

# “I Love You Too, Boo.”

An Explorative Study into the Role of City Government Employees  
In Serving, Loving and Protecting Youth in Chicago

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## **ABSTRACT**

Every day, thousands of local government employees across the country serve, support and protect vulnerable youth in administering legislative policies and public programs. Unfortunately, little research has focused specifically on the role of these employees in implementing youth policies and programs, and even fewer studies have translated employees' experiences into valuable lessons for the field of youth policy. To address this gap in the literature, this report analyzes the results of interviews with twelve City of Chicago government employees, each of whom work in child, family or youth programs, and explores their day-to-day experiences serving Chicago youth. Interview results find that the rise of the youth programs depended heavily on financial and political support from the mayor, as well as on the City government's operation as a service funder. The ongoing success of the programs, on the other hand, relied on expert frontline staff and long-term mayoral support. This report concludes with four youth policy recommendations, and ultimately shows how local government employees' nuanced policy knowledge can and should be used more effectively to inform youth policy decisions in the future.

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I dedicate this report to the City government employees who inspired and gave meaning to my research. You welcomed me into your lives with passion, and taught me what it means to serve and empower community. Thank you. I am honored to know you.

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the City of Chicago has responded to community needs with dramatic expansions to its youth services. In 2011, the City launched One Summer Chicago (OSC), the country's second largest youth employment program, which has since connected thousands of teens and young adults to summer jobs<sup>1</sup>. Three years later, the Mayor's Mentorship Initiative directed \$36 million to mentoring organizations for boys and young men across the city<sup>2</sup>. More recently, the City launched Chicagobility and OSC PLUS (OSC+), two programs that empower youth to build confidence, community relations and career readiness<sup>3</sup>.

Recent studies on program success are encouraging. In 2018, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago found that OSC participants reported heightened levels of self-confidence, broadened career goals, and positive support from workplace mentors<sup>4</sup>. OSC participants from 2018 also saved \$9.9 million for future endeavors<sup>5</sup> and 82% of those surveyed said they developed skills that would help them succeed in the future<sup>6</sup>. Even more striking, the University of Chicago Urban Labs released a 2018 impact report on OSC, showing that participants experienced a 40% increase in employment in the year following the program, as well as a 33% reduction in violent crime arrests<sup>7</sup>. Similarly, youth participants in Becoming A Man (BAM), an MMI-funded program, experienced decreased rates of violent crime arrests and increased rates of on-time high school graduation<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> "One Summer Chicago." Onesummerchicago.org.

<sup>2</sup> "City of Chicago : Mayor Emanuel's Mentoring Initiative." Chicago.org.

<sup>3</sup> MHA Labs, Chicago DFSS, "OSC Annual Report 2018." Pg. 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> Lansing, Carreon, and Schlecht, "Using Qualitative Research to Uncover the Mechanisms of One Summer Chicago: What Makes Summer Youth Employment Programs Meaningful for Youth."

<sup>5</sup> MHA Labs, Chicago DFSS, "OSC Annual Report 2018." Pg. 16.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, Pg. 13.

<sup>7</sup> Davis and Heller, "Rethinking the Benefits of Youth Employment Programs," May 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Davis and Heller (2017).

Improvements to youth outlook and behavior prove particularly impressive when considered within the Chicago context. Currently, Chicago hosts some of the highest rates of out-of-school and out-of-work young adults (about 46.6% of those ages 20-24), compared to national (32.2%) and other American city (31% in both New York and Los Angeles) averages<sup>9</sup>. Additionally, youth in Chicago face heightened risks of violent crime injuries, as exemplified by the 246 gun violence victims under 17 years of age in 2017<sup>10</sup>. Despite Chicago's decade-long rise in high school graduation<sup>11</sup> and college enrollment<sup>12</sup> rates, youth must still overcome barriers ingrained into the city's racially and socioeconomically segregated neighborhoods<sup>13</sup>, which disproportionately bar low-income and minority youth from quality education<sup>14</sup> and employment<sup>15</sup>.

While it is easy to characterize the challenges Chicago youth face as indefinite and insoluble—grounded in histories of inequity, entangled in education and justice systems, manifested in family and other relationships—the City of Chicago managed to create successful youth programs that empower participants to achieve. As youth grow into next generation's leaders, cities can learn from Chicago's programs to inspire strength in young people and to meet modern needs of youth and their families.

Unfortunately, if leaders from other cities were to replicate the Chicago programs, they would have little to no insight into how the programs operate on the ground. Very limited research has focused on the internal City structures, systems, technology and personnel required to run

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<sup>9</sup> Reynolds, "Meeting the Challenge of Youth Unemployment."

<sup>10</sup> Desk, "Chicago's Young Victims of Violence."

<sup>11</sup> Allensworth et al., "High School Graduation Rates through Two Decades of District Change."

<sup>12</sup> Coca, Nagaoka, and Seeskin, "Patterns of Two-Year and Four-Year College Enrollment Among Chicago Public Schools Graduates."

<sup>13</sup> Reynolds, "Meeting the Challenge of Youth Unemployment."

<sup>14</sup> Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*.; Lipman, "Contesting the City."

<sup>15</sup> Jankov and Caref, "Segregation and Inequality in Chicago Public Schools, Transformed and Intensified under Corporate Education Reform."

successful youth programs, and even fewer data has been collected on the government employees who made the programs possible. While research grows on youth service best practices—mentorship<sup>16</sup>, social-emotional<sup>17</sup>, sexual health<sup>18</sup> and employment<sup>19</sup>— as well as on the outcomes of such practices<sup>20</sup>, social scientists have an opportunity to learn about youth programming from the very government employees who implement them<sup>21</sup>.

With this opportunity in mind, my research answers the following questions: 1) how did Chicago City government implement its youth programs on the ground? and 2) what can the City government employees teach policy actors about youth needs and services moving forward? For data, I pull from interviews with twelve employees to the City of Chicago Administration of Children and Family Services (ACFS)<sup>22</sup>, each of whom work in child, family or support services, and who generously detailed their experiences in implementing the youth programs. In my methods and analysis, I focus on the value of the individual experience, and articulate overarching themes from the participants' insight and expertise.

I begin my report with background information on youth and youth services, both nationally and in Chicago. In my results and discussion, I describe policy and program lessons to

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<sup>16</sup> Allen and Eby, *The Blackwell Handbook of Mentoring*.; DuBois et al., "Effectiveness of Mentoring Programs for Youth."

<sup>17</sup> Greenberg et al., "Enhancing School-Based Prevention and Youth Development through Coordinated Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning."; Sancassiani et al., "Enhancing the Emotional and Social Skills of the Youth to Promote Their Wellbeing and Positive Development."

<sup>18</sup> Collins et al., "Programs-That-Work."

<sup>19</sup> Butterworth, Christensen, and Flippo, "Partnerships in Employment."

<sup>20</sup> Davis and Heller, "Rethinking the Benefits of Youth Employment Programs," May 2017.; "Penn Study: Summer Jobs Seem to Lower Teens' | UChicago Urban Labs."; Kazis, "Youth Summer Jobs Programs."

<sup>21</sup> Here, it is worth noting important contributions made by researchers from Chapin Hall with the University of Chicago in their 2018 report on OSC implementation. The report (footnote 4) offers a comprehensive review of OSC infrastructure, design and influence on participants, pulling from interviews with OSC stakeholders and worksite observation. While the report provides helpful insight into OSC programs, it focuses more on the onsite implementation (meaning youth's experiences within the programs) than the City government employees' behind-the-scenes operations. Additionally, it only studies OSC, not the City's other youth programs.

<sup>22</sup> To maintain interviewees' anonymity, I use ACFS as a pseudonym for the City government agency I studied.

be gained from speaking with the ACFS employees, as well as the daily challenges to program success. Before moving onto my policy recommendations, I explore ACFS' recent efforts to overcome its program challenges, because these efforts serve as a real-world example of frontline employees informing youth program improvements. I end the report with four policy recommendations, including professional development training for City employees and partners, standardized City database systems, updated background checks for youth and youth-serving adults, and City funding to employ additional frontline staff.

## **BACKGROUND**

The significance of the Chicago youth programs becomes most clear in the context of youth development, demographics and services. Who are youth? What services do they receive given their specific position in society? Why are Chicago's youth programs worth studying? This section explores answers to these questions and builds a comprehensive background for the policy and program lessons to come from the ACFS employees.

### **WHO ARE YOUTH?**

As a category or subpopulation, "youth" can hold diverse meanings and connotations, each of which carries heavy weight when we consider their influences on societal expectations of and services to youth themselves. The United Nations defines youth as all persons between 15 and 24 years of age, but only for statistical consistency in their reports<sup>23</sup>. In fact, they admit to the term's fluidity, and suggest that people understand youth not as a fixed age-group, but as "a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood independence and awareness of our

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<sup>23</sup> "Youth - Definition | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization."

interdependence as members of a community”<sup>24</sup>. Similarly, social scientists including Allen and Jones have argued that ‘youth’ is not an age but a process: a period of development, production and reflection, rather than a set of characteristics inherent to youth themselves<sup>25</sup>.

Other service organizations have echoed Jones and Allen’s characterizations of youth as an inexact but analytically helpful category. For example, researchers at the Mediterranean Institute of Berlin have defined youth as both a model of human development and a process of social integration<sup>26</sup>. Returning to the UN reports, the UN Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization describe youth as persons between the age in which they leave primary education and begin their first job<sup>27</sup>. But, researchers have criticized such definitions, which situate young people into traditionally Western, middle-to-high-income contexts. Instead, these researchers suggest that the term be understood as a category in history, as a “relational concept,” in which social processes construct, institutionalize and control age in culture and society<sup>28</sup>.

Despite disagreements behind ‘youth’ as a category, most youth-serving institutions agree to the term’s fluidity, and use the term to communicate a person’s developmental stage between childhood and adulthood. Developmental psychologists have suggested that brain development can reach its final stages as late as 24 or 25 years of age, and that the last areas of development occur in the parts of the brain most involved with decision-making, long-term risk assessment and social maturity<sup>29</sup>. Consequently, no matter how strictly we define ‘youth’ as a process or age group, it is fair to assume that most of them undergo important life changes without complete cognitive

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<sup>24</sup> “UNESCO-UNEVOC TVETipedia.”

