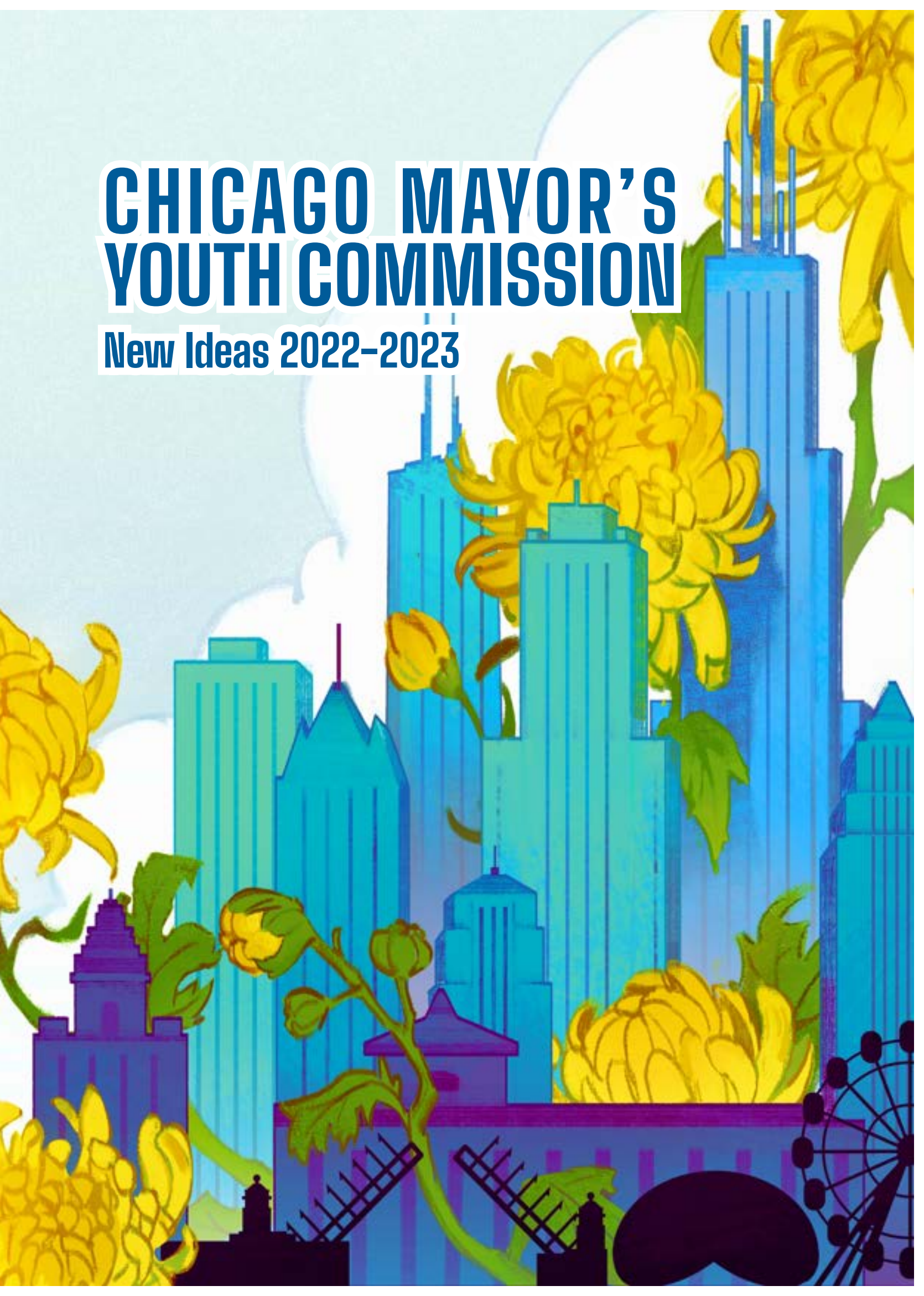


# CHICAGO MAYOR'S YOUTH COMMISSION

New Ideas 2022-2023





**MAYOR'S YOUTH  
COMMISSION**

# LETTER FROM THE MAYOR

Dear Youth Commissioners:

On behalf of the City of Chicago, I want to congratulate and thank you for your hard work, determination, and commitment to Chicago's young people as Mayor's Youth Commissioners.

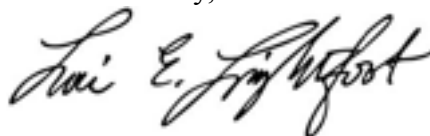
Four years ago, First Lady Amy Eshleman and I set out to create a process by which young people could advise our office and our city in meaningful ways. You all, the commissioners, have turned this vision into a reality, and you have worked tirelessly on behalf of Chicago residents.

During your time with the Youth Commission, you have advised department leaders on issues that have a daily impact on our residents, learned from city leaders, and developed ideas of your own. Your indelible contributions to conversations and policymaking in city departments have been vital in creating an equitable and impactful ecosystem for our young people.

This book of new ideas is a culmination of your hard work throughout the year, and I know you are already working to make your ideas a reality by collaborating with City departments. I hope that as you look back on your time as a Youth Commissioner, you are proud of your contributions to this city. Your hard work and dedication have no doubt ensured the growth and sustainability of this commission and paved the way for future young people to have a voice in city government.

I wish you all the best as you continue your academic journeys and I look forward to seeing what you will achieve in your future endeavors.

Sincerely,



Mayor of Chicago





# About



The Mayor's Youth Commission is a group of up to 32 Chicagoans between the ages 14 and 19 who are passionate about issues that impact youth. These commissioners advise the Mayor and City leaders, represent their peers and communities, and learn about policy and projects within the City of Chicago. The Youth Commissioners meet on a monthly basis to collaborate and positively impact Chicago's future.

The Mayor's Youth Commission began in the fall of 2019 under the leadership of Mayor Lori E. Lightfoot and First Lady Amy Eshleman. Each year since, Youth Commissioners have been selected every summer and can serve up to two consecutive one-year terms. The Commission represents the city across race, gender, geography, and school diversity. The 2022-2023 Youth Commission is the fourth cohort of this program.

This year, the Youth Commission's four Working Groups — Education, Neighborhood Development, Public Health, and Public Safety — examined specific issues youth face in their efforts to prosper. They consulted City departments and community-based organizations such as My CHI. My Future., the Department of Housing (DOH), Community Safety Coordination Center (CSCC), Shine On, Chicago!, Department of Planning and Development (DPD), and the Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE) on their projects and policies. The Commission also invited both City and community guest speakers to present on their work, including the Climate Action Plan 2022 with the Office of Climate and Environmental Equity, Back to Our Future and Choose2Change with Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and the CSCC, Healthy Chicago 2025 with Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH), the Office of College and Career Success at CPS, Lawndale Christian Development Corporation, and mentorship opportunities provided by C.H.A.M.P.S. and Operation Neighborhood Safety in Greater Grand Crossing.

Through their learning and research, each of these working groups present four innovative New Ideas that aim to address specific youth needs in the City of Chicago.

