

Request for Proposals: Next Generation Power-Building

LOI Release Date:	May 4, 2026
Information Session:	May 11, 2026 at 4:00 p.m. (CST)
LOI Submission Deadline:	June 5, 2026 at 5:00 p.m. (CST)
Invitation to Submit Full Proposal (if applicable):	July 20, 2026
Full Proposal Deadline:	August 14, 2026 at 5:00 p.m.
Site Visits:	Late August– Early September
Funding Decisions:	November 11, 2026 (notification by November 13)
Public Announcements:	Late November

Background

With the United States marking its 250th anniversary in 2026, it is a reminder that the nation itself was founded from collective action, rooted in resistance, and a shared commitment to enshrine those freedoms in the Constitution and Bill of Rights. Here in Chicago, that legacy continues. Our city’s rich history shows how Chicago has played a central role in movements advancing workplace dignity, civil rights, and racial justice, among many others. Throughout history, young people have been at the forefront of efforts to uphold and expand our founding ideals, from civil rights and women’s suffrage to immigrant, disability, and LGBTQ+ rights, driving broader pluralistic movements that address root causes of neighborhood disinvestment and create the conditions for marginalized communities to thrive and achieve justice.

At Polk Bros. Foundation, we are committed to making Chicago a place where all people can reach their full potential. As part of our ongoing strategic evolution to address longstanding disparities, we have made a deep commitment to *Fostering Participatory, Multiracial Democracy*. We believe that today, truly representative democracy in Chicago remains constrained by the enduring impacts of unjust systems and policies, forces that have divided communities, eroded trust in civic institutions, and fueled skepticism about individuals’ ability to effect meaningful change.

The COVID-19 pandemic, along with the protests for justice in 2020, laid these inequities bare. They revealed persistent gaps in power and influence across many Chicago neighborhoods, particularly on the south and west sides. At the same time, these moments also illuminated what is possible. We witnessed powerful mutual aid networks emerge, with neighbors supporting one another through profound uncertainty. We also saw cross-community collective action take shape in our streets, demanding a more just and equitable city.

For democracy to truly thrive, those most impacted by Chicago’s greatest challenges must be fully engaged in shaping narratives, influencing decisions, and holding systems accountable. In recent years, Polk Bros. Foundation has undertaken a deliberate effort to embed these principles more deeply into our grantmaking. We have engaged in an extensive strategic planning process, informed by conversations with philanthropic peers, civic leaders, and, most importantly, community voices, including members of our Participatory, Multiracial Democracy Advisory Cohort. These learnings have reinforced the need to strengthen and sustain the many innovative power-building efforts already underway across Chicago.

We believe this work must begin with, and be led by, young people.

Contrary to common narratives, young people in Chicago are eager to lead, contribute, and solve pressing challenges in their communities. Too often, what’s needed is not more direction, but more space, trust, and

support. Through this RFP, we are seeking proposals that center youth voice and agency, and empower young people to identify and act on issues that matter most to them.

We recognize that young people engage in civic life in different ways and at different stages. To reflect this, we have developed a power-building continuum that outlines these multiple entry points for youth leadership and action:

- Mutual aid
- Coalition-building
- Community organizing
- Policy advocacy
- Co-governance

We welcome youth-identified and youth-led initiatives **addressing distinct community challenges** through a range of approaches aligned with these entry points along the power-building continuum and consistent with 501(c)(3) requirements.

Democracy thrives when community voice, especially that of the next generation, drives collective action. We envision a Chicago where civic life is vibrant, inclusive, and shaped by the voices of all residents. We see this RFP as the first of many opportunities to advance this vision, starting with the young people who will define Chicago's future.

Need/Opportunity Statement

Young Chicagoans have often been misrepresented through harmful narratives that typically rely on isolated incidents and sensationalized moments to create exaggerated, misleading stories about an entire generation. Embedded in that framing is the assumption that young people desire to be disengaged from civic life – which is not true. According to a recent study, youth civic engagement has increased in the past decade with historically high voter turnout in each election cycle since 2018. Beyond elections, one in five youth has engaged in issue advocacy and 66% have discussed politics with friends.¹ And while local and systemic approaches to increase civic engagement beyond politics exist, such as volunteering in local community groups, young people are far too often excluded. Yet, when developed, organized, and mobilized, youth have created significant impact and important change in their communities.

In most instances, Black, Latine, lower income, and/or less formally educated individuals engage civically at lower rates than White people or those with higher education or income.² Schools are critical spaces of civic learning with nearly 20% of youth of color, and one third of Latine youth relying on school to learn about elections and voting,³ creating a high dependence on schools for civic education and limiting entry points for youth participation. This dynamic is compounded by economic barriers, as youth are less likely to take civic action if they are struggling financially.⁴ Together, these constraints continue structural inequities that determine which young people are engaged and which are excluded.