<sup>25</sup> Henze, “On the Concept of Youth – Some Reflections on Theory.”

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> “UNESCO-UNEVOC TVETipedia.”

<sup>28</sup> Damon, “What Is Positive Youth Development?”

<sup>29</sup> Scott and Steinberg, *Rethinking Juvenile Justice*.

or social-emotional maturity. Risks and opportunities associated with youth's life changes make the type and quality of their services important to researchers and youth policy actors.

For the purpose of this study, I use the Chicago City governments' definition of youth, which includes all persons between the ages of six and 24<sup>30</sup>. While some may question the categories' breadth—from small children to young adults— it serves a purpose for ACFS employees, perhaps best captured by an interviewee, who said that the definition allowed him to “try to reach as many young people as possible.” His sentiment behind the ACFS definition mirrors an overarching theme from interviews: an acceptance of the diversity of youth needs challenges, and a readiness to help any young person at any time.

## YOUTH IN THE UNITED STATES AND YOUTH IN CHICAGO

Publicly available data on youth reflects the term's fluidity. Most surveyors do not collect youth-specific information, and those that do use unique and irregular age intervals for data entry<sup>31</sup>. Regardless, surveyors' data provides valuable insight into youth's contexts and demographics.

The 2010 national census tallied approximately 84,652,193 people ages 5 to 24 in the United States<sup>32</sup>. Of the 72.4 million children under 18 in 2016, 41% were low income and 19% lived in poverty (family income of \$16,543-24,339 depending on size of family)<sup>33</sup>. Comparatively, 29% of Americans at the time were low-income and 12.7% lived in poverty<sup>34</sup>. Non-government

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<sup>30</sup> City of Chicago sources have published different definitions of 'youth'. On the City website (“City of Chicago :: Youth Services.”), they describe youth as persons between the ages of 6 and 24. The 2018 City budget (City of Chicago, “2018 Budget Overview.”), however, lists youth as persons 18 and under. I use the City website's definition because the programs mentioned in this report reach youth older than 18.

<sup>31</sup> For example, while some surveyors group participants into intervals such as 0-3, 4-10, 11-18 and 20-24 years of age, others may group them into intervals like 0-10, 11-16 and 17-21.

<sup>32</sup> Howden and Meyer, “Age and Sex Composition: 2010.”

<sup>33</sup> Koball and Jiang, “Basic Facts about Low-Income Children.” Pg. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. Pg. 3. ‘Poverty’ applies to families and individuals who live off of incomes below the federal poverty line.

agencies with more recent youth statistics have estimated that 48% of people ages 18-24 were enrolled in or had completed college in 2014<sup>35</sup>, and 17% of those ages 16-19 were employed<sup>36</sup>. Youth under 18 have historically shown high rates of homelessness, as high as 1.7 million in 2018,<sup>37</sup> which disproportionately includes LGBTQ youth<sup>38</sup>.

On the local level, youth statistics become scarcer. Of the estimated 2,716,000 people living in Chicago in 2017<sup>39</sup>, about 21% were under 18 years of age and about 350,00 were between the ages 5 and 24<sup>40</sup>. Of the 361,324 students enrolled in the 2018-2019 school year, 76% receive free or reduced lunch<sup>41</sup>, and 20.3% of all Chicago children with families below the federal poverty line<sup>42</sup>. In Chicago, statistics regarding youth barriers to success fall disproportionately along racial lines. Eighty-six percent of white CPS students graduated on-time in 2018, compared to 81% of Hispanic students and 72% of Black students<sup>43</sup>. Young Chicagoans of color also show lower rates of employment than their white peers, 47% of Black 20-24-year old's holding jobs in 2017 compared to 70% of Latinx youth and 73% of white youth<sup>44</sup>. Youth of color are also overrepresented in the City's sheltered and unsheltered homeless population<sup>45</sup>, as well as victims of violent crime<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> "Young Adults Ages 18 To 24 Who Are Enrolled In Or Have Completed College | KIDS COUNT Data Center."

<sup>36</sup> "Youth Unemployment Rate, Figures by State."

<sup>37</sup> Administrator, "How Many Homeless Youth Are In America?"

<sup>38</sup> HRC Staff, "LGBTQ Youth Disproportionately Experience Homelessness."

<sup>39</sup> "Chicago, Illinois Population 2019 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs)."

<sup>40</sup> "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts."

<sup>41</sup> "CPS : School Data : School Data."

<sup>42</sup> For information regarding the federal poverty line, see footnote 32. Statistics found on "Children in Poverty by Age Group | KIDS COUNT Data Center."

<sup>43</sup> "Chicago Graduation Rates Climb Again, but District Has 'work to Do' to Narrow Racial Gaps."

<sup>44</sup> Elejalde-Ruiz, "Chicago's Racial Employment Gaps among Worst in Nation."

<sup>45</sup> City of Chicago, "2017 Homeless Point-in-Time Count & Survey Report."

<sup>46</sup> Meisner, "92 Deaths, 2,623 Bullets."

## YOUTH SERVICES AND SUPPORT IN CHICAGO

Community members have responded to youth challenges and disparities by creating an ecosystem of youth-specific private and public services. Chicago’s largest and most influential direct service organizations include Youth Guidance, After School Matters, and Chicago Youth Programs, which provide counseling<sup>47</sup>, workforce development<sup>48</sup>, academic<sup>49</sup>, medical<sup>50</sup> and extracurricular activities<sup>51</sup>. These organizations and organizations alike often receive funding from the Chicago Administration of Children and Family Services (ACFS), which offers some of the largest grants available to community organizations<sup>52</sup>.

Within ACFS, the Youth Programs Unit<sup>53</sup> most directly reaches, protects, and empowers youth to achieve. The Unit leads three youth program portfolios—enrichment activities, preventative services, and youth employment services—each of which use evidence-based strategies that “build youth skills for success.” Between the three portfolios, ACFS and the Youth Programs Unit fund career-exploration and educational activities, mentoring programs, counseling services, and a summer employment opportunity.

Over the past decade, non-ACFS City agencies have also launched youth-specific programs, including Chicago Public Schools’ (CPS) Gang School Safety Team<sup>54</sup> and the Chicago Police Department’s (CDP) juvenile intervention programs<sup>55</sup>. Overall, Chicago youth receive

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<sup>47</sup> “Youth Guidance.”

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> “After-School Matters Homepage.” (2018).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> “After School Matters | Discover Your Potential. Find Your Future.”

<sup>52</sup> A very high-up leader in ACFS informed me that ACFS was the largest funder of youth programs in the City, offering the most and largest grants to service providers. While I cannot find such evidence online, I trust her information, given her title and responsibility in government.

<sup>53</sup> To protect interviewees’ anonymity, I also use ‘Youth Programs Unit’ as a pseudonym for another City government office.

<sup>54</sup> “City of Chicago’s Youth Violence Prevention Plan | Youth.Gov.”

<sup>55</sup> “Juvenile Intervention | Chicago Police Department.”

diverse services, often through partnerships between direct service providers and City agencies. In this study, I focus on the ACFS' specific contribution to these services.

## THEORY AND LITERATURE ON YOUTH SERVICES

Michael Lipsky inspires the bulk of my theoretical approach. In his study of public policies and services, he focuses on the individual lives of street-level bureaucrats, a term he uses to group school teachers, social workers, public administrators, policy officers, and other on-the-ground public professionals who influence citizens on a daily basis<sup>56</sup>. In his research, Lipsky highlights bureaucrats' discretion in policy and program implementation<sup>57</sup>, and famously argues that the decisions bureaucrats make strongly influence, if not wholly determine, the shape policy takes on the ground<sup>58</sup>. By situating his research subjects in their organizational contexts<sup>59</sup>, Lipsky makes space for the individual bureaucrat in policy research, and reflects on his subjects' emotional and cognitive experiences while on the job<sup>60</sup>.

Despite Lipsky's sprawling influence on policy research, scholars have highlighted important limitations to his methods and assumptions. First, researchers have criticized Lipsky's negative perception of street-level bureaucrats' discretion, claiming that he unfairly assumes street-level bureaucrats' ineptitude rather than expertise<sup>61</sup>. Second, researchers have argued that Lipsky inappropriately simplifies street-level bureaucrats, first by clumping them into a single bucket (teachers, cops, social workers, etc.) and second by characterizing their work environments

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<sup>56</sup> Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. Pg. xi.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid* Pg. 13.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid* Pg. 3.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid* Pg. 27-29.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid* Pg. 58.

<sup>61</sup> Hjørne, Juhila, and van Nijnatten, "Negotiating Dilemmas in the Practices of Street-Level Welfare Work."

only by a lack of time and resources<sup>62</sup>. Instead, these researchers argued for more nuanced studies into the work lives of on-the-ground public servants, accounting for more systemic<sup>63</sup> and professional forces<sup>64</sup>.

Taking seriously both Lipsky's theoretical contribution and subsequent critical interventions, I study the ACFS employees' discretion as an opportunity to learn more about the individual experience as youth program implementers. It was the ACFS employees I interviewed<sup>65</sup> who taught me exactly how academic research into city servicing is limited, how qualitative studies on social workers often simplify workers' experiences, and why theories of 'street-level bureaucracy' do not always voice all that city and social workers can teach us about policy. With an updated Lipskian lens, I answer the following questions: 1) how did Chicago City government implement its youth programs on the ground? And 2) what can the City government employees teach policy actors about youth needs and services moving forward?

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

I base the findings of this report in twelve interviews<sup>66</sup> with City of Chicago Administration of Children and Family Services employees. I conducted the interviews between January and April of 2019, after the University of Chicago Institutional Review Board approved of my study in November of the previous year. Each interviewee, at the time of the interview, held an ACFS

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<sup>62</sup> Hupe and Buffat, "A Public Service Gap: Capturing Contexts in a Comparative Approach of Street-Level Bureaucracy."

<sup>63</sup> Rice, "Street-Level Bureaucrats and the Welfare State."

<sup>64</sup> Evans, "Professionals, Managers and Discretion."

