

POLK BROS. FOUNDATION'S NEW GOALS AND FUTURE GRANTMAKING

October 2024

After two years of intentional planning that engaged all Polk Bros. Foundation staff and board and drew on research and lessons and input shared by many grantee partners and community leaders, Polk Bros. Foundation [announced](#) it will be changing in some key ways.

New Goals

For the Foundation's resources to truly help dismantle racial inequity in Chicago, we will be orienting our grantmaking around three goals:

- **Building Community Wealth Across Generations** to create pathways out of poverty and toward economic opportunity for residents of Chicago's historically disinvested communities, which are largely Black and Latine, through more equitable housing, education, and income
- **Closing the Life Expectancy Gap** to address the root causes of stark disparities in health equity and personal and community safety across different neighborhoods in Chicago
- **Fostering Participatory, Multiracial Democracy** to ensure that the diverse voices of our city are heard and can influence the decisions that affect their lives

New Funding Approaches

Historically, our grantmaking has been largely focused on support for direct services. While we continue to believe attention to immediate interventions that help Chicagoans access resources and services is critical, we will elevate the role of systems change work to a more meaningful part of our grantmaking.

- **Immediate intervention:** Efforts that address immediate needs of community members by providing supportive services, programs and critical care to help alleviate the effects of poverty and inequity and improve quality of life
- **Community power and influence:** Efforts by organizations, networks, and coalitions working to build community, trust, and shared narratives around shared goals and across organizations, communities, and issues so they can act together to influence change
- **Ecosystem of systems change:** Efforts to strengthen the ecosystem in which social change can happen in Chicago, including efforts to create critical infrastructure for

social change through multiplier effects such as research and data dissemination, public awareness efforts, convenings, leadership development, and nonprofit sector strengthening

- **Community innovation:** Proof-of-concept efforts to develop, pilot, or otherwise accelerate new ideas that are responsive to emerging community needs and that can be a source of shared learning for community, the field and philanthropy

We also hope to direct resources to community-driven, community-responsive, and community-led approaches. As our focus evolves, one thing remains constant. Community leads, and we are proud to follow.

Two-Year Transition Period Toward New Goals

Before we begin to put any of the Foundation's resources toward our new goals, we will first enter a two-year transition period to provide grantee partners with time and resources to enable them to plan for upcoming changes. The transition period will also provide an opportunity for us to continue conversations with our partners and other community leaders, so we can further refine our new grantmaking strategies and ensure the efforts we support are responsive to community visions and needs.

[Read more in our October 2024 open letter to grantee partners.](#)

GOAL: BUILDING COMMUNITY WEALTH, ACROSS GENERATIONS

Among the many important measures related to wealth and economic mobility, one particularly stands out: median net wealth for a Black family in Chicago is functionally zero.¹ The same study points out that a Mexican-American family's median wealth is \$40,500, itself less than one fifth that of the \$210,000 of a White family in Chicago.

A path out of poverty and toward opportunity that builds across generations means that residents of Chicago's historically disinvested communities, which are largely Black and Latine, could own and control critical assets that build individual and collective wealth, enjoy community stability through more equitable systems for housing, education, and income generation, and thus begin to address generational wealth gaps.

We are anticipating that our grants will focus on efforts that contribute meaningfully to:

- Growth of community wealth, assets, and resources that are created by and stay in historically disinvested communities
- Growth of family wealth, including current resources and stability, as well as the ability to pass on resources and assets to family and across generations
- Educational outcomes, especially those most highly correlated with lifelong earnings and family stability

Priority will be given to community-driven and community-responsive ideas, particularly those that center people with lived experience, retain resources in communities, and address one or more of these components:

- **Housing** because a safe, reliable stable place to call home is a critical building block for individual, family and community stability and provides the base from which people can build their lives and resources
 - Efforts to increase the supply and affordability of and access to rental housing and home ownership in disinvested communities and communities of color and to decrease barriers that perpetuate racial and ethnic gaps
- **Income** because work is a source of both income and dignity
 - High-quality and equitable training, preparation, placement, and retention, with wrap-around and barrier reduction, and career progression. Resources to build entrepreneurship and sustain small businesses owned by community members. And advocacy to improve and protect job quality, safety, and rights.
- **Education** because students' engagement in their education is a critical step toward securing quality jobs and financial security

¹ The *Color of Wealth in Chicago* report, The New School Institute on Race, Power, and Political Economy, June 2024. (Funded in part by Polk Bros. Foundation) Retrieved on July 12, 2024, from <https://colorofwealth.org/chicago/>

- Proven methods and policies to improve K-12 school climate, build family-school connectedness, accelerate learning, and strengthen pathways to college and post-secondary educational completion and affordability.

We will emphasize support for four types of approaches or work (described above) toward these goals:

- **Immediate intervention**
- **Community power and influence**
- **Ecosystem of systems change**
- **Community innovation**

This portfolio will also encourage new and intersectional ideas that extend beyond these areas but show promise for contributing to a reduction in the community and/or family wealth gap and could provide learnings about other effective approaches.

