

STEP **SOLUTIONS TOWARD ENDING POVERTY**

CHICAGO POVERTY SUMMIT 2020

Introduction

[The Chicago Poverty Summit](#), held on Feb. 20, 2020, served as a launchpad for a series of coordinated strategies across the city and brought local and national attention to the challenges of poverty and economic hardship in our City. The day aimed to create a shared understanding of the magnitude of the problem, how we arrived at this point at a city, and highlight successful strategies to move people out of poverty and into the middle class. Mayor Lori E. Lightfoot asked all attendees to join her – to be part of a new movement that will work together, across the city, to make Chicago a hub of anti-poverty and economic mobility innovation.

The following document captures highlights from the Summit. For more information, to receive updates on and to participate with the STEP agenda, [visit the City of Chicago's website](#).



Visual Presentation: What Poverty Looks Like in Chicago

Amanda Williams, AW|Studio



Artist [Amanda Williams](#) kicked off the summit asking the audience of stakeholders and policy influencers a critical question: “What if?” She began her introduction with very clear statements about poverty: **“Poor people are not a condition. Poverty is a condition.”**

“What I do know is art, and what I do know is the South Side,” she said as she shared works of art reflecting the complexities of low-income communities. The reality of poverty in Chicago is that it’s an uneven experience, she said, where many are struggling to survive and others continuing to thrive. Williams highlighted the various symptoms of poverty – educational environments disappearing, white flight to the suburbs and displacement, \$3B lost to restrictive covenants.

Williams encouraged attendees to reimagine what is familiar. She shared a story of how she used art to reimagine how wealth and land could be distributed differently in the City of Chicago and encouraged attendees to start asking more “What if?” questions. *What if we change the landscape of where certain conversations are had? What would it mean for Englewood to truly take part of the dollar lot system?*

She closed her introduction with a compelling reminder that reimagining a new approach may not be completely unrealistic, adding “What if we had a policy summit that opened with an artist instead of a policy maker?” Which is exactly what happened.

- **Key Quotes**
 - “Impoverished human beings are evidence of people not trying hard enough.”
 - “What color is poverty? - It’s redlining, white privilege, negro removal.”
- **Resources Referenced**
 - [The South Side, Natalie Moore](#)
 - [Color\(ed\) Theory, An Art Installation by Amanda Williams](#)
 - [Dorothea Lange’s - 1979 Magazine Cover “Migrant Mother”](#)
- **Next steps suggested**
 - We need to begin to reimagine and re-envision Chicago by asking more “What if?” questions and then continuing to do the work to make that vision come to fruition.

Introduction of Mayor Lori E. Lightfoot

[Chancellor Michael D. Amiridis](#), University of Illinois at Chicago



Welcome from Mayor Lori E. Lightfoot

Mayor Lori E. Lightfoot began by emphasizing that this summit is the “first but not last” convening on poverty and that the roots of this issue historically run deep and have citywide impact. Citing the 17-year life expectancy gap between a black and a white neighborhood as an example, the Mayor stressed that poverty is impacting families in Chicago at an astronomical rate and that there are too many families who do not have enough to survive.

The Mayor acknowledged that the government has to take accountability for being a cause—a driver—of these conditions. Now is the time, she said, to deal with the stark reality of how too many families are living.

Lightfoot highlighted the areas that she plans to address — job creation, lowering the costs of living in poverty – from unwinding the cycles of fines and fees that strip wealth from mostly black and brown families to stopping water shut-offs due to an inability to pay to, increasing income, to improving health to seeding and nurturing wealth creation.

“I am putting my name on the line,” Lightfoot said, committing to putting her political capital behind addressing this issue. She reiterated that addressing poverty and economic hardship in

Chicago requires a collaborative effort and a community-centered plan offers a new vision for economic growth in the city.

The Mayor ended by saying that the point of the summit is for learning and sharing ideas from thought leaders who know “what works” and that though the work won’t end today, she believes that Chicago can be a beacon for this issue for cities around the country.



Important Statistics

- 1 in every 5 Chicagoans live in poverty
- 1 in every 10 live in “extreme poverty”
- 76% of CPS students depend on their schools for meals during the day
- 4.5% (16,000) CPS students are homeless
- There can be up to a 17-year life expectancy gap between a predominantly black and predominantly white neighborhood.

Goals For Reimagining Economic Growth

- Job creation
- Focus on entrepreneurs and businesses
- Close the life expectancy gap between people living in black and white neighborhoods
- Unwind the fines and fees that have kept cycles of poverty going

Key Quotes from Mayor Lightfoot

- “We cannot be great as a city when our neighbors are suffering. We must conquer this in our generation, in our time, and we must start now.”
- “Chicago government has a history of exacerbating poverty and must be at the forefront of the solution.”
- “When is the last time a Mayor asked residents what their vision for the city is? Today, we as a city are going to start a journey of asking this question.”
- “We are going to reduce the cost of living in Chicago. We are going to grow quality jobs that you can actually support a family on and ensure that black and brown people actually get those jobs.”
- “We have the tools and the know how to be a beacon for this issue.”

