

Lifting Up Community in Chicago


Convergence
Partnership

PolicyLink

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PolicyLink serves as the program director for the Convergence Partnership, helping to develop and implement the plans and actions necessary to ensure that all people can live in healthy communities of opportunity.

In 2018 the Convergence Partnership provided grants to seven organizations to advocate for solutions that create equitable changes for diverse communities across the country. These profiles include stories that capture the experiences and impacts of this work from the perspectives of the community members, grassroots and community organizations, and funder partners involved.

PolicyLink is a national research and action institute advancing racial and economic equity by **Lifting Up What Works**®.

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The Changing Face of Chicago

Christian Diaz remembers what Logan Square was like when he was a kid in the 1990s. “It was a strong Latinx neighborhood, mostly Mexican and Puerto Rican. Even if you didn’t speak English, you could live a full life here.” The area had lots of Spanish-speaking businesses, events, newspapers, restaurants, and social clubs. Diaz’s mother worked at the airport Starbucks, and his stepfather delivered newspapers in the nearby Lincoln Park neighborhood.

Though he recalls the good aspects of the Logan Square of his childhood, he could not help but notice that other areas, like Lincoln Park, were richer and whiter. It was not until later that he learned the backstory. White flight in the 1950s and 1960s, and years of disinvestment that followed in the mostly Latinx

community were part of what allowed Diaz's mother and stepfather to buy a house at an affordable price in 1991. But, since at least the turn of the millennium, things have been changing. Nearly 20,000 Latinx people left the neighborhood between 2000 and 2015. That means that the Latinx community is down to 43 percent of the neighborhood population today—about half of what it used to be in Diaz's younger days. What is happening in Logan Square is happening in other neighborhoods as well. During the same years, 2000 to 2015, Washington Park lost more than 2,000 African American residents, and those residents were part of the more than 200,000 who left the Chicago area in that period.

People often say with a sigh that gentrification is just what happens with time. Diaz disagrees. As the lead housing organizer for the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA), he says, "Part of the work we do here is to tell a story that's more nuanced than just 'neighborhoods change.'" Instead, he says, the exodus of people of color is the result of political decisions made by people with entrenched political and commercial interests. "Government lets property values deteriorate in a given area, then banks and developers decide that it's a hot new neighborhood. Developers invest, and they donate to the campaigns of city aldermen," Diaz explains. "In Chicago, each alderman has total power in their ward over zoning, land use, and permits, and how many affordable units there will be in a development. They can't just say no to the developers who donated to the alderman's campaign."

LSNA started in 1962 to improve economic conditions in the neighborhood and has since transformed into a multi-issue community organization working on housing, economic development, education, immigration, wellness, and recreation. It represents nearly 40 churches, schools, block clubs, and other member institutions. LSNA is itself part of a larger collaborative called [Elevated Chicago](#). Launched in 2017 with support from the Strong, Prosperous, And Resilient Communities Challenge (SPARCC), Elevated Chicago is a collaborative of organizations and neighborhood-based community groups working across Chicago to advance "community-led solutions to neighborhood displacement and inequities using an underutilized asset: [the] public transit system." Elevated Chicago's work began receiving funding from the Convergence Partnership in 2018.

Organizing Development Around Transit

In the first half of the twentieth century, urban development started to be structured around cars more than public transit. That is why today the shape of our cities and outlying areas is dictated by highways, streets, on-ramps, off-ramps, parking lots, garages, and street parking, not to mention gas stations and body shops. In contrast, a Chicago city ordinance passed in 2013—and updated in 2015 and 2019—called for transit-oriented development (TOD). This practice provides incentives to developers to create walkable housing, businesses, and other amenities in the half-mile radius around transit assets, such as train stations.

"Transit-oriented development is better than car-oriented development," says Roberto Requejo, the program director of Elevated Chicago. "It makes communities healthier, more livable, and more sustainable." But when TOD is driven solely by the market, it can contribute to displacement. In "hot" neighborhoods, long-time residents, often people of color, get priced out of the neighborhood with the rising costs of rent, property taxes, and amenities—such as when fancy health-food stores replace mom-and-pop fruit-and-vegetable stands. At the same time, disinvested communities undergoing depopulation are often bypassed by TOD, and reap no benefits from this policy conceived to spur development.

"Our answer is equitable transit-oriented development," explains Requejo. "Or eTOD for short." Using the eTOD model, Elevated Chicago examines how racial and other structural inequities affect neighborhood development, and how to enhance health indicators, climate resilience, and cultural vitality through improvements in the built environment.

Elevated Chicago focuses on seven selected "eHubs"—the half-mile-radius circles around public train stations located in communities of color affected by displacement. Each of the neighborhoods is connected to Elevated Chicago by a Community Table of local grassroots groups, art and cultural institutions, health and social service providers, fair-minded developers, residents, and other partners dedicated to equity. Each Community Table promotes eTOD in a way that makes the most sense for their neighborhood, and each collaborates with the larger Elevated Chicago collaborative. All told, neighborhood groups work together under the umbrella of Elevated Chicago to forge a vision of equitable development, and put it into practice.

