

CASE STUDY

# Green Justice for Chicago: A Community-Based Approach to a New Green Learning Agenda

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# About the New Green Learning Agenda Project

As we find ourselves in a kaleidoscope of efforts, strategies, and actors in pursuit of results-oriented approaches to tackling the climate crisis and achieving a just transition, we are alarmed by the inadequate attention to the education and training required to support meaningful and sustainable actions in the short-term and to seed deep systemic transformation in the long-term.

This project aims to address this gap by organizing the richness of perspectives not always invited to green economy decisionmaking tables. In doing so, this project aims to empower the actors in the education and training ecosystem to identify actions toward building a New Green Learning Agenda. This agenda will serve as a vision for education and training in a climate-impacted world that ensures the transition to the green economy is inclusive, diverse, and just, centering the needs and experiences of environmental justice communities and climate vulnerable populations around the globe. This report is the second report of two.

The first report, *Education and Training: An Opportunity to Achieve a Just Transition to a Low-Carbon, Socially Inclusive Economy*, illuminates the extent and scope of postsecondary education and training investments needed to achieve a just transition in the U.S. The report maps the landscape of green jobs, green skills, and green learning opportunities with an eye toward understanding how gaps in these landscapes intersect with issues of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. The report also provides recommendations to postsecondary institution leaders and education decisionmakers to direct future U.S. climate policy attention toward more transformative investments in education and training.

This second report is the byproduct of a collaboration between Unbounded Associates and place-based research partners in Hawai'i, Chicago, and Kentucky. Together, we explore community-driven approaches to closing green learning opportunity gaps from a variety of voices across three case studies: from community-based organizations to workforce training program alumni and from faculty and administrative staff of postsecondary institutions to students of community and technical colleges. This report synthesizes insights from these actors and cases on the paradigm shift required among postsecondary institutions to unlock their potential as both community-based actors and community-serving actors. The report also offers a set of recommendations for postsecondary institutions to co-define with community-based organizations a New Green Learning Agenda that can enable a just transition that serves the needs of historically marginalized populations in their surrounding communities.



# Introduction

**For the past few decades, community leaders, allies, and some governmental officials throughout the Chicagoland area have fought to address environmental injustice within communities of color. Fighting for clean air and green space in the name of combatting environmental racism and community disinvestment, neighborhoods throughout the city and in some suburban areas have slowly begun to see improvements. But there are continued battles and ongoing environmental injustices that have resulted in racialized violence, the perpetuation of anti-immigrant and white supremacist policies, and actions targeting communities of color.**

*I think that if universities want to be part of the just transition, they need to have radical standards for how they're going to get to just transition. And they need to be able to name themselves as responsible and take action steps.*

Alma, Little Village Environmental Justice Organization [LVEJO]  
Focus Group, 08/15/2022

In these battles, the historic lack of engagement by universities and community colleges adds to the disadvantages these communities face. If Chicago is to achieve a just transition, it must solve the systematic racism entrenched in urban planning, policy, and city investments—and not just as they relate to education and training. Postsecondary institutions ought to play a transformative role in engaging communities, strengthening transformative skills to tackle environmental racism, and enabling advocacy across the city and nearing suburbs, and promoting green learning opportunities that build a breadth of green skills, including those to tackle systemic discrimination. The relationship between postsecondary institutions and communities of color in Chicago is even more critical as greater attention to environmental justice and the pursuit of a just transition by federal and state policy has created more incentives for collaboration and partnership.

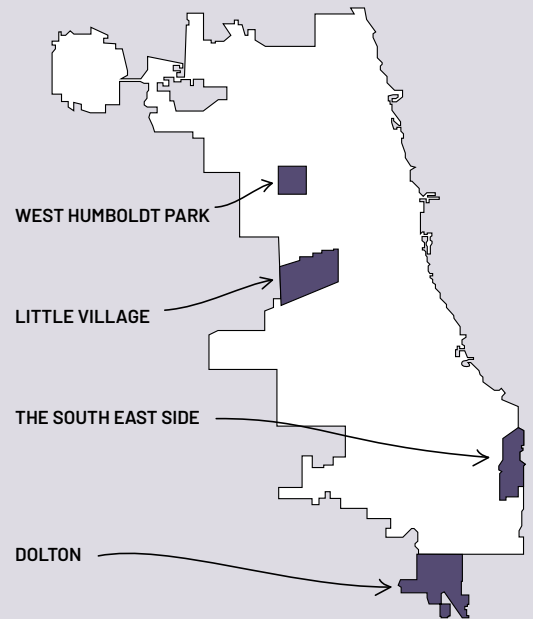
In this case study, for postsecondary institutions, we attempt to shed light on the social, political, and

