

Chicago Targets 15 Hard-Hit Communities For A Vaccination Blitz To Fight Disparities By Becky Vevea, Kristen Schorsch

WBEZ Chicago
February 17, 2021

Since the pandemic began, Belmont Cragin on the Northwest Side has lost more than 20 of its residents to COVID-19, the third highest number of deaths of any neighborhood in Chicago.

Last weekend, more than 1,500 of its residents got their first shots of a COVID-19 vaccine — roughly seven times more than the average number of vaccines received so far by residents of any other neighborhood.

The vaccination boom in Belmont Cragin wasn't random: It came after weeks of planning with the public health department, elected officials, community organizations and a local clinic.

It's part of Protect Chicago Plus, an initiative the city announced with fanfare in late January to focus vaccinations on communities hit hardest by the pandemic. Mayor Lori Lightfoot and the Department of Public Health planned to target 15 communities, with each getting specific allotments of vaccine, a health care partner to do the vaccinating, and a group leading the outreach efforts.

There's a key element of Protect Chicago Plus: anyone who lives in the neighborhood is eligible for the vaccine, regardless of whether they fall into a priority group defined by the CDC.

This comes after initial efforts at vaccinations went overwhelmingly to Chicago's white residents, a disproportionate rate that recent city data suggests is improving. Organizers say the early turnout for their efforts also shows that despite hesitancy in some of these communities to take a COVID-19 vaccine, right now, there are still scores of people who are ready to get it.

"It just shows what you can do ... if we can commit to actually being really deliberate in how we target populations and making it really easy for them to get this vaccine," said Dr. Ali Khan, Executive Medical Director of Oak Street Health, which is the local clinic administering the vaccines in Belmont Cragin, which is a mostly Latino neighborhood.

There are 14 other neighborhoods that will see similar vaccine blitzes under Protect Chicago Plus in the coming months. They are:

- Little Village, Gage Park and North Lawndale in mid-February;
- Montclare, Englewood and West Englewood in late February;

- Austin, Back of the Yards and Archer Heights in early March;
- Roseland, Washington Heights and South Deering in mid-March;
- and Humboldt Park and Chicago Lawn in late March.

The effort has intentionally targeted only those residents who live in the neighborhood, said James Rudyk, Jr., the executive director of Northwest Side Housing Center, one of the community groups leading the effort in Belmont Cragin.

“We decided to opt for a closed registration system, which means that we did not circulate flyers, materials, or any sort of publicly available registration tool,” Rudyk said. Instead, about 50 different individuals and institutions booked appointments for people, including the local alderman and state representative.

Rudyk said they used their own databases, email lists, and phone trees to reach out to people with Belmont Cragin addresses and when people came to them, they didn’t require ID, but asked for some kind of address verification, like a piece of mail. The vaccinations were done at Steinmetz College Prep over the weekend to accommodate people’s work schedules.

That’s where Jose A. Orjales Jr. found himself getting a shot this past weekend. At 56, he’s retired and now takes care of his 80-year-old mother, who lives with him.

“For me, I thought it was going to take a couple of months,” Orjales Jr. said. “I was more concerned about my mom.”

Her doctor told them it would be at least a few weeks before she could get in for a vaccination appointment.

But Orjales Jr.’s cousin heard about the event at Steinmetz and was able to register both Jose and his mother for Saturday.

“It wasn’t crowded. It was easy,” Orjales Jr. said, adding that he only had a sore arm the next day.

Getting vaccines where they’re needed most

Chicago officials have been trying to ramp up vaccinations in these neighborhoods after initial vaccination efforts focused on health care workers and nursing home residents showed that half of residents vaccinated so far were white.

Neighborhoods downtown and on the North Side have not been particularly hard hit by COVID-19 cases and deaths, yet they are leading the pack when it comes to vaccinated residents.

Data provided by the Chicago Department of Public Health Tuesday shows that trend shifting, with 41.1% of first doses going to white Chicagoans, 26.2% going to Latinx residents, 23.6% going to Black Chicagoans and 6.7% to Asian residents over the past week.