<sup>65</sup> Here, I should note that I knew several of the interviewees before launching my research project, through my previous internship with ACFS. I expand on my reflexivity in my Research Methodology section.

<sup>66</sup> While 12 participants constitutes a relatively small sample size, they covered a very large portion of ACFS's total employees involved with youth programming. For example, the Youth Programs Unit consisted of twelve employees, eight of which I interviewed (the rest declined my invitation). The remaining four interviewees were managers within ACFS, as well as frontline staffers from other youth-serving Units within ACFS.

position in which they could serve, represent and/or make decisions that influence youth. These positions included frontline staff, Unit-wide leadership and Administration-wide leadership. I did not restrict my sample to a specific Unit within ACFS, but instead sought the employees with the most tangible influence on the City's youth programs.

Each interview lasted on average 48 minutes, and took place in the interviewee's place of work. Before conducting every interview, I explained the purpose and parameters of my study, as well as how I would secure their anonymity in all expressions (verbal and written) of my findings. Several interviewees asked how I would hide their identities, given my study's already-revealing focus on youth-serving City government agencies. In response, I promised to use a fake name for their government agency (ACFS), and to use pseudonyms or position titles for direct interview quotations. After answering questions on anonymity, I received their verbal consent<sup>67</sup> to record the interview.

During interviews, I asked each employee about their role in the office, experiences in serving vulnerable youth, and the challenges and successes in their work. I loosely followed the interview guide listed in the appendix<sup>68</sup>, however I allowed interviewees to stray from my questions when they felt so inclined. Within a few days of each interview, I transferred the audio recordings to my computer, which I transcribed and coded using a grounded theory approach<sup>69</sup>. After analyzing interview data, I removed it from my computer.

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<sup>67</sup> Before receiving their verbal consent, I also showed them a consent form with information regarding my study. I did not ask interviewees to sign the consent form, only to read it for information about my study. See consent form in Appendix (A).

<sup>68</sup> See interview guide in Appendix (B).

<sup>69</sup> By grounded theory, I refer to a type of research that systematically collects, analyzes and revisits data until a fully formed concept arises from the data. Read more on grounded theory here: Corbin and Strauss, "Grounded Theory Research: Procedures, Canons, and Evaluative Criteria."

Two additional nuances informed my methods: the theoretical inspiration of my research questions, and my subjectivity within the study itself. As listed in the appendix, my interview questions asked interviewees about their experiences with, challenges to and success in implementing the youth programs. My interview guide also posed a series of questions about what I conceived of as employees' *relationship to policy*: how they understood policy, interacted with policy, talked about policy and informed policy. Theories on legal consciousness<sup>70</sup> and power relations<sup>71</sup> inspired me to inquire about their relationship to policy, however these inquiries grew less relevant during the interviews themselves<sup>72</sup>. As a result, over half of my interviews ended around question 11. Partially, this was due to the interviewees' comprehensive responses to the first 11 questions, but also because they revealed more information about their relationship to policy when talking about their roles, challenges and experiences than they would have if I actually asked them the remaining six questions.

Second, my unique relationship to the people I interviewed influenced my recruitment methods. The summer before I conducted this study, I interned with ACFS and met several of the interviewees included in this study. I interviewed these employees first, and from there, accepted their recommendations on other youth-involved ACFS employees to contact. The snowball effect thus began from my time with ACFS and grew into a twelve-person study. My relationships to some of the interviewees gave me to access professionals who were previously hidden from the public eye, and established an interviewer-interviewee openness that may not have been developed

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<sup>70</sup> Sarat, .. “.. The Law Is All Over”; Yngvesson, “Inventing Law in Local Settings.”

<sup>71</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*; Fraser, “Talking about Needs.”

<sup>72</sup> Throughout the process of interviewing the employees, I realized that I did not have to ask them directly about their relationship to policy, because they showed me this relationship as they talked about their daily work in government and community. I consider this realization a finding in itself, but leave further elaboration to the results and analysis sections.

without our previously established trust. That being said, my bias toward the interviewees, despite my efforts to mitigate them, may have found their way into my conclusions and recommendations.

## **RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

Interviews with ACFS employees revealed that the rise and success of the Chicago youth programs required intricate behind-the-scenes planning and came with significant challenges. Below, I expand upon these findings and use employee insight to recommend youth policy improvements.

### **THE RISE OF YOUTH SERVICES IN CHICAGO**

When asked about the rise of the City's youth programs, interviewees generally pointed to three factors: political support from the mayor, financial support from the mayor, and the City government's function as a youth program funder (rather than youth program provider). Together, these factors provided the money, political will and internal government structure needed to launch a series of youth programs quickly and efficiently.

#### *The Mayor and His Passion (or Politics)*

In 2011, candidate Rahm Emanuel promised to rebuild the city by investing into youth and youth services<sup>73</sup>. At the time of his election, news outlets painted Chicago as a dangerous city, corrupted by gang and gun violence. His public safety campaign<sup>74</sup> focused on young people as the secret to city-wide progress, his idea being: investment into Chicago's youth is investment into Chicago's future.

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<sup>73</sup> "If Youth Are Really on Emanuel's Agenda, Here's What He Can Do."

<sup>74</sup> Dumke, "Did Rahm Live up to His Campaign Promises on Public Safety?"; "If Youth Are Really on Emanuel's Agenda, Here's What He Can Do."

Once in office, Mayor Emanuel advocated for the expansion of after-school, mentorship and employment programs for underserved youth across the city<sup>75</sup>. His office sent out celebratory press releases, hosted youth events, broadcasted program success in press releases and news outlets. He called on ACFS to host celebratory events for youth participants, during which he spoke of the importance of youth programs and encouraged young people to build their own futures.

Whether for political points or out of a genuine passion for young Chicagoans, Mayor Rahm Emanuel managed to pull the political support and public attention needed to transition the City into a new phase of youth services. By using “youth as a strategy”<sup>76</sup> to address other issues facing the city, most prominently violent crime and unemployment, Mayor Emanuel became a “champion” for youth and youth-serving ACFS employees<sup>77</sup>.

### *The Mayor and His Fundraising (or Friends)*

Even more than public attention and political support, the mayor brought money to the City’s youth programs—and a lot of it. Soon into Mayor Emanuel’s first term, federal budget cuts threatened the continuation of youth program funding from federal grants<sup>78</sup>. Instead of waiting for federal funds to dissipate, Mayor Emanuel transitioned ACFS off of public grants and onto private donations, as described by a frontline<sup>79</sup> employee:

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<sup>75</sup> Information in this paragraph came from interviewees.

<sup>76</sup> Quotation from an ACFS manager who works closely with Mayor Emanuel.

<sup>77</sup> Two interviewees referred to Mayor Rahm Emanuel as their champion, most others implied the sentiment less directly.

<sup>78</sup> Insight from an ACFS manager.

<sup>79</sup> By frontline staff, I refer to ACFS employees who worked directly with youth service organizations to administer programs, a topic I explore later in the section titled ‘Success of the Youth Programs.’

We used to have a CDBG<sup>80</sup> grant. When the mayor became mayor, he moved us—and rightfully so—off of CDBG<sup>81</sup> and onto the city's operating budget because [CDBG funds] weren't sustainable with the sequesters... Even now federal funding has been jeopardized. With our commitment to youth, we have to make sure that there's a constant flow of money.

By shifting ACFS away from public funds, the mayor and his team removed program dependency on federal budget allocations. To replace the funds, he collected hefty private donations, mainly from large organizations and foundations. When I asked an ACFS manager how the mayor secured the private donations, he responded with another question about a recent (and publicly celebrated<sup>82</sup>) donation:

Interviewee: How do we get a big grant from Obama?

Me: Sure. A big, big grant from Obama.

Interviewee: That really comes from—for the most part—relationships the mayor has... to those big ones with big foundations with big wigs. [My department] doesn't even bother reaching out to them because we'd probably just screw something up that the mayor's office was trying to do between the administration, City Hall and these outside groups... If you've got a strong relationship—it's just the way it goes<sup>83</sup>.

ACFS' intake of private donations drastically changed how and to what degree its programs could reach and support young people. Unlike federal grants, private donations came without strict compliance and reporting requirements. As explained to me by interviewees, the private donations came with flexible guidelines, which gave employees more freedom in program expansion and creation. Employees repeatedly expressed gratitude for the dramatic rise in funds, one stating, “if

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<sup>80</sup> The Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) is a federally allocated block grant given to states and municipalities to invest in diverse programs that promote community growth and progress. See more information on CDBG here: “Community Development Block Grant Program - CDBG/U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) | HUD.Gov / U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).”

<sup>81</sup> Verified on City of Chicago website: “City of Chicago :: Community Development Block Grant (CDBG).”

<sup>82</sup> Elejalde-Ruiz, “Obamas Pledge \$2 Million for Summer Jobs.”

<sup>83</sup> To be clear, interviewees never implied corrupt or unethical money flows on the part of the mayor. They did, however, question whether cities with the wealthiest and most connected mayors should have the best youth programs, compared to cities that elect mayors with limited access to generous private donors. This question unearths interesting conflicts regarding youth funding ethicality, which I urge researchers to further explore.

you look at our budget over the last eight years, you'll see just how much local funding has been important to [youth services] ... It's actually pretty amazing." Interviewees made it clear that it was these private funds that allowed the first youth programs to get off the ground.

*Chicago City Government: Service Funder, Not Provider*

In the years preceding Mayor Emanuel's election, ACFS shifted in essence from a direct service provider to a direct service funder. More than offering its own youth programs, ACFS now designs program *initiatives*—youth mentorship, for example—and then funds the businesses and organizations that best advance those initiatives. In the case of youth mentorship, ACFS funds mentoring organizations across the city and holds them accountable to high standards of program quality, evaluation and reporting.

It was the direct service organizations' expertise that allowed the City's youth initiatives to rise quickly and efficiently. Instead of designing, funding *and* providing youth programs, ACFS employees could choose which initiatives would best meet Chicago youth needs, and then assist direct service organizations that wanted to expand and improve their programs. Additionally, by working through non-government service providers, the frontline staff could operate outside slow-moving bureaucracy and support innovation at the service-level.

