterns—recognizing that while investments have been made in Black communities, they have not occurred at a scale sufficient to address deeply rooted disparities. Data from The Color of Wealth in

Chicago shows that the median wealth of Black households is nearly zero, compared to over \$200,000 for white households. National research from Echoing Green and Bridgespan also finds that Black-led organizations receive significantly less philanthropic funding than their white-led counterparts. Grounded in this context, the framework supports institutions in aligning grantmaking and endowment strategies with their stated equity goals. It moves philanthropy beyond incremental approaches toward more intentional, coordinated capital deployment—expanding support for Black-led organizations, strengthening community-based enterprises, and investing in neighborhood-driven economic development. The framework also introduces tools to activate endowment capital, including mission-aligned investments, program-related investments, partnerships with community funds, and support for Black-owned asset managers. It encourages shared governance models to ensure community insight informs decision-making and emphasizes ongoing measurement and learning.

This is a forward-looking approach to help philanthropy align resources with mission, expand access to capital, and support sustainable wealth-building in Chicago’s Black communities, with CAAIP serving as a trusted intermediary throughout the process.

#### **NEXT STEPS:**

The next phase of this project is exploratory and focused on learning. CAAIP will begin sharing the framework with philanthropic partners to gather feedback on its practicality, governance considerations, and potential impact. Through a series of small convenings and conversations with foundation leaders, investment advisors, and community partners, the goal is to refine the model and identify opportunities for pilot participation. These discussions will help determine what tools, partnerships, and institutional supports are necessary to make the framework a viable and useful resource for philanthropy. The long-term aim is to develop a collaborative approach to funding that aligns philanthropic capital with strategies that strengthen community wealth and opportunity in Black communities in Chicago.

#### **ADDITIONAL MATERIALS AND RESOURCES:**

Learn more by visiting:

- [www.caaip.org](http://www.caaip.org)
- [www.linkedin.com/company/chicago-african-americans-in-philanthropy](https://www.linkedin.com/company/chicago-african-americans-in-philanthropy)



Norman E. Clark is the Executive Director of Chicago African Americans in Philanthropy (CAAIP), a membership organization that connects and supports Black professionals working in philanthropy while strengthening relationships between philanthropic institutions and Black-led community organizations. Founded in 1998, CAAIP advances racial equity in philanthropy through convenings, professional development, and capacity-building initiatives that support nonprofit leaders and philanthropic practitioners. Norman helps lead programs such as Connecting Philanthropy and Community (CPC), member convenings, and collaborative efforts with Chicago affinity groups that foster dialogue, leadership development, and sector learning. In addition to his role at CAAIP, Norman founded 3CEEs Consulting Strategies, where he works with nonprofit and philanthropic partners to strengthen organizational capacity and community impact.

# EQUITY IN CARE: INTEGRATING MENTAL HEALTH EQUITY INTO CHICAGO'S ENTREPRENEUR ECOSYSTEMS

CHRIS COLE

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## ORGANIZATION:

Hilo

## THE CHALLENGE:

Entrepreneur support systems prioritize capital, compliance, and technical assistance while overlooking mental health access. For BIPOC small business owners, experiences shaped by structural, systemic, and institutional racism deepen barriers to affordable mental health support. These inequities compound stress and limit access to needed care and resources. Advancing mental health equity is essential to building sustainable, human-centered entrepreneurial ecosystems rooted in long-term community resilience.

“Economic equity is incomplete without mental health equity. If we want resilient neighborhoods, we must care for the people building them.”

- Chris Cole

## PROJECT SUMMARY:

Equity in Care: Integrating Mental Health Equity into Chicago's Entrepreneur Ecosystem is a participatory research initiative that positions mental health as essential infrastructure within Chicago's small business ecosystem. While entrepreneur support systems prioritize capital, compliance, and technical assistance, they often exclude mental health access despite its role in long-term economic resilience.

This gap is especially pronounced for Black, Latine, immigrant, and historically marginalized entrepreneurs, whose experiences are shaped by structural, systemic, and institutional racism. These inequities compound across healthcare access, wealth building, and business systems, intensifying stress and limiting access to affordable, consistent mental health care.

National research shows that employer-sponsored insurance (ESI) is a key but unequal pathway to healthcare access for small business owners. Minority-owned firms are significantly less likely to offer ESI compared to White-owned firms, even after controlling for firm size and industry (Tran & Krueger, 2025). Because small businesses are far less likely than larger firms to provide benefits, owners often rely on the individual insurance market, where high costs and limited networks create structural barriers to care (Tran & Krueger, 2025). These disparities directly translate into unequal access to mental health services.



Broader health equity research further shows that employer-sponsored coverage reflects structural inequalities in labor markets, producing disproportionate gaps in coverage among marginalized populations. Chicago's small business landscape reflects these national patterns, with many firms operating with fewer than ten employees and limited benefits infrastructure. Within this context, mental health needs are often deprioritized as entrepreneurs navigate economic instability and systemic barriers.

This project uses a racial equity-centered co-design approach to develop a needs assessment focused on entrepreneurial mental health. Through surveys and compensated focus groups across Chicago neighborhoods, it gathers quantitative and qualitative data on barriers to care and preferred support models.

**NEXT STEPS:**

The project is currently in the data collection phase, with a needs assessment actively gathering insights from small business owners across Chicago. The next phase will translate findings into implementation through compensated focus groups centering the lived experiences of BIPOC entrepreneurs. Participants will be resourced for their time and expertise to ensure equitable engagement and deeper qualitative insight. Findings will inform culturally responsive mental health supports, including strategic partnerships with providers, group-based care models, ecosystem policy recommendations, and integration of mental health navigation into existing and new support models.

**ADDITIONAL MATERIALS AND RESOURCES:**

Follow along and access updates on the needs assessment findings:

- Instagram: @wearehilo\_
- Website: [www.teamhilo.org](http://www.teamhilo.org)
- Email: [chris@teamhilo.org](mailto:chris@teamhilo.org)



Chris Cole is a Chicago-based leader advancing equitable economic development through community-driven systems change. As part of Hilo, a BIPOC-led small business support organization, Chris works to strengthen culturally responsive entrepreneurship across Chicago neighborhoods. Their work integrates participatory research, ecosystem partnerships, and strategic communications to advance inclusive growth. With a commitment to equity, Chris centers lived experience in program design and believes economic resilience must include mental well-being. Through Equity in Care, Chris is expanding the organization's framework to integrate mental health equity into Chicago's entrepreneur ecosystem.

# FROM COMPLIANCE TO CO-GOVERNANCE: INSTITUTIONALIZING THE CPS EQUITY FRAMEWORK IN DISTRICT POLICY

ALEJANDRA DIAZ

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## ORGANIZATION:

Chicago Public Schools, Chief Equity Office

## THE CHALLENGE:

As Chicago transitions to a fully-elected Board of Education in 2027, changing who governs will not close equity gaps if how we govern remains a siloed, reactive exercise that unintentionally upholds structural racism. To build effective co-governance, this project institutionalizes the CPS Equity Framework, equipping policymakers to systematically redesign policies alongside impacted communities to eliminate opportunity gaps across the district.

“One does not understand structures or systems by looking at intent. Instead, we have to examine what they actually do—how they operate and what the outcomes are... most structures produce racialized outcomes without intent.”