That brings the cumulative tallies of first doses so far to 40.8% to white residents, 19.1% to Black residents, 18.1% to Latinx Chicagoans, and 6.7% to Asian residents, as of Feb. 13, the city's data indicated.

It's too early to attribute the shift to Protect Chicago Plus, but organizers involved with the effort say the all-hands-on-deck approach is vital to ensuring vaccines are getting to the places that need it most.

Another one of the 15 communities to see an influx of vaccines is Gage Park on the Southwest Side.

The heavily immigrant community is home to many essential workers, most of whom can't do their work from home. And here, many generations of families live together in the same building, so being able to vaccinate across the age groups instead of waiting for tiers could lead to faster overall protection against the virus.

"We want to make sure we can vaccinate pretty much anyone in the household," said Carmen Vergara, chief operating officer at Esperanza Health Centers, which is doing vaccinations as the health partner for Gage Park. "To have as many people in the building protected at one time, it helps with the overall spread."

Esperanza's mass vaccination clinic in Gage Park opened this week inside a former fitness center. Esperanza is partnering with other organizations that know the community well to spread the word, from passing out fliers in local grocery stores to door-knocking.

The partners are hoping to saturate the community with vaccinations over the next 12 weeks, six days a week. The clinic could vaccinate up to 3,000 people a week, Vergara said.

Ensuring vaccines go to neighborhood residents, not outsiders

Partners in the Protect Chicago Plus vaccination efforts say focusing some portions of vaccine toward specific neighborhoods is a small step toward leveling an uneven playing field for vaccine access.

The limited supply of COVID-19 vaccine is driving people to go to extreme measures to get one. It also tends to shut out people of color, low-income communities, and undocumented people, who may not have time and resources to "stay up until

midnight, set an alarm and navigate systems and online portals” to get an appointment, Rudyk said.

“There are a lot of places where people are hunting for extra doses,” Khan said. “We cannot let this be one of them.”

Khan said he could count on two hands how many out-of-towners showed up to Steinmetz hoping for a vaccine.

“I had a couple of pointed conversations with individuals from the northern suburbs, who showed up and were asking for doses,” Khan said. “And we said, ‘Look, this is specifically for this community and the extra doses, if we have them at the end of the day, will go to this community.’”

The vaccination blitz in Belmont Cragin is set to run for eight weeks, but the last four weeks will only be for second doses.

Ald. Gilbert Villegas, who’s 36th Ward covers part of Belmont Cragin, said it won’t be enough to catch up to the more well-off downtown communities, who have seen close to 25% of their population get a first dose already.

“It’s just that: it’s a blitz,” Villegas said. “Until we get the needed resources in the form of vaccines from the (federal government), we’re gonna continue putting bandages in these communities.”

Chicago launches new racial healing and equity initiative 'Together We Heal' By Will Jones

ABC 7
January 29, 2021

CHICAGO (WLS) -- The City of Chicago has a new initiative promoting racial equity and healing called "Together We Heal."

The city's Office of Equity and Racial Justice hosted a virtual summit Friday in support of the effort.

Mayor Lori Lightfoot and Governor JB Pritzker had a candid conversation about their leadership and navigating the reckoning on race.

"You and I are similar in this way we want to solve problems. We want to help and that's our reflex. We want to jump in but sometimes it's better to just listen," Lightfoot said.

The governor also spoke on the importance of listening to those around him following the killing of George Floyd.

"The fact that you mentioned listening and the thing I was thinking most about is the people who surrounded me, helped me along as I listened to them, and I did," he said.

The Office of Equity & Racial Justice was created under Lightfoot. Candace Moore, the city's Chief Equity Officer, said she has made it her mission to normalize discussions about race at City Hall.

"We know the tale of Chicago. We talk about it a lot in terms of the segregation, the historic disinvestment. That has a living impact," she said.