economic dynamics that must be accounted for in any attempt to define or implement a New Green Learning Agenda in Chicago that advances a just transition. Through the course of 6 months, our Chicago research team, Green Justice for Chicago (GJ4C), worked collectively to identify common narratives of key community stakeholders when it comes to the cost of neglecting the intersectionality of green learning and historic environmental injustice. Through individual and focus group interviews, we documented the experiences and educational recommendations of local community organizations, entrepreneurs, community leaders, and alumni of a solar certification program, to capture how educational institutions can better serve communities of color in support of a just transition and environmental justice.

This case study focuses on three Chicago communities and one surrounding suburb. The following narrative captures the ways in which community stakeholders talk about systemic racism, unethical leadership, and the way community-based organizations (CBOs) have filled critical gaps in green learning opportunities impacting their neighborhoods. Based on these insights, we then provide three community demands that, if acted upon, could help postsecondary institutions better support a New Green Learning Agenda in Chicago.

# Context

**Our study took place in four communities of color within the Chicagoland area's 77 official communities and a nearing suburb:** The South East Side of Chicago; West Humboldt Park; and the Little Village Neighborhood, also known as South Lawndale and La Villita; Dolton, Illinois.



## The South East Side of Chicago

The South East Side of Chicago is located 13 miles south of downtown Chicago between the Calumet River and the Illinois-Indiana state line. The neighborhood has a park on Lake Michigan, Calumet Park, and a forest, Eggers Grove Forest Preserve. The South East Side neighborhood also holds an industrial corridor that houses factories that produce pollution, emissions, and other contaminants that affect the residents in various ways. Over 75% of the population of the South East Side of Chicago is Latinx, and only 30% of the population has some postsecondary education (Table 3).<sup>1</sup>

**Table 3.** Demographics for The South East Side of Chicago

DEMOGRAPHICS	TOTAL
<b>Population:</b>	<b>41,422</b>
Latinx	75.8%
White	12.6%
Black or African American	4.8%
Asian American	1.6%
Other	5%
<b>MEDIAN AGE</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Educational Attainment:</b>	
Less than high school (HS)	53%
HS Graduate	10%
Some College	10%
Bachelor Degree	15%
Graduate Degree	5%
<b>MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME</b>	<b>\$51,256</b>



**West Humboldt**

West Humboldt is the area west of Sacramento Boulevard.<sup>2</sup> Many residents have low incomes and are working class. Historically, residents and property owners in West Humboldt Park are known for organizing to address problems and enhance the livability of the area. In 1995, they incorporated The United Blocks of West Humboldt Park (TUBOWHP) to a) establish and maintain an open line of communication with government agencies and other neighborhoods, and b) provide an open process by which all residents may involve themselves in the affairs of the neighborhood. Approximately 75% of the population is either Black or African American or Latinx, and 45% of residents have some postsecondary education<sup>3</sup> (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Demographics for West Humboldt

DEMOGRAPHICS	TOTAL
<b>Population:</b>	<b>79,704</b>
Latinx	→ 51.8%
Black or African American	→ 25%
White	→ 8.9%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	→ 2.1%
Asian American	→ 1.7%
Other	→ 6.9%
<b>MEDIAN AGE</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Educational Attainment:</b>	
Less than HS	→ 40%
HS or equivalent	→ 10%
Some College	→ 15%
Associate Degree	→ 5%
Bachelor Degree	→ 10%
Master Degree	→ 5%
Professional or Doctorate Degree	→ 10%
<b>MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME</b>	<b>\$42,735</b>

**Little Village**

Little Village, or *La Villita*, is located in South Lawndale and has a long history of the community asserting its voice. For example, in 2001, mothers and other community members came together in a hunger strike at Camp Cesar Chavez<sup>4</sup> to demand a new high school, fighting until leaders agreed to build the Little Village Lawndale High School in 2005. In 2012, the Crawford Coal Plant, which had been in operation since 1924 and the source of pollution (along with other nearby industrial factories), was successfully shut down after nearly 20 years of community organizing efforts.