- john a. powell

## PROJECT SUMMARY:

In massive public school systems, policies have historically been updated behind closed doors, pushed through a compliance checklist, and approved by the Board. In April 2023, CPS adopted a new biennial policy review process. Three years later, the evaluation revealed a critical structural truth: equity cannot be compartmentalized into a single office. To actually change outcomes, policy owners needed more time and intentional space to disrupt isolated workflows, because driving district-wide change requires deep, cross-departmental alignment.

As Chicago prepares for a fully elected Board of Education in 2027, this project reimagines the policy review process. True co-governance requires a multi-year effort, and we are actively building the institutional capacity to make it a reality. By expanding the mandatory revision cycle from 6 to 8 months, policy owners are given the time and space to co-design policies with communities rather than write them in isolation.

This extended process serves as a safeguard for equity work during district transitions. It requires deeper internal alignment and the documentation of policy recommendations, revisions, and short- vs. long-term goals, establishing a baseline to track the actual impact of district policies. This pushes staff outside traditional comfort zones, guiding them to embed the CPS Equity Framework’s four dimensions:

- **(Use) Liberatory Thinking:** The process challenges policy owners to look beyond compliance, analyze systemic impacts, and specifically ask, “Who is burdened, and who benefits?” This dimension pushes policymakers to challenge the status quo and reimagine a system traditionally centered on those furthest from opportunity.

- **(Catalyze) Inclusive Partnerships:** “Closed-door” drafting is disrupted on two fronts. Externally, it demands intentional engagement spaces that prioritize the lived expertise of the district’s most vulnerable communities. Internally, it forces policy owners out of historical silos to work cross-collaboratively among departments, bridging the gap between offices that previously never spoke to ensure intersecting policies are aligned before they are finalized.
- **(Direct) Resource Equity:** Recognizing the reality of a district budget deficit, this dimension pushes policy owners to audit current resource allocation, state hard financial truths to stakeholders, fight for creative interim re-allocations to close opportunity gaps, and actively pursue long-term funding solutions
- **(Design) Fair Policies & Systems:** Systemic accountability checkpoints ensure policies advance only if they demonstrate how they will eliminate opportunity gaps. By pushing policy owners to continuously monitor their policies using historical, community, and school-level data, this dimension transforms the policy system from a reactive compliance to a proactive engine for racial equity.

#### NEXT STEPS:

An effective co-governance strategy is a systemic disruption that requires a multi-year runway. The district must prepare its internal systems to govern collaboratively with its community. The immediate next phase focuses on the critical process of helping policy owners unravel decades of systemic impacts. By continuously evolving the policy revision process, this work supports staff in applying a deep racial equity lens to ensure policies promote equitable academic and socioemotional outcomes. Simultaneously, to center policy decisions within students’ lived experiences, we are building intentional engagement spaces to get everyone on the same playing field, spanning central office, network leaders, and school-level stakeholders. Establishing these accessible pathways for the 3i’s of Inclusive Partnerships, those with Institutional memory, those most Impacted by inequities, and those Implementing change, prepares the CPS policy system for meaningful, long-term co-governance, ensuring the district isn’t just demanding shared decision-making, but actively building the continuous improvement infrastructure to actually sustain it.

#### ADDITIONAL MATERIALS AND RESOURCES:

<https://www.cps.edu/strategic-initiatives/equity-at-cps/>

<https://www.cps.edu/sites/equity/equity-framework/>

<https://www.cps.edu/sites/equity/equity-framework/equity-lens/applying-the-equity-lens/>



Alejandra Diaz (She/Her/Ella) is the Equity Policy Strategy Specialist for Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and a proud first-generation Latina from Chicago’s Southwest Side. Driven by her background navigating systemic disparities, she leverages a multidisciplinary expertise in Urban Planning and Policy to dismantle inequitable structures at scale. With nearly a decade of research into systems, structures, and policies, Alejandra views the district’s policy landscape as a vital lever for equitable transformation across Chicago’s 77 communities. Today, her work at CPS brings her mission full circle: leading the strategic evolution of district policy from a tool of exclusionary compliance into an instrument for racial and educational justice. Grounded in her lived experiences and professional expertise, she believes deeply that to close equity gaps, institutions must not just change what they do, but how they do it. By redesigning institutional processes to center inclusive partnerships, she ensures that policies are co-created with, not just for, Chicago’s students and communities. Alejandra is dedicated to shifting institutional power and grounding policy decisions in the lived realities of the district’s most vulnerable populations, working to eliminate opportunity gaps in education quality, policies, and supports to ensure all students and adults reach shared universal goals.

# LEFT OUT OF THE SAFETY NET: GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE, RACE, AND EQUITY IN CHICAGO

DARCI FLYNN

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## ORGANIZATION:

Brave Path Strategies

## THE CHALLENGE:

The mainstream gender-based violence safety net has not meaningfully changed in decades, and data prove that it leaves survivors of color underserved. This project addresses that failure directly: a policy brief will document racial disparities and gaps in the service ecosystem, and a survivor-informed needs assessment will translate those findings into concrete recommendations for funders and policymakers, ensuring future investments are guided by the people most impacted.

“In a time of alleged heightened ‘feminism,’ women of color and poor women are being left behind, and yet the trappings that uniquely target us—like poverty, incarceration, police brutality, and immigration—aren’t often quantified as ‘feminist issues.’”

- Kao Beck, *White Feminism: From the Suffragettes to Influencers and Who They Leave Behind*

## PROJECT SUMMARY:

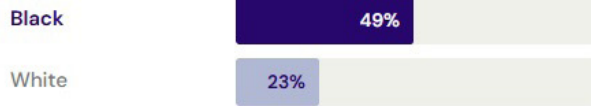
Black, Indigenous, and other survivors of color are disproportionately impacted by gender-based violence, yet remain significantly underserved by the mainstream gender-based violence (GBV) social safety net. Data from Chicago reveals a stark disconnect between who is experiencing harm and who is accessing formal services. In 2024, 61% of reported DV-related aggravated battery victims were Black, according to the Chicago Police Department, yet only 30% of those served by DV service providers identified as Black, per *The Network: Advocating Against Domestic Violence’s* annual *Measuring Safety* data report. The disparity is equally pronounced for sexual assault: Black survivors represented 47% of reported victims but just 19% of those served by sexual assault service providers. Similarly, according to the *Measuring Safety* data report, 49% of callers to the IL Domestic Violence Hotline identified as Black compared to just 25% of Black survivors served by domestic violence service providers. These gaps point to systemic barriers that push survivors of color away from formal support systems and toward informal networks – grassroots organizations, mutual aid, and community-based care – that are often underfunded and under-resourced.

This project works to close that gap in two phases. The first deliverable is a policy brief that synthesizes readily available data to document these disparities and map the current landscape of GBV services in Chicago. The second deliverable uses that brief as a tool to procure funding to launch a participatory research project – a community-

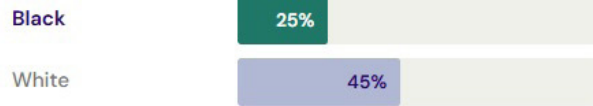
### ILLINOIS STATEWIDE DATA

Who calls the IL DV Hotline vs. who is served by DV providers across Illinois

#### IL DV HOTLINE CALLERS



#### DV PROVIDER CLIENTS SERVED



**49% → 25%**

Black callers who sought help vs. Black clients actually served

**23% → 45%**

White callers who sought help vs. White clients actually served

*\* Data from 2021. The Network has not released race data for callers to the IL DV Hotline since 2021. Data reflects statewide IL figures, as Chicago-specific provider data by race is not separately reported by The Network.*

centered needs assessment that engages survivors directly in identifying what a truly responsive, equitable ecosystem of care looks like. Rather than defining safety and well-being on survivors' behalf, this project centers their voices and lived expertise to inform how resources should be built and invested going forward.