That's why Moore wants city officials to embrace data to understand how decisions can impact residents differently.

"I don't care if it's planting a tree. Having that context matters, so that you can really think about and then try to produce a result that really sort of meets the needs of that community," she said.

OERJ is asking Chicagoans to participate in a survey to share their vision for racial healing and equity. [Click here to take the OERJ Race Healing & Equity Survey](#)

CPS Partnering With Community Groups to Rethink School Safety Without Resource Officers

By Matt Masterson

WTTW News

January 26, 2021

Chicago Public Schools says it is partnering with local community groups to develop “trauma-informed safety approaches” following the widespread pushback against its school resource officer program last year.

The district on Tuesday announced it had entered into partnerships with five community organizations to “reimagine” school safety strategies as new alternatives to the existing school resource officer (SRO) program.

“We have made it a priority to empower schools to determine if school resources officers should be in their buildings,” CPS CEO Janice Jackson said in a statement, “and now we are taking the next step by developing a new set of alternative trauma-informed approaches for schools to consider.”

The police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis last year sparked a push to reform policing across the country, including in Chicago, where youth led several protests calling on CPS to terminate its existing contract with the Chicago Police Department to provide school resource officers.

Jackson and Mayor Lori Lightfoot opposed that move, saying they instead wanted to maintain local control over the SRO programs at the school level and let local school councils decide if they wanted to maintain their individual resource officer programs.

In the end, 55 LSCs voted to keep their officers, while 17 others ended their SRO programs, and in August, the Board of Education approved a one-year, \$12 million intergovernmental agreement with the CPD to continue providing police in schools.

At that same meeting, the board also passed a resolution requiring CPS to work with stakeholders on developing alternative school safety plans without SROs, which led to Tuesday’s announcement.

CPS said it sought out community-based organizations to partner with through a selection committee that included students, a teacher, a parent, an LSC chair, a principal and a CPS chief safety and security officer.

That committee chose five groups out of 15 applicants: Voices of Youth in Chicago Education, Mikva Challenge, Community Organizing and Family Issues, The Ark of St. Sabina and BUILD Inc.

Each of those organizations will receive a \$30,000 stipend, which CPS said was funded by philanthropic organizations.

“Now is the time,” Voices of Youth in Chicago Education youth leader Meyiya Coleman said in a statement. “We are in a moment to do something transformational. This is about trusting the community to help tackle this challenge. The district needs it. Students need it.”

The groups and CPS will form what’s being called the Whole School Safety Steering Committee, and the district said its work will occur in two phases.

First, they’ll work with an independent consulting firm, Embark Strategies, to design a process that each organization will use to gather input from students, families, educators, and the community on school safety needs and their vision for SRO alternatives.

Those recommendations will then be presented to school administrators, LSCs and school communities, who will work to reimagine safety options for their schools through the committee’s recommendations.

The steering committee will host 10 community engagement sessions next month, gathering community feedback and turning that into recommendations for CPS to consider. Updates on that process and the scheduled meetings can be found at bit.ly/WholeSchoolSafety.

“The end goal is to make system-wide changes that stop the criminalization of students,” said Verneé Green, executive director of Mikva Challenge Illinois. “Students deserve safe spaces in which to learn and grow, and it is crucial to engage and listen to student and community voices to improve student safety in schools.”

Pandemic, civil unrest likely contributed to more than 50% increase in Chicago homicides in 2020, experts say

By Annie Sweeney and Jeremy Gerner

Chicago Tribune

December 31, 2020

In a year marred by a deadly pandemic and rocked by civil unrest over policing in America, Chicago endured a level of violence in 2020 that reversed recent progress, with homicides increasing by more than 50%, according to official statistics.

Through Sunday, Chicago had recorded 762 homicides this year, a 55% jump over the same period in 2019, when 491 people in the city were slain, according to official Chicago police data. It is among the highest year-over-year increases in recent city history.

The total number of shootings this year also was up sharply. That figure rose by 53%, to 3,237 from 2,120, according to the police information.