**Table 5.** Demographics for Little Village

DEMOGRAPHICS	TOTAL
<b>Population:</b>	<b>71,399</b>
Latinx	→ 80.8%
Black or African American	→ 13%
White	→ 5.5%
Asian American	→ 4%
Other	→ 3%
<b>MEDIAN AGE</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Educational Attainment:</b>	
Less than HS	→ 41%
HS or equivalent	→ 32.6%
Some College	→ 12.2%
Associate Degree	→ 3.4%
Bachelor Degree	→ 8.4%
Professional or Doctorate Degree	→ 2.4%
<b>MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME</b>	<b>\$33,612</b>

However, the plant was soon replaced by a warehouse purchased by Hilco Global, then leased to Target which brought hundreds of diesel-fuel trucks to the neighborhood a day, contaminating the air from a different source of pollution. Today, Latinx represent 80% of the population, with Mexicans as the dominant ethnic group, many of whom identify as working-class laborers.<sup>5</sup> *La Villita* is also home to the largest single-site county jail in the nation, currently housing over 5,000 male (92.7%) and female (7.0%) inmates.<sup>6</sup> Of these, 73.7% are reported to be Black or African American and 15.7% Latinx. Just over 25% of the population has some postsecondary education (Table 5).

**Dolton**

Dolton, earlier known as Dolton Station, is a village in Cook County. It has historically been known as the agricultural center of Chicago, producing potatoes, asparagus, cabbage, onions, sugar beets, eggplants, and lima beans.<sup>7</sup> Today, Dolton is a suburb of Chicago, located just west of the Interstate 94 expressway and immediately south of the city limits. Approximately 92% of Dolton’s population is Black or African American and more than 52% of the population has had some postsecondary education (Table 6).<sup>8</sup>

**Table 6.** Demographics for Dolton

DEMOGRAPHICS	TOTAL
<b>Population:</b>	<b>21,080</b>
Black or African American	→ 92.1%
Asian American	→ 23%
White	→ 5.2%
Other	→ 8%
<b>MEDIAN AGE</b>	<b>36.7</b>
<b>Educational Attainment:</b>	
Less than HS	→ 1.8%
HS Graduate	→ 28%
Some College	→ 34.5%
Bachelor Degree	→ 12.1%
Graduate Degree	→ 6.1%
<b>MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME</b>	<b>\$50,237</b>



# Key Findings

**As postsecondary institutions consider how they might implement a new green learning agenda in Chicago, stakeholders must respond to the unique social and economic challenges communities are facing with climate change, environmental racism, and a lack of green learning opportunities for a just transition. We identified narratives around systemic discrimination, unethical leadership and accountable businesses, and unsustainable educational programs, and highlighted how community stakeholders talk about the impacts of each on their neighborhoods.**

## Race and Racism: Drivers Behind Disinvestment in Chicago's Communities of Color

Historically and across the country, Chicago is known to be one of the most segregated cities in the United States. Over the last century, political and cultural forces have created clear lines of division between racial groups. Through these boundaries, racism is evident in communities of color. Its members are aware of the impact this has on how the city has financially disinvested in communities based on race and proximity to the downtown area. For example, Efrem from Blocks Together, a social and welfare organization located in the West Humboldt Park neighborhood, expressed his concerns about the historical, economic, and educational differences between Black and white communities in Chicago.<sup>9</sup>

Reflecting on his experiences as a Black man living in a predominantly Black community, he argues about how racism and white supremacist ideology dictate the ways their communities experience disinvestment, materializing as a lack of resources to support the improvement of their living conditions.

*Now that shit [food] got pesticide, you don't know where it came from. Resources [housing, jobs, health care, education] cut, and the ones that's left [... are] the leftover resources. I've never thought*

*about it, how fucked up left over resource [are,] but it's the shit that they don't want.*

Efren, Blocks Together, 08/04/2022

In calling out the way that resources are not equally distributed to communities of color, Efren points out deeply held feelings of animosity and injustice as well as an acute sense of social division and exclusion. If postsecondary institutions are committed to a just transition, then they must acknowledge and address the deep history of inequities of housing discrimination, food insecurity, joblessness, and underresourced schools across Chicago's neighborhoods.