#### NEXT STEPS:

The policy brief will be socialized with funders and community organizations to build momentum for funding to support a survivor-led community needs assessment. Once a community needs assessment is complete, learnings from that process will inform advocacy efforts targeting government and philanthropy to ensure investments in the social service ecosystem for survivors mirror their needs for safety, healing, and justice.

#### ADDITIONAL MATERIALS AND RESOURCES:

To learn more, email Darci at [darciflynn@bravepathstrategies.com](mailto:darciflynn@bravepathstrategies.com).

Darci is a dynamic leader focused on addressing complex social issues through collaborative partnerships. Her career reflects a deep commitment to dismantling gender and racial inequities, with a focus on eradicating gender-based violence and exploitation.

Darci founded Brave Path Strategies in 2024, a consulting firm that fosters solutions-driven strategies to transform systems. Previously, she served in the Mayor's Office as the first Director of Gender-based Violence Strategy & Policy, co-designing the city's first-ever strategic plan to address gender-based violence and human trafficking. Before that, she was Associate Director of the Freedom from Trafficking program at Heartland Human Care Services. Her policy wins include workplace protections, expanded paid leave, and stronger rights for domestic workers and undocumented survivors.



# ZONING 101: BUILDING YOUR OWN COMMUNITY

GARY JIMENEZ

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## ORGANIZATION:

Palenque LSNA

## THE CHALLENGE:

In Chicago, zoning has long been used as a tool to shape and, often, segregate neighborhoods. Most residents aren't given the tools or knowledge to understand how zoning works. Limited civic education around zoning creates real barriers, especially for Black, Latino, immigrant, and low-income communities. At the same time, a lack of transparency around how decisions are made and who holds decision-making power makes it even harder for residents to meaningfully participate. Together, these challenges limit community voice in shaping the neighborhoods they call home.

“What we do to the land, we do to ourselves.”

- Chief Seattle

## PROJECT SUMMARY:

Imagine you're walking through your neighborhood on a warm Saturday morning, running some errands, and ready to enjoy the day and support some local businesses. As you look around, you start to notice something: your neighborhood doesn't quite have everything you need. That realization sparks a question: who decides what goes into a neighborhood?

In Chicago, zoning remains one of the most powerful tools shaping neighborhoods, and yet it is largely controlled by the government, with significant influence concentrated in the hands of local elected officials. The city is divided into 50 wards, each represented by an Alderperson who plays a key role in guiding real estate development decisions. These decisions impact everything from housing, local businesses to public spaces, ultimately shaping the character of each community and neighborhood.

Historically, zoning has not been neutral. It has been used to define—and often segregate—neighborhoods along lines of race, income, and immigration status. While these patterns have deeply impacted communities across Chicago, the zoning process itself remains complex and often leaves out many residents' voices.

Today, zoning remains widely misunderstood. Many residents lack access to clear, meaningful civic education on how zoning works, what it controls, and how decisions are made. This knowledge gap creates barriers to participation, particularly for communities of color and other groups who have been historically excluded from planning and real estate development processes.

This project seeks to increase civic education around zoning and build pathways for more inclusive participation through a community zine. The goal is to ensure that those most impacted by zoning decisions are informed and centered in the process.

Zoning shapes nearly every aspect of daily life, and it determines where parks, businesses, and affordable housing can exist. It should become a shared responsibility between elected officials and residents. By building awareness of zoning's history, processes, and impacts, this project envisions a future in which Chicagoans, especially people of color, feel confident, informed, and valued in shaping the neighborhoods they call home.

**NEXT STEPS:**


The zine will be distributed through partnerships with local nonprofits, community-based organizations, and Alderperson offices committed to more inclusive zoning processes. Through Palenque LSNA, these partnerships will help share the zine as both an educational tool and a community resource. Designed to be adaptable, neighborhoods can use the framework to tell their own zoning stories while maintaining core educational content.

To ensure accessibility, the zine will be available in English and Spanish, with plans to expand into additional languages based on community needs. Distribution will include physical copies at community spaces and events, as well as digital versions to broaden access. At its core, this work centers power-sharing, civic trust, transparency, and community participation.

**ADDITIONAL MATERIALS AND RESOURCES:**

Palenque LSNA website:

- <https://www.palenuelsna.org/housing>
- <https://www.palenuelsna.org/sanctuary>

A circular portrait of Gary Jimenez, a man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a white turtleneck sweater. The portrait is set against a blue background and is framed by an orange border.

Gary Jimenez is a Housing Organizer with Palenque LSNA. Born and raised in Humboldt Park, he is the proud son of two immigrant parents. As a teenager, Gary experienced housing instability linked to displacement pressures following the development of the 606 trail, an experience that shaped his lifelong commitment to affordable housing advocacy across Chicago's Northwest Side. He draws on his lived experience to advance equitable housing policies and ensure Black, Brown, and communities of color have access to stable, healthy living environments.

Today, Gary organizes in and around Chicago's North West Side, working to center equity and racial justice in housing policy discussions. Most recently, he helped lead efforts to pass the Northwest Housing Preservation Ordinance, an anti-gentrification measure supporting both renters and homeowners.

# PROCEDURAL JUSTICE SCORECARDS

SANAM KAZI

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## ORGANIZATION:

Chicago Police Department, Office of Equity and Engagement

## THE CHALLENGE:

The Chicago Police Department has a legacy of inflicting harm in the communities it serves, which has degraded public trust. The Department is currently under a court-ordered settlement, or consent decree, due to a 2017 civil rights investigation conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice. The investigation found that African American and Latino communities in particular have felt targeted by racially discriminatory policing, and that city taxpayers have paid more than \$930 million in settlements for improper police conduct.

To help restore trust, the Department must ensure that officers are adhering to professional standards by improving accountability and transparency. Regularly reviewing officer conduct is necessary and improves upon the current complaint process, which puts the onus on residents to inform the Department of issues.

“Chicagoans deserve government agencies that hold themselves to high standards of professionalism and are transparent with the public. Improving internal systems to proactively identify and correct issues is vital for a thriving and welcoming city.”

- Sanam Kazi

## PROJECT SUMMARY:

The term Procedural Justice refers to treating people with dignity, neutrality, transparency, and respect.

Procedural Justice Scorecards would employ random reviews of existing body-worn camera footage to ensure that Department members are operating in accordance with the standards of Procedural Justice in their day-to-day interactions with the public. Typically, body-worn camera footage is reviewed in response to adverse incidents. Procedural Justice Scorecards would change that approach by reviewing footage and evaluating professionalism and appropriate conduct before any incidents escalate. This review process would support corrective action and also allow leadership to commend those who are performing their duties well. The scorecards would also provide a way to document good conduct and incorporate that information into promotion decisions.

The Procedural Justice Scorecard would consist of objective questions about Officer behavior, along with space for qualitative observations.

Some example questions include:

- Did the Officer identify themselves clearly?
- Did the Officer explain the reason for the interaction?
- Did the Officer answer all questions that were asked of them?
- Did the Officer use any profanity or inappropriate language?

Knowing that trust is strengthened by visibility, not just internal monitoring, it is important to identify a reporting structure for Procedural Justice Scorecard results and trends. In the long term, the anticipated results include a reduction in civilian complaints, fewer use-of-force incidents, and improved relationships between the Department and community members. Recalling that the initial Department of Justice findings highlighted disproportionate impact on African American and Latino communities, it will be helpful to review officer conduct and operationalize impartiality and professionalism throughout the Department.

