

# PROGRESS, PATHWAYS, & POSSIBILITIES

*How a Shared Vision Put a System to Work*

## Making Opportunities

When Derek Hall<sup>i</sup> decided to strive for a better paying job with the Chicago Transit Authority, he knew he needed more education. The problem was, he had no idea how to get it.

Thankfully, a relative who had successfully completed the Career Foundations program at North Lawndale Employment Network (NLEN) sent him there. Since his incarceration from 2008 to 2010, Hall had done a variety of jobs, including construction and warehouse work. Now he was looking for benefits, higher wages, and long-term opportunities to advance.

What Hall needed was an entry point into a career pathway. Career Foundations, which connected him to the credentials he needed to earn through City Colleges of Chicago, provided the opportunity. It was the first connection he had ever had to Illinois' largest community college system, including the nearby Malcolm X College, where he is earning his high school equivalency.

“It gave me a second chance to do the right things, to make the right choices,” said Hall, 40, of North Lawndale. But the program does more than help people get jobs; it arms them with the knowledge and confidence they need to keep those jobs, Hall said.

This is especially critical on the West Side, where the per capita income in his North Lawndale neighborhood is about \$12,000, with about 43 percent of households below the poverty line.<sup>ii</sup> The neighborhood is also more than 90 percent black, the group experiencing the highest unemployment rates in Illinois: As of August 2018, just 57.1 percent of working-aged black residents were employed, representing one of the highest rates of black unemployment in the country.<sup>iii</sup>

Even for those who are working, like Hall, the challenges persist. Employers report a major skills gap in the region, with an estimated 28,000 middle-skill jobs being created each year and a lack of workers on career pathways to fill those positions.<sup>iv</sup> By 2025, 81 percent of jobs will require a

## THE WONKY STUFF

### Career Pathways

A career pathway means a combination of rigorous and high-quality education, training, and other services that aligns both vertically and horizontally across Secondary Education, Adult Education, Workforce Training and Development, Career and Technical Education, and Postsecondary Education systems, pathways, and programs. A career pathway also includes multiple entry and exit points to facilitate individuals to build their skills as they progress along a continuum of education and training and advance in sector-specific employment.

*Illinois' complete definition can be found at [bit.ly/CareerPathDefinition](https://bit.ly/CareerPathDefinition).*

### Bridge Programs

Bridge programs prepare adults with limited academic or limited English skills to enter and succeed in credit-bearing postsecondary education and training leading to career-path employment in high-demand, middle- and high-skilled occupations. The goal of bridge programs is to sequentially bridge the gap between the initial skills of individuals and what they need to enter and succeed in postsecondary education and career-path employment.

*A full definition for the state is available at [bit.ly/ILBridgeDefinition](https://bit.ly/ILBridgeDefinition).*

### Career Foundations

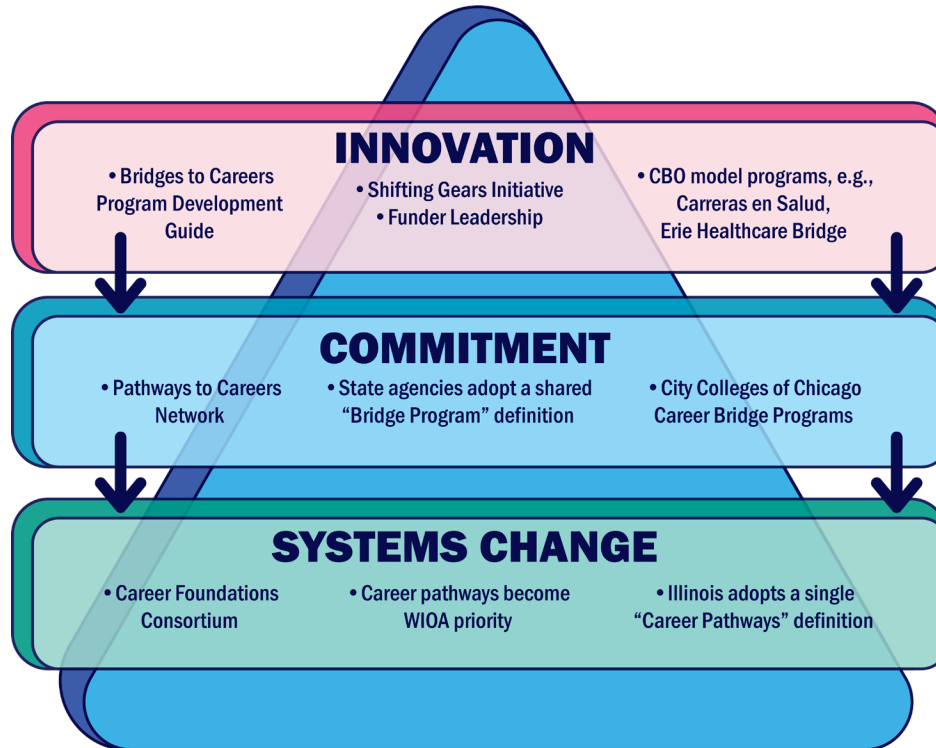
Launched at City Colleges of Chicago in 2014, Career Foundations is a career exploration and goal-setting course jointly developed by City Colleges and Women Employed.