# YOUTH COMMISSION II

“

I have grown in my ambition and communication skills, and I do not shy away from opportunities. From the beginning, I was propelled into a leadership role where I had to manage Neighborhood Development and come up with a tangible idea to pursue and present to the Mayor. As the MYC continues to grow and evolve, I am excited to see what new projects and opportunities will come our way. It is clear that our involvement has made a positive impact on the community, and I hope to see that impact continue to grow in the future.

- Faith Townsell

”



“

As a youth from the city, the Commission encouraged me to prioritize communication and leadership skills and to be more accommodating and assertive. My involvement has increased, pushing others to be more involved as well.

- Katie Williams

”

# IMPACT STATEMENTS



“

During our meetings with the Mayor, it was nice to receive feedback on what we were working on. Her words inspired our working group to put in more effort. I was glad that she pushed us to do more with our project, and to think outside the box regarding our positions on the MYC. I hope the next administration is equally dedicated to the MYC.  
- Charlotte Ernst

”





# 2022-2023 MAYOR'S YOUTH COMMISSION

## Education Working Group



### **NORAH AL-HALLAJ**, Bridgeport

Norah Al-Hallaj is a junior in high school and the Vice Chair of the Education Working Group. She began her time on the Mayor's Youth Commission in October 2022. Norah was drawn to the program for the incredibly unique opportunity to amplify the voices of a large group of Chicago's population, voices that oftentimes are the least represented in government. She aims to pursue a career in law and government and is looking forward to continuing to be a part of MYC next year.



### **SAMUEL HOLMES**, Garfield Park

Samuel Holmes is a sophomore in high school from Garfield Park. He is a member of the Education Working Group. This is Samuel's first year on the commission.



### **SAMUEL ITURRALDE**, Pilsen

Samuel Iturralde is a senior in high school and a member of the Education Working Group, Charter Committee, and New Ideas Committee. He joined the MYC because he believes in the power of education to create positive change and wants to advocate for equitable access to quality education for every community in the city. He has a passion for government and plans to study political science and pre-law at Georgetown University in hopes of one day running for public office.



### **ANASTACIA KELLY**, Belmont Cragin

Anastacia Kelly is a senior in high school and a member of the Education Working Group, New Ideas Committee, and the Charter Committee. She was initially brought to the MYC through her work as an officer in a Women Supporting Women club. In this role, she strives to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves and provide possible solutions to today's issues. Her future aspirations include being a travel NICU nurse and starting a nonprofit focusing on women's education.

# 2022–2023 MAYOR’S YOUTH COMMISSION



**AYANNA MCCARTHY**, Washington Heights

Ayanna McCarthy is a high school sophomore. She is a member of the Education Working Group and Social Media Committee. She joined the MYC with the aim of devising innovative ways to promote equity in youth outreach and eliminate disadvantages that may impede equal opportunities for young people. Her future goal is to become a child advocate lawyer and champion the voices of silenced youth.



**DEBBIE MOJEKWU**, Beverly

Debbie Mojekwu is a senior in high school and the Chair of the Education Working Group. She joined the MYC because she felt a deep sense of responsibility to give back to the city where she grew up in, starting with the youth who are disadvantaged by educational inequities. She plans to continue her passion for education on the pre-med path at Yale University next year in hopes of becoming a physician.

## Neighborhood Development Working Group



**ZUHAIR ALSIKAFI**, Gold Coast

Zuhair Alsikafi is a junior in high school and was born and raised in Chicago. Zuhair is a natural problem solver and seeks to find solutions to current issues that young people in Chicago face. In his free time, he enjoys playing tennis, exploring the diverse restaurants in Chicago, and spending time with his friends.



**DANARI BOWDEN**, Hyde Park

Danari Bowden is a senior in high school. Prior to joining the MYC, he was a youth speaker for Mayor Lori E. Lightfoot and helped plan the Summer Kickback series events in Auburn Gresham—what he considers a brilliant idea created by the Mayor and her team. His work on the Kickback events, which helped spread positivity in his neighborhood, motivated him to create his own non-profit and to find his way to the MYC. He believes expanding and spreading positivity throughout the city he was born and raised in is something every Chicagoan desires at heart.



# 2022-2023 MAYOR'S YOUTH COMMISSION



## **CHARLOTTE ERNST**, Old Irving Park

Charlotte Ernst is a senior in high school. She is the vice-chair of the Neighborhood Development Working Group and a member of the New Ideas Committee. She joined the commission to share her insights with city representatives, and, she now also looks forward to connecting with her peers across Chicago. Charlotte intends to major in environmental engineering and pursue her passions for playing the trumpet, learning French, and participating in community activism.



## **AYAN SAYANI**, Edgewater

Ayan Sayani is a junior in high school. He is a member of the Neighborhood Development Working Group and the New Ideas Committee. Ayan joined the Mayor's Youth Commission to be a part of a group of driven youth from all over the Chicago area who want to make a positive impact. Ayan also is interested in using behavioral economics to explore how people's decisions relate to socioeconomic inequality. In his free time, Ayan enjoys skateboarding, playing table tennis, and writing poetry.



## **FAITH TOWNSELL**, North Lawndale

Faith Townsell is a senior in high school. She currently is the Chair of the Neighborhood Development Working Group and is a member of the Charter Committee. Prior to joining the MYC, she founded a nonprofit called Feud for Food. Her passion for socio-economic, racial, and gender equality led her to join the MYC. In addition, Faith is currently employed at Chicago's Mayor's Office, working with the Education and Human Services team. Faith plans to major in Political Science to help make Chicago a more equitable city.



## **YARETZI ULLOA**, Brighton Park

Yaretzi Ulloa is a senior in high school. She is a member of the Neighborhood Development Working Group and the New Ideas and Charter Committees. Yaretzi joined the Mayor's Youth Commission because she is passionate about diversity, equity, and accessibility and wanted to address concerns regarding resources available to Chicago residents. Yaretzi plans to study engineering or computer science and hopes to create accessible data visualization tools that support transparent, people-centered governments design within the human-computer interaction field.

# 2022-2023 MAYOR'S YOUTH COMMISSION

## Public Health Working Group



### **GIDEON BURNETT**, Wicker Park

Gideon Burnett is a junior in high school. The MYC stood out to him because of its commitment to enabling Chicago youth to make a meaningful difference in their communities with city resources that would otherwise be inaccessible. He is a firm believer in the importance of youth mental health, which, following the pandemic, inspired him to join the public health team. He plans to study neuroscience and biochemistry in the future, in pursuit of becoming an anesthesiologist.



### **BENJAMIN KAGAN**, Lakeview

Benjamin Kagan is a high school junior in high school. An engaged vaccine advocate, he founded the Chicago Vaccine Angels in February 2021. Benjamin hopes to effect change within Chicago's public health systems. He is also a commissioner for the Illinois Governor's Commission on Volunteerism and Community Service and a student representative to the Illinois High School Association.



### **ANOUSHKA LAL**, Lincoln Park

Anoushka Lal is a junior in high school. She is the Chair of the Public Health Working Group. Anoushka joined the MYC to deepen her understanding of city policy and social justice, and to help build a brighter, more equitable future for Chicago's teens. Her passion lies in streamlining and developing city resources and youth-oriented initiatives to make them more accessible and engaging for young people. Anoushka aspires to study International Relations/Policy in college, and to continue working in youth policy and organizations like the MYC!