By instituting Procedural Justice Scorecards, the Department can both rebuild public trust, especially with communities that have been historically harmed, and mitigate future risk posed by unprofessional conduct.

#### **NEXT STEPS:**

There are multiple points at which Procedural Justice Scorecards could be incorporated into the Department's existing workflows. The next steps include finalizing where the reviews would fit best, clarifying roles and responsibilities, and determining consequences and commendation processes. Additionally, the assessment rubric has to be finalized. It is important that the review process is objective and impartial, while also allowing room for qualitative notes. In addition to the structure of the Scorecard implementation and the specific metrics to be reviewed, it is necessary to develop a public reporting process to share information with the public.

#### **ADDITIONAL MATERIALS AND RESOURCES:**

Contact Sanam Kazi via email at [Sanam.Kazi@chicagopolice.org](mailto:Sanam.Kazi@chicagopolice.org), or visit [linkedin.com/in/sanamk](https://www.linkedin.com/in/sanamk) to connect. More information about the Chicago Police Department's ongoing improvements can be found at <https://www.chicagopolice.org/transform/>

Sanam advances reform efforts with the Chicago Police Department. She collaborates with community stakeholders and within the Department, aligning diverse priorities, building buy-in, and developing systems to ensure sustainable change. She started her career in the credit union industry, where she was anchored by the movement's "people helping people" ethos. This philosophy has served her across her work in financial services, academia, and the public sector. A versatile generalist, she readily navigates new environments by focusing on improving processes and systems.

Sanam is a proud graduate of the University of Illinois at Chicago, where she studied Sociology and English, with a concentration on American Literature, and she holds an MA from the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago.



# LIBERATORY ARTS PROJECT

## ORION MEADOWS

### ORGANIZATION:

RETINC (Reassemble Education & Training INC.)

### THE CHALLENGE:

As someone who grew up in Auburn-Gresham, I experienced the impact of street violence and the prison-industrial complex's contribution to a decline in camaraderie in the neighborhood. The arts can help resuscitate the spirit of a community, heal from the losses inflicted by violence at the physical and systemic levels, and improve the experience of the community's residents.

“The keys to liberty can be found in Revolutionary Love, which is the art of radical resistance to repression.”

- Orion Meadows

### PROJECT SUMMARY:

As a late teen, I found myself facing an extensive amount of time in the Illinois Department of Corrections. After serving my sentence, I returned to my community in Auburn Gresham to find more vacant lots, dilapidated or unkempt properties, and an intense war between rival neighborhood factions. The community had changed drastically over the years from being vibrant, replete with exuberant, charitable residents to a neighborhood where the sidewalks and streets were empty for several blocks. Some of this was due to the residents relocating elsewhere, and another reason was the incarceration of many of the people indigenous to the area. This created a void in the community that still needs to be filled.

The Liberatory Arts Project focuses on the arts such as poetry, creative writing, and music to tap into the imagination and creativity of Auburn Gresham residents, which is a vast resource existing within the community. The goal is to cultivate and amplify the creative power of Auburn Gresham residents as they envision and build toward collective liberation. The Liberatory Arts Project workshops will



use art and history as tools to create change and inspire intergenerational dialogue, building community. It also intends to incorporate cultural studies to raise the consciousness and pride of the members of the community as a counter to the negativity and violence that have pervaded the streets of Chicago. The project aims to include social-emotional learning, anti-violence skills building, social media, and drone programming for youth.

#### **NEXT STEPS:**

The next step is to build partnerships with local sponsors and community organizations that can support the implementation of this project. I am also seeking accessible, community-centered spaces to host events and workshops.

The Liberatory Arts Project has strong potential to positively impact Black youth in Auburn Gresham by creating spaces for creative expression, historical inquiry, and critical dialogue. I have extensive experience leading poetry and Black history workshops, I am eager to collaborate with organizations interested in creating art- and history-centered programming. These partnerships would help expand awareness of the project while offering the community a tangible example of what a liberation-focused educational workshop can look and feel like.

#### **ADDITIONAL MATERIALS AND RESOURCES:**

Orion can be found on Instagram ([orion\\_meadows\\_](#)) and Facebook.

Email: [orionmeadows67@gmail.com](mailto:orionmeadows67@gmail.com)

Website: [sahucreative.org](http://sahucreative.org)



Orion Meadows is a two-time National Spoken Word Award-winning artist, author of three poetry publications, recording artist, nationally certified nonviolence trainer for The Institute for Nonviolence Chicago, and community violence intervention specialist. Orion sits on the board of Chicago Area Peace Action (CAPA), serves on the editorial board for the prison newsletter Statesville Speaks, and is a business manager and host for The PIC TV Network. Among the aforementioned credentials, he is a member of the Illinois Task Force for Amnesty International and an advocate for prison reform and higher education in prisons. He is the official Poetry Ambassador for The Chicago Hip-hop Heritage Museum and has performed poetry and participated in nonviolence training in various states throughout the country.

# CIVICS RESEARCH PROJECT

MAGGIE O'KEEFE

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## ORGANIZATION:

40th Ward Democratic Organization

## THE CHALLENGE:

Primary elections play a crucial role in shaping our political landscape, yet they often see lower participation than general elections. When a small share of voters determines outcomes that affect entire communities, representation narrows, and racial inequities deepen. Strengthening primary turnout ensures leadership reflects the broader electorate and reinforces a more representative and accountable democracy.

“Democracy is a verb and works best when participation is a habit, not situational. By understanding why voters skip primary elections, we can remove barriers, build trust in government, and make civic engagement the norm.”

- Maggie O'Keefe

## PROJECT SUMMARY:

The 40th Ward Democrats Civics Research Project is a data-driven initiative designed to understand and address low voter participation in primary elections. While many residents reliably vote in general elections, thousands disengage during primaries, even though a Chicago primary election often determines the final outcome for local leadership. This participation gap means that a small segment of voters is shaping decisions that impact entire communities.

This project focuses on just over 5,000 registered voters in the 40th Ward who voted in the two most recent general elections (2024, 2022) but did not vote in the last two primary elections. By narrowing the scope to this specific group, these are registered voters who have already demonstrated civic engagement, yet may face structural, informational, or motivational barriers to consistent participation.

Through historical turnout analysis, voter interviews, surveys, and collaboration with research partners, including the Analyst Institute and a UIC research professor, patterns are being identified and evidence-based interventions are being tested. From May 2025 to March 2026, voters were directly engaged through canvassing, text outreach, community events, and the distribution of accessible educational materials.

This project is action-oriented with engaged volunteers. Research findings inform targeted ‘Get Out The Vote’ communications and engagement strategies designed to measurably increase Democratic primary turnout, with a goal of boosting participation by 7%.

Through grassroots organizing, the Civics Research Project seeks to create a replicable, community-based model to strengthen civic participation and ensure that primary election outcomes reflect the full diversity and voices from our community and to elect representatives that advance racial equity and justice on behalf of its constituents.

**NEXT STEPS:**

The next step is to analyze primary election turnout data to determine whether the contacted voters ultimately cast a ballot. Participation rates will be compared among individuals who received different messaging, including information about candidates and guidance on how to vote through early voting, vote by mail, or on Election Day. The results will also be analyzed in the context of broader political trends, including national Democratic engagement since the 2016 General Election. This evaluation will measure the effectiveness of the outreach, assess whether the interventions supported more informed voting decisions, and inform refinements to future strategies aimed at sustainably increasing primary election participation.