*The full Career Foundations curriculum is at [womenemployed.org/PTCnetwork](https://womenemployed.org/PTCnetwork)*

college degree or certificate,<sup>v</sup> but close to three million adults in Illinois don't have education beyond high school.<sup>vi</sup>

Hall sees the connection from Career Foundations to the next step on a career pathway as a way for him and others in his neighborhood to experience the same quality of life as other Chicagoans.

"Everybody else is enjoying life and living life to the fullest," he said. "It's like, the opportunities out there, it's like they're not for us," Hall said. "That's why it's a great program, because it makes more opportunities for black people."



## Setting the Table

The seeds for Career Foundations were sown more than a decade ago.

Workforce development and education providers regularly test new approaches for their clients to help them gain skills and get better jobs with better wages. But individual programs could only do so much—students who completed often needed to be connected to the next level of education or training to keep growing and advancing in their careers.

Connecting education and training programs and aligning support services to help people continually progress in their careers was known as a "career pathway." While career pathways were common between two- and four-year colleges and universities, entry points for adults without a high school diploma were not always intentionally created. Adult education students often went through general programs that had no career focus, transitioned few students to college credit, and took time students didn't have.

So providers began to develop new approaches to connect their students to career pathways. One of the innovations that showed great results was "bridge programs," which put classes for adults without a high school diploma in context for those eager to get to work, tailoring the information around particular sectors, such as manufacturing or health care. But creating these programs wasn't easy.

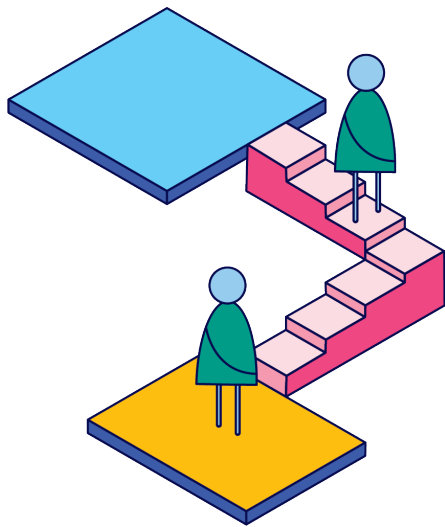
Prompted by the national Center for Law and Social Policy in 2005, Chicago Jobs Council and Women Employed joined forces with UIC Great Cities Institute to publish a guide to bridge programs featuring examples of how providers were

making those connections.

As bridges from the adult education and workforce worlds into college and careers, these programs significantly increase the chances that adults such as Hall will transition to college and earn credentials and/or degrees.

In Chicago, many community-based organizations developed their own bridge programs to address the specific opportunities and challenges facing the families they serve. They were part of an emerging national movement to create new education and training opportunities for low-skilled adults.

Philanthropy also recognized the promise of these approaches and committed to significantly expanding the work. For instance, the Joyce Foundation launched the \$8 million Shifting Gears initiative in six Midwest states. The foundation challenged teams in each state to change systems to help low-skilled adults gain in-demand skills and postsecondary credentials.



Under Shifting Gears, teams in each state had three years to create initiatives to deal with this challenge and two years to implement them. Leaders from the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity and the Illinois Community College Board joined with advocates and experts from community-based organizations and colleges to embrace these goals and use funds to expand the bridge model. Coordination among partners led to a statewide bridge program definition and helped policymakers and providers manage their creation and execution.