City leaders and experts say the increase in violence likely was a byproduct of more than one factor. The spread of the coronavirus forced an economic shutdown and stay-at-home order, exacerbating economic woes in some neighborhoods and limiting some social services. The high-profile killings of Black people by police officers sparked a national reckoning on race issues, and in some cases generated instability across the city and increased distrust of police officers, eroding their ability to rely on community members for help.

Those who have long studied homicide rates say 2020 is also a clarion call to policymakers to reevaluate traditional attempts to reduce crime that rely heavily on police.

“What worries me is just how much has changed in the past year and how bad it (got) this past summer,” said Patrick Sharkey, a professor of sociology and public affairs at Princeton University, calling it a key time to find new strategies. “This is the moment. The trust in the old model has fallen substantially.”

Asked this week about the increase in homicides, Mayor Lori Lightfoot acknowledged some communities have endured a particularly heavy loss of life from both crime and the coronavirus, exacerbating existing troubles.

“It’s been a hard time,” Lightfoot said. “Frustration, anger, unfortunately some of that is playing out in violence. A lot of things that are manifestations of trauma and mental health challenges have been in full bloom.”

The mayor's hand-picked police superintendent, David Brown, said in a statement that violence reduction will take the cooperation of partners including the police, community organizations, faith leaders and others.

"The criminal justice ecosystem, however, was profoundly impacted and disrupted by the global coronavirus pandemic and the death of George Floyd," Brown wrote of 2020, noting the violence problem was not unique to Chicago. "Our Chicago Police officers faced an unprecedented set of circumstances in contending with a spike in violent crime, made even more difficult by having to contend with a health pandemic while facing extended periods of heightened civil unrest and looting."

From progress to dismay

Just a year ago, Chicago was in the midst of a third straight year of gun violence reductions.

New strategies and organizations had launched around the city, and there was an air of promise despite the remaining challenges.

Among the new initiatives was the West Side Sports Police & Youth Conference, which drew hundreds of children and offered competitive play at local parks in a variety of sports, including baseball and basketball.

Amaria Jones, a funny, giggly girl who loved to dance, was just one of the eager players.

But this year, Amaria, 13, became one of 55 young children and juveniles lost in the violence. Coach Brandon Wilkerson was left to help his players cope.

"Let's give Amaria 12 seconds," Wilkerson, 30, a lifelong Austin resident, would tell the players at the start of practices and games after Amaria was killed. The number 12 was her jersey number. "She's in our minds. She's in our hearts. Who (do) we do it for?"

They'd answer in unison: "Amaria Jones!"

A tough year from the start

The year began with higher than usual violence numbers, even ahead of the emergence of the coronavirus in February and March. And when the pandemic set in, it only added to a storm of conditions that led to the runaway violence.

The ensuing shutdown caused economic distress and piled on the trauma of loss, experts said, as the city's most violent neighborhoods also saw loved ones die, at times disproportionately, from the virus.

Institutions like libraries, parks and schools that provide safe havens were shuttered. And some natural safety nets were gone too — blocks no longer filled with people out walking to the store or picking up kids from school.

“You take away the businesses, all the pieces of society that generally have eyes out, and you are left with young people, and a lot of young people, who don’t have resources or that level of support if they are left on their own,” said Chicago Police Department community policing Sgt. Jermaine Harris, who cofounded the sports league that Amaria played in and works with youth on the West Side.

The shootings and homicides continued to outpace last year’s totals throughout the summer in the wake of the killing in May of Floyd, a Black man, by a white Minneapolis police officer who knelt on his neck for nearly 9 minutes as horrified witnesses looked on. The killing triggered nationwide organizing and protesting against racism, especially in policing. In several cities, widespread looting also broke out, including in Chicago.

Instability set in, experts said.

The highly charged environment is likely to have caused some police officers, fearing their actions would be scrutinized, to stop aggressively policing. Many cops found themselves off their normal beats to address protest activity, while community distrust of police escalated.