**ADDITIONAL MATERIALS AND RESOURCES:**

Learn more by visiting <https://www.40thwarddems.org/civicsproject> or emailing Maggie O’Keefe at [maggie@maggieokeefe.com](mailto:maggie@maggieokeefe.com).



Voting rights activist, political consultant, and community organizer Maggie O’Keefe was elected as the 40th Ward Democratic Committeewoman in 2020. Now in her second term, she has built a strong volunteer base, expanded voter turnout, and helped make the 40th Ward one of Chicago’s highest-voter-turnout wards. Her campaign ended a 36-year consolidation of power, separating the roles of Alderman and Committeeperson. Under her leadership, the ward has increased youth engagement, protected fair and accessible elections during the pandemic and census remap, and launched civic education programming. Maggie has also led neighborhood organizations, organized large-scale deputy registrar trainings, registering thousands of voters while supporting successful progressive candidates across Illinois, and managed successful campaigns across the state of Illinois.

# CATALYZING STUDENT INTEREST IN CIVIC CAREERS

KUMAR RAMANATHAN

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## ORGANIZATION:

University of Illinois Chicago

## THE CHALLENGE:

Many students—especially students of color and first-generation students—perceive careers in the public and civic sectors to be opaque, inaccessible, and unstable. But many of these students are precisely the people with the lived experience and passion to address the deep civic inequalities that Chicago faces. My project seeks to help students find both career security and political empowerment in the public and civic sectors.

“In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation.”

- Pablo Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

## PROJECT SUMMARY:

At the University of Illinois Chicago, a revamped political science curriculum is being developed to introduce students to politics and government in Chicago. Many of the students are passionate about addressing racial inequality and making the city a more just place. The goal is to use the curriculum to expose students to the wide range of possible civic careers in Chicago, and to inspire them to identify and cultivate career paths that they can pursue after graduation.

The curriculum will be revised to include three related courses. The first is a course that provides background on Chicago’s civic history and racial and class inequalities, introduces students to the dynamics of local politics and government, and invites them to bring their lived experiences and passions into the classroom. The second is an experiential learning course that will combine guest speaker panels, site visits, and public engagement assignments to give students exposure to the many ways that civic leaders and activists in Chicago are working to transform the city. The third is an internship course that students will take alongside their internship, applying what they have learned in the first two courses and sharing their experiences with one another. The courses are designed as a sequence, but students can mix and match them as needed.

Once the courses are established, the next step is to incorporate robust career development resources and programming. In the long run, the plan is to cultivate relationships with civic employers where students can be placed for internships, working together to make sure that the internships are meaningful for both students and internship sites.

**NEXT STEPS:**

This first year will serve as a pilot for this sequence of courses: (1) a classroom-centered course on the history and dynamics of Chicago politics and government; (2) an experiential learning course exposing students to Chicago; and (3) an internship course. In the summer and fall, outreach will be conducted to arrange guest speakers and site visits for the experiential learning and internship courses. In the meantime, efforts are underway to secure resources and relationships needed to offer students more formal internship placement and stipend support.

**ADDITIONAL MATERIALS AND RESOURCES:**

To partner or learn more about this project, email Kumar Ramanathan at [kumarr@uic.edu](mailto:kumarr@uic.edu).



Kumar Ramanathan is a postdoctoral scholar at the Department of Political Science at the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC), and will begin as an Assistant Professor in the fall semester. Beyond professional training as an educator, his passion for this project is reinforced by experience organizing in his neighborhood for immigrant rights and housing justice.

UIC is an exciting environment for this project. The political science department has a longstanding connection to city politics, and much of the student body has deep Chicago roots. Kumar hopes to draw on these strengths in creating a sustainable and empowering curricular program.

# CULTIVATING COLLABORATION: IMPLEMENTING CO-GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORKS IN THE CITY OF CHICAGO'S FOOD EQUITY COUNCIL

MARANDA RASKIN

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## ORGANIZATION:

City of Chicago Mayor's Office, Business and Neighborhood Development

## THE CHALLENGE:

Barriers to urban agriculture exist on the municipal level in the City of Chicago, perpetuated by policies that fail to incorporate the views and experiences of urban growers, especially Black and Brown growers. This has led to farmers and community gardeners being mischaracterized as contributors to community problems rather than being recognized as environmental stewards who address food access needs in disinvested communities. This has also contributed to unclear, expensive, and burdensome processes for accessing City-administered resources and navigating zoning codes.

“Decision Making Principles: Give enough TIME to consider each decision,  
Give enough INFORMATION for everyone to be fully informed when making decisions,  
Give enough SPACE to ask questions, Give VALUES guiding work.”

- Advocates for Urban Agriculture

## PROJECT SUMMARY:

The City of Chicago's Food Equity Council (FEC) is a mayoral body of 80+ stakeholders across Chicago's food ecosystem, committed to ensuring access to healthy, affordable, and culturally nourishing food for all Chicagoans.

This project seeks to strengthen and implement co-governance frameworks within the Food Equity Council's four subcommittees to reduce barriers to meaningful community participation and co-create policy priorities alongside the community members most directly impacted. To support this goal, the Urban Agriculture Subcommittee is participating in the Co-governance Pilot Initiative, in partnership with Chicago United for Equity (CUE) and the Mayor's Office of Equity and Racial Justice (OERJ), to establish an Urban Ag Policy Sprint Group (decision-making table) and provide stipends for growers to participate.

The Urban Agriculture Subcommittee of the Food Equity Council seeks to remove barriers to urban agriculture, but growers are often not able to participate due to time and financial constraints. Utilizing strong co-governance frameworks and providing stipends for growers' participation enables more meaningful and effective food equity policymaking.



The CUE/OERJ Co-governance Pilot Initiative provides support through strategic guidance, workshops, resources, and co-facilitation. This support enables the Mayor's Office and Advocates for Urban Agriculture, the community co-lead of the FEC Urban Agriculture Subcommittee, to develop an Urban Ag Policy Sprint Group whose members include stipended growers and City stakeholders.

The Urban Ag Policy Sprint Group will work to:

1. Develop 2026-2027 Food Equity Council Urban Ag Subcommittee policy priorities and implementation plans
2. Support the mapping of a comprehensive Urban Ag Policy Plan

Ideally, this pilot initiative can be replicated across the three other Food Equity Council subcommittees (BIPOC Food Businesses, Institutional Procurement, and Emergency Food System) to build the Food Equity Council's sustained political power, institutionalize co-governance, and build a racially equitable local food system.

#### NEXT STEPS:

In March 2026, an application was released to select stipended local growers from Chicago neighborhoods with low food access to participate in the Urban Ag Policy Sprint Group. In April, the first introductory meeting was held at City Hall. The Urban Ag Policy Sprint Group will continue to convene with the Urban Ag Subcommittee of the Food Equity Council to implement the Chicago Co-governance Framework and drive the City's urban ag policy agenda.