¹ Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), Tufts University, Youth Are Taking Civic Action, But Need Opportunities and Support to Overcome Socioeconomic Barriers, 2025, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/youth-are-taking-civic-action-need-opportunities-and-support-overcome-socioeconomic>

² The Chicago Community Trust; Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy (University of Illinois Chicago), Changing the Frame: Civic Engagement Through a Racial Equity Lens, 2022, https://www.cct.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/IRRPP_300dpi_Civic-Engagement-Through-A-Racial-Equity-Lens.pdf

³ Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), Tufts University, CIRCLE Growing Voters: Building Institutions and Community Ecosystems for Equitable Election Participation, 2022, https://circle.tufts.edu/sites/default/files/2024-05/circle_growing_voters_report.pdf

⁴ CIRCLE, *op. cit.*, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/youth-are-taking-civic-action-need-opportunities-and-support-overcome-socioeconomic>

Specific to Chicago, in 2024, 15.8% of Black 16- to 19-year-olds were out-of-school and jobless, compared to 6.9% of Latine youth and 1% of White youth. Additionally, almost half (46.6%) of Black young adults ages 20-24 were jobless – more than twice the rate of their White peers (18.9%) – primarily impacting youth on the south and west sides.⁵ The absence of many young people in the pathways that lead to higher civic engagement makes clear the need to center youth participation in civic life from a different access point. This access point must be grounded in the communities where young people reside and spend their time, as traditional approaches do not consistently reach or engage all youth. Community-led initiatives rooted in power-building create needed opportunities to elevate youth voice, agency, and leadership using methods that place young people at the core and foster their participation.

When the definition of civic engagement is narrowed to voting or volunteering, an apparent gap exists in the participation of Black, Latine, and lower-income Chicagoans. However, when this definition is expanded to include engagement in activities within the power-building continuum like community organizing efforts, policy advocacy, and issue-based campaigns, often common in these communities, participation figures increase.⁶

Since Gen Z and Millennials will comprise more than half of the adult population by 2028,⁷ Polk Bros. Foundation seeks to nurture and elevate civic leadership among young people across Chicago's neighborhoods by supporting community organizing, non-legislative policy advocacy, coalition building, co-governance, mutual aid, and/or other power-building strategies along the continuum that clearly demonstrate a youth-identified objective, youth voice, agency, leadership, and self-determination.

Goals, Outcomes and Learning

This funding opportunity is intended to support near-term progress while laying the groundwork for sustained impact. Within the grant period, projects should demonstrate measurable progress and early indicators of impact, while contributing to longer-term systems change and asset-building in Chicago's neighborhoods.

Through this funding opportunity, short-term outcomes may include:

- Engaged youth across multiple stages of the power-building continuum with increase in number involved, knowledge gained on the issue, and leadership responsibility
- Increased participation and leadership of youth in civic activities
- Strengthened trust between youth and decision-makers to support sustained civic engagement and collective action aimed at addressing a social issue impacting community
- Demonstrated increase in civic knowledge by youth and directly impacted community members, leading to sustained engagement (e.g., changes in local decision-making structures, policy processes, avenues for influence)

Over time, this work is intended to contribute towards the following outcomes:

- Increased presence of youth-led and youth-informed platforms to amplify community issues, build awareness, and drive advocacy
- Expanded feedback loops between youth, community members and decision-makers leading to more responsive, collaborative, and accountable governance

⁵ Great Cities Institute (University of Illinois Chicago), A Normalized Crisis: Youth and Young Adult Joblessness and Disconnection in Chicago, Cook County, Illinois, and the U.S., 2019-2024 (Data Brief), <https://greatcities.uic.edu/news-stories/a-normalized-crisis-youth-and-young-adult-joblessness-and-disconnection-data-brief-feb-2026/>

⁶ The Chicago Community Trust et al., *op. cit.*, https://www.cct.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/IRRPP_300dpi_Civic-Engagement-Through-A-Racial-Equity-Lens.pdf

⁷ Governing, How Much Could Younger Voters Affect Future Election Outcomes?, 2024, <https://www.governing.com/now/how-much-could-younger-voters-affect-future-election-outcomes>

- Increased access to and utilization of third spaces⁸ that foster youth and community connection, civic engagement and identity, leadership development, and pathways for collective action
- Increased youth-led efforts influencing policy, systemic practices, institutional norms, and resource access and allocation locally and citywide
- Increased representation of youth (especially from historically excluded communities) in decision-making and community impacting spaces
- Increased youth-led efforts that shape and change policies and practices addressing root causes of social issues, leading to safer neighborhoods, increased access to resources, and stronger, more connected communities

Applicants are not expected to achieve long-term outcomes within the grant period but should demonstrate how their work contributes to building the conditions necessary to realize them over time. We anticipate measuring success through a combination of tangible outcomes (e.g., individuals engaged, communities involved, movement towards systemic or policy change, coalition creation, etc.) and leading indicators that capture early momentum (e.g., increased confidence, knowledge, and relationships); this RFP funding is intended to support progress and learning that may inform future rounds of funding.