## Chicago Policies and Politicians: Extractive Relationships Between Government, Private Sector, and Communities of Color

A second emerging theme focuses on the history of experiences with unethical leadership, both at the corporate level and in particular with Chicago elected leaders. This focus has given participants a strong sense of conviction that there must be stringent policies to hold politicians and other officials accountable for the environmental health and well-being of its residents. For example, Luis from the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO) expressed concern about the environmental injustices that continue to be produced by large corporations and the rise in health concerns in his neighborhood.

*Believe it or not, there's a lot of these companies are causing the people in my neighborhood [to] suffer from cancer, asthma, and heart disease. As a matter of fact, my neighborhood has one of the highest child asthma rates in the whole city, which is no surprise, given that 40% of land is dedicated to industry. It's crazy too that right next to the Unilever company, which is a huge manufacturing company that distributes throughout the Midwest region, or*



*even throughout the nation—it's literally next door to Zapata Elementary.*

Luis, LVEJO, 07/28/2022

Luis pointed to the ways in which large corporations settle in communities of color and willingly contribute to producing harmful pollutants.

Participants also spoke about how particular policies have been leveraged to create equitable metrics for investing in the community and also to empower the community to hold politicians accountable. For example, Karla from Blocks Together and Valentina from South East Environmental Task Force (SETF) spoke about how policies impact how city politicians determine and influence decisions made, all while helping community members understand disparities and the impact policies hold for neighborhoods.

Karla argued around the significance of budgeting and understanding the impact financial contributions have on whether or not communities can thrive. Community members need to understand how the city operates.

*The more people understand how money works, and, how cities and departments operate, the more they begin to understand how the city prioritizes [decisions.] Shit, they can't lie to you, right? 'Cause numbers don't lie. So, you're gonna tell me youth matters, and you fucking only put \$50,000 in the city budget on youth development? What the fuck you talking to? That [investment] doesn't show me that right? So, at the core [what we want is for people to] understand numbers, understand budgets, and understand who dictates how this stuff moves.*

Karla, Blocks Together, 08/26/2022

Furthermore, Valentina explores the possibility of creating equitable policies that impact how zoning ordinances are approved or denied in neighborhoods of color.

*So, if I were mayor, I would um, create some equity [around] land use and zoning policies. [...] We don't need to be holding sulfuric acid here. We're making tons of concrete because they're building these massive skyscrapers in the west loop. If they want all these super expensive state-of-the-art things in the west loop, then they're gonna get a cement factory over there right next to them. Why does it have to be halfway across the city in this really poor community?*

Valentina, SETF, 07/28/2022

Valentina's account of how she would advance political change through policy stands in stark contrast to that of elected leaders and business leaders. And Karla's account of city financial decisions demonstrates what seems to be most concerning for residents. That is, leaders, especially politicians, who may purport to have the best interest of the community at heart, cannot be trusted. And because of these repeated betrayals, suspicion towards good intentions must be held as there may be an ulterior motive that is not always obvious. During a focus group interview with LVEJO, Gabriela conveys her disappointment after discovering that city mayor Rahm Emanuel, who helped LVEJO close the Crawford Coal Plant, lied to the community about his interest in dismantling the coal plant. He had not disclosed accepting money from the corporation, Hilco Global, which eventually purchased the plant in *La Villita*.

*Before he was even elected, Rahm Emanuel actually got money from Hilco. And so, then it made me think, well, why did Rahm Emanuel help us shut down the coal power plant? He had already gotten money from Hilco. So, that deal had probably already been in the works since before Rahm Emanuel was in office. It makes me really angry to think about the hold that corporations have on politicians. [...] We were thankful for the fact that this mayor was helping us advocate to shut down the coal power plant. But what was his agenda? I don't think we knew that he had accepted money until years after we started digging into the Hilco stuff. And so, I think we probably wouldn't have been so welcoming of Rahm Emanuel had we known that he had gotten money for that same site.*

Gabriela, LVEJO Focus Group, 08/15/2022

This example illustrates how a politician and business used a critical environmental issue (shutting down a polluting coal plant in *La Villita*) for their own benefit and financial gain. But adding salt to injury, the new occupant of the coal plant has refused to honor the voice and autonomy of residents and community leaders who fought to close the former occupant. Gabriela goes on to share additional information about Hilco's leadership position in the Chicago Police Foundation and how this further entrenches a system of harmful practices by corporate leaders and politicians that sustains an extractive economy, low-wage jobs, and unhealthy neighborhood conditions, making a just transition impossible.