Police across the country recognized their footing in their communities had changed. In a national survey this fall, police chiefs were asked what was the No. 1 thing they needed as they lead their departments. The top response was to restore the public trust.

“We were surprised,” said Chuck Wexler, executive director of the Police Executive Research Forum, which conducted the research. “The sense from police chiefs is this recognition something is broken in the relationship between police departments and communities, more so than ever today. Doing something about homicides means doing something about restoring public trust.”

Superintendent Brown agreed. He noted the department had shifted during 2020 to sending more resources into areas seeing the worst of the crime surge but said the key for police is a good relationship with the neighborhoods.

“The best way to reduce crime and violence is to prevent it from happening in the first place by building bridges and trust in the community,” he said in his statement.

The issues didn’t just bubble over in Chicago. Other large American cities saw 2020’s issues manifest themselves in surges in violent crime.

Through Dec. 20, New York City, with more than three times Chicago's population, saw slayings jump by 39% from the same time in 2019, to 437 from 314, official police statistics there show.

In Los Angeles, a city with more than a million more residents than Chicago's 2.7 million, its 343 homicides in 2020 represented a 33.5% jump over last year, when 257 were recorded. That was according to LAPD statistics through Dec. 26.

Sociologists have noted Floyd's death was a stark, painful reminder of decades of indignities and fear that people living in some neighborhoods have often suffered at the hands of police. This, they said, led to an increased potential for some to lash out.

"When you live under that precarity, there is the greater opportunity for any interaction with folks in your grouping to be heightened or more intense and more violent," said David Stovall, a professor of Black studies and criminology, and law and justice at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "Your frustrations are expressed into people you are in proximity with."

A young life lost

Amaria was among the victims caught in the summertime violence surge in Chicago.

A bullet fired from the street struck her inside her South Austin home over the Father's Day weekend as she was showing her mother a dance move. Two teens, 16 and 15, who were standing on the porch also were injured.

Her teammates signed her #12 Austin basketball jersey for her family, writing sweet remembrances on it.

"Fly High, Yaya," one message reads. And, up in one corner, next to the "n" in Austin, is a simple, "I love you."

The jersey was presented to Amaria's family at her funeral. Like many Chicago families, the Jones' had already lost loved ones to gun violence by the time Amaria was killed — and after her death, her older brother, 18, was killed in December.

This is the kind of ongoing trauma her community was already facing, said Mercedes Jones, Amaria's 27-year-old sister. So the year Amaria spent playing on a team and being with other kids was precious. She loved it all — the uniform, the team pictures, competing and helping everyone out in the league, her sister said.

"Growing up in the area we grew up in, sometimes kids battle with anger issues and resentment for what they see around them," Jones said. "As soon as she got on that team ... when she first got her uniform, she had the little shirt and shorts, she was so excited to just be a part of something."

Harris, the Chicago police sergeant who cofounded the league, said he thinks it has succeeded because it was designed to have three anchor institutions — community organizations, police and clergy — running the programs. Each team, for example, aims to have a coach from each of the groups.

“With so many people around them, there were ways to stay in touch,” Harris said. “It was COVID-proof. You have to coordinate things so it happens at the same time to counteract the negative things.”

Wilkerson, the coach, recalled the call he’d get at exactly 3:05 p.m. each day from Amaria, who was looking for a ride to youth programs that Wilkerson runs when he is not coaching.

“Coach B, can you pick me up,” he said she’d ask each day, even though his answer was always the same.

“I said, ‘Yeah, Amaria you know we’re picking you up.’”

The impact on outreach

Chicago’s community-based violence reduction organizations, which rely heavily on jobs to help divert people from violence, faced challenges too.

Work was scarce during the pandemic. And as happened everywhere, communication went virtual, posing a special challenge for those in the field of outreach.