Commitment from the state and shifts in adult education policy would help advocates and practitioners make significant progress at the local level. As the initiative progressed, a change in leadership at City Colleges

of Chicago offered new opportunities for breaking down silos and gaining traction statewide.

## Building Trust

City Colleges of Chicago is one of the nation's largest community college systems, serving roughly 82,000 students in 2017 in 10 different career focus areas. Nearly 27,000 of those students are enrolled in adult education courses, pursuing a range of certificates in various industries. Roughly 58 percent are Latino, 22 percent are black, and 12 percent are white.<sup>vii</sup>

In 2010, then-chancellor Cheryl Hyman rolled out City College's "Reinvention" initiative, an effort to increase degrees earned, job placement, and career advancement among students. As City Colleges' officials described, too few of the system's students could envision a long-term goal or even "think of themselves as college material" beyond a GED.<sup>viii</sup>

Reinvention aligned with new goals from the Illinois Community College Board's five-year strategic plan for adult education, unveiled in 2009, which envisioned "a foundation of a career pathways system that prepares adult learners for economic self-sufficiency." Statewide, the pendulum swung strongly toward career pathways and their entry points, like bridge programs.

Yet the massive City Colleges system proved too intimidating for many prospective students and for the community-based organizations that provided many of the region's adult education courses. Its seven campuses often operated independently, and many organizations had a history of negative experiences under the prior leaders. Students told stories

of not feeling respected or valued, and older students shared their reluctance to sign up for programs filled with younger adults. Depending on which school they went to and who they spoke with, clients from community-based organizations got different information about what City Colleges could offer them, and the organizations' coaches had the same challenge, said Kristi Garcia Relaz, the North Lawndale Employment Network's business solutions manager and former bridge instructor. There simply was nowhere to get training for City Colleges' requirements for adult learners, she said. Without help, her clients would be far less likely to try to access those services.

"People are so ashamed," she said. "There's a fear of failure or of disappointing themselves or other people."

City Colleges took these concerns seriously, and under Hyman, dramatically increased efforts to improve its public reputation, increase transparency, and strengthen its relationships with NLEN and other community-based organizations. A strong, joint effort could signal a new day for strengthening the skills of adult learners and workers.

## Joining Forces

City Colleges invited trusted advocates and policy experts who focused on adult literacy, improved wages, and opportunities for all workers to the table.

By working together, these and other partners realized that while bridge programs were providing a crucial strategy for moving people onto career pathways, successful programs typically relied on the talents of individual instructors or the availability of targeted grant funds and fell apart when those instructors or resources moved on.

The partners worked together to create improved bridge program curricula, which meant developing detailed lesson plans for industry-specific bridge programs so that adult education instructors had a framework for teaching. They also developed training for teachers on using the curricula.

A commitment from City Colleges to integrate bridge programs as a regular feature in adult education ensured a replicable model that was not reliant on a particular grant or an individual instructor. This enabled the partners to create tools to launch and sustain this work broadly.

By 2013, City Colleges had rolled out three career bridge programs. At the same time, the partner organizations launched their continuation of the Shifting Gears initiative, the Pathways to Career Network. The Network brought hundreds of advocates and program specialists from organizations and colleges across the state together for regular webinars and information sharing on a range of topics aimed at getting more adults the credentials they needed to get good jobs. Thanks in part to continued funding from the Joyce Foundation, the Network also mobilized advocates



### A Bridge Story

Madelin DeJesus woke up in a hospital bed in 2016 at what she calls "rock bottom." She didn't know then that she would be in college a year later, pursuing an advanced degree and working in a job she found exciting and fulfilling. After completing a recovery program, Madelin was fired up to change her life for the better and get out of retail.

"In my mind I just wanted to get my GED and get a job. I wasn't even thinking of continuing on to college or anything like that," Madelin said. "Then one thing led to another. The bridge program was an awesome first step of faith. It was the beginning of a journey that is still going."

In late 2016, Madelin decided to take the health care bridge program at Wilbur Wright College so she could get her high school equivalency certificate.

"I'm 42 and I hadn't been in school for a while," Madelin said, "but because of the amazing instructors my reading level went from 6.0 to 12.0."

Madelin credits bridge program instructor Rachel Michaels with seeing something in her she didn't see herself. On completion of the program, Rachel asked Madelin to speak at her class graduation ceremony. She accepted.