Pride in the ACFS' function as service funders came from all interviewees, from frontline staff to Administration leadership. By working closely with partner leadership, frontline staffers felt a sense of agency in and responsibility for youth program success. Administration leadership, on the other hand, seemed to associate the ACFS' role as a program funder to a responsibility to inspire innovation in Chicago's youth services See interviewee reflections below:

Frontline Staffer 1: I think a lot of people fail to recognize that we are a funder. We are frankly one of the largest foundations—to utilize that analogy—in in the city of Chicago. We get the job done.

Frontline Staffer 2: As funders... we are pretty badass. Other cities call us; people from other countries visit us about the work that we do and ask about our practices... I was talking and meeting with folks from... the Department of Justice... and they were just like, “you do so much work in Chicago that’s powerful,” and when that was said to me, I was like... “I already knew that.”

Administration Leader: We are the biggest single donor on youth, year in and year out... \$50 million just for youth<sup>84</sup>.... That’s the thing about government: no one can match our scale. It doesn’t mean that we’re the best or necessarily on the cutting edge of new thoughts, although we are trying to do more of that... There’s nobody out there that’s funding more [than us].

I list these employees’ assertions because they reflect interviewees’ overall sense of pride in their work as program funders. By shuffling funds to service organizations—by choosing which programs to promote and coaching them—they exercised discretion and creativity for the betterment of the programs. Language of business-like innovation permeated the interviews, as exemplified by an ACFS leader who said that she functioned “very much like a CEO of a business” as she provides “the vision and direction and strategy” behind ACFS’ work. Later in the interview, this leader told me that she wanted her government to work like a well-run company: data-driven, outcomes-focused, and efficient. Here, one cannot help but wonder if the long-held stereotype of local government as full of outdated, slow-moving bureaucrats would have lost relevancy without the City’s shift in identity from a service provider to a service funder.

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<sup>84</sup>This is an approximate budget of the City’s youth services. According to the City budget from 2018 (City of Chicago, “2018 Budget Overview.”), the Youth Programs Unit received \$50,236,437 in funds.

## SUCCESS OF THE YOUTH PROGRAMS

After the initial rise of the youth programs, ACFS employees needed to find ways of continuing the programs with long-term success. Throughout the interviews, it became increasingly clear that programs would not have thrived and survived without the work of strategic and expert frontline staff, or without the ongoing financial and political support from the mayor.

### *Strategic and Expertise Among Frontline Staff*

Implementation strategies used by frontline staff were most commonly cited as the key to success. By frontline staff, I refer to ACFS employees who work directly with youth service organizations to ensure organizations' compliance with the City's quality, reporting and evaluation requirements. Of the many implementation strategies these employees exercised, the most prominent involved their cultivation of informal partnerships, their timing of decision-making amid political turbulence, and their ongoing research into youth and youth programs.

#### 1. Informal Partnerships and Collaboration

Formally, ACFS partners with direct service providers that receive funding from the City. Informally, frontline staffers build alliances with members of outside organizations and institutions, who served as points of contact, information, resources and support during youth program implementation. It was through these informal partnerships that frontline staff exercised their creativity and discretion for the betterment of the youth programs.

Most informal partnerships involved one frontline staffer and one-to-two employees from outside entities, including non-profits, local businesses, research institutes, public institutions and non-ACFS government agencies. While the specifics of the partnerships varied, they all involved an exchange of in-kind goods that were bound not by funding nor by contract, but by a shared

interest in empowering youth to achieve. For example, one interviewee who worked on the City's youth employment initiatives had long wanted youth participants to receive financial literacy training to learn how to save their hard-earned money. But, she knew that the City did not have the resources to provide the training. Instead she partnered with a non-profit organization that provided financial literacy training. As she explained to me, "we don't pay them. But, in order for them to reach their goals, I help them by giving them access to my youth... then I say to them, 'you handle everything financial,' meaning the logistics of youth participant training." This partnership allowed ACFS to fill a gap in City's services (in this case, financial education) by collaborating with a local partner.

Other members of the frontline staff partnered with larger, more profitable companies in exchange for in-kind support on a greater scale. One interviewee spent years cultivating an alliance with the Chicago chapter of a publicly known international company, which I refer to as Big Partner, to enhance the City's youth employment programs. When I asked him about the programs, she attributed most of its success to her alliance with Big Partner:

A major part to the program being as successful as it is and getting things done [is that] I make relationships with people that are at the top of the game and that just genuinely want to do right by young people... Several [ACFS leaders] are not pleased with the fact that Big Partner does not give us any money. They do not give us any money, but they give me time; they give me resources; they connect me to employers. Their in-kind contribution is just awesome.

In this example, Big Partner's in-kind contribution often took the form of connecting youth to employees, hosting youth events in their downtown offices, and incorporating youth into their own programs. Again, these contributions filled a gap in youth programming that the City could not have on its own. Her appreciation for the in-kind contributions led her to defend Big Partner in the face of City leadership who disapproved of her alliance.

As highlighted in the Big Partner example, frontline employees relied on time and resources provided by informal partners, because time and resources *were precisely what the frontline employees lacked*. One interviewee justified an informal partnership by expressing the impossibility of her job without the partner, claiming “this [youth program] is too much... [management] keeps pushing and pushing... but for my health, I can’t do it... it’s too big of a lift for one person.” Another interviewee seconded this sentiment, telling me how “every time you do something great with so little, [ACFS managers] continue to come back at you and they want more.” Under such demands, the frontline staff had no choice but to find innovative means of yielding strong outcomes—and they did so by cultivating, calling on and defending their outside and informal supports.

Apart from overcoming time and resource constraints, employees also leaned on informal partners when faced with policy and legal inconveniences. For example, when CPS replaced their universal background checks with multiple (and often school-specific) background checks<sup>85</sup>, ACFS, which subsidizes background checks for youth-serving adults in their programs, had to pay for as many background checks per adult as the number of schools youth participants attended. In other words, instead of subsidizing one background check per adult in City-funded youth programs, the City was expected to pay multiple. A frontline staffer resolved this issue by calling employees from the organization that profits off of the background checks, and making a deal. In her recount of the negotiation, she said, “OK, if I give you X amount of business, how much of a discount are you giving me?” because she made it clear that “I’m not paying-- I don’t even know—

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<sup>85</sup> For context, Chicago Public Schools recently replaced its universal background checks with school-specific background checks, largely in response to recent misconduct charges against CPS teachers and staff. Although the details regarding the replacement of background checks remains unclear from the interviews, several interviewees expressed frustration for having to subsidize multiple background checks per every youth servicing adults (depending on how many schools youth participants attended).

\$75? I can't even imagine. I'm not paying that." Instead, she saw an opportunity to make an informal agreement and move forward because "to me, it's not a burden anymore. It's one of those 'ok we gotta do it, let's figure out how we can do it without giving us heartburn.'"

Other interviewees used informal partnerships to overcome smaller, more day-to-day hurdles to program efficiency. Below, I provide two examples of partnerships that allowed frontline staff to achieve their responsibilities without losing time or resources:

Example of legal partnership: as much as our law department is strict with us, we've gotten to the point where if we're very clear on what we're asking for and why we're asking for the most part, we get it, we're able to move it. But it just depends who you get. Right? So, it's what relationships you have with which attorneys and then what relationships with those attorneys have with the other attorneys.

Example of political partnership: he was one of my go-to's at City Hall, which was nice to have because he had access to higher level data that then would [allow us to] tell the story [in our reports], which then allowed us the autonomy to go after other funding... So, it's important to have those allies within the bureaucracy.

As depicted in the examples above, frontline staffers' informal partnerships allowed them to implement the programs despite legal inconveniences and bureaucratic lull, and to skip over political inconveniences that impeded program success.

## 2. Timing and Political Wit

Apart from developing informal partnerships, the frontline staff also timed their decision-making around the ever-changing municipal political climate. They pitched changes to program implementation at the right time and to the right people, and designed youth programs in accordance with newly elected officials' (mayoral or aldermanic) campaign promises. In short, they made strategic, timely decisions to secure the ongoing success of youth services, despite shifting political administrations.

Most employees used timing to overcome challenges associated with the seasonal replacement of elected officials and their appointees, each of whom entered into office with their own priorities, personalities and campaign promises. In order to ensure the ongoing success (and existence) of youth programs, the frontline staffers appealed to officials' egos and timed appeals around moments of political opportunity. When I asked an interviewee how she overcame the intake of new officials who may or may not concern themselves with youth programming, she said:

Timing. Timing is very important. For policy to work, you have a new mayor comin' in. You have no idea who that person's gonna be. Let's say [their] platform is, "I want to build... summer employment." If this person is elected... I come with already-made programs and say "this is yours. This isn't from [the previous mayor]. We can do this and it would be yours." So, timing... when they're in office, finding out when you can meet with the mayor's team, and having some relationship with them so they can say to you, "listen, [the mayor] gonna be really big on X<sup>86</sup>." Then, we go undercover to find where that X program is that got shut down years ago... and see if we can get it back.

This interviewee's insight reveals important nuances to the frontline staffers' use of timing and political awareness. First, they tracked incoming candidates so that they could pitch "already-made" programs that align with the candidates' platforms. As this same interviewee explained, "as time would go on, I would start developing very small programs under the radar, and I would figure out when was the best time to introduce it." Second, they appealed to egos typical of Chicago City officials, claiming "this is yours" in reference to the youth programs that *the frontline staffers, in fact, designed*. Third, frontline staff members felt the need to operate "undercover" when

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<sup>86</sup> The interviewee used 'X' as a filler for possible mayoral priorities.

designing youth programs, and to wait until political leaders aligned with their mission and initiatives.

Each nuance revolved around an implicit need to receive mayoral and aldermanic approval, which hindered employees' ability to design youth programs off of youth needs alone. Instead, frontline staffers had to "create initiatives that the new administration can take part of and be excited about... find something that, you know, may be jazzy." But, interviewees made it clear that designing "jazzy" youth programs required intense tracking of elections, which involved attendance at mayoral forums, community events, and campaign rallies, all during their off time. When one interviewee was explaining how she kept up with Chicago politics, I commented that she always needed to be a step ahead. She agreed:

Interviewee: A step ahead, a year ahead, a month ahead.