“You can say anything over the phone, but when I get to see you face-to-face, I can read your body language and tell what’s going on,” said Terrance Henderson, who works as an outreach supervisor for Chicago CRED, which stands for Create Real Economic Destiny, a community organization that assists people in the Roseland and West Pullman communities.

Meanwhile, Henderson suspected the unemployment benefits that flowed through some of the city’s neighborhoods might have had some unintended consequences.

“A lot of illegal guns was being bought. A lot of drugs were being sold,” Henderson said. “Then you had a lot of robberies that took place because now it’s more ... people with money. It’s people that never had money with money.”

Outreach teams remained on the street, switching gears to deliver food to those in need and, in the early days of the pandemic, were some of the first workers to hand out sanitizer and educate people on how to protect themselves from the virus.

But the gun violence proved persistent — even though many feared it could have been worse without the new violence reduction infrastructure in the city.

“Without it, it would have been more chaos, more anarchy,” Henderson said. “We’d probably be over 1,000 homicides by now.”

Going forward

The historic jump in violence this year has left both academics like Stovall and those who work in violence reduction emphasizing how key the community voice will be going forward.

Henderson, the outreach supervisor, stressed his workers’ abilities to make inroads with people who don’t trust law enforcement.

“Right now, everyone fears the police. ... If you have a conversation with someone, they’ll say, ‘The police have never helped me in my life. ... They arrest me,’” he said. “The police don’t go into the areas where outreach goes.”

Over the past two years, Chicago has created its first Office of Violence Reduction, and in the most recent budget, dedicated \$36 million to support community-driven strategies like Henderson’s work, which combines outreach and intervention with jobs, therapy and victim support.

The city is also piloting an alternative response program that would pair police with mental health professionals when answering certain 911 calls.

While these are all new efforts, many criticize the investments as not nearly enough to fully address the scope of the violence problem.

All of the tests for Lightfoot and Brown come as the coronavirus continues to wreak havoc in neighborhoods and on the economy, and pressure for policing changes here and across the country still is high. They also come as Brown’s department remains under a federal consent decree that mandates reforms, and as Lightfoot has struggled to control the fallout from a botched police raid that has renewed questions about transparency.

Those challenges are not expected to fade when the calendar turns to 2021.

**Chicago's Police Department Launches An Intense Outreach Program
By Cheryl Corley**

NPR

December 25, 2020

*Heard on Morning Edition

Building trust between police and residents is a key effort of community policing. A Chicago initiative puts police in communities to build trust. But officer turnover has left some skeptical.

NOEL KING, HOST:

The Chicago Police Department is trying to rebuild trust in communities with which it has a terrible relationship, so it launched an outreach program that's designed to change the ways in which police approach their work. Here's NPR's Cheryl Corley.

CHERYL CORLEY, BYLINE: At a recent food giveaway at a Chicago park, a cluster of police officers wearing masks greeted drivers and loaded boxes of food in the trunks of a long line of cars.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #1: How many?

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #2: I have four. I got to get on line for four.

CORLEY: Twenty-fifth District police commander Adnardo Gutierrez watched to make sure things were going smoothly.

ADNARDO GUTIERREZ: We're here to work together with the community. We want the community to embrace us, embrace each other. It's making sure that there's no violence in our district, in our neighborhoods. That means we got to work together as a team.

CORLEY: This is a collaboration with an area church and an alderman's office, and it's here in the 25th District where Chicago decided to go a step further. The district is the first to set up a neighborhood policing initiative, patterned after a similar program in New York City.

DAVID BROWN: The best way to reduce crime is to prevent it from happening in the first place.

CORLEY: That's Chicago Police Superintendent David Brown.

BROWN: And you do that through community policing. Getting officers out of their cars and into the barbershops and beauty salon and churches and into the living rooms of our neighborhoods where they are assigned is community policing.

