



Trust Talks Episode #1: Partnership for Safe and Peaceful Communities

How do The Chicago Fund for Safe and Peaceful Communities and Let's Link Chi connect to long term impacts of safety and peace for Chicago?

Anna LauBach: The Chicago Fund and Let's Link Chi are similar in many ways, and they're different in some important ways. The Chicago Fund is intended to provide as much support to these 21 communities most impacted by violence during the summer months, and really create a concentration of activities and therefore alternatives to violence and the opportunity to engage in peaceful activities throughout the summer when we know violence is at its highest peak. Let's Link Chi, while also intended to create alternatives to violence and provide opportunities for peace, is also focused on taking back spaces that may have been used for violent activity. Where there may be a hotspot for violence, community groups are taking back that space and doing activities there. Both of these initiatives are intended to engage community residents in this work and give them a sense of agency at being able to build peace in their own neighborhoods.

Anna Lee: When we started the fund, five years ago, we knew that a lot of these community organizations, have been doing this. They've been doing activities or providing opportunities to engage younger folks or aging adults, and they just were never funded to do it. So, this is sparking hope. This is showing that we believe that communities and these grassroots' organizations have the answers. And that it has to be multi-pronged. There has to be systems level work, we need to have policy reform, and these community organizations should be well-resourced. Safe communities are not the communities that are over-policed. They're the ones that have social cohesion and they're well-resourced. They have good quality schools and well-resourced libraries. With these community grants, both Let's Link Chi and The Chicago Fund, we're trying to build that neighborhood response.

Deborah Bennett: The final point that I would like to make is that the overwhelming response the Chicago Fund and Let's Link Chi have had shows that people in these communities on the South and West side are not apathetic or hopeless about the violence that's plaguing their neighborhoods. These efforts have unleashed a myriad of activities in which people are engaged to make their communities safer places to live, work, and play. And I think our role as funders is to support and amplify that activity.

Why is engaging grassroots' organizations important in promoting safety in our region?

DB: The Chicago Fund supports grassroots organizations in 21 communities on the South and West sides that are experiencing the most gun violence. I firmly believe, and I think we all believe, that the organizations and the people who make up those organizations who are most significantly impacted by violence should be helping to develop the solutions. And, as Anna said, they should be resourced to do

that. We can't make a direct link between the activities of Chicago Fund and Let's Link Chi grantees to violence reduction. But what we know is that those activities build trust and stronger bonds and social cohesion and relationships in communities. And that creates the conditions for violence reduction.

ALau: The only thing I might add is that the investment that we can make, and especially if we make investment over time, really does help to solidify the ability of these organizations to do this work. It builds their capacity to be even stronger in community and have a sense of agency in all that we're doing to reduce violence.

How has COVID_19 and the racial uprisings impacted community-led initiatives? And how did they impact your work in the coming year?

DB: The 2020 Chicago Fund grants were approved in March 2020, when the lockdowns were just beginning to happen with COVID-19. Our grantees, had to pivot, do program modifications and figure out how to offer their programs remotely or to learn how to offer them in accordance with CDC guidelines. That meant that The Chicago Fund needed to provide resources to do that, so we provided technical assistance on how to offer engaging programs virtually. We provided our grantees with Zoom licenses. We provided them with PPE, including masks and hand sanitizer. Many of them did not have access to the technology, so we purchased 600 laptops and distributed them to organizations on the South and West sides.

AL: The Chicago Fund has always been about responding to the needs of those really hyper-local organizations. And, it's no surprise that the areas that have been disproportionately impacted by COVID also mirror the communities that have been impacted by gun violence. I think that we knew that we needed to be flexible and responsive. And at the same time, really try to figure out how we can ensure that these grassroots organizations could respond to the issues that they were seeing and be able to hold their events, even if it was virtual.

ALau: As we embark on the Let's Link Chi initiative, which will support organizations starting in December through June, we don't know what's ahead. We're going to have to be very flexible and just really support the organizations to do the work in the best way they can.

DB: Regarding the racial uprising, I would say, speaking for the Polk Bros Foundation, we are trying to learn more about the community's vision of public safety without relying as much on the police. The philanthropic community in Chicago is learning more about 211 systems around the country and trying to figure out if we can develop that kind of a system here. When people are having a mental health crisis or there's a domestic violence crisis, the police are not necessarily the first responder. There are other first responders who can handle those situations more appropriately.

What would you say is the benefit of funders working together to support community organizations?

AL: Our organizations, we're all funders and we work in all of the communities. I would also say that we're all really curious and approach this work with humility with an appetite to learn, and the adage that we can do more together. With more we can do more. And I see that. Every year the number of funders grows. I think that we benefit as we engage more people and that includes funders too.

ALau: if there are more people investing, then there's more money available to the groups. It's also helpful to the organizations, because if you establish a fund that multiple funders are putting money into, community groups don't have to seek out separate foundations and fill out separate applications. It makes that process easier for them to be able to apply for grants. I think it's really important to mention that this is intended to be as low barrier as possible for people to access resources.

DB: Gun violence is a complicated social issue, and we need a variety of solutions. Some funders fund direct service, other funders fund policy work, others fund advocacy and organizing. We need all of those strategies to reduce gun violence in the city of Chicago.