### **SAMANTHA LOPEZ**, Gage Park

Samantha Lopez is a junior in high school. She serves on the Public Health Working Group and is a part of the Social Media Committee. She joined MYC to make a positive change for Chicago. In the future, she hopes to make a difference in someone's life through the medical field. Outside of the MYC, she loves watching the TV show Criminal Minds.

# 2022-2023 MAYOR'S YOUTH COMMISSION



## **WINIFRED OFORI-MANU**, Uptown

Winifred Ofori-Manu is a senior in high school. She currently serves on the Public Health Working Group and the Charter Committee. Her passion for public policy and social equity led her to the Mayor's Youth Commission through the Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy (CAPS) Program where she served as a peer juror. She plans to major in Computer Science with a minor in African American Studies this fall, and hopes to work for a government agency as a software developer in the future.



## **YAMALÍ RODAS FIGUEROA**, Englewood

Yamalí is a nonbinary and Guatemalan immigrant that resides in the stolen land of the Kickapoo people which is currently known as the southside of Chicago. Xe is passionate about cultivating community and creating civic engagement opportunities to empower marginalized people to take action towards their liberation. Xe is the founder of competitive dance team Baile Latiné, is involved with Illinois Safe School Alliance, and is participating in the 2023 UCLA Labor Center Dream Summer National Fellowship Program as a Fellow with HANA Center.



## **ANABELLE SANCHEZ**, West Elsdon

Anabelle Sanchez is a junior in high school and currently serves as the Vice Chair of the Public Health Committee. She joined the MYC to provide a voice for Chicago teens and believes that youth can make a significant impact on issues affecting Chicago and beyond. After graduating from high school, she plans to pursue a career in the medical field and continue her work in the MYC.



## **EDGAR JARED VILCHEZ**, Belmont Cragin

Edgar Jared Vilchez is a senior in high school. He is currently involved in the Public Health Working Group, as well as the New Ideas and Social Media Committees. His involvement with the MYC stems from his interest in the youth perspective on City of Chicago initiatives. His long-term goal is to pursue a career in politics/government and run for Congress, with the aim of representing his community at the federal level. In his free time, he enjoys attending concerts and studying at local cafes.



# 2022-2023 MAYOR'S YOUTH COMMISSION

## Public Safety Working Group



### **PRECIOUS ADEDOKUN**, Rogers Park

Precious Adedokun is a sophomore in high school and the Vice Chair of the Public Safety Working Group, as well as the Social Media, Charter, and New Ideas Committee. The opportunity to help develop and plan events and policies in Chicago was one of the main reasons that brought her to the Mayor Youth Commission. She finds it fulfilling to be part of a committee where the voice of youth is the primary driving force behind creating change. Her aspiration is to lead a life where she can bring care and justice to people in any form.



### **TAYLOR ANDERSON**, North Lawndale

Taylor Anderson is a high school sophomore and a member of the Public Safety Working Group and the Social Media Committee. Her goal in the MYC is to make sure the youth of Chicago feel safe and welcomed. Taylor enjoys giving back to her community and helping in any way possible. She plans on becoming a forensic psychologist and fulfilling her dreams of being a FBI agent.



### **AYUSHI JHA**, Little Italy

Ayushi Jha is a junior in high school. In addition to the Public Safety Working Group, she is a member of the New Ideas Committee. She was initially brought to the Mayor's Youth Commission through her work in her school community as well as the organization Chicago Teen Mentors. In this role, she strives to speak up for other youth whose voices are often silenced. Her future aspirations include becoming a physician and continuing to serve their community.



### **NATORION JOHNSON**, Washington Heights

Natorion Johnson is a senior in high school. He is a part of the Public Safety Working Group, New Idea Committee, Social Media Committee, and the Charter Committee.

# 2022-2023 MAYOR'S YOUTH COMMISSION



## **SAMANTHA MARQUEZ**, Little Village

Samantha Marquez is a junior in high school. She is a part of the Public Safety Committee, Social Media Committee, and the Charter Committee.



## **SHANYAH MORRIS**, Garfield Park

Shanyah Morris is a junior in high school and a member of the public safety working group as well as the charter committee. Shanyah was inspired to join the MYC because of her principal and saw it as an opportunity to demonstrate her leadership skills. Shanyah is passionate about her community of East Garfield park, and hopes to continue planning and developing events for the community. Shanyah loves helping people, listening to others, and drawing.