StoryCorps Audio Listening

[StoryCorps](#)' mission is to preserve and share humanity's stories in order to build connections between people and create a more just and compassionate world. StoryCorps provided audio stories to illustrate first-person experiences living in poverty.

Story #1 - Roger Thompson | A Safe Haven resident shared his experience with homelessness.

[Listen to Roger's story](#)

“We're like seeds, when we are nurtured we blossom just like those flowers.”

Roger Thompson had a few hardships in his life. He was incarcerated, struggled with alcoholism, lost a few family members and friends and became depressed. Since his mother died while he was incarcerated, when he was released, he was homeless for 3-4 years. He describes sleeping in abandoned buildings and on the subway trains, before being able to take solace at A [Safe Haven](#). He later began working for A Safe Haven and describes how his life changed dramatically. He talked about how having resources and support uplifts people in need.

Bearing Witness to How We Got Here: an account of our history in Chicago



Elizabeth Todd-Breland,
University of Illinois at
Chicago
Carlos Tortelero, National
Museum of Mexican Art
Adrienne Alexander, AFSCME
Claude A. Robinson, UCAN

University of Illinois Professor, Elizabeth Todd-Breland, offered a 15-minute history lesson of Chicago to introduce context to the panel. In her words, “Today we live in a deeply inequitable city” and she credited economic disparities to the historical exploitation of this land from indigenous communities at its founding. Professor Breland’s history lesson gave an in-depth breakdown of Chicago’s history from white settlers exploiting and selling indigenous land, to its massive growth of over a million people by 1890, to massive immigration to the city by European, African and Latin American immigrants and Black Americans from the South to the discriminatory policies that paved the way for education inequality, housing disparities, displacement and segregation, acknowledging even current issues including the building up of downtown at the expense of Black and Brown communities on the South and West sides of Chicago. She ended by recognizing the resilience of many vulnerable communities and their ability to “survive with joy.” She offered that to undo this treacherous history requires a massive new investment and requires government and social movements to have an ethics of reparations and redistribution of wealth.

The panel of experts then discussed the importance of addressing poverty in Chicago as an issue, how to tackle it and the ways that poverty is experienced differently across demographic lines.

- **Key Takeaways**
 - **Impact of Poverty on Families:** The impact of poverty goes beyond economic instability. Families are also traumatized by poverty that can lead to health symptoms such as hypervigilance, hyperarousal and reduced immune systems.
 - **Jobs In the Public Sector:** Government jobs were vital for people of color creating a ladder to the middle class. Strengthening the pipeline for K-12 students into training for trade careers can help increase the number of people of color in public sector jobs.
- **Resources Referenced**
 - [“Souls of Black Folks”, W.E.B. Dubois](#)
 - [“Invisible Man”, Ralph Ellison](#)

StoryCorps Audio Listening

[StoryCorps](#) provided an additional audio story to share voices and lived experience on the topics of poverty and housing.

Story #2: Stephanie and Pamela | [Listen to Stephanie and Pamela’s story](#)

The second story shared the exchange between two women working for CHA while also living in public housing.

Stephanie Thompson describes how difficult it was to afford housing when minimum wage was \$4.25, even though at the time her rent was less than \$500/month. She was hesitant about moving to “the projects” but says she learned that public housing was the best thing that could have happened for her. She shared how her life continued to get better after she was able to live in a more financially stable environment.

Pamela Fairley expanded on her experience in public housing discussing how difficult the transition was to move out of that environment because there was little education and resources. For example, she described that she didn’t know about paying for gas and electricity separately and then her utilities were disconnected. They both agreed that what they learned through their experiences have helped them better serve in CHA.

Panel: What do we know works?

What does the evidence say about changing the trajectory? What do we know works when rolling out a municipal policy agenda? Nationally-recognized academic experts discussed the number of different actions it takes to move people out of poverty.

Moderator: Erika Poethig, Urban Institute
Ariel Kalil, University of Chicago
Luke Shaefer, University of Michigan
Jocelyn Fontaine, Laura and John Arnold Foundation
Marci Ybarra, University of Chicago



Erika Poethig, from the Urban Institute, introduced the panel by acknowledging that it's important to address poverty from an intersectional lens.

"The burden of poverty has many layers," Poethig said, and explained that in order to fully address the problem, those layers need to be pulled back. The panel then proceeded to address different layers that poverty impacts varying communities and experiences – including immigrant families, people embedded in the criminal justice system and parents with young children.

By the end of the panel, there was consensus that there are too many unnecessary barriers facing people who are experiencing poverty preventing them from getting the resources they need. They also agreed that a part of moving forward needs to be innovation in thinking, including not relying on a "big vision" to work towards but determining small changes that can be implemented regularly to ensure progress.

Keynote Address

[Dr. Michael McAfee, Policy Link](#)



Dr. Michael McAfee delivered a spirited keynote address that engaged attendees around how they can take ownership over the work that needs to be done to see the change in economic disparities that they desire.

“What you all are setting in motion is some of the most powerful work in the nation,” Dr. McAfee said, highlighting how the Mayor’s approach centers the most vulnerable and most important people. However, Dr. McAfee warned that the work could “dissolve to charity” if people are not committed to their outcome and their soul is not in the work. He provided some suggestions on how this journey could be handled differently.