Caption: Former Crawford coal plant in Chicago.  
Photo credit: Miguel A. Saucedo

*The fact that the CEO of Hilco is also the director of the Chicago Police Foundation [means] we're adding this whole other layer of policing, right? The police already have 40% of our city's budget held hostage. We have no fucking resources. We don't have a community center here in our community, but we bring the second-highest tax revenue to the city. That's extraction, right? That's obviously what we're trying to move away from when we're thinking about just transition. [It] is moving from the extractive economy in which we're in right now to a regenerative economy where we're not only thinking about our money, we're thinking [of] a person as a whole. That's how I see it. That's how I view it.*

*Of course, te quiero conseguir un trabajo [I want to get you a job]. Of course, I want you to work, but does your job [at Hilco] pay you above living wage? Do you have health insurance? Are you going to be cool if you have a kid that gets sick? Can you leave, [or] are [you] gonna have to find a new job? And thinking about the person as a whole and thinking about the community as a whole too—what Hilco and a lot of these corporations have been doing has been complete bullshit at the cost of our health, at the cost of having no type of development, at the cost of having Cook County Jail, and not have a community resource center.*

Gabriela, LVEJO Focus Group, 08/15/2022

## Environmental Justice: Holding Health and Wellbeing at the Center of a Just Transition

The pursuit of a just transition in Chicago—and therefore any approach to green learning that postsecondary institutions might pursue—must include that institutions have knowledge of and be fully willing to understand the city's history of racial geographic segregation, housing, and environmental injustices. They need to know the negative impacts of these racial and geographic disparities on the people in these communities.

### Impact on health disparities

Raul and Luis from LVEJO describe how geographic discrepancies translate into health discrepancies through environmental racism, putting into perspective how the pursuit of a holistic just transition is entwined with the pursuit of environmental justice.

*Environmental racism occurs through the use of zoning in urban planning to place toxic facilities in communities of color, disproportionately impacting communities of color across the country. It also historically goes back to the original colonization of the Americas and the destruction and degradation of indigenous environments.*

Raul, LVEJO, 07/29/2022

*Environmental justice means being allowed to breathe in good air, and being in a space where your health is not being jeopardized, especially in Black and Brown communities. That's something we don't really have. We suffer from a lot of air pollution, bad water quality, and it's awful.*

Luis, LVEJO, 07/28/2022

Sofia, a staff member from LVEJO, shared her vision for supporting environmental justice campaigns. According to Sofia:

*LVEJO has been a part of the cleanup right where La Villita Park is now, a formally known Superfund site that not only was causing a lot of air quality concerns but also urban flooding concerns, [which] were a public health risk because a lot of those neighbors were highlighting that they were having rashes in their arms and their feet and their legs, based on*

*the sewage that was being brought back up to their homes. [...] Another legacy campaign would be the shutting down of the Crawford and Fisk coal plant. That was a 10-year campaign that highlighted the vast amounts of neighbors that we've lost both in Little Village and in Pilsen to premature deaths because of the coal ash being emitted.*

Sofia, LVEJO Focus Group, 08/15/2022

Carlos, an LVEJO alumni, points out how simply cleaning the streets and having green space is symbolic of what all communities across Chicago deserve.

*And right away something as simple as that [cleaning the streets and creating green space], is only every day deeply appreciated by the communities that we do these projects because they can see that we're trying to clean up and make the area better. And that just creates a domino effect where people just feel better around seeing green spaces. Southwest and South and Southeast communities deserve as much as the North side does and the North Shore.*

Carlos, LVEJO Alumni, 07/14/2022

## Impact on zoning and economic disparities

As a continuation of the ways in which the northern and southern parts of the city present significant divides, including disinvestment in small business, housing, and green space, community members like Valentina discussed how the process of gentrification, aided by zoning policies, have contributed to the co-location of less affluent communities and polluting industries.