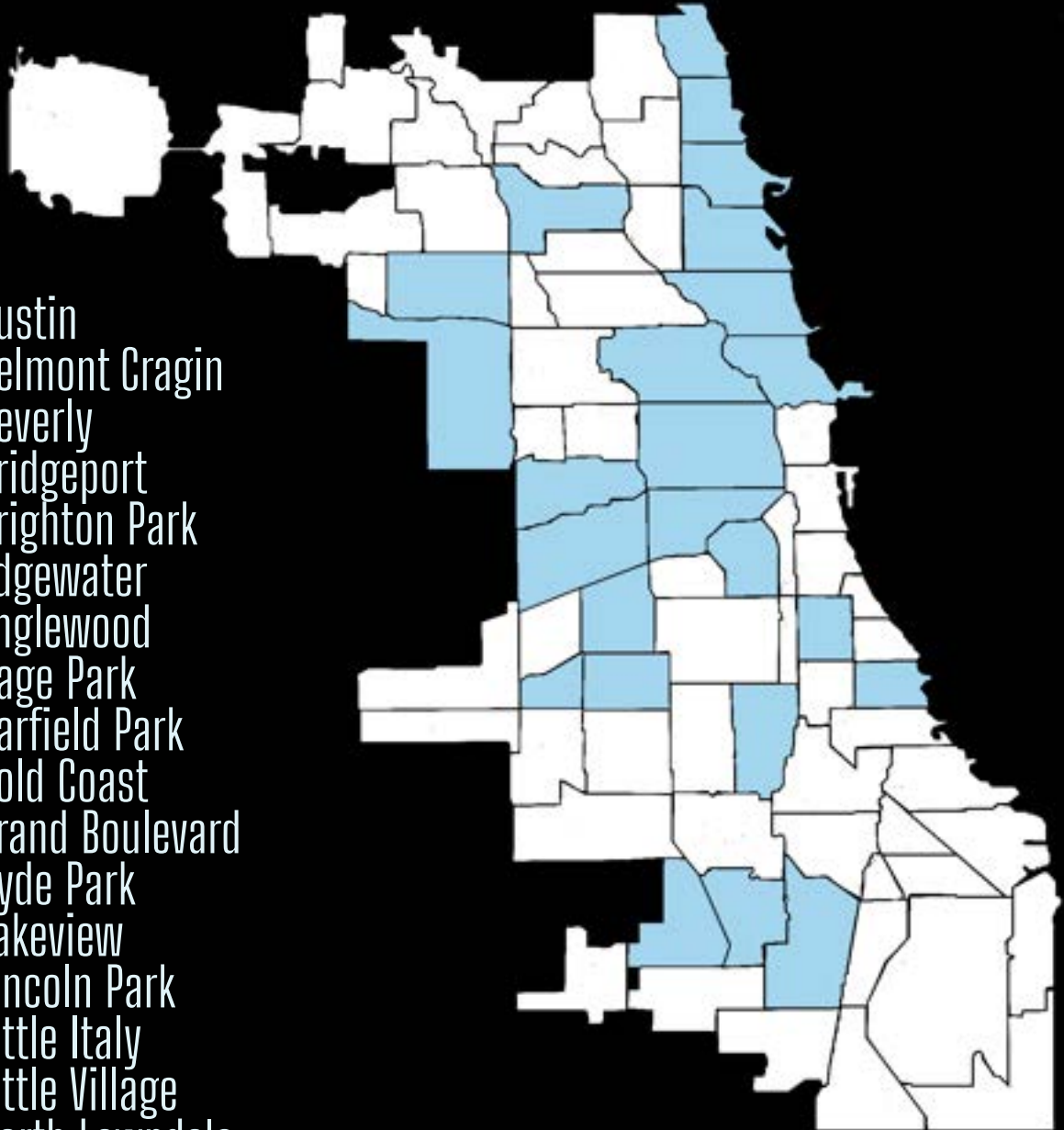


## **KATIE WILLIAMS**, Roseland and Grand Boulevard

Katie Williams is a junior in high school. She serves as the Chair of the Public Safety Working Group and is a member of the New Ideas Committee. Katie joined the MYC to advocate for equitable change for underserved communities by addressing the root cause of divisions in Chicago: lack of communication. She also hopes to explore her interest in public policy and later enact equitable legislation to uplift communities across the country.

# Neighborhoods represented by the 2022–2023 Youth Commission

- Austin
- Belmont Cragin
- Beverly
- Bridgeport
- Brighton Park
- Edgewater
- Englewood
- Gage Park
- Garfield Park
- Gold Coast
- Grand Boulevard
- Hyde Park
- Lakeview
- Lincoln Park
- Little Italy
- Little Village
- North Lawndale
- Old Irving Park
- Pilsen
- Rogers Park
- Roseland
- Uptown
- Washington Heights
- West Elsdon
- Wicker Park











Youth Commissions in front of the Martin Luther King Jr. mural in North Lawndale

# EDUCATION WORKING GROUP

Norah Al-Hallaj, Samuel Holmes, Samuel Iturralde, Anastacia Kelly, Ayanna McCarthy, Debbie Mojekwu

The Education Working Group works to provide equal access to quality academic resources in Chicago. As current students in the Chicago Public School system, the Commissioners have acute insight into the obstacles that prevent students from achieving their full potential within and outside of their academic life. In doing so, the Education Working Group aims to improve student opportunity and mitigate the current educational disparities that exist within our communities. The Education Working Group works alongside Mayoral Fellow Rebecca Silverman, and is led by Chair Debbie Mojekwu and Vice Chair Norah Al-Hallaj.



# Post-Secondary Resource Database

Facilitating pathways for student success

## Background

For much of its history, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) have suffered from low graduation rates, poor academic performance, and a lack of postsecondary readiness. In 2006, only 57% of CPS students graduated from high school,<sup>[1]</sup> and only 8% were expected to receive a bachelor's degree by 25.<sup>[2]</sup> Though these rates have improved, with graduation rates rising to 82.9% in the 2021-2022 school year,<sup>[3]</sup> CPS still has room for growth. In efforts to continue to improve college and career readiness, the district has launched several initiatives.

In 2017, CPS launched the Learn. Plan. Succeed. (LPS) program, which began requiring all students to submit post-secondary plans to receive their diplomas to increase access to post-secondary information. The program was largely seen as a success, with 97.2% of all seniors completing a post-secondary plan.<sup>[4]</sup> However, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in counselor workload, truancy rates, and student to counselor ratios which may negatively impact graduation and post-secondary plan completion rates.<sup>[5]</sup>

In addition to post-secondary plans, LPS also encourages students to achieve a list of things, whether it be applying to a university, trade school, community college, or jobs. Students need to know what options are available to them after they graduate high school. Equipping students with this knowledge is the first step towards planning success after graduation, whatever path they choose.

Another resource offered by CPS is the Chicago Roadmap. It is a good resource and

gives students the support they need to decide on a college that will lead them to a career of their choosing.

## Importance

When high school seniors have a postsecondary plan, they are set up for greater success. However, obtaining a postsecondary plan requires students to have an inclination of what they want to do in the future. For students to find such post-secondary pathways, there needs to be exposure to numerous college and career options to build their interest in the pathway of their choice. Though there are many programs available in Chicago, such as Chicago Roadmap and LPS, students may not know that these programs are out there. As high school students ourselves, we have found that most of our peers either do not know about these programs or have only heard about them through their counselors. Guidance counselors are an amazing resource, but since the student to counselor ratio is so high, it can be difficult to serve all students' needs and get them all where they need or want to be. Many students that do not have consistent access to a guidance counselor are left in the dark partly because the resources available are not clearly listed online. For



CITY COLLEGES of CHICAGO

**Malcolm X**

Education that Works





Exterior of Malcolm X College,  
located in Near West Side

example, on the City of Chicago website, there is a clear deficiency of adequate information for students who want to learn about internship opportunities and gain SAT and college application help.<sup>[6]</sup> And employment and internship opportunities have benefits beyond college and career applications: they can also build up students' confidence and motivation to do something productive and may even reduce crime rates. According to Urban Labs, "young people who were offered jobs were 43% less likely to be arrested for violent crimes, and their lower crime involvement lasted beyond the summer – in fact, the impact was largest during the months following employment."<sup>[7]</sup> Evidently, access to opportunities can lead to benefits for the city as a whole by fostering a next generation of leaders. Thus, without access to these helpful resources, we're still putting Chicago's youth at a disadvantage.

High school graduation is the start of independence for many, whether it is looking for internships, stable jobs, or plans to continue to higher education. Either way, as students, we need to be prepared before we are pushed out into the real world, yet many students don't know about the programs available to them to explore and plan prior to graduation. This puts students at risk of graduating unprepared, which may negatively affect employment prospects and their mental health, and potentially lead to involvement within the justice system. Addressing this problem is critical to the future of our city.

## Solution

Solving the issue will not take creating new programs or large budgets, but instead starts with students having easy access to and knowledge of the resources that already exist. Our proposed solution is to create a category within the My CHI. My Future. (MCMF)

app containing pre-existing resources pertaining to high school and college education, the college application process, standardized testing preparation, scholarships/financial aid, and internship opportunities. The MCMF app is currently designed to connect Chicago's youth to out-of-school events, gatherings, programs, and jobs. With our proposal, the app would include a new section for post-secondary resources. For example, with incorporating a dedicated tab for post-secondary resources, the Explore Page will help youth navigate to the appropriate resource they need. Many parents and students have difficulty facing the daunting task of higher education preparation and enrollment. This project is the ideal solution because it adequately addresses the issues of scattered resources across various platforms and websites and enhances an already existing resource utilized by CPS and over 20,000 users. These new features on the app can be a one stop shop that increases accessibility of the previously hard to find information.

## Next Steps

- Research and consolidate college application resources, test prep materials, internship opportunities, trade schools, and more into an appropriate format for the app
- Work with the Mayor's Office to code and implement the change to the MCMF app
- Develop a marketing campaign to promote the launch of additional features on the MCMF app.