#### ADDITIONAL MATERIALS AND RESOURCES:

Learn more by visiting:

- <https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/sites/advancing-food-equity-in-chicago/home.html>
- <https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/sites/cogovernance-steering-committee/home/pilot-initiatives.html>



Maranda Raskin (she/her) is a Project Manager on the Business, Economic and Neighborhood Development team in the City of Chicago Mayor's Office, where she leads food equity initiatives. She co-leads the Food Equity Council, a cross-sector collaboration of over 80 partners working to ensure that every Chicagoan has access to healthy and affordable food, and that food becomes an engine for community wealth-building. She also manages the Food Equity Council Community Growers Program, a \$2 million investment in technical assistance and land access support for urban growers on Chicago's South and West Sides. Prior to joining the Mayor's Office, Maranda worked on a farm researching carbon sequestration in Central Illinois and interned with a farmers market advocacy organization as well as a civil rights testing nonprofit. She earned her BA in history and political science from McGill University.

# OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO PROPERTY TAX SAVINGS

JENNIFER SANCHEZ

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## ORGANIZATION:

Cook County Assessor's Office

## THE CHALLENGE:

The digital divide, language access, and commute to the downtown Chicago office, combined with a fear of immigration raids, are some common barriers expressed by homeowners seeking their property tax savings. We must create a safe, community-based approach for homeowners to apply for their exemptions. A solution that intersects with our most vulnerable community members: seniors, veterans and people with disabilities, and our immigrant neighbors.

“We have an opportunity to facilitate access to property tax savings information through existing community safe havens: our public libraries.”

- Jennifer Sanchez

## PROJECT SUMMARY:

Inequities in government have a long-lasting impact on the way services are delivered to residents. As a first-generation daughter of immigrants, I know firsthand some of the barriers to accessing government services and information. For my single mother and many other immigrants in Cook County, language access and the inability to take the day off work to commute and navigate a bureaucratic system were overbearing.

Since becoming a public servant, I have become even more aware of the historical inequities that have been made pervasive by infrastructure and policies. As my knowledge increased, so did my drive to make local government accessible. Access, or lack thereof, can be seen in many ways. It can be a senior, veteran or person with a disability unable to make a long commute to downtown Chicago. An immigrant neighbor whose English is not their first language, or a working parent who can't take the day off work.

Data demonstrates Cook County's Black and Brown communities are largely impacted by inequities. At a local level, our most vulnerable community members: seniors, veterans and people with disabilities, and our immigrant neighbors, have been heavily burdened by property taxes. The online exemptions application increased access to property tax savings but many barriers still exist. The digital divide, language access, and the commute to the



downtown Chicago office are common barriers expressed by homeowners. This project explores a solution that addresses the inequities towards our Black and Brown communities, and intersects with our most vulnerable community members. Libraries are existing infrastructures that enrich our communities in many ways. By using them as resource hubs, we are creating a community pathway to property tax savings. We increase property tax savings information access from one downtown Chicago office to 81 access points across the City of Chicago.

**NEXT STEPS:**

In the immediate future, the goal is to have the Cook County Assessor’s Office (CCAO) information and property tax saving exemption application distributed at all 81 Chicago public library branches. The public library CCAO resource display will include an area with our brochure guides, one-pagers, and exemption applications available in multiple languages. We will also have an exemptions poster available for libraries to display with a trackable QR code.

The CCAO will look into an intergovernmental agreement or a branch-by-branch permission. In the long term, I aspire for this project to be scaled across all of Cook County so homeowners can access information on property tax savings and easily apply for their exemptions from a community safe haven.

**ADDITIONAL MATERIALS AND RESOURCES:**

For eligibility and information on property tax saving exemptions, visit <https://www.cookcountyassessoril.gov/exemptions>

Social Vulnerability Index Map for Cook County: <https://maps.cookcountyil.gov/svi/>

Cook County Treasurer’s Office Tax year 2024 Bill Analysis Report: <https://cst.brightspotcdn.com/27/23/d2b777cf4f66964dc2b8d220b461/taxyear2024analysisenglishversion.pdf>



Jennifer is a bilingual communications professional. Driven by her experience as a lifelong Chicagoan and the daughter of Mexican immigrants, she is passionate about language access and bridging the gap between government and the communities it serves. She takes pride in delivering accessible, transparent, and high-quality information to residents across Cook County.

As Director of Communications for the Cook County Assessor’s Office, Jennifer leads the Office’s digital media presence and strategic communications, ensuring residents have the tools and information they need to navigate complex systems. She is also a public speaker and has presented at the IAAO Conference, sharing insights on bilingual communications, outreach, and social media for government.

Jennifer received her bachelor’s degree from DeVry University and is a 2020 fellow of the Chicago Latino Caucus Foundation Leadership Academy. She also serves as Co-Chair of the Young Professionals Advisory Council of Mujeres Latinas en Acción. In her spare time, Jennifer enjoys a cup of cafecito, participating in her book club Rise & Thrive Latinas, and staying civically engaged in her community.

# PERFORMANCE ART AS AN ECONOMIC DRIVER: REFORMING THE PPA LICENSE

SAM THOUSAND

## ORGANIZATION:

ChiBrations

## THE CHALLENGE:

Chicago's Public Place of Amusement (PPA) license restricts small businesses and curators from hosting sustainable, ticketed arts programming. This matters because neighborhood-based arts drive local economies. Additionally, over 75% of the careers of creative performers in Chicago are propelled by Open Mics, Jam Sessions, and Workshops. Reforming this policy aligns regulation with how culture is curated, expressed, and experienced in third spaces today.

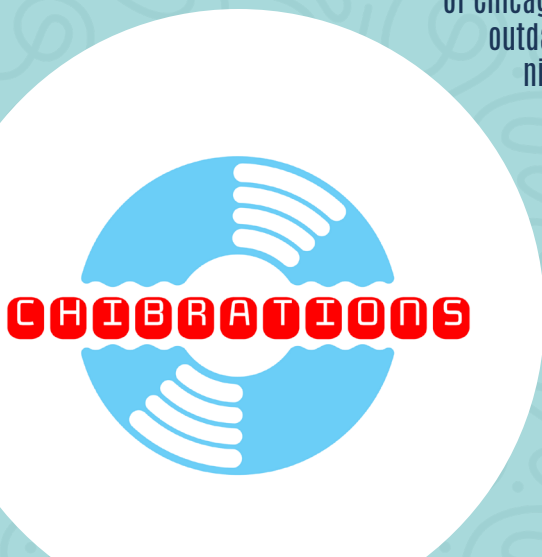
“We have our PPA License. A business like ours couldn't survive without it.”

- Andre Guichard [Gallery Guichard]

## PROJECT SUMMARY:

The PPA license is framed as a public safety and zoning policy focused on occupancy limits, exits, electrical systems, and insurance. On the surface, these are reasonable concerns, but when looking deeper at the history of Chicago's cultural landscape, one can see that this policy originated as the Cabaret License in the 1920s, a period when Black cultural production was driving Chicago's nightlife economy, particularly on the South Side. That original license functioned not just as regulation, but as a tool of control, disproportionately targeting Black-owned venues, mixed-race establishments, and nightlife spaces through fines and shutdowns. While the City of Chicago formally rebranded the policy in 2006, its structure remains rooted in an outdated entertainment model designed for large theaters, nightclubs, and late-night venues.

Today's creative ecosystem looks radically different. 90% of the historic venues that once anchored Chicago's Black cultural economy are all gone. In their place, artists now gather in “third spaces”, which are small neighborhood businesses like cafés, salons, bookstores, restaurants, and galleries. These spaces partner with cultural curators to host intimate, often multigenerational gatherings that amplify performance, art-making, sharing, collaboration, and community connection. Yet, these are the very spaces most harmed by the PPA license, as the financial burden and administrative requirements are often impossible to justify for small-scale, occasional programming.