Washington Park—On the Cusp of Gentrification

“Washington Park is now where Logan Square was about 30 years ago,” says Ghian Foreman, the largest property owner in Washington Park, with one million square feet of land. That is, Washington Park is a community of color facing gentrification and mass displacement. Today, most residents in the area are African American, and many lots are vacant. But signs of gentrification are starting to show. “The good news,” says Foreman, “is that we get to look at Logan Square and learn from their experience.”

Foreman, in his side role with a different, nonprofit developer, is also a member of the Elevated Chicago Community Table for the larger Green Line South area, which includes three eHubs. Though Foreman is a for-profit developer in his primary role, he retains his sense of mission from his days on the nonprofit side of things. “My intention as a developer is to build community. I want people to feel safe, to shop, go to school, know their neighbors,” he says. “If we do it that way, the money comes—not necessarily today, but eventually.”

Chicago’s population loss has been driven in large part by an exodus of African Americans in recent decades. Between 2000 and 2015, some 2,000 African Americans left Washington Park alone—that’s about 14 percent of the community’s entire population. When one out of every seven of your neighbors leaves or gets replaced, that is a big change. Many of these residents were displaced from public housing as a consequence of the Chicago Housing Authority’s massive “Plan for Transformation.”

Each of the member groups in the Community Table for Green Line South has identified a number of real estate projects, including several incubators for the arts, business, and education. In 2019, the Community Table members worked together to apply for a multimillion-dollar grant to revitalize and brand the neighborhood around historic African American assets, such as a soul-food restaurant or a historic home. “Even if we don’t get the grant, we’re already successful,” says Foreman, “because it’s the first time we’re working together.”

Working Together Across Neighborhoods

It is not only within neighborhoods that Community Table groups are working together, but also across neighborhoods, connected and supported by Elevated Chicago. The organization brings together member groups from around the city to advance one another’s work. Diaz of LSNA says, “If not for Elevated, I never would have met anyone like Ghian Foreman—a for-profit developer with a community mission.” And for his part, Foreman says that he learns from the example of Diaz’s group, a community-based organization in a neighborhood that has already experienced the rapid gentrification that his Washington Square area is in the earlier stages of.

Together, these and other partners are hashing out just what equity means, and they are demonstrating it in practice. In 2019, LSNA and other Community Table partners in Logan Square mobilized thousands of residents and won approval for 100 units of affordable housing in the heart of Logan Square. Other recent victories include approval of a mental health clinic and an agreement with a new boutique hotel that 75 percent of hiring would happen through the Community Table. Now the partners are working on securing passage of a demolition fee on developers, building a publicly owned parking lot, as well as developing a community land trust to create a more sustainable source of affordable housing. “It’ll be owned by the community,” Diaz says, “so it’s taken out of the speculative land market, which developers are using for private profits.” Elevated Chicago has contributed \$130,000 to seed the land trust.

Member groups of Elevated are also collaborating to make grants and provide lower cost debt to eTOD projects, launch a racial equity curriculum for developers and policymakers, and create an equitable policy agenda to guide the city’s TOD ordinance. Driven by the grassroots, Elevated has worked with leaders in the Chicago city government and the regional planning organization to develop a racial equity agenda.

A grant from the Convergence Partnership has helped Elevated Chicago focus explicitly on racial equity at the grassroots level. Funds went primarily to promote collaboration in the community tables and to compensate the community-based organizations in the Elevated Chicago collaborative with flexible grants. A final share of the funds supported a retreat of built-environment leaders and community groups. The retreat was led by the Metropolitan Planning Council—a national leader on equitable development, and a member of Elevated Chicago. Says Requejo, “Thanks to Convergence, we’re bringing racial equity closer to the ground.”

Love and Community

Diaz’s own experiences reflect the change he feels has to happen to build healthier and stronger neighborhoods. “The way we talk about ‘the blight machine’ of our neighborhoods—that kind of language reflects the attitude that lets neighborhoods get disinvested,” he says. “Instead, we organize from a place of love. We love our communities.”

The intangible work of enhancing love and pride means more than just putting on a happy face, organizers say. It’s a matter of understanding local history and politics, organizing to create more affordable housing, and using art to communicate and heal.

Love and pride are also part of an underlying agenda: Elevated Chicago has to make equitable development matter. “We want to transform not only what we build in communities,” says Requejo, “but also how we build it. We’re looking for more transparent decision-making, greater community power, and healthier neighborhoods.” Toward that end, Elevated Chicago published in 2019 its Community Engagement Principles and Recommendations. Those principles apply not just to buildings, but also to gardens, murals, participatory budgeting, and other endeavors—before and after they are carried out. The new mayoral administration led by Lori Lightfoot has adopted Elevated Chicago’s principles in projects managed by the Chicago Department of Public Health, the Mayor’s Office of Engagement, and the Chicago Public Schools, among others.

“We want to be a catalyst for ever-stronger community engagement in Chicago,” says Requejo. “That means all Chicagoans—not just the usual suspects—deciding what Chicago can and will be.”

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