# References

1. Chicago Public Schools. "Chicago Public Schools Celebrates Class of 2022 Record-High Graduation Rate and Scholarship Totals." Chicago Public Schools. 2022. <https://www.cps.edu/press-releases/chicago-public-schools-celebrates-class-of-2022-record-high-graduation-rate-and-scholarship-totals3/>
2. "The Educational Attainment of Chicago Public Schools Students." University of Chicago Consortium on School Research. 2018. <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/educational-attainment-chicago-public-schools-students-2017#:~:text=75%20percent%20of%20CPS%20students,50%20percent%20in%202006%3B%20and>
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6. City of Chicago. "Internships and Volunteer Programs." 2023. <https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/dhr/provdrs/emp/svcs/internships.html>
7. Urban Labs. "One Summer Chicago." The University of Chicago. 2019. <https://urbanlabs.uchicago.edu/programs/one-summer-chicago>









The Public Health Working Group led student interviews in the process of creating mental health awareness videos at YOUmedia in Harold Washington Library



# PUBLIC HEALTH WORKING GROUP

Gideon Burnett, Benjamin Kagan, Anoushka Lal, Samantha Lopez, Winifred Ofori-Manu, Yamalí Rodas Figueroa, Anabelle Sanchez, Edgar Jared Vilchez

The Public Health Working Group is dedicated to supporting youth health in Chicago, specifically those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and mental health crisis. The group focuses on streamlining behavioral and mental health services for teens, and has discussed their ideas with Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) Commissioner Dr. Arwady. The working group has previously advocated for lowering the age of consent for vaccinations statewide and is currently collaborating with CDPH to create a video resource guide and website landing page accessible to teens in time for Mental Health Awareness Month in May 2023. The Public Health Working Group works alongside Mayor's Office Youth Programs Manager Stender Von Oehsen, and is led by Chair Anoushka Lal and Vice Chair Anabelle Sanchez.

# Chicago Mental Health Awareness

## City Outreach For Youth Mental Health Resources

### Background

Mental health services are critical, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Center for the Disease Control (CDC), more than 37% of high school students in the United States reported poor mental health in 2021, with a disproportionate impact on youth of color, low-income groups, and members of the LGBTQAI+ community.<sup>[1]</sup> Despite the need for such services, young Chicagoans still face barriers of stigma and lack of awareness about the city's mental health resources.<sup>[2]</sup>

### Importance

Chicago provides free mental health resources through initiatives like Unspoken and NAMI, a problem lies in the City's shortcomings in effectively marketing and advertising these resources to its youth audience. The Unspoken website, for instance, is primarily catered to adults. This limits the city's ability to help the youth that need help most.

The young people's growing advocacy for mental health services has underscored the importance of this issue, and the City has taken notice. There is currently a city-wide expansion of mental health services in select Chicago Public Libraries which had previously offered none.<sup>[3]</sup> In addition, collaborations have occurred between Mayor Lightfoot and state regulators to bring the mental health hotline to Chicago, whereby mental health workers can be dispatched to calls made to 911.<sup>[4]</sup>

By better publicizing mental health resources, the City would provide Chicago's youth and adult residents a better opportunity to seek help, and such knowledge can equip

youth with the necessary tools to transition into adulthood healthily.

### Proposal

The primary concern of the Public Health Working Group is increasing awareness of the vital mental health resources available for youth, specifically to counselors, social workers, teachers, and young people with mental health care needs. The Working Group recommends that the City of Chicago create a specific video campaign to address youth mental health, develop a website landing page with dedicated youth mental health resources, and create an official Youth Mental and Behavioral Health Task Force within the Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) that deals exclusively with youth mental health equity.

First, the Public Health Working Group recommends the City create a video campaign that centers youth voices in the mental health conversation and informs young adults about low-cost mental health resources. The campaign will feature relatable young people in digestible video episodes, ensuring it is interesting and accessible to its target audience. The campaign's primary goals are to acknowledge the challenging times that young people have faced (particularly during the pandemic) and emphasize the importance of public health unity and resilience. Additionally, the campaign will raise awareness of the many Chicago-based organizations, programs, and clinics that offer mental health services. Through this campaign,







First Lady Amy Eshleman meets with young people at the Face Forward youth vaccination event

the City of Chicago shows its commitment to May's Mental Health Awareness Month and prioritizes the mental health needs of its youth population.

Second, the Public Health Working Group recommends that an online landing page be developed that provides access to key youth mental health resources and the video campaign. To improve the promotion of Unspoken and community-based mental health centers, the website must be streamlined and made more accessible to young people. By creating a centralized landing page accessible from the CDPH, Chicago Public Schools (CPS), and the City of Chicago - Office of the Mayor websites, as well as the My CHI. My Future. app and website, young people can easily access digestible mental health information and major resources. This will eliminate the process of searching through mental health resource information scattered across multiple platforms. To ensure maximum reach, promoting the landing page and videos through the CPS district student email chain is a vital step. By implementing these changes, the website will become a valuable tool in promoting mental health resources and aiding young people in accessing the help they need in Chicago.

Finally, the Public Health Working Group believes a Youth Mental Health and Behavioral Task Force will support and sustain this comprehensive and engaging youth mental health resource campaign. This task force would bring Equity Officers and staff from intersecting departments to collaborate on youth mental health initiatives. The Task Force would focus on the following key goals:

1. The City of Chicago must ensure mental health resources are marketed to all school counselors. As the primary point of contact for many students, counselors must be equipped to distribute information about the City and local mental health resources that students can access. Counselor training would include a comprehensive guide created by the Task Force and the Chicago Department of

Public Health that includes information on the City's core mental health initiatives and community resources available to support their students.

2. The Task Force should aim to increase the number of school-based mental health resources by establishing more peer-support mental health organizations led by (and for) students. Students who value mental health can create a positive culture and safe school space. The Task Force can partner with CPS to promote the implementation of mental health peer-supported clubs in each of the 152 CPS high schools and ensure that Mental Health Awareness Month is recognized and honored to reinforce its importance to students.
3. The Task Force should emphasize culturally responsive care to improve mental health equity. With 77 neighborhoods, Chicago caters to diverse cultural public health concerns. Community-based public health and mental health centers like Pilsen Wellness Center, Humboldt Park Health, C4 Community, and City-implemented mental health centers offering low-cost resources. Public after-school programs like the South Side Help Center, Chicago Youth Programs, and Brave Space Alliance (a Black-led, Trans-led LGBTQ+ Center on the South Side of Chicago) offer great after-school spaces and programs. The "Self Care Kickback," provided by SouthSide Help Center, offers professional mental health therapists for youth. These program models and locations improve mental health equity – and the task force must help uplift these opportunities and connect more youth to them.

## Next Steps

- The MYC Public Health working group will create a mental health video campaign in collaboration with CDPH. The video campaign will include youth and highlight youth mental health resources in recognition of Mental Health Awareness Month.
- The MYC Public Health working group will create a landing page where youth mental health resources are consolidated in collab-

oration with the Mayor’s Office. The landing page will include links, videos, and various other resources to provide information regarding where youth can seek help.

- The MYC Public Health working group and CDPH team will discuss further how a Youth Mental and Behavioral Health Task Force — designed to formulate direct ideas to serve the youth of Chicago better — can be created. Providing a voice for youth regarding mental health will help destigmatize the topic and empower young Chicagoans to seek resources.