Through this process, we are particularly interested in understanding:

- Areas where philanthropic dollars can be most catalytic
- Gaps in financing, technical assistance, or ecosystem infrastructure
- Barriers that limit growth, implementation, or long-term sustainability
- Opportunities for stronger coordination across efforts in Chicago

Approaches and Priority Activities

The goals and outcomes listed above can be achieved through many approaches. This RFP seeks to provide support to organizations that take one or more of the following specific approaches to their work:

- Providing immediate intervention by offering youth-centered mutual aid efforts or other youth-informed social services
- Strengthening community power and influence through youth-led community organizing efforts, non-lobbying policy and advocacy efforts, and expanding opportunities to collaborate with other sectors to share resources, build partnerships and increase programming
- Building an ecosystem of systems change by advancing activities aligned with the Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing's (FCYO) [Power to Win](#) framework which centers youth voice, agency and self-determination, such as youth representation in coalition leadership and decision-making roles
- Facilitating community innovation by expanding opportunities to pilot efforts that test new civic engagement approaches, learning from youth, and scaling youth-led, power-building initiatives

Applicants are encouraged to demonstrate depth and breadth in one or more of the approaches through their programs or initiatives. Through these grants, we intend to build greater understanding of the key role of youth in fostering participatory, multiracial democracy.

Grantmaking Criteria

PBF is seeking proposals for youth-led collective action initiatives that address specific issues of significance to young Chicagoans (ages 26 and under). Eligible projects may include community organizing, non-legislative policy advocacy, mutual aid, and other power-building strategies, but must clearly demonstrate

⁸ A third space is a social environment distinct from the primary settings of home and school/work.

authentic youth voice, agency, and self-determination.

To be considered for this RFP, applicants **must articulate a clear civic goal or objective** that is connected to Chicago and describe how it was identified, as well as how it continues to reflect the priorities of the young people leading the work and how the young people articulate its contributions to affecting change in their neighborhoods.

Preference will be given to proposals that include one or more of the following elements:

- Policy and/or systems change objective(s) that are aligned closely with PBF's strategic goals: Building Community Wealth Across Generations, Closing the Life Expectancy Gap, and Fostering Participatory, Multiracial Democracy
- Narrative-shifting work that centers youth as leaders and valued community assets
- A multigenerational strategy that also engages younger and/or older community members
- Cross-community solidarity principles intentionally embedded in program design and delivery
- Arts-focused activities or initiatives that serve as a catalyst for civic engagement
- Alignment with FCYO's [Power to Win](#) framework

Note: Projects may not be used for any activities prohibited by laws governing the work and grants of private foundations, lobbying or electioneering activities as defined by Section 501(c)(3), or any activities that incite political violence. Proposed activities must be structured in a way to avoid private benefit or inurement.

Organizations that meet the eligibility criteria and see alignment with this opportunity are invited to apply through a two-phase application process.

Phase I: Open Call – Letter of Interest (LOI) – Two pages maximum (Use the fillable form provided below and on the Foundation's website and grantmaking site)

All eligible organizations may submit a Letter of Interest (LOI) that includes the components below. The LOI for this funding opportunity will be evaluated based on the level of alignment with the priority activities described in this RFP and Polk Bros. Foundation's strategic goals. To capture the information needed to evaluate the submitted LOIs, please provide a short response that addresses all the components listed below.

- **Organizational Overview:**
 - Mission – include the organization's mission statement
 - Organization Description – include a few sentences on the description of the organization's history and core work
- **Grant Request Information:**
 - Overview - provide a concise summary of this grant request, clearly identifying the issue to be addressed and highlighting your organization's track record of centering youth voice and leadership
 - Description of Activities - detail the power-building tactic(s) employed by the youth you work with to advance their civic goals, and explain why these approaches are the most effective use of your organization's people power
 - Neighborhoods Served - identify the Chicago neighborhood(s) in which your organization operates and describe what makes these communities well-positioned for youth-led power-building efforts
 - Demonstrated Experience - cite key campaign victories and/or progress to date
- **Additional Requested Documents** (not counted toward two-page limit):
 - Organizational Budgets – include 1) last full year's itemized revenue and expenses, as well as 2) current fiscal year's budget with itemized revenue and expenses
 - If a program or organization is fiscally sponsored, the fiscal sponsor must be the applicant

submitting the LOI and provide required information. This will include a copy of the fiscal sponsorship agreement between the sponsor and the sponsored project.