Because a venue without a PPA license cannot legally host ticketed events, curators and artists are blocked from earning income, and small businesses are prevented from leveraging cultural programming to sustain themselves. This policy interrupts a natural ecosystem that should be strengthening neighborhood economies. This project calls out this harsh reality and proposes a reimagined, scaled licensing framework that reflects how arts and culture operate today. With collaborative reform, the city can enable safe, ticketed cultural gatherings in small businesses that support creative livelihoods, stimulate local economic growth, and ultimately improve quality of life by making arts and culture more accessible across Chicago's neighborhoods.

Specifically for disinvested South and West Side neighborhoods, art activations in small businesses could be a beautiful solution in countering disinvestment, while empowering the community's existing cultural heritage.

#### **NEXT STEPS:**

The next steps are to finalize interviews with artists, curators, small business owners, and cultural organizations to document real-world impacts. From there, partner with a law team to draft a scalable licensing reform proposal, develop visual and narrative materials for public engagement, and begin convening meetings with aldermen and city officials to build momentum toward a pilot policy that better supports neighborhood-based arts and culture in partnership with small businesses.

To ensure accessibility, the zine will be available in English and Spanish, with plans to expand into additional languages based on community needs. Distribution will include physical copies at community spaces and events, as well as digital versions to broaden access. At its core, this work centers power-sharing, civic trust, transparency, and community participation.

#### **ADDITIONAL MATERIALS AND RESOURCES:**

Learn more about ChiBrations at our website - [www.chibrations.app](http://www.chibrations.app)

Download the FREE "ChiBrations" mobile app - available for iOS and Android - and discover the vibrancy of Chicago's performing arts scene.



Sam Thousand is an award-winning performing artist, curator, and social entrepreneur with 15+ years in live performance, curation, and artist advocacy. A vocalist, composer, and trumpet player with a Jazz Studies BFA, he has toured and recorded with diverse collaborators. His multidisciplinary work bridges performance and civic impact, earning recognition from 3Arts (2019) and the Walder Foundation (2024).

He is the founding Executive Director of ChiBrations, advancing artist-centered infrastructure through programming, storytelling, and the ChiBrations App, a revolutionary mobile app for discovering creative communities through Open Mics, Jam Sessions, and Workshops. Sam also serves as Co-Chair of the Arts Leadership Council at Arts Alliance Illinois and is a 2025 Fellow with Chicago United for Equity.

# CO-DESIGNING ANTI-RACIST POLICY

JUSTIN WALKER

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## ORGANIZATION:

ChiByDesign

## THE CHALLENGE:

Communities most impacted by racial inequities are routinely excluded from policymaking. Historically, policy has reinforced racial harm rather than redressing it, producing inequitable outcomes across sectors such as health, housing, education, and safety. When policy is disconnected from lived experience, it becomes ineffective and harmful. This project addresses that gap by outlining a process for co-designing anti-racist policy with those most impacted.

“To be truly visionary we have to root our imagination in our concrete reality while simultaneously imagining possibilities beyond that reality.”

- bell hooks  
[Gallery Guichard]

## PROJECT SUMMARY:

This project establishes a structured process for co-designing anti-racist public policy with communities most affected by racial inequities. The approach is grounded in anti-racist design work conducted with the Illinois Department of Early Childhood to address disparities in access to Early Intervention (EI) services for children and families across Illinois.

Stakeholder interviews and a series of co-design workshops with caregivers, providers, intermediaries, and state partners revealed how policies, practices, and system conditions contribute to inequitable access and inconsistent service delivery across communities. Co-designers (defined as ChiByDesign staff and previously mentioned stakeholders) collaborated to identify barriers, envision more equitable futures, and co-create policy pathways and supporting infrastructures to improve access to and delivery of EI services. This work served as the foundation for developing a broader, replicable approach to anti-racist policy design. The process is organized into four phases: planning, outreach, co-design execution, and implementation. Each phase centers individuals with lived experience, fosters relationship-building, and repositions community members as contributors to problem framing and solution development.

- **Planning:** Define the problem, identify those most impacted, and design an approach that prioritizes racial equity and shared decision-making.
- **Outreach:** Recruit and support participants with both lived and professional experience to engage as co-designers.
- **Co-Design Execution:** Identify racial inequities and other systemic barriers, envision more equitable futures, and co-create policy solutions and supporting structures.
- **Implementation:** Translate co-designed ideas into action and determine the conditions necessary for adoption, accountability, and sustained impact.

The project also revealed significant limitations. Although a co-design process facilitated meaningful opportunities for co-creating policy, gaps exist in translating co-designed policy pathways into fully implemented policies. These challenges highlight the need for stronger connections between co-designed policy recommendations and institutional action.

The outcome of this work is a process model that can be adapted by cities and agencies seeking to address racial inequities through co-created policy. It provides both a practical approach and reflections on what is required to move from community-driven policy creation to enduring, equitable systems change.

**NEXT STEPS:**

This project will deepen our understanding of how policies move from adoption to implementation, including the political, operational, and administrative conditions necessary for policy deployment. Through interviews with city leaders and policy experts, this project will identify the factors that enable or constrain the racially equitable implementation. There is also a plan to continue iterating on the anti-racist co-design process by prototyping and facilitating workshops with Chicago residents focused on a specific policy sector, using those learnings to strengthen and clarify the process model.

**ADDITIONAL MATERIALS AND RESOURCES:**

To learn more and get updates, email Justin Walker at [justin@chibydesign.com](mailto:justin@chibydesign.com).



Justin Walker is a design researcher and strategist working at the intersection of anti-racist design, community-led design, and systems change. Through his work, he identifies how racist outcomes are produced by policies, practices, and institutions, surfacing inequitable outcomes and experiences, and co-designs interventions and infrastructures to address them. As a leader at ChiByDesign, a firm pioneering anti-racist design practice, he co-develops methods and tools that help organizations confront and dismantle structural racism. Justin is an adjunct lecturer at Virginia Tech's School of Design and proudly serves on the board of STEAM & Dream Liberation Labs, a nonprofit organization working to close the STEM exposure gap in Chicago.

# THE CONDITIONS WE DESERVE: A BLUEPRINT BY BLACK EDUCATORS IN CPS EMPHASIZING LIVED EXPERIENCE, BELONGING, AND THRIVING

NAOMI WILFRED

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## ORGANIZATION:

University of Chicago To&Through Middle Grades Network

## THE CHALLENGE:

Black educators are navigating layered realities every day. Many are working in under-resourced schools and supporting students facing complex social and economic challenges. Additionally, they carry the weight of cultural taxation and a lack of decision-making power. When educators are constantly pouring into students without spaces to process, restore, and reconnect, burnout becomes inevitable. And burnout is not a reflection of commitment; it is a reflection of conditions.

“Black educators have this stereotype of being strong. They don’t check on us because they assume ‘we got it.’ A lot of the time we get overlooked. You’re tired and nobody has loved on you. You (just) have to keep being strong until burnout.”

- Black Educator,  
South Shore Fine Arts Elementary School

## PROJECT SUMMARY:

Chicago Public Schools serves 34.2% Black students - the second-highest student racial makeup in the district. Despite that, Black teachers only make up 20.6% of the teacher population.