## References

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CDPH Crisis Assistance Response and Engagement (CARE) vans provide compassionate care to residents dealing with a mental health crisis



# PUBLIC SAFETY WORKING GROUP

Precious Adedokun, Taylor Anderson, Ayushi Jha, Natorion Johnson, Samantha Marquez, Shanyah Morris, Katie Williams

The Public Safety Working Group prioritizes collaboration with policy-makers, organizes youth-centered events, distributes public safety-based resources to youth, and supports outreach and communication campaigns aimed at youth. Such efforts are necessary to ensure that youth voices are included in all future actions related to youth safety. The Public Safety Working Group promotes and facilitates conversations around the under-discussed topic of youth safety. As the Youth Commission continues its work, the Public Safety Working Group aims to have a more significant influence. The Public Safety Working Group works alongside Mayor's Office Recovery Team Program Manager Travis Moore-Murray, and is led by Chair Katie Williams and Vice Chair Precious Adedokun.



# Chicago Department of Planning and Development Expansion:

Enhancing Public Safety By Incorporating Youth Involvement In Community Vacant Lots

## Background

The City of Chicago's South and West Sides have been plagued with vacant lots for decades due to a lack of investment and systemic racism. Moreover, practices of urban renewal, redlining, contract buying, and highway construction displaced Black and Brown communities and cut off access to resources and wealth. This has contributed to an increase of community safety concerns, impoverished areas, and desolated neighborhoods.<sup>[1]</sup> Currently, there are approximately 32,000 vacant lots in Chicago; however, the City has introduced several efforts to fill the vacancies.<sup>[2]</sup> First, the program ChiBlockBuilder, led by the Chicago Department of Planning and Development (DPD), encourages the purchase and redevelopment of City-owned vacant land in partnership with community stakeholders by increasing the purchase of City-owned properties across the South and West sides.<sup>[3]</sup> The purchases are eligible for four uses: housing, side yards, commercial development, and open spaces.<sup>[4]</sup> Another example comes from the Chicago Community Safety Coordination Center (CSCC), which is implementing a multi-layered engagement strategy that solicits feedback from community members and subject matter experts alike to drive the violence reduction strategy across the city and from the ground up.<sup>[5]</sup> The CSCC has a committee of community partners that advise the City on its approach to violence prevention. In addition, Public Outdoor Plaza (POP!), is an initiative designed to help community-based organizations revitalize underutilized land along neighborhood retail corridors.<sup>[6]</sup> It pursues ideas to develop purposeful neighborhood meeting places that serve as destinations for neighbor-

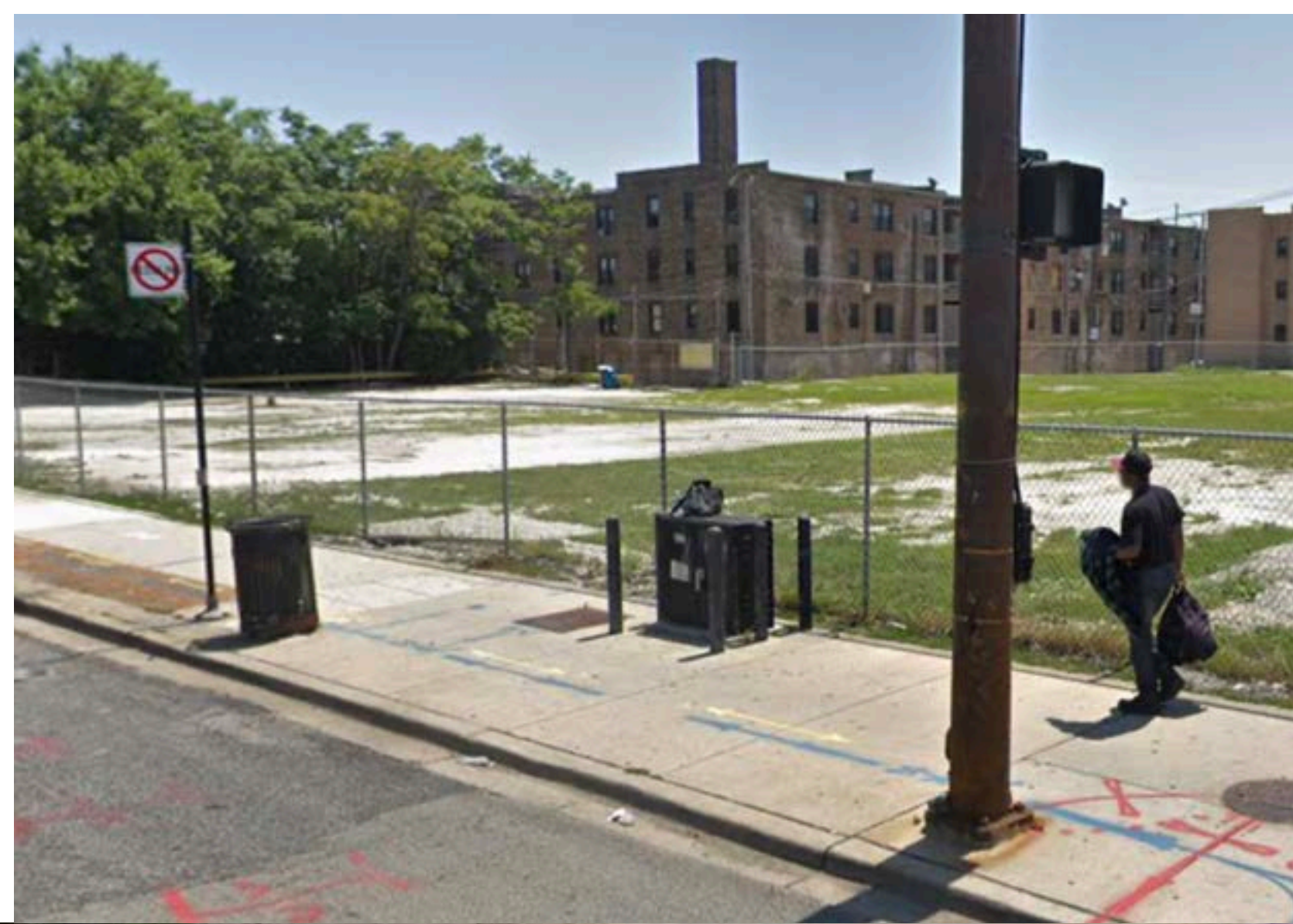
hood visitors, shoppers, commuters, and local residents that are located in low-income areas.<sup>[7]</sup> Proposed improvements to existing plazas and gathering spaces will also be considered.

## Importance

We define "vacant lots" broadly as unoccupied one-to-four-family homes or lots without built structures, regardless of the cause. Over 10,000 vacant lots are currently owned by the city of Chicago, many of which are located in economically depressed areas that have received little investment for many years.<sup>[8]</sup> Vacant lots plague our city and enable revenue for illegal activities such as drug sales and usage in adolescents, sex trafficking, and other criminal activities that increase community safety concerns. This results in growing teenage crime statistics as both perpetrators and victims.