Me: [laugh]

Interview: No, it's serious. I'm already thinking about 2020. 2019 hasn't happened and I'm already thinking about 'how are we going to fund us in 2020?' because we're not in the budget yet. And that will be contingent upon the new administration. So that's the part where I don't know. And not to say that there wouldn't be youth [services]—there will always be youth [services]—but you just never know. And I think we have a responsibility to position ourselves and that's what we're doing.

This interview's insight showcases the consequences associated with poor political tracking—the loss of youth funding—and how personally the frontline staff felt such consequences. Because ACFS employees do not secure long-term funding, they feel a "responsibility" to follow mayoral and aldermanic candidates, and to time when and how they will advocate for youth funding. If money for youth programming was not at stake, they would not have to time their decisions around individual candidates and elections. But the money *is* at stake, which influenced what strategies they used to secure long-term program success.

### 3. Expert Knowledge on Youth and Youth Services

Frontline employees rooted their service in their personal connection to, knowledge of, and passion for Chicago youth and families. All but one frontline staff member was born and raised in Chicago, and had careers beginning in teaching, social work, city government or juvenile justice. Most had received postgraduate training in education, psychology or social work. But, it was their direct work with communities—much more than their academic credentials—that informed their everyday decisions and, in their eyes, contributed significantly to the success of the youth programs. As one frontline employee reminded me:

You can't in good conscience—and I'm going to say this loud and clear—in good conscience, you can't sit and think about this work from a theoretical perspective. You have to spend time in community [with] the very people that you're serving. In my world, it's youth... and families.

Apart from the apparent dig at my research and university<sup>87</sup>, several frontline staff shared this pride in community-level experience that allowed them *really know* youth needs. They criticized the hypothetical City employee who did not work “in community,” but came from high ranking universities out of state, and wanted to “sit there and think about things from a more stereotypical perspective.” In contrast, they praised previous leaders who fought for Chicagoans *like a Chicagoan*, saying “there was just something about the woman who was from the South Side [of Chicago] that she just would not back down. And that's like me. I'm born and raised in Chicago. I don't back down.” Although interviewees favored Chicago-grown leaders, they also made it clear that they would respect any leader who had committed themselves to learning from and with

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<sup>87</sup> This interviewee was not the only to disdain academics, who found authority in their elite degrees rather than on the ground experience with families. Several interviewees criticized the impracticality of theoretical studies, and one challenged academics to live one day in her life as a frontline government employee. Overall, these interviewees' disdain reinforced the pride they felt in their acquirement and application of community knowledge.

communities. This was best depicted by an interviewee who warned me, “I’m not saying that folks have to be from the hood or something to do this work, but just understand who are you serving.”

In addition to using community knowledge, the frontline staff kept themselves up to date with the ongoing research on youth development, youth service best practices, and Chicago’s changing demographics. Most interviewees believed that data should inform policy and program decisions on the ground, and mentioned their deep appreciation for research conducted by Chicago universities on the ACFS programs. When I asked one interviewee how she kept up with the data, while balancing her other responsibilities, she responded by positing and answering another question: “how do we keep up with the current trends? We make it our business to keep up with the current trends” (Interview 3). She, like several of her colleagues, told me about her favorite sources, including the Department of Labor, where she studied “what industries are popping up nationally,” I assume for youth employment opportunities. Two other frontline staffers shared their research tactics:

Frontline Employee 1— I mean there's a lot of reading, right? I'm looking at Brandeis University, at Brookings Institute. My counterpart in New York<sup>88</sup>, whatever latest data they have, we share. And I think part of CFE has even allowed us to share the latest research.

Frontline Employee 2— We work closely with the Aldermen offices [and] some of the congressional offices to hear what the needs are of the people.... We work with excellent schools [like the] University of Chicago Urban Labs... and we've done some work with Chapin Hall and UIC. A lot of that informed our work.

As depicted in these quotations, most frontline staffers’ research involved informal data and report sharing with their counterparts in and out of government. Others tracked policy and legislative developments, such as updates to the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and Head Start, so that

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<sup>88</sup> A youth-serving member of the New York City government, I’m assuming within the Administration of Child and Family Services.

they could help service providers meet legislative requirements. In short, the frontline staff made sure to remain experts in the field through their ongoing cultivation of their personal, professional, scholastic and legislative knowledge.

Frontline employees leveraged their expert knowledge to make informed program decision on the ground, as best illustrated by an interviewee who, years ago, noticed that Chicago demographics had been changing, with more young people moving to west and southwest neighborhoods, and even crossing city borders. Believing that “we have to keep up with those statistics,” he went to ACFS leadership and recommended that they change their programs to target and support youth from those neighborhoods. With leadership approval, he spent the following months marketing programs to the South and Southwest Side, and recruiting new youth into the City’s out-of-school<sup>89</sup> programs.

While not every frontline decision found root in hard data, most frontline employees expressed a desire to challenge stereotypes regarding slow-moving local government workers, and believed in the power of informed program implementation. In contrast to Lipsky’s street-level bureaucrats who misused their discretion in the face of resource constraints, the ACFS employees yielded successful youth programs by cultivating informal partnerships with outside organizations, timing program changes around politics and personalities, and developing expertise in contemporary research.

### *Ongoing Mayoral Support*

Earlier in the report, I described how the mayor’s financial and political resources contributed to the rise of the City’s youth programs. But, unlike other government initiatives that die a year or two after their launch, the Chicago youth programs survived political turbulences and

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<sup>89</sup> Out-of-school program include both after-school and summer programs.

grew in scope and achievement. Every year, the programs received more funding and attention<sup>90</sup>, and paved the way for new programs that served different youth needs. When talking about the success of the youth programs, interviewees often mentioned the mayor's ongoing advocacy for the programs, which seemed to follow the following pattern: set ambitious program goals, secure funding to meet those goals, broadcast program successes, repeat.

The mayor's broadcast of youth program successes often consisted of his attendance at City or community events designed to congratulate youth and youth service providers<sup>91</sup>. He hosted several luncheons for the youth, in which he sat at round-tables, heard about their experiences in the programs, and took photos for local publications<sup>92</sup>. According to interviewees, each interaction with youth participants earned him notable attention from both the press and funders, and seemed to feed Chicago's movement to "focus on youth as a strategy"<sup>93</sup> to address other community needs. Soon after press releases met the public eye, the mayor would internally set goals to not only match, but dramatically exceed, the following year's yield. For example:

The mayor really wanted to hire more youth for the summer. So, every summer the goal for the number of youth increased and increased... [one year] he promised to hire 13,000 more youth... But how can you increase the number of youth to hire? Where are the youth?

To better understand the mayor's motivation behind goals like the example above, I asked an interviewee where exactly the mayor's push for more and better youth services came from—public need, community forums, the mayor's ethical preferences, etc.—and he mentioned the news

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<sup>90</sup> Newspapers from Chicago publications and universities announced the success of the youth programs, including but not limited to the following: "Chicago Summer Jobs Program for High School Students Dramatically Reduces Youth Violence." And "News and Blog - One Summer Chicago Youth Quiz Show on Financial Literacy - Financial Education Initiative - Magnetar Capital | UChicago." And "Nearly 200 Students Showcase App Prototypes At Apple; One Summer Chicago."

<sup>91</sup> "City of Chicago :: Mayor Emanuel Closes One Summer Chicago With A Thank You To Youth."

<sup>92</sup> "OSC | Newsroom."

<sup>93</sup> Quotation from interview with ACFS manager.

attention on youth crime during the mayor's campaign, but concluded that "it absolutely came from downtown." Immediately after setting his demands, the mayor's team would get to work securing more funds. Interviewees described how the mayor's team would "reach out to their people that they knew to try to get more funding," for whichever project they wanted to expand. Other employees referred to private funders with nicknames like the "mayor and his people," "the mayor's friends" and "the big wigs." Although I could not find the number or total of donations attributed to the youth programs, I *do* know that interviewees believed them to make up a large portion of the Youth Programs Unit, about \$53.7 annually<sup>94</sup>. While interviewees shared limited details regarding private donations, they seemed grateful nonetheless. After all, it was these funds that made the actuality of Mayor Emanuel's goals possible.

In addition to private donations, Mayor Emanuel also secured innovative means of intaking long-term funding from public-private partnerships. Most notably, he created the City's first funding stream from a home sharing ordinance, in which a certain percentage of every booking at a home sharing company, such as Airbnb, went to the City budget for homelessness services, including youth homelessness. One interviewee who works closely with the mayor called him "quite bullish and creative" in his efforts "to supplement funds that were not growing," meaning public grants for child, youth, family, and homelessness services. Because he could not receive federal or state dollars, he found alternate means to secure the ongoing success of the programs, and to support the employees as they worked hard to put out successful programs.

## CHALLENGES TO EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

Previous sections showcased how expert frontline staff and ongoing mayoral support contributed to the success of the youth programs. Challenges to program implementation also shed

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<sup>94</sup> See footnote 84.

important light onto youth program functionality, and further emphasize the importance of learning about youth programs from the implementers themselves. Below, I articulate some of the most common barriers to success, including pressure from political leaders, data scarcity and under-evaluation, and a “capacity gap” between youth needs and youth services.

### *Challenge One - Political Pressures and Expectations*

When asked about challenges to youth program implementation, almost all interviewees mentioned the extreme and constant pressure from the mayor’s team to meet his program expectations. Many had stories of “dropping everything” to respond to mayoral requests, which usually took one of two forms: dramatic expansions to youth programs or launches of new programs entirely. Regarding the former, one interviewee recalled an instance in which the mayor wanted 13,000 more youth to enroll in a summer employment program than the previous year. At the time, ACFS did not have the funds to enroll more youth, so frontline staff and unit leadership stopped everything, got on the road, and started campaigning for donations:

The mayor really wanted to hire more youth for the summer. Every summer... the goal for the number of youth increased and increased and increased. And if you don't have the money every year, how can you increase the number of youth to hire? So that's why... they had to go on the road and get more money, because we needed to. If he promised to hire 13,000 youth, we needed to get the money to be able to hire 13,000 youth.