Once reviewed and evaluated, organizations may be invited to submit a full proposal. Not all organizations will advance to Phase II. Those selected to submit a full proposal in Phase II will be based on qualifications of the organizations and the work proposed within this LOI.

Phase II: Invitation to Apply - Full Proposal

Organizations invited to submit a full proposal will be notified on July 20, 2026. Full proposals will be evaluated based on the following criteria:

- **Community Need** - describe the key challenges facing the community or neighborhood in which you operate, and explain how mobilizing youth assets serves as an effective response
 - In this section, please describe in further detail the specific social issue identified by the young people you work with, and explain how building power will serve as an effective strategy for addressing it
 - Identify any third spaces your organization leverages to advance its goals
- **Theory of Change** - recognizing that power-building is inherently long-term work, provide a comprehensive explanation of how and why your desired long-term outcomes will be achieved
 - include the strategies and activities that lead up to these outcomes
 - share how your organization defines and assesses impact
- **Proposed Activities and Implementation** - describe in detail how support from PBF will advance your goals, including the specific activities, timeline, and anticipated outputs
- **Youth Governance Structure** - explain how youth play a leading role in shaping organizational priorities, and how civic leadership development and education are embedded throughout your work
 - If applicable, describe how your approach aligns with FCYO's Power to Win framework
- **Partnerships and Collaboration** - describe your approach to partnerships, including key considerations in selecting collaborators
 - Who are your organization's partners, and what is the purpose of those partnerships?
- **Long-Term Vision and Sustainability** - explain how your organization will sustain this work beyond the term of a PBF grant
- **Annotated Project Budget, if applicable** - provide a detailed budget and accompanying narrative that clearly connects expenses to project activities, deliverables, and required resources

Grant Amounts Available and Grant Term

One-year (12-month) grants will support programs and operations and range from \$50,000 to \$75,000.

Eligible Applicants

To be considered eligible for funding under this RFP, organizations must be:

- A nonprofit organization that has been determined and is currently recognized by the Internal Revenue Service as a tax-exempt public charity described in Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, that is not a private foundation described in Section 509(a) or a supporting organization described in Section 509(a)(3), and that operates exclusively for charitable/educational purposes*
- Based in and primarily serve Chicago residents
- Place youth in meaningful, decision-making roles within the organization's governance structure
- Lead work that falls within one or more components of PBF's Power-Building Continuum framework

- Demonstrate the ability to build and maintain active coalitions of young, next generation leaders
- Demonstrate viability of financial sustainability plan and how further support will be leveraged
- Use funds solely for charitable purposes

*For fiscally-sponsored organizations, submissions will only be accepted from the fiscal sponsor. Per law, fiscal sponsors assume full legal and financial responsibility for the fiscally sponsored organization/project, acting as its official entity, including fiduciary oversight of funds, tax compliance, and ensuring the project operates in accordance with 501(c)(3) regulations. Accordingly, fiscally-sponsored organizations without 501(c)(3) status must identify a fiscal sponsor as soon as possible and ask the sponsor to complete an organization profile in Polk Bros. Foundation's grants management system, Fluxx, in order to submit an LOI. Fiscal sponsors must log in to complete and certify their organization profile in Fluxx at https://polkbrosfdn.fluxx.io/user_sessions/new. An agreement confirming the project's relationship with the fiscal sponsor is also required as part of the grant application.

An organization's tax status is verified in the Fluxx registration process. To complete registration, you will be required to upload a copy of the organization's 501(c)(3) determination letter from the IRS.

Please note that the Fluxx registration approval process may take up to two business days and applicants should plan accordingly.

Ineligible Uses

Polk Bros. Foundation's grants will **not support** the following activities:

- To pay down existing project debt
- To fund individuals
- For any activities that result in private benefit or inurement, including direct support of for-profit businesses or commercial ventures
- For any activities prohibited by laws governing the work and grants of private foundations, lobbying or electioneering activities, or activities that incite political violence
- For any activities inconsistent with private foundation regulations

Grant funds will be restricted to uses that are outlined in the awardee's grant application.