A Johns Hopkins University Study found that Black students who had just one Black teacher by 3rd grade were 13% more likely to enroll in college, while those who had two Black teachers were 32% more likely. These findings are a continuation of the 2017 study that found that a low-income Black student’s probability of dropping out of high school is reduced by 29% if they have one Black teacher in grades 3-5. Despite these important data metrics, Black educators are leaving the classroom in droves. With many stating burnout and constant survival mode as the reasons. Through empathy interviews and meaningful stakeholder engagement, I was able to move beyond assumptions and understand what is and is not working for Black educators in CPS. So, what does thriving and not surviving look like for Black educators?

It looks like having access to resources that match the magnitude of the work, affinity spaces, and increasing their decision-making power. Additionally, being seen as whole people, with full, complex lives that need their well-being centered. Well-being shapes how educators show up every day. It affects patience and instructional

quality. With this centered, they are able to bring their full brilliance into the classroom, rather than simply managing stress. Belonging, too, is imperative to their well-being. Sense of belonging leads to taking risks, mentoring others, and investing in the long-term health of the school community. Which in turn impacts communities across the city.

Stakeholders need to engage in honest conversations about the real needs of Black educators. Taking their concerns and struggles seriously. And then, most importantly, act on it. The work of Black educators is already demanding and is layered with additional expectations, pressures, and challenges that cannot be ignored or minimized.

Centering their lived experiences and needs can lead to transformative classrooms for many of our students, which in turn leads to transformation for our city.

#### **NEXT STEPS:**

Next steps include a convening for the educators who were interviewed and identifying the top priorities for support, both across the district and within individual school communities. Those will be brought to the district offices, where relationships are already established; specifically, those connected to teaching and learning, equity, and talent. The goal is not just to name challenges, but to ensure the insights of Black educators inform decision-making at every level. Listening and taking action can lead to true impact. These shifts can ripple outward, to students, to school communities, across the entire district, and our city.

#### **ADDITIONAL MATERIALS AND RESOURCES:**

Learn more by emailing Naomi Wilfred at [nwilfred@uchicago.edu](mailto:nwilfred@uchicago.edu). For current supports for Black educators in Chicago Public Schools, visit <https://tinyurl.com/4pa6kkfm>



Naomi Wilfred is a visionary, dreamer, and disruptor. She currently serves as Manager of Coaching & Improvement with the University of Chicago To&Through Project Middle Grades Network. In this role, she partners closely with a cohort of schools across Chicago Public Schools to strengthen the middle grades experience. Grounded in both qualitative and quantitative data analysis and adolescent development research, her work centers on a sense of belonging, ensuring that students and educators are positioned to thrive. Prior to her current role, Naomi was a classroom teacher in Chicago Public Schools. That experience anchors her leadership in lived understanding. She knows firsthand the brilliance of Black educators—and the systemic barriers they navigate daily. Her work is fueled by a deep commitment to ensuring that Black educators are able to create the conditions they deserve.

# LEVERAGING SURVEY FINDINGS FOR SHARED UNDERSTANDING AND ACTION: HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE FINANCIAL HEALTH PULSE 2025 CHICAGO TRENDS REPORT

LIZA YOUNGLING

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## ORGANIZATION:

The Chicago Community Trust

## THE CHALLENGE:

Financial health research is intended to be actionable and understandable so that community stakeholders can use it to drive change. Yet it is often inaccessible to and disconnected from the communities it strives to describe, perpetuating social and economic inequities. This series of sensemaking sessions is a first step to address some of the power dynamics at the heart of research - Who is the research subject? Who decides what will be asked? Who decides what it means? Who are the research findings for? By sharing relevant findings from the Financial Health Pulse 2025 Chicago Trends report with grant partners, the Trust can increase the usefulness of the report and build trust and understanding with its nonprofit partners to make sure that future research design, data collection, and dissemination include the priorities and perspectives of the people being researched in meaningful ways.

“Right or wrong, research can drive decisions. If we do not address the power dynamic in the creation of research, at best, we are driving decision-making from partial truths. At worst, we are generating inaccurate information that ultimately does more harm than good in our communities. That is why we must care about how research is created.”

- Why Am I Always Being Researched? Report by Chicago Beyond

## PROJECT SUMMARY:

My project is a series of sensemaking sessions hosted by The Chicago Community Trust to share and discuss findings from the 2025 Trends Report with our grant partners—nonprofits that can improve Cook County residents’ financial well-being through direct service, advocacy, and policy change. Financial health reflects a household’s ability to cover daily expenses, manage financial shocks, and build long-term security. Understanding the components of financial health, as well as how different households and groups are faring over time, helps the Trust measure progress and plan initiatives to address persistent barriers.

The 2025 Trends report, which follows a 2023 benchmark study, finds that while financial vulnerability has decreased for Black and Latine Chicagoans over the last three years, disparities still exist along racial, ethnic,

and geographic lines. The report points to policies to build on, such as an increased minimum wage between 2023 and 2025, as well as persistent gaps to address, such as lower incomes and less asset ownership for Black and Latine college graduates in comparison to their white counterparts. For nonprofits, access to this kind of data can make it easier to document community needs and advocate for solutions to the inequities that can hold residents—and the region—back. However, such data can only inform interventions if the findings are accessible and understandable. While philanthropic and research organizations play important roles in commissioning and carrying out large-scale research, ensuring that research is relevant to the communities it focuses on requires deeper engagement and dialogue.


As an equity intervention, my project seeks to democratize access to a large data set that can be broken out by race, ethnicity, age, and other variables, as well as compared to national data. By creating a space to share and interpret research findings together instead of reinforcing common hierarchies between the researcher (or research sponsor) and the researched, the project can help build trust and begin to establish a shared knowledge base around financial health disparities. This shared understanding can lay the groundwork for both future research and the collective will necessary to address the deep racial, ethnic, and economic divides in the region.

#### **NEXT STEPS:**

The next steps are to build relationships so that financial health research is available and usable for all, and includes the questions and priorities of those most impacted by systemic barriers such as racism and economic disinvestment. After learning about key findings from the study, nonprofit staff have the opportunity to ask for specific data sets that relate to the needs of the people they serve. They are also asked how they currently interact with research and whether and how they would like to engage with future research initiatives sponsored by the Trust. Being responsive to their needs lays the groundwork for more equitable research design going forward.

#### **ADDITIONAL MATERIALS AND RESOURCES:**

Find more information by visiting: <https://www.cct.org/research-and-reports/financial-health-pulse-2025-chicago-trends-report/>

A circular portrait of Liza Youngling, a woman with long, wavy brown hair, smiling. She is wearing a green top with white polka dots. The background of the portrait is a solid blue color.

Liza Youngling is a learning and impact manager at The Chicago Community Trust, a community foundation that is working to build a Chicago region where equity is central—and opportunity and prosperity are in reach for all. In her role, she gathers, makes sense of, and shares key insights from grant reporting as well as external research so that nonprofit partners, Trust staff, and the broader Chicago community can learn, strategize, and work together to effect meaningful change.

Liza holds a Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a B.S. in foreign service with a certificate in Justice & Peace Studies from Georgetown University. Prior to joining the Trust, Liza worked as a policy fellow at the American Academy of Arts & Sciences on projects focused on renewing democracy and reimagining the economy in the United States so that they work well for all. And prior to that, she taught cultural anthropology at DePaul University. In every role, she strives to ensure that the knowledge gained from research can be an accessible resource for people to understand, question, make decisions, and reflect on change. Originally from rural New York State, Liza now lives in Lincoln Park with her husband Elliott and their two children, Cal and Phoebe.

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Visit [www.chicagounitedforequity.org](http://www.chicagounitedforequity.org) to learn more, stay connected, and invest in a just, equitable, and inclusive Chicago.





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