In addition to expanding the youth programs, employees also had to implement new programs handed to them from the mayor’s office without blueprints or instructions. Interviews told me how, in these instances, “it’s our responsibility to figure [the new program] out... we’re the behind the scenes people that folks don’t realize. We’re the ones that push out the work that folks think about theoretically... without understanding the logistics of it.” Similarly, other interviews described how the mayor would ask them to plan and host publicity events with only a few weeks’ advance.

Orders like these often came from the mayor's team, who told ACFS leadership, who told Unit leadership, who told frontline staff, who looked at each other and said, "put aside whatever it is—your daily things—that you do. Put it aside because we have to work on this project. Everybody has to rally... we have to get it done."

To be clear, not all expansions to the youth programs nor launches of new programs were initiated by and only by the mayor's team. Interviewees exercised significant agency in youth program implementation and were often consulted by ACFS leadership before accepting the mayor's demands. That being said, pressures from the mayors' office took serious tolls on the people I interviewed and pushed some to the brink of quitting. One interviewee recalled a particularly affecting story, in which she and a coworker had to take on a responsibility that they could barely manage:

The City said, "you're going to do centralized payroll," and I thought, "you didn't even think about how comfortable we are working with numbers." It wasn't "can you do this?" or "do you want to do this?" No, it was "you're gonna do it." And the two of us, we have really high work ethics and we said "fine" because we can't let the young people down. And we literally worked seven days a week for four weeks... After that was over, I told everybody that I'm not doing centralized payroll ever again, and if you ever ask me to, I'll quit.

This interviewee's story highlights an important detail regarding mayoral demands: no matter how onerous, employees usually swallowed and accepted them, and found ways to make them happen. Their passion for youth services and duty to their communities inspired them to overcome individual weaknesses—in this case, "working with numbers"—in order to provide quality program for youth and their families. Unfortunately, this employees' hardship did not end with payroll. Another top-down demand pushed her to confront management once again, this time claiming that "for my health, I can't. I can't. I'm going to apply for something else within the

City—within your Department—to prove to you that I will leave.” For what it’s worth, this employee received some relief from management, however the mayor’s pressures to put out more and better programs continued to impede frontline employees’ ability to do their jobs well.

### *Challenge Two - Data Scarcity and Under-Evaluation*

While top-down pressures posed serious challenges to implementation success, ACFS’ lack of comprehensive and shareable data inhibited interviewees’ ability to evaluate, recommend and improve the youth programs. Before diving into these challenges, it is important to note that interviewees’ characterizations of ACFS’ systems were scattered and inconsistent, revealing discrepancies around what data ACFS *actually* collects, where they store it and how they use it. In my analysis and recommendations, I do my best to resolve these discrepancies.

ACFS seems to collect a large portion of its data through its public-private partnerships with direct service providers and research institutes. Direct service organizations submit data to ACFS through requests for proposals (RFPs), which typically include information on the organization itself and on youth participants. Research institutes and universities, on the other hand, share data collected from studies on ACFS programs. Only one interviewee mentioned ACFS’ financial relationship to the research institutes, suggesting that the City funds some studies and not others.

Outside of public-private partnerships, ACFS also works with government agencies and public institutions to share data on youth and families. Details around these intra-government data-shares held the most discrepancies among interviewees. For example, one interviewee told me that ACFS works closely with CPS and CPD to share data on youth involved in the juvenile justice system, but two other employees complained that CPS rarely shares its data with other government

agencies. Regardless, interviewees seemed to agree that ACFS at some point used CPD data in order to target programs to youth involved in the juvenile or criminal justice systems.

Interviewees made it clear that ACFS' data from private and public partners is often incomplete, outdated and non-sharable for the purposes of ACFS youth programming. Not every direct service organization submits the same information in their RFPs, and research institutes focus on narrow variables over a short period of time and often over a small sample size<sup>95</sup>. CPS' data is always a school-year behind, which inhibits analysis of program impact on youth in the present. Further, public agencies like the CPD and CPS do not always collect information on the same youth and, if they do, privacy guidelines internal to CPS prohibits full data transparency. With so many gaps in the City's data on youth, interviewees looked to census data from 2010, which does not account for shifts in Chicago demographics over the past nine years.

While incomplete data posed problems to understanding youth demographics, incompetent *data systems* made large-scale program evaluation nearly impossible. Interviewees often complained about the City's multiple database systems that could not share or merge information between them:

We have maybe three or four different [data] systems and they don't all speak to each other... because what someone in [the Youth Programs Unit] may need is not the same thing that someone in [Fiscal Unit] may need.... But then, when we get projects from the mayor's office, they'll ask for both of these things to somehow marry.

Later in the interview, this employee explained to me how, over time, different ACFS units updated their databases at different times, which has resulted in ununiform data storage systems. The system's inability to transfer data to each other—to “speak” to each other—prevented employees

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<sup>95</sup> See studies from footnotes 3, 4 and 7, as well as the following studies: “Chicago Summer Jobs Program for High School Students Dramatically Reduces Youth Violence.”; “Penn Study: Summer Jobs Seem to Lower Teens’ | UChicago Urban Labs.”

from completing the simplest of tasks, such as counting how many youth are involved in City programs:

Right now, as it stands for each program, people have a different username and password to go into that particular database and enter information. But, none of those databases talk to each other. So, if I wanted to run a report and—say I wanted to know how many youth are being served across the [Youth Programs Unit]—I would have to go into [each youth program]’s databases, and pull information from all of those systems because not all of them talk to each other.

For context, this employee’s Unit has several youth initiatives—employment, enrichment, and prevention/intervention—each of which its own youth programs. Here, she was not trying to learn how many youth are involved in programs across all City departments, or across ACFS but rather how many youth participate in *one Unit’s* programs.

Barriers to data sharing and communication became most problematic when employees needed to understand and evaluate youth program success. Several interviewees recalled instances in which they could not generate content requested of them from research institutes or government agencies. Others expressed frustration around ACFS’ program evaluation process, claiming that there are “a lot of people who have an interest in [serving youth],” but that the City does not have “rich data to make really good recommendations.” Despite the ongoing grievances regarding data storage, application and evaluation, most interviewees stressed the importance of putting out evidence-based programs, and of using data to inform and improve upon their programs in the future. Their wishes for more evidence-based programs showcased their disappointment in the City’s lack of data technology, without which they could not use data to improve program design.

Unfortunately, the employees’ grievances regarding data collection and evaluation are not Chicago-specific. Many local, state and federal governments lag behind the private sector in terms of data-use and technology. Interviewees told me how counterparts in other city and state governments were expected to generate and store masses of public information, however worked

with antiquated data systems that inhibited most forms of innovation. One interviewee shared her frustration with the lack of technological innovation in U.S. governments at-large:

Government systems are struggling to be able to be responsive. We are one of the most technologically advanced societies on the planet, but yet people in governments are just getting email. The databases we have look like they were created in the 1980s. You can't run reports. People are utilizing excel spreadsheets to keep track of different data points. It's that kind of environment that we are expecting people to do more with less.

This paradox—inept government databases within a technologically advanced country—resolves itself only in the context of government funding. The cost required to upgrade data systems nationwide is close to incomprehensible and, as one interviewee described to me—political suicide: “I need to raise, let’s say, \$20 million to get a new database system for the City to be able to serve people better. Folks would be up in arms! Like, “what do you mean... what’s that going to help anybody?” Throughout the interview, this employee continued to tell me about the her failed attempts to pull more City funding, which she attributed to a lack of public support and political incentives.

### *Challenge Three – “The Capacity Gap”*

Close collaboration with direct service organizations posed daily problems for frontline employees. Several frontline staffers described their typical work days as “putting out fires” set by leaders from direct service organizations, who struggled to meet ACFS’ compliance and reporting requirements. In consequence, frontline staffers spent hours each week on the phone with organization leaders, walking them through RFPs and other City protocols, providing technical assistance, and offering emotional support to balance the stress of running a business or non-profit and partnering with the City. Interviewees regularly implied that some partners would not have

met the City's requirements without the ongoing support from frontline employees, a problem a Unit manager called "the capacity gap":

There is a pool of young people who need help... or want to access services. And then separately there is a pool of organizations and people who can provide those things. Now, within that pool of organizations and people who can provide those things, there is a smaller pool of people who have the business sense and the business processes in order to do that. There is a big difference between people who want to do a nice thing and people who are running an organization that allows them to do that nice thing through the construct of a nonprofit... And those... smaller and smaller pools are what I call the capacity gap.

Herein lies the third most common challenge to successful youth program implementation: the gap between youth service needs and youth organization capabilities. Dozens of non-profits in Chicago provide services specifically for youth, however very few have the resources, personnel, and business skills needed to provide those services successfully over time. As a result, Chicago hosts limited community leaders that "are able to have a functioning organization, have the desire to do good work, *and* can actually do good work." To compensate for service providers' lack of business sense or experience, frontline staffers had to invest significant time and energy into helping providers improve their programs, meet City requirements and run their organizations.

Apart from overwhelming frontline employees' schedules, the partners' lack of business training and experience had serious consequences regarding ACFS mission and priorities. Most interviewees expressed a passion to connect youth to both "mom and pop shops" and "big wig companies," however distrusted some of the smaller, more local organizations to make good use of City funds. While mom and pop shops may provide niche, well-intended services to youth in their direct communities, they may also struggle to "take on the stress of additional resources." As one interviewee informed me:

Many a nonprofit will go under in this year because people think “because I want to do good stuff, that means that I don't need to understand that I am also running a business.” So, if people don't have a background in nonprofit management, they don't understand that they need to have some sort of operations in place. They don't have the people within their network to help them to run their operation... and too often doing the good thing is not necessarily the same as doing the best operational thing.

In short, the capacity gap forced frontline employees to make a decision regarding the City's youth programming: to fund small community organizations that provide intimate services but require significant attention from ACFS staff, or to fund large organizations that provide quality programs but are in less need of City funds. More often than not, employees found an in-between, in which they could support both.