Evaluation and Learning

Sharing successes and challenges in achieving key measures of progress is essential to the field's collective learning, informed decision-making, and overall impact. Accordingly, the Foundation will request a one-year follow-up report detailing the awarded project's progress and lessons learned.

Awardees will be asked to report measures of progress that **may** include:

- Power Mapping and Strategy: How have you identified key decision-makers, allies, opponents, and lines of influence to strategically focus organizing efforts for maximum impact?
- Stakeholder Engagement: Have you convened a representative group of young people, particularly those most directly impacted by the challenges?
- Information and Capacity Building: How have you equipped stakeholders with information on current policies, practices, and relevant options to support informed participation?
- Alignment and Priority Setting: Have you facilitated a process for stakeholders to co-develop shared recommendations grounded in lived experience?

- Messaging and Mobilization: How have you developed and deployed messages that activate key audiences, including those with strong influence over decision-making?
- Non-legislative Advocacy and Policymaker Engagement: How have young people been effectively organized to engage decision-makers? Have key decision-makers publicly championed the proposals?
- Policy Advancement and Adoption: How have any related policy proposals advanced through meaningful stages?
- Implementation and Accountability: Is the policy being implemented in alignment with the original intent and principles? How have decision-maker champions been leveraged to support effective implementation?
- Evaluation and Impact: Is relevant data available to assess outcomes? How have you evaluated the policy's impact on intended beneficiaries and its progress toward stated goals?

Application Process

Applicants must submit their application via Fluxx. This application is a two-phase process. In Phase I, organizations who meet the eligibility requirements may submit a letter of interest as the process is open and competitive. To submit an LOI through Fluxx, please follow these steps:

- First-time applicants to Polk Bros. Foundation will need to register their organization [here](#). Please note that the registration approval process can take **up to two business days** and applicants should plan accordingly.
- Registered organizations should log into the [Grants Portal](#) and begin a new application (button on the bottom left of the Portal's landing page)
- Complete the application. Please be sure to:
 - Select the "Next Generation Power-Building" drop-down option for funding opportunity.
 - Attach your completed LOI (fillable form available as a [PDF](#) or [Word document](#) and on the Grants Portal landing page and PBF website)
 - Attach your organization's budget
- Be sure to click "save and close" when you are finished
- Applications must be submitted by also pressing the "submit" button (bottom right of the page once you have saved and closed out of your application)
- You can save your application and return to it at any time using the "save" and "save and close" buttons – applications will not be submitted until you press the "submit" button

If an organization advances to Phase II, Polk Bros. Foundation will invite the organization to submit a full proposal. A site visit (either virtual or in-person) will be conducted as part of the evaluation in Phase II. Polk Bros. Foundation staff will coordinate with applicants to schedule the site visit.

Late or incomplete applications will not be considered. In the interest of fairness to all applicants, the Polk Bros. Foundation staff cannot respond to unsolicited inquiries, emails, or phone calls individually. An information session, an online resource with frequently asked questions, and a recorded video with information, instructions, and questions and answers will be made available to all interested applicants.

Submission Deadlines and Other Key Dates

- Open application is released on **May 4, 2026**
- Phase I – Letters of Interest deadline is **5:00 p.m. on June 5, 2026**. Applications will be reviewed by a review committee selected by the Polk Bros. Foundation Programs Team.
- Phase II - By **July 20, 2026**, selected applicants receive an invitation to complete a full proposal.

Site visits will be conducted between **late August and early September**. Phase II applicants will receive a separate email inviting them to register for a time for a site visit. The full proposal deadline is **5:00 p.m. on August 14, 2026**. Applications will be reviewed by the Polk Bros. Foundation Programs Team.

Funding decisions will be **made on November 11, 2026 and applicants will be notified by November 13, 2026**.

Information Sessions

In the interest of fairness to all applicants, we cannot respond to inquiries, emails, or calls individually. A group information session, FAQs, and recorded Q&As will be made available to all applicants to assist with applicants' questions.

Polk Bros. Foundation will host an information session **on May 11, 2026 at 4:00 p.m. (CST)** via Zoom to provide an opportunity for Q&A regarding the LOI request for this funding opportunity and offer technical guidance on the Fluxx online portal.

- Register [here](#)

Polk Bros. Foundation is committed to making the information session accessible for all attendees. If you require an accommodation to fully participate, please email info@polkbrosfdn.org. We will make our best effort to address any reasonable accommodation request.

Contact Information:

For technical questions regarding use of the Fluxx grants portal, email grantsmanager@polkbrosfdn.org.

Direct all questions and inquiries regarding the funding opportunity by emailing info@polkbrosfdn.org with **Subject Line: PBF Next Generation Power-Building RFP**.