- Asking - Is your soul in this work and do you love ALL Chicagoans? If not, find a different line of work.
- Asking - How will you use yourself to enact a different possibility? How will you stop being afraid of being disruptive?
- Getting clear about the work that you are trying to do.

Dr. McAfee reminded attendees that it’s not about having a grant to get the work done or jumping back into research but about getting into transformative collaboration with communities and being willing to “struggle together.” Dr. McAfee wrapped up by saying that this can be a “moment to win” because the Mayor has set the table for this work to exist without hiding behind words like “race” or “equity.” Instead, this is the time to evolve capitalism, work in partnership with each other and commit to using power and privilege to show up for communities to usher in a world that is fair and just to everyone.

Policy Agenda review

Daniel Lurie, Chief of Policy, Office of the Mayor at City of Chicago



Chief of Policy Daniel Lurie opened by emphasizing that addressing poverty for the City of Chicago is fundamentally about growth and upending the “trickle down” approach. Additionally a collaborative approach with communities and incorporating intersectionality is critical.

The Four Pillars of the STEP Policy Agenda are as follows:

- Reduce the expenses and costs of being poor
- Increase quality jobs
- Improve health and life expectancy – closing the up-to 17-year life expectancy gap between majority white and black neighborhoods.
- Foster wealth building

Lurie also emphasized that the goal of STEP is to showcase and uplift other issues/ideas in addressing poverty in Chicago and participating in a citywide engagement project. However, what is most urgent on the city’s agenda is for full city-wide participation in the 2020 census to ensure that federal dollars help to support these initiatives.

Afternoon Breakouts: Big Problems Require Big City Solutions

Facilitators: [Hearken](#)



Small-group discussions centered around the following topics: **Access, Equity, and Resiliency**. The participants created groups of 5-10 to discuss the following questions:

- What people, organizations or movements in Chicago are already working to address this topic [Resiliency, Access or Equity] that everyone should know about or lift up?
- What people, organizations or movements working outside of Chicago that's doing work we can learn from to address this topic [Resiliency, Access or Equity]?
- What's one step toward solutions on this topic [Resiliency, Access or Equity] that you can picture happening in the next two years, if there was unanimous support and sufficient resources?

The breakout sessions concluded with a call to make a personal commitment. Participants wrote a postcard to themselves around what they feel they can commit to doing around ameliorating poverty. If you'd like to have a breakout group discussion like the one had at the Summit, we have provided this [toolkit](#) to print out and use. If you'd like to see the commitments generated and make your own, head to the [STEP site](#).

Mayor Lightfoot and Darryl Holliday in conversation

Darryl Holliday, City Bureau



City Bureau Director and journalist Darryl Holliday jumped right to the point with Mayor Lori E. Lightfoot, asking "Why this issue? Why now? And why are you the right person to tackle this?"

The Mayor responded, “Because we’ve waited too long and I’m afraid we’re going to lose another generation of kids.” The Mayor pointed to the plight of children living in economic hardship throughout the interview, noting that the stress of poverty in childhood has dire long-term consequences.

In response to Holliday’s questions, the Mayor also noted that collaborating with organizations already doing this work will be critical to moving the needle on these issues. “Too many people are working in silos. Too many people are competing for grant dollars. This can’t be about chasing the next grant,” she said.

Mayor Lightfoot emphasized that what is different about this initiative is a sustained collaborative commitment and the building of an infrastructure that will exist beyond her tenure as Mayor. Some of the goals the Mayor hopes to see in a year included:

- Growth of small businesses
- More community spaces for intergenerational conversations
- The next phase of fines and fees reform implemented
- More robust infrastructure + skills training for people reentering into society after incarceration
- Unlocking the potential of CHA and housing options

The Mayor is open to new and innovative ideas to lift people out of poverty, including work that the City is not yet positioned to try at city-wide scale such as cash transfer programs that give low-income residents cash to help them make ends meet. She stated that she has questions about how a program such as a universal basic income effort would work and needs private sector partners to use UBI pilots and smaller-scale investments to explore everything from operational and administrative questions to how such programs will support strengthening the social safety net. She spoke of wanting Chicago to be a place where bold new anti-poverty projects can be tried, and noted that no public official is universally loved, and that “There are always going to be critics. My desire is to make a difference in the quality of people’s lives.”

Closing Remarks from Mayor Lightfoot



In her closing remarks, Mayor Lightfoot said that an initial goal of this gathering had been accomplished, which was to get people to start saying the “p-word;” that is, “poverty.”

She expressed her gratitude for all involved, and provided this reminder: Chicago is a great city filled with wealth and resources, and by devoting time and talent to addressing poverty, we can make change.

The Mayor concluded the day looking toward Chicago’s future: the city’s children:

“I am committed to doing this in a fundamentally different way. To break down barriers that people can live the life the Lord intended for them to live. That we can look into the lives of children and see unbridled joy knowing their city loves, embraces and celebrates them.”

Next Steps: to keep up to speed on the STEP agenda, share your insights and your commitments to working to end poverty in a generation, participate on [the City’s website](#).