We must introduce special havens that allow communities to gather with productive activities to establish enjoyable and secure neighborhood spaces. Creating safe spaces provides alternative options to the dangerous activities youth sometimes choose when they have downtime. While the City has implemented initiatives such as ChiBlockBuilder and POP! Plazas to combat this issue, these initiatives lack youth voice. This is particularly harmful when youth are the most impacted as both perpetrators and victims of violence









Mahalia Jackson Court in Chatam before (above) and after (below) the POP! Plaza renovations



that occurs on vacant lots. The City aims to sell most lots for the development of new residential buildings, open areas, and commercial endeavors. As of now, there have been very few places where vacant lots have been used for creating safe spaces specifically for youth.

Designated policies to involve youth in the development process allow youth to create spaces where they feel safe, can have fun with peers, and work on projects to make the city better. For a teenager who walks down their street that's riddled with vacant lots, it is natural to not see the value in their community, their neighbors, and even themselves, because they are presented only with examples of inequity and disinvestment. Youth who are continually exposed to this environment expect to achieve less than their peers in wealthier neighborhoods. Partnering with youth to enhance the City's vacant lot strategy will lead to impactful changes in their community, their own self-image, and their incentives for growth.

## Proposal

The Public Safety Working Group hopes to increase youth voice by collaborating with existing departments and programs and finding ways to promote youth-led initiatives in vulnerable communities to decrease crime rates and unite communities. We propose to create a youth cohort with DPD to ensure youth opinions are incorporated when implementing commercial development and open spaces within their neighborhoods. This cohort will host youth-led community meetings for the youth that reside near vacant lots during the process of commercial or community development to ensure their voices are incorporated throughout the development of the vacant spaces. We would like to work in partnership with the City to determine a subset of projects that would benefit the most from a youth perspective, including POP! Plaza and ChiBlockBuilder.

We can also collaborate to expand community efforts to create positive and productive activities in vacant lots. For example, Shelly Quiles and her neighbors used a vacant lot in Woodlawn to create "The Lemonade Land", which is a pop-up fundraiser and networking event for local and small Chicago businesses to sell their merchandise. "A lot of the purpose of what we did was to create economic opportunity for Black and Brown people in our neighborhood who were disenfranchised during Covid, which allowed the neighborhood to reinvest back into its neighbors," said Shelly Quiles.<sup>[9]</sup>

With Shelly's work in mind, the Public Safety Working Group believes we should work alongside the efforts of the DPD to establish a vendor showcase that hosts local youth-owned small and micro-businesses on vacant lots that have not yet received plans for redevelopment. This initiative could be driven through another round of POP! Plaza funding targeted towards youth. One way to ensure this is to require any applicant to have a functioning body of local youth with a demonstrable voice in the decision-making process. This youth-led vendor showcase will attract local investment, give residents greater control over vacant land in their neighborhood, build wealth in communities, and ensure land gets put to productive use in a community-driven and equitable manner.

## Next Steps

- Connect with the DPD to learn about their community engagement strategy and pitch our "New Idea"
- Inquire about crime and violence statistics for communities with highest percentages of disconnected youth to create list of priority lots
- Identify barriers to developing priority lots, such as environmental issues, previous commitments made, etc.
- Collaborate with community and City to determine how we define success and impact when activating a vacant lot
- Solidify plan for youth engagement, including what their specific roles are.

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The 606: Chicago's elevated park and trail





# NEIGHBORHOOD DEVELOPMENT WORKING GROUP

Zuhair Alsikafi, Danari Bowden, Charlotte Ernst, Ayan Sayani,  
Faith Townsell, Yaretzi Ulloa

The Neighborhood Development Working Group is a diverse group of high school students who are committed to working toward equity for all of Chicago's neighborhoods. They bring valuable and nuanced insight to the Mayor's Office, drawing on their experiences from across the city. They aim to reach youth across the city and ensure that all input is equitable and well-rounded. With the goal to develop youth-led leadership whose unique insight will bolster sustainable development in Chicago's under-resourced neighborhoods, the Neighborhood Development Working Group works alongside Community Engagement Manager Christian Robinson, and is led by Chair Faith Townsell and Vice Chair Charlotte Ernst.

# We Will ENGAGE

## Youth Liasion Program To Improve Equitable Participation In City Planning

### Background

The “We Will Chicago” plan was launched in July of 2020 as a multi-year community-driven process to develop a 10-year framework to address and improve equity in health, economic stability, and neighborhood livability among other systemic issues in Chicago. This plan was drafted by neighborhood residents and leaders of Chicago and was officially adopted in February of 2023 by the Chicago Plan Commission. The last citywide plan of this type was the 1966 Comprehensive Plan.<sup>[1]</sup>

### Importance

Since 2020, We Will Chicago has engaged over 13,000 residents, including deep engagement with 115 Chicago residents and 25 community partners selected through an open, citywide application process to co-create the draft plan. Yet, youth still face barriers to participate in City initiatives such as the We Will Chicago plan.<sup>[2]</sup>

At the 2021 Mayor’s Youth Commission Youth Summit, young people expressed interest in increased involvement in city conversations and policy, yet conveyed the difficulty of actually participating. Many guests were unaware of current and upcoming legislation surrounding youth due to the lack of youth input in both the planning of and the advertising of programs. Despite beneficial policies already being in place and future programs in the works, a lack of effective communication to adolescents and direct participation in town halls results in the targeted demographic not taking advantage of these initiatives. This problem could also lead to discontent among youth voters with local government, discouraging them from city-wide civic engagement.

Chicago’s youth involvement in the civic

processes of its city and community is of utmost importance. Youth play a core role in shaping the future of our neighborhoods, jobs, and opportunities that Chicago has for its residents. Inaccessible town halls prevent youth changemakers from having a direct impact in their own communities.

This not only causes the youth of our diverse communities to lose interest in participating in government, but also furthers the notion that the government is a separate entity from them, creating a cycle of disconnection. A series of accessible town halls and events for youth to foster an environment of civic engagement is a crucial requirement for the success of our communities.

Without proper representation of youth perspectives on issues within their community, the City is underutilizing a valuable group that ultimately will determine the future success of Chicago. It is necessary to seek out a solution towards the problem.

### Solution

We propose the We Will ENGAGE Youth Initiative, a program that will empower young people in Chicago by giving them a platform to voice their opinions on policies that affect their communities within the We Will plan. The program will select seven young people from across the city to serve as liaisons between the existing We Will focus groups and their own school communities. The selected youth will represent one of the seven pillars of the initiative





Mayor Lori E. Lightfoot and community members breaking ground for the Invest South/West project.





and will commit to attending each community meeting. Those pillars include:

- Arts and culture
- Civic and community engagement
- Economic development
- Environment climate and energy
- Housing and neighborhoods
- Lifelong learning
- Public Health and Safety
- Transportation and Infrastructure

This program will provide an opportunity for young people to make their voices heard and potentially have a direct say in the infrastructure being developed in their communities. The We Will ENGAGE Youth Initiative will recognize that young people are the future of Chicago and therefore must be involved in the process and policies that will shape the city's future.

Through an application selection process, the initiative would choose youth representatives to serve for one school year. During this time, they would represent both their school and neighborhoods. The representatives will compile youth feedback obtained from the community meetings and report back to the Mayor in a cumulative meeting. This will provide an opportunity for the Mayor to hear directly from young people about policies that affect their communities.