*And on the map, you can see on the south and north side of Chicago that all those neighborhoods that are Black and Brown are dominated by industry, crusher scrap yards, and hazardous waste. And that's not a coincidence. The city laws and rules and policies influenced that. And so, you see communities like Lincoln Park getting zoned back in the day for industry very similar to the southeast side.*

*And you see as more investments are getting put into place, as the community is getting gentrified and whiter, that the city will overnight, under [the guise of] laws [and] administration, [begin to] zone those neighborhoods. And where did the*

*industries go? They concentrate them on the south and [less affluent] north side of Chicago.*

Valentina, SETF, 07/28/2022

Residents are acutely aware of gentrification pushes investment and resources—in this case, symbolized as green spaces and skyscrapers—into wealthier communities in the city while locating investments into polluting and hazardous industries in communities of color. Ernesto a Solar Alumni and Brayton from Blocks Together describe this phenomenon even further.

*Those [the factory on Pulaski] are our skyscrapers. Those are like the landmark where you know where your neighborhood starts and where your neighborhood ends. So, it starts on California [Avenue] and it ends at Pulaski [Road]. That smokestack would let you know, hey you're already in a different neighborhood.*

Ernesto, Solar Alumni, 08/07/2022

*Like we got pollution, we got like a lot of abandoned buildings, a lot of empty spaces.*

Brayton, Blocks Together Focus Group, 08/04/2022

Given the historic legacy of environmental racism among communities of color in Chicago, any pursuit of a just transition must be pursued simultaneously with environmental justice. In this context, opportunities for green learning are as important as opportunities for community well-being and health.

Economic disinvestment not only impacts the health of communities of color and their surrounding natural environments, but it also impacts “who” has access to postsecondary education and training opportunities for the green economy. Census data shows how within the more affluent northern parts of Chicago, there is more access to higher educational attainment compared to demographics reported on the less affluent southside of the city.

Furthermore, residents within the communities of this case study expressed the visible differences between the North and South neighborhoods of Chicago and how these differences are symbolic of being left behind or excluded from access to resources, including those within postsecondary institutions.

## Community-Based Organizations: A Key Actor in a Just Transition Education and Training Ecosystem

The cost of neglecting green learning in the coming years will translate into the further stratification of the green workforce into high-paying jobs versus cheap labor. The testimonies from community residents, alumni from solar training programs, and leaders of CBOs demonstrate the need to fight for resources and investment to advance green learning campaigns, programming, and services to train residents of low-income and communities of color in green jobs. In this regard, participants shared the need for workforce development agencies and postsecondary institutions to partner with and fund CBOs to implement education and training programs in communities of color throughout Chicago to prevent the further economic exclusion of their residents. This is especially the case for vulnerable populations like those living in food deserts, with a high number of returning citizens, and/or with gaps in green learning and employment opportunities.

Importantly, participants also stressed that for efforts to partner with CBOs to be successful, workforce development agencies and postsecondary institutions must lean into CBOs' prior knowledge of their communities, especially the challenges and realities that residents are navigating. Referring to a student survey that was conducted by Blocks Together in the West Humboldt Park neighborhood to understand the job-seeking experiences of youth, Karla explains the connection between youth unemployment, violence, and the need for survival.

*I think it was like 500 students that they [Blocks Together] surveyed about getting summer jobs. [They found that] less than 5% actually got those jobs [that they applied to]. But out of those same [students], almost 70% already had had some interaction with money, making money on a hustle.*

*So, we know that money is the biggest driver of the violence in our community. But yet we're not bringing in anything to really financially sustain our children. Or even people that are coming back out [of incarceration]—we're working [in an area that has] a high percentage of returning citizens, but we're not putting anything in place for them to become financially independent. [We've] analyzed a lot of these crimes as crimes of survival. [If you] take the need to survive out, we would be the fucking*

*most calm-ass neighborhood in the fucking world. There's this need to provide people with holistic support. And it's not just about the jobs—because there has to be an understanding that if there's not a culture of work, throwing jobs in the neighborhood is not going to work.*

Karla, Blocks Together, 08/26/2022

Here, Karla draws attention to the dangers of designing and implementing green learning or green jobs programs without an understanding of the challenges communities are facing. CBOs play an important role not only as implementers but as stakeholders who hold critical knowledge of community needs and, therefore, community solutions that heal. Ignoring this will mean neglecting a just transition.