"I want to help other ladies that maybe went through what I went through."

Now Madelin is working towards an Associate's Degree in counseling at Wright College. She hopes to eventually become a social worker and help people who are struggling with addiction. As part of a work-study, Madelin also works in Wright College's bridge program department—the very place that started her on this journey.

around a number of policy issues.

Due to these coordinated efforts, thousands of adults statewide now had new opportunities to start on the path toward sustainable careers. Hundreds of adult education and workforce advocates were learning and working together to better serve their clients.

But the partners realized that something important was missing: Bridge programs alone weren't enough. Students needed more help accessing the world of adult education in ways that related to their own interests, skills, and goals.

City Colleges and Women Employed set out to develop a supplemental adult education course—the missing link—that would precede the bridge program and help participants with a minimum fourth-grade reading level, or at least intermediate-level English language skills, make informed career pathway choices. They tapped bridge instructors and community-based workforce organizations to inform the curriculum, creating a course that met everyone's needs.

For instance, Women Employed and City Colleges knew they couldn't foster partnerships and create real systems change without their essential workforce and adult literacy partners at the Chicago Jobs Council (CJC) and the Chicago Citywide Literacy Coalition (CCLC), two organizations that had worked with City Colleges during Reinvention. Research from Chicago Citywide Literacy Coalition would help make the case, as it revealed that approximately two-thirds of all students in adult education programs fall below the ninth-grade reading and math skills threshold typically required in workforce development programs.<sup>ix</sup>



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because it spoke to challenges faced by all providers.  
This was the thing everybody could organize around.**



Together, they embraced a vision of aligning programs across the city, facilitating student transitions across programs, and ensuring students would experience consistent services no matter where they began their journey.

And so, Career Foundations was born.

“We saw this as the thing everybody could use because it spoke to challenges faced by all providers,” CJC Executive Director Carrie Thomas recalls. “This was the thing everybody could organize around.”

For a year, leaders at these three organizations talked with leaders of community organizations and held focus groups to build trust between them and City Colleges. For the first time in years, the organizations became optimistic about collaborating with City Colleges.

“It was community organizing,” said CCLC Executive Director Becky Raymond.

This was critical, given that 40 percent of all adult education learners access adult education programs via community organizations, not community colleges, Raymond said.<sup>x</sup>

At the same time, other community organizations started hearing about the Career Foundations course, viewing it as a tool they urgently needed to build into their programming, including the “career exploration” part of their bridge programs. The idea of partnering around Career Foundations resonated with organizations in a way that partnering around bridges themselves had not.



## Common Ground

Career Foundations became the tool that expanded the work to a wider cross-section of organizations. Everyone agreed that adults with low skill levels and others who hadn't been able to access the community college system or other postsecondary options needed more support to define their career goals, timelines, and plan for moving into better-paying work.

**Any low-skilled Chicagoan, no matter which organization s/he approaches for help, has the opportunity to improve his or her skills to be able to transition to a postsecondary credential leading to a family-sustaining job.**

Career Foundations gave organizations a concrete way to plug their clients into that system and ensured every student could access the same services, said Christina Warden, Director of Education and Training Policy at Women Employed.

“Often, adults arrive at the door of service providers saying, “I need to earn my GED.” Whether it’s a workforce provider of manufacturing on the West Side, or you go to the North Side to get your high school equivalency, somebody should be saying to you, ‘Yes, absolutely, we’ll help you do that, but let’s talk about what comes next and what training will let you not only get your GED to get or keep your job, but start a career. We’ll help you get there and start moving you along that pathway.’”

While Career Foundations was the tool, the glue that made it stick within broader career pathways efforts was that it was grounded in a shared vision: *Any low-skilled Chicagoan, no matter which organization s/he approaches for help, has the opportunity to improve his or her skills to be able to transition to a postsecondary credential leading to a family-sustaining job.*

Unlike a traditional job readiness course that focused on soft skills, the Career Foundations course empowered students to take control of the course itself and thus, their own goals, first by setting their own standards in the four key areas of attendance, punctuality, focused teamwork, and homework completion, and sharing how they would help each other meet their goals when they ran into problems.