The Mayor's Youth Commission and the We Will ENGAGE Youth Initiative will be two separate groups. While they are different, due to the similarities of the Neighborhood Development working group and We Will ENGAGE Youth Initiative, it will be encouraged for the groups to reach out to each other for ideas, feedback, and progress reports. Meetings between the groups could often be informal and over video conference calls. The We Will ENGAGE Youth Initiative would be advised to come to the Mayor's Youth Commission meetings when the Neighborhood Development Working Group has brought in a speaker (and vice-versa) as often the speakers would provide helpful insight for both

groups. The time spent together will allow both groups build on each other's ideas and be more successful.

In conclusion, the We Will ENGAGE Youth Initiative would be an essential program that prioritizes young people's voices and empowers them to participate in personal advocacy, communication, and, most importantly, the development of their communities. By selecting youth representatives to serve as liaisons between the We Will focus groups and their school communities, the program provides an opportunity for young people to make a difference and have a direct say in the future of Chicago.

## Next Steps

- Before anything else, we must find adults who can serve as advisors and manage the group. These steps would serve as a stable foundation to ensure the group would be a longstanding success.
- We must outline target communities and clump together parts of the city so there is representation from all parts of Chicago.
- Since the available funds would limit the number of members in the group, it would be crucial to outline a possible budget. We must identify sources of funding for each young person involved.
- Advertise the initiative with CPS counselors, teachers, community leaders, etc. to reach youth leaders in the targeted communities and increase awareness of the program.



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# POWER TO THE POLLS

Increasing Youth Voter Turnout To Amplify Youth Voice

Mayor's Youth Commission

## Background

Voting is a fundamental right and an act of civic participation through which young people can contribute to democracy. While it's just one of many ways youth can be engaged, it is a powerful way for young people to make their voices heard and to have an impact on issues that affect them and their communities.

Increasing eligible and active voters has been a stated goal of government and community leaders for decades. While there has been a general consensus that getting more people to vote is desirable, there has not always been a consensus on how to accomplish that goal. This lack of consistency is most obvious when speaking with youth and hearing the variety of perspectives many have expressed when discussing their disengagement with voting. As members of the Youth Commission engaged with their friends and classmates about attitudes towards voting, we have heard a wide range of views from other youth, many of them being disenchanted with voting. For us, this means that when developing strategies for youth (people ages 18 through 24), efforts to increase voter turnout must be markedly different than strategies used for older demographics. Youth have demonstrated time and time again that traditional methods of engagement are not effective in connecting with us and that we are most influenced by other young people. Therefore, a separate marketing and promotion strategy for youth is needed. Also, whatever strategies that are developed to engage youth must be developed by youth to be nuanced and accessible to a wide range of perspectives.

As strategies to increase voter turnout are explored, it should be acknowledged that voting policies are established by state and federal government. As the Youth Commission establishes our agenda for increasing voter turnout, we acknowledge the limitations of City government while remaining hopeful that a partnership in support of our proposal can lead to something transformative for youth in our city.

## Importance

In Chicago, this year's voter turnout was lower than has been in the last three elections and about 10% lower than it was in 2011. Typically, voter turnout is lower among younger voters and higher among older voters, and this trend was seen again this year. During the February 2023 Chicago municipal elections, turnout was once again lowest in the younger demographic of voters ages 18 to 24, as they cast just under 16,000 ballots – only 3% of all votes. Additionally, only 14% of registered voters in the 18 to 24 age demographic participated in the Chicago municipal election - the lowest of any age group.<sup>[1]</sup>

Nationwide, national elections saw a major increase in youth voter turnout in 2018 and 2022.<sup>[2]</sup> We can only hope that trend continues and that it doesn't start to mirror more local elections. Generation Z is on its way to becoming the second largest population of potential voters by 2028. When combined with Millennials, the two groups will account for more than half of all potential voters.<sup>[3]</sup> Broadening youth voting is a vital task in strengthening participation and representation in our democracy. If our current youth are not activated as voters, we can expect to see an unprecedented wave of Americans who are disinvested from voting.

Addressing low voter turnout for youth is incredibly important. If we cannot engage youth in local politics now, the outlook for overall voter engagement will only trend downwards over time. We should do everything we can to work against that outcome because

many of the decisions made in government will impact this demographic more than the demographics that are currently exercising the most power. We know that youth are always talked about when discussing issues surrounding public safety, mental health and education, however they have the least amount of voice in decisions involving these subjects. In our city, youth have repeatedly organized around their feelings of marginalization and not being heard. Voting is a measure that could help to address this. Right now, our youth are missing an opportunity to participate in improving our communities. We need to support systems that develop informed, passionate and civically engaged people while addressing structural barriers to civic learning and opportunities.

## Solution

To address the challenge of increasing voting participation amongst youth, we recommend an adoption of a voter preregistration program that allows individuals younger than 18 years of age to register to vote, eliminating the barriers and restraints from the current registration process.<sup>[4]</sup> A pre-registrant will fill out an application (they will be required to present a valid state ID or ID# at the time of the application submission either online or in-person) and will be added to the voter registration list with a “pending” or “preregistration” status.<sup>[4]</sup> When the young person turns 18, they would be added to the State of Illinois voter registration list and be able to vote in the next election.

Research done by the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University’s shows that Youth voter registration is 9 points higher in places where youth can pre-register to vote at age 16 or 17, yet less than half of U.S. states allow it.<sup>[2]</sup> Currently, fifteen states and Washington D.C. allow preregistration beginning at 16 years old (California, Colorado, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Hawaii, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Rhode Island, Utah, Virginia and Washington.), four state permit preregistration beginning at 17 years old (Maine, Nevada, New Jersey and West Virginia) and five additional states set another age at which individuals may preregister.<sup>[4]</sup> Currently, in the State of Illinois you must be at least 17 years old on or before the date of the Primary Election and turn 18 on or before the date of the General or Consolidated Election in order to register to vote.<sup>[4]</sup>

To further support youth voter turnout, the City of Chicago should add and/or move Chicago election polling sites to Chicago Public School (CPS) High Schools and City College locations (these locations should also double as voter registration sites) to increase access to physical voting locations and registration sites to young people. This step should also be accompanied by a marketing campaign targeting young people ages 18-24 (i.e, ads on social media) that would promote the importance of using your voice to vote, how and where to register, how and when to vote and the different ways in which you can vote

We also believe that the City should collaborate with community partners and push forward conversations that engages the State in thinking about other voting initiatives like ranked-choice voting and a universal voter opt-out as opposed to an opt-in.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Next Steps

- Set-up a day for the Mayor’s Office to pitch the pre-registration program idea to the Governor



- Partner with CPS to plan a school based citywide registration day
- Analyze locations of current polling sites and how those locations can potentially be moved to CPS High Schools and City Colleges locations or add more polling sites to these locations
- Coordinate stakeholders (CPS, City Colleges, Youth Serving Community Based Organizations, Parks) to create a citywide marketing plan to increase youth awareness of resources, importance of voting and ultimately voter turnout.

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The Mayor's Youth Commission with community leader Richard Townsell during a tour of North Lawndale in March 2023



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