Notably, CBOs point to the need for those in power, such as corporate leaders and politicians, to stand in solidarity with community members rather than perceiving efforts to support and empower them, especially returning citizens, as charity. CBOs play a critical role as the amplifier of individual voices and the appropriate platform to implement the training and learning opportunities for the green economy.

*When given the tools, you decide you have agency. And I think that's part of that humanization respect—that you're [seen as] a whole person. You may be in different situations. And I think that's the notion of solidarity, not charity.*

Karla, Blocks Together, 08/26/2022

## Sustained Educational Programming: The Need to Invest in the Long-Term

While most of the interviewees that participated in LVEJO solar training/certification programs reported good experiences and had gained a general understanding of the solar field, many students wished there were follow-up programs that could expand on more specific solar topics and offer advanced degrees. However, students were also aware that the lack of sustained educational programming was a result of LVEJO not being sufficiently funded to provide additional training for students. To effectively address the green skills gap, key actors need to develop and implement a holistic approach to green skills development.



*There's just so many things that deal with solar technology that can be beneficial for these programs to expose the trainees to. For example, about the different levels of skill required for different [jobs] in the industry. There's just a ton to do. The more advanced courses will be very beneficial after learning the basics.*

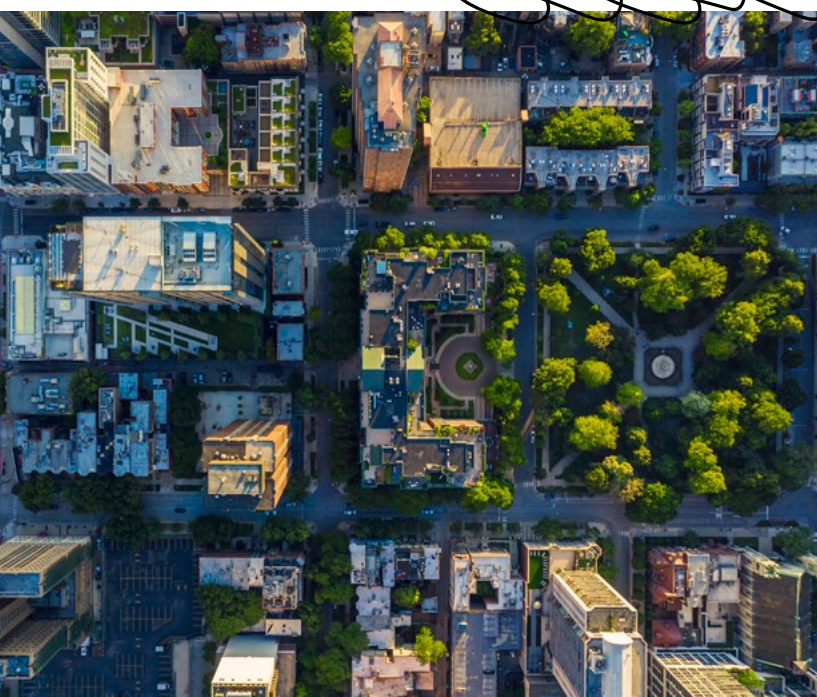
Carlos, LVEJO Alumni, 07/14/2022

For green learning opportunities to support short-term green transitions in low-income and communities of color as well as the long-term community transformation needed for environmental justice, postsecondary institutions, and other workforce development partners need to consider how to sustain educational programming. As Carlos references above, offering the basics should be viewed as an entry point to all postsecondary credentials in addition to green learning opportunities. Without a long-term green learning agenda, residents may become stuck behind a glass ceiling of low-paying jobs. Aiyden, an alumnus of the LVEJO solar training program, explained how it was through local connections that he found and applied to the LVEJO solar program.