Students also described themselves in terms of their skills, interests, and values, including the skills they already had from everyday activities like cooking or working with their hands, and created elevator speeches describing their strengths and goals. Then they set a variety of short and long-term goals, including personal budgets and thinking about their needs and wants based on different income levels they’d like to achieve. This became their potential career path.

Students used data from City Colleges (or their local community college) to complete charts showing what steps they would take to achieve a career goal, including which certificates need to be completed along the way, and what supports they would need, in easy-to-read formats. This became their plan for accessing



college-level courses and resources, which each student presented to their peers.

But the partners also recognized a good course wasn't enough. For Career Foundations to succeed, a cross-section of organizations would need to commit to implementing it and monitoring what was or wasn't working along the way.

### Career Foundations Consortium 2017-2018

Albany Park Community Center  
Asian Human Services  
Centers for New Horizons  
Central States SER

Centro Romero  
CFL Workforce & Community Initiative  
Erie Neighborhood House  
Howard Area Community Center

Heartland Human Care Services  
National Able Network  
North Lawndale Employment Network  
Safer Foundation

By 2015, 12 organizations agreed to form the Career Foundations Consortium, led by Women Employed, which agreed to convene the organizations—and pay them modest stipends to help cover the costs of training teachers, collecting data through instructor and student surveys, and participating in joint planning sessions.

So far, that data reveal that 95 percent of students completing Career Foundations have learned about the next steps they needed to complete their educational goals and 96 percent are more confident about reaching their education and career goals.

## The Path Forward

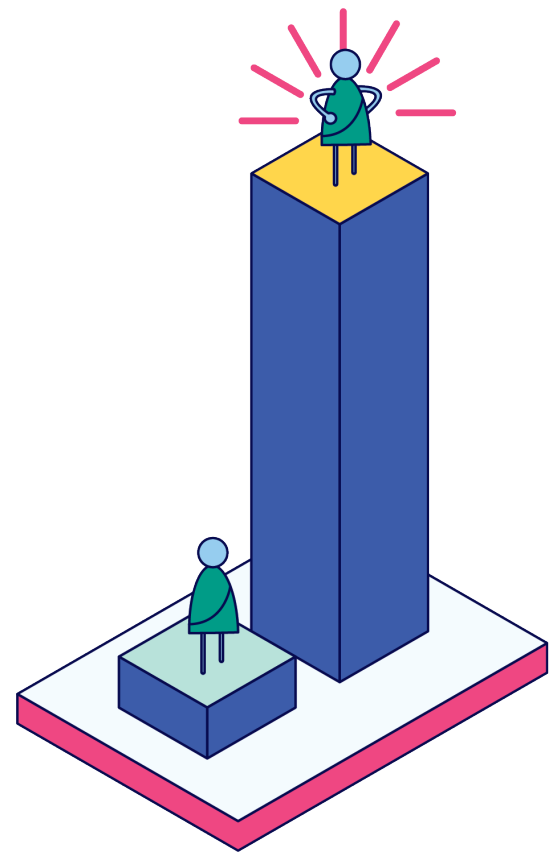
Much more work is needed to ensure all low-skilled adults have clear paths to career success. But the story of career pathways provides important lessons learned.

Through Career Foundations, 12 organizations have demonstrated the power of working together around a clear vision for change. That work wouldn't have happened without funder support, shared state definitions that guide the work, policies that support innovation and remove obstacles for providers and students, or years of relationship building to ensure a range of organizations' strengths were brought to the table.

The Consortium members had to agree how to measure and report success and commit to having frequent, open communication.

Success has also depended on organizations' ability to notice and name key barriers to success to address a number of policy obstacles.

For example, even though the State of Illinois had been centering the concept of career pathways in its workforce strategy for years, it lacked a guiding, unified definition for career pathways that ran across all agencies and providers. Women Employed and Chicago Jobs Council connected with their partners at the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity and Illinois Community College Board to convene a wide group of stakeholders in career pathways. Working together, they developed a single definition of career pathways. It ensures that everyone working on those pathways—from





## When adults discover they are capable of learning, that's really exciting.



policy makers to practitioners—has the same understanding of what a career pathway is and can use the same language and framework to connect their services and programs. Other policy obstacles remain, however, and the partners are still working to break down these barriers.

Beyond definitions, CCLC are already exploring ways to incorporate more technology and digital literacy tools into the curriculum, beyond using their smartphones, to help students gain these essential skills.