## **DISCUSSION**

Data results showcase the importance of studying youth program implementation from the street-level implementers themselves. Without sitting with the ACFS employees, asking about their day-to-day circumstances, and inquiring about their challenges, I would not have acquired such detailed insight into how and why the Chicago youth programs succeeded. I also would not have understood what the ACFS employees needed to do and be in order to keep the programs afloat despite time, resource and political constraints. Moving forward, researchers should consider City government employees valuable sources of youth program information and communicate employee insight to youth policy decision-makers.

Before deriving my own recommendations from the interview findings, I want to draw attention to ACFS' recent efforts to enact the very type of youth program change my report recommends: change informed by the City government employees who know and implement the programs on the ground. In 2016, ACFS rewrote its mission, vision, goals and priorities into a

‘New Plan of Action,’<sup>96</sup> which combined frontline staff insight with ACFS leaders’ desire for innovation. Below, I briefly explore ACFS’ New Plan of Action because it serves as a real-world example of a City translating employee insight into youth program changes and improvements.

The New Plan of Action began in 2016, when ACFS leadership recognized room for improvement and, instead of making top-down change, collaborated with employees from all levels of City government. As described by the interviewees, ACFS leaders spent months visiting every Unit, inquiring about their strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for innovation. They then used the Units’ insight to rewrite ACFS’ mission, vision, goals and priorities. Over the next few months, Units spent in-office meetings and weekend get-aways brainstorming how they wanted to incorporate the New Plan into their own programs and operations.

The ACFS leaders I interviewed suggested that the Youth Programs Unit took particularly well to the New Plan. After years of growing in scope and achievement, they needed time to reflect on their services and think critically about their goals for the future. As described by an interviewee:

[After the rise of the programs,] the [Youth Programs Unit] never reset themselves. This effort really drove them [to say], “okay, we need to reset.” They finally thought about [questions like], “what is our focus? What are we trying to do?” and they realized that they weren’t really structured the way they needed to be... They were one of the couple of units that really went through a total reorganization and realized “ok, we’ve got three different groups of services” and... created goals for those particular groups.

Frontline employees generally agreed with this interviewees’ sentiment, and felt that the New Plan gave them the space and opportunity needed to reflect on their success and plan for the future. Even more importantly, the New Plan allowed frontline employees to articulate their challenges

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<sup>96</sup> Employees referred to the transformation using a different name. I use ‘New Plan of Action’ to preserve their anonymity.

to ACFS leaders and expect concrete plans for improvement. For example, the New Plan included means of collecting more comprehensive data on youth programs, particularly through its RFPs from direct service providers. Additionally, the New Plan works to mitigate the capacity gap through a tactic called ‘active contract management.’ At its most basic level, active contract management allows ACFS to include in its contracts with service providers certain youth program guidelines and requirements. More specifically, active contract management allows ACFS to have control over program quality, as depicted in the following example offered by an ACFS leader:

If you go back to mentoring... the randomized controlled trial proved that there were five promising practices that should be included in all the best mentoring programs—things like dosage, things like a curriculum. So... when we write the RFP for mentoring [organizations], we can say “no matter what your model is”—BAM does their stuff in schools... somebody else might have a chess club, somebody else might do afterschool health—“these are the five promising practices that you should incorporate into your model, whatever it may be.” Because we believe those five practices lead to the two outcomes we're going to track and... the contracts need to support that.

Here, active contract management strives to fill Chicago’s capacity gap by demanding that direct service providers prove that they meet youth needs through evidence-based practices that produce measurable results. Lastly, regarding frontline employees’ challenges around political pressures and expectations, the New Plan calls on the Youth Programs Unit to design their own programs proactively. As one ACFS leader explained to me:

We stopped being in a mode of sitting and waiting on the mayor’s office to call us with a problem. We started to talk to them like, “here is a problem that we think we can help address” or “here is an opportunity that we see.” We are trying to shift the dynamic... We will always need to be able to be responsive to an elected official... But to be 75% in react mode—that’s not healthy. So, we tried to shift that... in a perfect world, we would flip it and be 75% proactive.

While none of the interviewees seemed to imply that they were now in 75% ‘proactive mode,’ they did acknowledge that they were moving in the right direction. Instead of being told what services to fund, what goals to achieve, and how to relate to partners, the Youth Programs Unit was given the opportunity to reimagine its programs and decide how they wanted to grow as a service funder.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

The ACFS New Plan of Action demonstrates how frontline government employees can inform youth program improvements to inspire more efficient, evidence-based and proactive services. In what remains of this report, I make my own policy recommendations which, like the New Plan, are directly inspired by insight and instruction from ACFS employees. At the end of each interview, I asked employees what could be done to make their jobs easier. Their suggestions compiled into the following categories: data standardization and ongoing evaluation, city employee and partner training, updated background checks for youth and youth-serving adults, and additional City funds to hire more frontline staff.

### **RECOMMENDATION ONE – DATA STANDARDIZATION & ONGOING EVALUATION**

Considering employees’ challenges to data intake, storage, sharing and evaluation, the City should renovate its database systems and require more rigorous evaluation of its youth programs. Regarding database renovation, the City should invest in a universal system for its government offices that can easily share data with public institutions and research institutes. By replacing the multiple and non-communicatory systems with a single system that operates within all City government offices (including ACFS and CPD) and can communicate with non-government institutions (including CPS and universities), ACFS could collect more comprehensive youth data

and use the data to track program achievements. Next, ACFS should require that a small team of frontline staff and managers from the Youth Programs Unit evaluate its programs using data collected from youth service providers and research institutes.

Additionally, I suggest that the universal database system come with a City-wide policy that encourages data-sharing between agencies. Several interviewees expressed a desire to provide more comprehensive services to youth and families with diverse needs. But, they had no way of knowing whether youth in their programs had also been touched by CPD, Immigration Services, the ACFS Homelessness Unit, etc. When I asked a Youth Programs Unit manager how to promote transparency between City agencies, she suggested the enactment of a City-wide policy:

It's a slow process to work out a data share agreement, even with a sister agency like CPS. I think [we need] an overarching policy that really makes... that process easier and encourages it... there are times when partners are resistant to giving us data that would be helpful to us. And if you've an administration saying, "no Sister Agency, we want this shared between City partners,' that would be helpful.

Without knowing the intricacies behind the City's data privacy laws, however, I cannot suggest a detailed account of what such transparency policy would entail. But, I *do* know that a data-sharing policy would not bring significant advancements to the youth programs if ACFS does not also modernize its technology at its most basic level. Most frontline employees complained about their office's poor internet connection, pointing out that "the City of Chicago downtown offers free Wifi but a City [government] building does not." Another employee told me how "our phones can go faster than our office computers," and how they cannot download apps or programs that would help them streamline daily responsibilities. Thus, for data standardization and information sharing to work, the City would need to invest into its overall technological equipment.

The sheer number of City government offices would, however, raise the up-front cost of database renovation remarkably high. Several interviewees doubted that the City would ever invest into new database systems without the political will and public support needed to do so. Instead, they suggested that ACFS partner with an outside organization that could manage its data for them, claiming that: “the city itself—really any government entity by itself—is never going to be able to answer or to address the database question... I think we need to be figuring out some public-private partnerships that... could be brought to bear to answer all [our database questions]. This interviewees’ cynicism, while rooted in his decade-long service in government, does not seem to get at the root of the City’s data problem. Interviewee complaints about the data systems reached far past ACFS and the Youth Programs Unit, and required a full-City database technology renovation. Given the enormous advancements an updated database system would inspire, I recommend that the City find the will and resources to install a single and operationally apt system across its diverse government agencies.

## RECOMMENDATION TWO – CITY EMPLOYEE AND PARTNER TRAINING

Almost all frontline staff described their typical work days as “putting out fires” set by direct service organizations that struggled to meet the City’s budget, program and reporting requirements. To prevent future fires, I recommend that both ACFS employees and leaders from direct service organizations receive training on how to be in partnership with each other.

Training for direct service providers should include how to abide by ACFS voucher requirements, design and manage budgets, collect youth data, and input youth data into ACFS’ database systems. The training itself could take several forms: online modules, in-person coaching from City staff, in-person coaching from an outside organization. Online modules would save City

employees time away from in-person coaching, but not provide the in-person or interactive learning that may would enhance participants' learning of complex material. In-person coaching from an outside training organization, on the other hand, may inspire more in-depth learning, but require that the City allocate even more funds to youth-serving Units to pay for the trainees. Also, the outside training organization would need access to the City's databases (insofar as they need to understand the systems to teach them), which may violate data privacy laws, as suggested by the interviewees.

Based off of my time with the employees, it seems that training for direct service organizations would have to come from ACFS employees themselves. As those with the most direct knowledge of and access to the databases and contract requirements, they know exactly what leaders from services organizations need to do to be in partnership with the City. Further, ACFS would not need to pay an outside organization to provide the training or design the modules. But, the City would have to find ACFS employees who had time to conduct the trainings—a heavy ask for an already overloaded team. Regardless, I am compelled to believe that a formal, one- or two-time classroom instruction from ACFS employees would relieve partners' need for on-call assistance, and consequently save ACFS time in the future. Additionally, during these training, City staffers could set harsher punishments for service organization's non-compliance, which may also prevent future mishaps.

The final component of direct service training should involve at minimum an introduction to youth service best practices. Returning to the capacity gap, interviewees regularly came across direct service providers who cared for youth and families, however lacked the business sense or youth-services training to put out quality programs in the long-term. While two interviewees

recommended that partners receive introductory business and youth service training from the City, another suggested that colleges and universities should carry the burden:

Partners] usually have the background in working with young people, but I don't think there's an actual certification. I think only one university in Chicago has a bachelor's degree in youth development.... Some studied psychology or sociology, some ended up working at the YMCA or the boys and girls club... but we probably need more classes that universities can offer on youth development, on creating after-school programs, on working with young people, on being a role model and mentor. I don't know if that will be exactly a class but maybe some workshops.

While the creation of youth development or youth mentorship degrees does not fall directly under the realm of public policy, this interviewees' insight sheds important light onto critical youth service questions that need to be answered: what qualifications do people need to work with youth? Is their passion for youth achievement enough or should they also understand youth cognitive and social-emotional development, as well as research-proven best practices? Satisfying answers to these questions require future consideration, however I am inclined to believe that City partner training should at minimum include an introduction into youth development and youth service best practices—knowledge that may come from ACFS employees, but more likely from trained professionals from colleges or workforce development agencies.