GOAL: CLOSING THE LIFE EXPECTANCY GAP

Life expectancy should not be determined by race, ethnicity, or geography. Yet, in Chicago, there is a 30-year difference between the life expectancy in Streeterville, where primarily White residents can expect an average lifespan of 90 years, and Englewood, whose primarily Black residents live to be 60, on average. The top drivers of this so-called “death gap”² are chronic diseases, homicide (often due to gun violence), infant mortality, infectious diseases, opioid overdose, as well as the cumulative effects of poverty, chronic stress, and weathering.³

Investing in an integrated healthcare, homelessness services, and public safety system focused on wellness, prevention, coordination, and accessibility that truly meets people where they are can address the root causes of disparities in mortality and the conditions holding those disparities in place and leading to sickness and early death.

We are anticipating that our grants will be focused on efforts that contribute meaningfully to some of these community-level metrics:

- Narrowed life expectancy gap, especially through a reduction in opioid overdoses and a reduction in shootings and deaths due to gun violence
- Increased violence prevention, intervention, and wellness assets in communities
- Reduction in early mortality of people cycling through the health, homelessness, and criminal-legal systems
- Stronger, more coordinated community health systems

Priority will be given to community-driven and community-responsive ideas, especially those that promote harm reduction, center people with lived experience, focus on those at highest risk, and address one or more of these areas:

- **Harm Reduction Infrastructure** because a harm reduction approach increases care access and effectiveness
 - Efforts to create, implement, and strengthen the harm reduction infrastructure including policies, practices, and services that have been shown to reduce the disproportionate number of Black and Brown Chicagoans who are experiencing homelessness or are dying from opioid overdose.
- **Family and Community Violence Prevention and Intervention** to break cycles of violence within families and communities
 - Programs and policies to prevent and intervene in cycles of family and community violence, with an emphasis on gun and structural violence. Efforts that provide wrap-around supports to adults and youth directly impacted by violence; increase

² A term coined by Dr. David Ansell of Rush University Medical Center in his book, *The Death Gap: How Inequality Kills* (2017).

³ *The State of Health for Blacks in Chicago* report, Chicago Department of Public Health, 2021 and multiple University of Michigan and St. John's University studies

community voice in public safety; and build community cohesion, connectedness, and healing to create conditions for reduced violence.

- **End Cycles of Harm** where people cycle through the health, homelessness, and criminal-legal systems
 - Efforts to build an integrated system that addresses mental health, substance use, violence, and economic and housing instability, especially for people at highest risk, such as returning citizens, people experiencing chronic homelessness, and youth in temporary living situations.
- **Coordinated, Holistic Social Service and Healthcare System** to address systems gaps and remove barriers to effective preventative care and access
 - Efforts to coordinate benefits and services across systems and address healthcare workforce shortages, pipelines, and networks of trusted messengers, including community health workers.

We will emphasize support for four types of approaches or work (described above) toward these goals:

- **Immediate intervention**
- **Community power and influence**
- **Ecosystem of systems change**
- **Community innovation**

This portfolio will also encourage new and intersectional ideas that extend beyond these areas but show promise for contributing to a reduction in the life expectancy gap and learnings about other effective approaches.

GOAL: FOSTERING PARTICIPATORY, MULTIRACIAL DEMOCRACY

Strengthening a participatory, multiracial democracy in Chicago will lead to real and meaningful progress toward a more equitable and just Chicago. The essential tools of systems change are power, networks and relationships, influence, information, and narrative. By supporting efforts that increase the power and influence of Chicagoans most negatively affected by racial disparities to develop and shape policies and initiatives that impact their lives, we can help address both the root causes and the effects of racial disparities.

We are anticipating that our grants will focus on efforts that contribute meaningfully to:

- Increased connectedness within and across Chicago's communities
- Growth of the organized base of people residing in Chicago's most disinvested communities who act together to influence change
- Increased prevalence of narratives that capture multiple viewpoints on fault-line issues, build recognition and empathy, and support new storylines, narrative change, and visions for a shared future
- Strengthened civic infrastructure in Chicago to encourage a more informed, inclusive, and culturally-responsive public discourse
- Strengthened nonprofit sector that functions as an essential part of a multiracial democracy, with highly effective leadership that reflects Chicago's diversity

Priority will be given to community-driven and community-responsive ideas that address one or more of these components:

- **Sector Strengthening** to reinforce and sustain a nonprofit ecosystem with highly effective leadership that represents Chicago's diversity
 - Investments in leadership and pipeline development efforts, as well as sector-building initiatives, especially those designed to support leaders looking to make change toward a multiracial democracy.
- **Connectedness and Social Cohesion** to support those closest to Chicago's most persistent racial disparities to create a shared vision for a more just and equitable future
 - Work that builds capacity, space, and support for people in Chicago's most disinvested communities to recognize common threads and systemic factors that shape their experiences, to develop narratives and goals across communities and issues, and to act together to influence change.
 - Efforts to generate and build the role of neighborhood, community, and cultural anchors as centers of gravity for local residents, often providing valuable on-site programming, multiple support services and connections, and a starting point for civic engagement and participation.
- **Informed, Inclusive and Culturally-Responsive Public Discourse** to strengthen Chicago's civic infrastructure to create a public discourse more informed by Chicago's diverse voices and an environment more receptive to social change

- Efforts that amplify voices that reflect Chicago’s diversity through stories, journalism, data, and research, especially those with an orientation toward community-level perspectives and solutions-based discourse.

We will emphasize systems change and support for three types of approaches or work (described above) toward these goals:

- **Community power and influence**
- **Ecosystem of systems change**
- **Community innovation**

This portfolio will also encourage new and intersectional ideas that extend beyond these areas but show promise for contributing to participatory, multiracial democracy and learnings about other effective approaches.