Career Foundations could also benefit higher education more broadly: Students surveyed reported a 19 percent increase in their level of interest in going to college as a result of the course. As enrollment declines at Illinois' colleges overall, this has very practical value, said Warden of Women Employed.

Antoine Chandler of Austin agrees. Though he was more advanced than the typical Career Foundations students, having worked in human resources, four years of struggling with unemployment had seriously shaken his confidence.

"It kind of takes a toll," he said. "I just felt as if I didn't know anything."

Through a course which reaffirms students' intelligence and capability, Career Foundations enabled him to see new possibilities for himself. That affirmation, says Garcia Relaz, is a key element of students' success.

"When adults discover they are capable of learning, that's really exciting," she said.

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**Presented By:**





- i Name has been changed.
- ii City of Chicago, Selected Socioeconomic Indicators, 2008-2012 <https://data.cityofchicago.org/Health-Human-Services/Census-Data-Selected-socioeconomic-indicators-in-C/kn9c-c2s2>.
- iii Illinois Department of Employment Security, [http://www.ides.illinois.gov/lmi/Local%20Area%20Unemployment%20Statistics%20LAUS/LAUSTopics/ILCPS\\_eprate\\_12moavg.xlsx](http://www.ides.illinois.gov/lmi/Local%20Area%20Unemployment%20Statistics%20LAUS/LAUSTopics/ILCPS_eprate_12moavg.xlsx).
- iv Chicago Skills Gap Report, JP Morgan Chase, 2015, <https://www.jpmorganchase.com/corporate/Corporate-Responsibility/chicago-skills-gap-report.htm>.
- v “Illinois Middle-Skill Fact Sheet”, National Skills Coalition, 2017, <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/state-policy/states/illinois>.
- vi Current Population Survey data provided through the Working Poor Families Project, 2015.
- vii City Colleges of Chicago Statistical Digest, 2017 <http://www.ccc.edu/Pages/StatisticalDigest.htm>.
- viii “Bridging the Gap Between Adult Education and Careers” Webinar, Pathways to Career Network, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K\\_xcaI9-3nQ&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_xcaI9-3nQ&feature=youtu.be).
- ix “Career pathways programming for lower-skilled adults and immigrants: Report on survey findings”, Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy, 2017, <https://sites.psu.edu/adultpathways/files/2015/08/survey-findings-IES-v-5-12nq28m.pdf>.
- x Area Planning Council 508 FY19 Area Plan provided by the Chicago Citywide Literacy Coalition, 2018.

## Acknowledgments

**This report was made possible thanks to the generous support of the Lloyd A. Fry Foundation and to its primary author, Alysia Tate.**

We would like to acknowledge the following partners:

Adah Wilson Fund for Nursing at the Chicago Community Trust  
 Albany Park Community Center  
 Alphawood Foundation  
 Asian Human Services  
 Centers for New Horizons  
 Central States SER  
 Centro Romero  
 CFL Workforce & Community Initiative  
 The Chicago Community Trust  
 Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership  
 Chicago Commons  
 Chicago Foundation for Women  
 Chicago Tribune Charities, a McCormick Foundation Fund  
 Chicagoland Workforce Funder Alliance  
 City Colleges of Chicago  
 The Crown Family Philanthropies  
 The Elizabeth Morse Genius Trust  
 Erie Neighborhood House  
 Grand Victoria Foundation  
 Howard Area Community Center  
 Heartland Human Care Services  
 Goldie’s Place  
 Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity  
 Illinois Community College Board  
 Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy - Penn State University

Joyce Foundation  
 JPMorgan Chase Foundation  
 National Able Network  
 North Lawndale Employment Network  
 Onward Neighborhood House  
 Polk Bros. Foundation  
 Puerto Rican Cultural Center  
 The Richard H. Driehaus Foundation  
 Safer Foundation  
 Tolton Adult Education Center  
 Woods Fund of Chicago  
 Working Poor Families Project  
 YWCA Metropolitan Chicago  
 Allison Kadlec  
 Ann Darnton  
 Brian Durham  
 Hillary Hodge  
 Jennifer Foster  
 Jenny Wittner  
 Julio Rodriguez  
 Lauren Hooberman  
 Lisa Jones  
 Maureen Fitzpatrick  
 Sameer Gadkaree  
 Stephanie Sommers