Apart from direct service organization training, ACFS frontline employees also recommended they themselves be trained on how to be in partnership with the organizations. Several employees felt that they or their colleagues inadequately understood the City's database systems, which inhibited their ability to coach service providers on data management and input. Other frontline employees felt a general confusion regarding their individual goals and responsibilities, because they were expected to wear too many hats at once: technical assistance providers, business management coaches, sources of emotional support, etc. From the outside, this

confusion seems to find root in ACFS' overall shortage of frontline staff, but I nonetheless suggest training for frontline employees to learn how to manage their busy schedules and assist direct service providers.

### RECOMMENDATION THREE – UPDATED BACKGROUND CHECKS FOR YOUTH AND YOUTB-SERVING ADULTS

In every interview, I asked ACFS employees what policies complicated or impeded their day-to-day work. While managers typically listed policies around funding, over half of the frontline employees I interviewed mentioned the exclusive background checks for both youth program participants and youth-serving adults. Made plain, exclusionary background checks for youth barred young people with juvenile or criminal records from employment opportunities. Background checks for youth-serving adults, in a similar vein, prevented individuals with criminal records from joining direct youth service organizations.

To address the exclusionary background checks for youth, the City of Chicago should weaken clearing requirements for teens and young adults seeking employment. In light of the Ban the Box campaign, policy actors should secure other means of determining a young person's readiness or virtue, such as school attendance or participation in Chicago's youth programs. One interviewee justified such alternatives by situating youth's behaviors in context:

[The criminal record] doesn't really speak to the character or the integrity of the person. It's just like "I had to do this... to provide for myself and provide for my family. It doesn't say who I am. It's just something that I had to do when times are tough and tight and I don't know where else to turn."

As suggested by this interviewee, some of the city's most in need youth may have been touched by the juvenile or criminal justice systems. Similarly, the City should weaken clearing

requirements for adults who want to work with through direct services organizations. As one interviewee told me, staff in the City’s intervention services “tend to be folks with backgrounds because they’re the ones that are doing the best mentoring.” To compensate for more lenient background checks, the City could ask adults to undergo a more rigorous interview process. I mention interviewees’ background check recommendations not only because I agree with their general purpose and implications, but also because they provide a real-world example of what policy actors can learn by asking City employees *what they need* to do their job well and to empower youth to achieve.

#### RECOMMENDATION FOUR – CITY FUNDING FOR MORE FRONTLINE STAFF

My final recommendation calls upon the Chicago City government to hire more frontline staff in its youth-serving departments. Interviews with ACFS employees exposed the fundamental role of frontline employees in implementing the youth programs, as well as their shortage of resources, personnel and support. If the results of my report have not made clear the value of hiring more frontline support, the following quotations from should do the same:

Frontline Employee 1: I really do think management needs to say “these are the three things... that you're supposed to be working on... This next step is tier two—you do it when you have time. And this third tier is if you have time after tier two, but you can drop it off.” No one will say that to me. Because I can't drop anything off.

Frontline Employee 2: In order to really effectively help, I feel like, honestly, there are certain [initiatives] that I focus most of my time on because of the fact that it’s just me. I can’t really help every [initiative] out the way I would like.

ACFS Manager 1: The work remains very, very intensive and the [Youth Programs Unit] is small. They are probably—actually no, I won’t say probably—they are *really* not big enough for all that we ask them to do.

ACFS Manager 2 – Maya and Maria<sup>97</sup> grind on [Summer Program], which is an insane job for two people. Everybody helps obviously, but between Maya and Maria, they run the program. It's just... insane.

In short, the frontline employees I interviewed overcame significant challenges to success, and took on heavy roles for the sake of the youth programs. They exercised discretion in the face of time, resource and political barriers, and managed to make use of every dollar allocated to them from private donations. They developed innovative means of partnering with outside organizations, timing their decisions amid political administrations, and developing expertise in youth program research. Moving forward, policy actors should learn from Chicago's youth programs and design policies that empower City government employees to serve youth.

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<sup>97</sup> Maya and Maria are pseudonyms for two frontline employees.

## APPENDIX

### A. Consent Form

#### UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPATION

Study Title: BA Thesis for the Public Policy Department  
Principal Investigator: Dr. Chad Broughton  
Student Researcher: Mia Greco  
IRB Study Number: IRB18-1451

I am a student at the University of Chicago, in the Department of Public Policy. I am planning to conduct a research study, which I invite you to take part in. This form has important information about the reason for doing this study, what we will ask you to do if you decide to be in this study, and the way we would like to use information about you if you choose to be in the study.

#### Why are you doing this study?

You are being asked to participate in a qualitative research study about the role of female city government workers in implementing youth policies and programs in Chicago. The purpose of the study is to reveal important nuances in the servicing of at-risk youth in Chicago through interviews with on-the-ground professionals.

#### What will I do if I choose to be in this study?

You will be asked to describe your roles and responsibilities within city government. You will be asked about the strategies you've used to reach and support minors through your position in government. Most importantly, you will be asked about your relationship to public policy (your policy knowledge, how you enforce policies, how you are expected to implement policy).

Actual verbal consent will then be obtained during the day of the participant's study visit, prior to their beginning the interview. Participants will be informed that their decision to participate, or not participate, will not affect their employment within city government

Study time: Study participation will take approximately between 1-5 hours total. Each interview will take 40-70 minutes, and participants will not be interviewed more than four times.

Study location: Participants will be asked to participate in a confidential one-on-one interview with me in a private location within the City of Chicago Department of Family and Support Services (1615 W. Chicago Ave.). For employees from other Chicago departments or other cities, interviews will be conducted over the phone.

I would like to audio-record interviews to make sure that I remember accurately all the information you provide. I will store these tapes on my UChicago Box account and secure them using two factor authorization. Only I will have access to the tapes. If you prefer not to be audio-recorded, I will take notes instead.

What are the possible risks or discomforts?

To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life. If you feel emotional or upset when answering some of the questions. Tell me at any time if you wish to take a break or stop the interview. You may be uncomfortable with some of the questions and topics we will ask about. If you are uncomfortable, you are free to not answer or to skip to the next question.

As with all research, there is a chance that confidentiality of the information we collect from you could be breached – we will take steps to minimize this risk, as discussed in more detail below in this form.

What are the possible benefits for me or others?

You are not likely to have any direct benefit from being in this research study. This study is designed to expose the critical and unique role of female city government employees in reaching, supporting and protecting minors. The study results may be used to help other people in the future.

How will you protect the information you collect about me, and how will that information be shared?

To minimize the risks to confidentiality, we will store all data with encryption on UChicago Box (a secure server) and access the data via password-protected computers. The crosswalk between the generic identification numbers that the participant will be assigned and their real name and contact information will be stored in a password protected, encrypted electronic file on Mia's password-protected computer. This crosswalk will be permanently destroyed no later than September 1, 2020. De-identified transcripts of interviews will be kept indefinitely.

Results of this study may be used in publications and presentations. Your study data will be handled as confidentially as possible. If results of this study are published or presented, individual names and other personally identifiable information will not be used. A pseudonym will be used to protect your identity, unless you specifically request that you be identified by your true name.

If we think that you intend to harm yourself or others, we will notify the appropriate people with this information.

Financial Information

Participation in this study will involve no cost to you. You will not be paid for participating in this study.

What are my rights as a research participant?

Participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to answer any question you do not want to answer. If at any time and for any reason, you would prefer not to participate in this study, please feel free not to. If at any time you would like to stop participating, please tell me. We can take a break, stop and continue at a later date, or stop altogether. You may withdraw from this study at any time, and you will not be penalized in any way for deciding to stop participation.

If you decide to withdraw from this study, the researchers will ask you if the information already collected from you can be used.

Who can I contact if I have questions or concerns about this research study?

If you have questions, you are free to ask them now. If you have questions later, you may contact the researchers at [miamgreco@uchicago.edu](mailto:miamgreco@uchicago.edu) or Mia's cell (614)-456-9822.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, you can contact the following office at the University of Chicago:

Social & Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board  
University of Chicago  
1155 E. 60th Street, Room 418  
Chicago, IL 60637  
Phone: (773) 834-7835  
Email: [sbs-irb@uchicago.edu](mailto:sbs-irb@uchicago.edu)

B. Interview Questions:

1. To start, could you please describe your role in the office for me?
2. How did you get into this field? What drove you to work for city government?
3. What training or education did you receive to prepare for this position?
4. Please describe your typical day in the office for me.
5. What major projects, programs or policies do you work on?
  - a. Probe: Have you worked on One Summer Chicago, for example? Or the Mayor's mentorship program?
6. What is your favorite part of your job?
7. Does anything ever stand in the way of you doing your job?
8. What makes your work easier?
  - a. Probe: For example, office leaders, sense of community, office efficiency protocols, self-care, etc.
9. I've heard that a lot of child welfare offices have significantly more female employees than male employees. Does that seem true in your office? If so, does the male-female ratio impact your job in any way?
10. Now we are going to talk some more about policy. I've been thinking a lot about how city government workers become policy experts, and I'd love to ask you about your experience with youth policy here in Chicago. Please let me know if any of my questions are unclear and I'll try to explain them in a better way. To start, are there any city, state or federal policies that you deal with at work on a regular basis?
  - a. Probe: for example, any child protective policies, youth employment policies, or family welfare policies?
11. How much is policy on your mind when you're doing your daily work?
12. Did you receive any policy-specific training to earn your position?
13. Who writes the policies you implement, and do you know or interact with them?
14. What do you think about the Mayor's Mentorship Program? One Summer Chicago?

15. Does your work with youth policies or programs change with changing political climates or administrations?
16. After considering your answers to previous questions, how would you characterize your relationship to public policy?
  - a. Probe: how do you deal with policy?
  - b. Probe: how often do you have to deal with it?
  - c. Probe: Is policy important to what you do every day?
17. Lastly, what brings you to serve Chicago youth and families in this way?

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