CORLEY: The notion of community policing isn't new, but it takes on a bigger meaning now after this summer's protests. Instead of working from one radio assignment to the next, district coordinating officers, or DCOs, as they are called, hand out business cards and encourage people to email or call them on their cellphone. They work together with residents to resolve problematic non-emergencies like speeding cars or a loud neighbor. The officers have helped some residents find jobs, the homeless places to live. And they often turn to beat officers, businesses and community groups for assistance. Commander Angel Novalez, the head of the Office of Community Policing, says he's witnessed something among the DCOs you don't hear much about these days.

ANGEL NOVALEZ: Joy that comes from helping members of the community - that's why we came on the job. We weren't just showing up and writing reports and making an arrest and moving on to the next thing.

CORLEY: Instead, says Novalez, they are actually creating strategies with people to solve problems. Officer Malcolm Brooks says he wanted to help change the perception of the police, and after a couple of years on the job, he signed up to be a district coordinating officer. Brooks says they get calls day and night.

MALCOLM BROOKS: We deal with people who have mental health issues. We deal with people who may be out of work - 'cause we've helped people get jobs. We helped a lady find an apartment.

CORLEY: And work to build relationships, he says, with business owners and residents. City officials say in the 25th Police District, where it all started nearly two years ago, there have been 10,000 fewer calls this year to the 911 emergency number, a drop city officials directly credit to people having direct contact with officers who are part of the neighborhood initiative, a program that's now active in five police districts challenged by crime and gangs. The 25th Police District is big, also diverse. But its nearly 200,000 people live in distinct neighborhoods largely defined by ethnicity on the West and northwest sides of Chicago.

RONALD WILKS: Good morning.

CORLEY: Good morning. How are you?

WILKS: OK. Just go up the stairs and to your right.

CORLEY: Ronald Wilks (ph), a retired pastor, lives in a brick two-flat on a tree-lined street about a block behind the police station. He's the president of the street's block

club and a community ambassador, a point of contact for the police in their outreach and for residents. He says there has been tension between police and residents here for decades, but the ambassadors know the area and the community and work with the officers, explaining what's going on in the neighborhoods, the hot spot, when crime is happening. He says the DCOs have made a difference in certain areas but not all of the district.

WILKS: Now, could this plan work? Yeah, it could because when we first jumped off, we was all over the place. They was walking the streets with us, getting introduced to people and things, but something happened.

CORLEY: What happened in the 25th, says Bertha Purnell, was a lack of follow-through by new officers. She's another community ambassador and a longtime resident.

BERTHA PURNELL: I feel like we're not taken seriously a lot of the times because it's almost like pulling teeth to get information.

CORLEY: Purnell says too many DCOs get pulled off the job to handle other police duties. Police commanders cycle in and out of the job, too. That means they have to try building new relationships over and over again. Commander Novalez says attrition, reflective of cops leaving the profession nationwide and officers being promoted, have affected the program, but he expects that may be resolved as the initiative grows.

NOVALEZ: The question is, what are the key elements that will get translated as it expands?

CORLEY: Northwestern University professor Andrew Papachristos, who's been evaluating the program, says there's been frustration on both sides. But overall, results in the 25th District, at least before the summer protests, seemed promising. He says both residents and officers felt like relationships were moving in a better direction. But there's a caveat. Papachristos says no one should expect the DCOs and the neighborhood policing initiative will cause any drop in crime.

ANDREW PAPACHRISTOS: The mistrust and the cynicism in the police took centuries to get to where it is, and so if crime is going to improve because of that trust, it's going to lag behind. It's going to take years to build and work on this relationship, especially as we as a society reckon with the history of policing in America.

CORLEY: City officials agree, saying the policing initiative won't be able to resolve all the long-standing issues rooted in a lack of trust and respect, like police misconduct or stop-and-frisk policies that have caused a rift between police and communities. Still, Chicago's mayor, the police superintendent and many residents call the program with the district coordinating officers a positive police reform. They say eventually it should be a citywide project to bring police and residents together to solve problems, to work

for safe streets and safe homes and to build trust block by block. Cheryl Corley, NPR News, Chicago.

Column: Chicago launches Together We Heal initiative, aimed at healing racial wounds. 'This has got to be something we make space for, as an entire city.'
By Heidi Stevens

Chicago Tribune
December 9, 2020

When civil rights attorney Candace Moore became the city of Chicago's first chief equity officer in 2019, she made it clear that Chicago's path toward equity and racial justice couldn't start and stop in City Hall.

"It's certainly about supporting city employees with the language, with the frameworks, to understand how to engage in these conversations," Moore told National Public Radio's Jenn White after a month on the job. "But it's not just the responsibility of City Hall. We also have to have that conversation in our communities."

This week, Moore's Office of Equity and Racial Justice announced a citywide Together We Heal initiative aimed at launching more of those community conversations and pointing people toward the ones already taking place.

"This is why I said yes to this job," Moore told me Wednesday. "This has got to be something we make space for, as an entire city."

Together We Heal invites Chicagoans between now and the end of January to organize around racial healing — acknowledging and discussing past wrongs, addressing consequences of individual and systemic racism, working together toward solutions.

The website offers some suggestions: Organize a healing circle or other event with friends, neighbors, colleagues, family members, congregants; find an existing event on the site's healing map; fill out a form on the site detailing your event for others to learn from.

"A lot of the specific strategies you're seeing in Together We Heal are born out of my own personal and professional experiences since COVID has landed here in Chicago," Moore said. "The challenges we are facing at a systems level and what I was hearing back from folks as they dealt with all the different blows we've experienced this year."

The coronavirus pandemic, Moore said, exposed a lot of what racial healing aims to address.

"COVID tells us a story about what's at stake," she said. "We see the disparate outcomes that are happening, that have happened, that will continue to happen if we don't do anything different. COVID laid bare the fault lines of inequality. The protests we have seen are a call for justice that's been going on well before this moment."

Moore said she was on a phone call recently with leaders from around the world, and all of them had a story about their countries' responses to George Floyd's death.

"That moment struck a nerve around fairness, equality and inclusion," she said. "Our people don't feel included, don't feel like they have an ability to thrive. People are literally dying and experiencing economic hardships that threaten who we are as a city and, I would argue, as a country."

A number of community organizations are partnering with the city on Together We Heal: American Jewish Committee; Chicago Community Trust; Equity Advisory Council; Racial Equity Rapid Response Team; Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation Chicago; and YWCA Metropolitan Chicago.

"I immediately thought, 'Yes, I'm in,'" Dorri McWhorter, CEO of YWCA Metropolitan Chicago said Tuesday. "I'm really excited to see Chicago as a city, knowing its legacy and history of segregation and racism, is willing to make this move at this time."

YWCA Chicago recently launched a racial justice league that works to expand early childhood education, trauma intervention, skills training and job placement in the service of a more equitable Chicago. McWhorter said Together We Heal's mission complements her own.

"Racism isn't just one thing," McWhorter said. "Racism is a lot of little things and also a lot of big things, and I do feel like solving it starts with each individual. Racial healing and healing circles remind us of the humanity that racism takes the ultimate toll on. At the end of the day, it's the humanity in us that takes the brunt of this. I don't know that we acknowledge that enough."

Organizers are asking communities to launch their healing work before the end of January, but they don't expect the process to end there.

"That's when we want to celebrate what we have been able to do and set a path forward for what our year looks like," Moore said. "What did we get to? What didn't we get to? How does this connect to other initiatives that already exist in the city?"

Together We Heal will have its critics.

"I recognize this may not go as far as some people want to go," Moore said. "But that's not a reason not to do something. We're in a moment, in all its messiness and imperfections, where we ought to make sense of what our part and what our role is. We'll never be at a perfect place to start something. You have to decide this is important enough, this is something that is worth you starting to take steps forward and you

committing to learning. I'll commit to learning. Every day, I'm going to continue to try. I invite people to walk that same path with me."

I like that.

"You can't do this work if you don't believe in better days ahead," McWhorter said.

And we all have a part to play in creating them.