*I looked into a bunch of different options. I looked into classes in my community college, I looked into trade schools that you had to pay for. None of them really seemed like they'd be worth it. And then I decided to go with LVEJO.*

Aiyden, LVEJO, 08/01/2022

For reasons beyond the scope of this case study, residents are likely to look for education and training opportunities that are local. However, for communities that have faced historic disinvestment, environmental racism, and social exclusion, a lack of sustained, local green learning opportunities means residents will continue to be neglected to access these programs and a just transition will not be possible. As our interviewees pointed out, low-income and communities of color not only need access to green learning opportunities, they also need sustained ones.



# Recommendations

**The communities we highlighted in this study put forward three demands for postsecondary institutions to better support a New Green Learning Agenda in Chicago: 1) honor community self-determination, 2) fund CBOs and their environmental justice campaigns, and 3) prioritize community needs first and foremost in postsecondary institution partnerships.**

## 1. Honor Community Self-Determination

The first demand urges policymakers, researchers, and philanthropists to respect the autonomy of communities' vision for a just transition in their respective neighborhoods. Universities and foundations that conduct research studies and fund grant projects in communities of color need to honor and respect communities. Organizations argue that they want to be included from the inception to the end of the project and not merely seen as research subjects. All of the CBOs in our research expressed that university researchers often design research projects and programs and identify milestones without the inclusion, input, and insights of community leaders and residents. Instead, participants are brought in at the end of the research project when community outreach needs to be conducted. Such a top-down approach is disrespectful to communities of color and creates ongoing mistrust among community residents and university researchers, politicians, and philanthropists. University researchers often enter the research process with an attitude of paternalism, with a lot of assumptions, and are unaware of the real problems communities face. Chantel expressed her vision for community self-determination:

*I've always wanted to see our community [to] be able to grow. But to be self-sufficient, I want to see our community be able to grow using our resources. And I think that number one resource is our people.*

Chantel, SOUL Focus Group, 08/08/2022

Viewing the residents as the primary resource and solution to implementing a just transition in her neighborhood, Chantel's comment puts front and

center what is often ignored by actors in power—be it those that exclude residents from the research process and funding grants or those that view the community through a deficit lens and as recipients of charity. Participants demanded that if just transition efforts are going to be implemented in Chicago, those critical actors in power need to respect the autonomy of communities and view its residents as assets and resources when designing, funding, and implementing research and campaign strategies.

## 2. Fund Community-Based Organizations and Environmental Justice Campaigns

For the second demand, CBOs seek to challenge environmental racism in their neighborhood and be equal decision-makers in the further development of their community, especially when addressing the health of residents, the impact of pollution from local industries, the development of new community green spaces, and the creation of new green jobs. To combat environmental racism in Chicago, residents argue that there needs to be an intentional strategic plan to fund CBOs and their environmental justice campaigns to help educate and organize local residents to implement just transition efforts at the community level. By funding these environmental justice campaigns, organizations can boost their general operating budget, increase staff capacity, and expand programming.

All of the CBOs shared that they are consistently operating with a limited budget and cannot afford to financially support staff salaries, pay general operations costs, as well as fund their existing programming. Organizations argue that grants from universities and foundations cannot solely fund programs that funders want organizations to implement. On the contrary, more funding is needed to support CBOs as essential entities in local education and training ecosystems who serve critical functions that a just transition requires. Therefore, the program needs, and financial stability of organizations ought to be acknowledged and included when determining what organization and/or program will be funded.





## 1. Hold Postsecondary Institutions Accountable to Communities

The third and final demand is a call to action for postsecondary institutions to be more accountable to communities, especially those historically excluded and marginalized, and to be better champions in support of a just transition movement in Chicago, especially when it relates to providing access to knowledge, skills, and campus resources. CBOs in our research suggest that colleges and universities could employ college interns to help with various campaigns, especially for organizations that need assistance with conducting research, co-applying to grants that can help fund programming, direct partnerships with individual professors, and other pro-bono services. Participants also shared that their residents need access to campus resources, such as legal services, and can serve as guest speakers in the college classrooms to educate students about the environmental issues that are impacting residents.

Alma from LVEJO shared a note to philanthropists:

*Fund environmental justice movements, with no strings attached... Just get out of the way. We're gonna bring you up to speed. Just watch.*

Alma, LVEJO Focus Group, 08/15/2022

Efren from Blocks Together also shared that what his organization needs are:

*Funds. [We] need money. [We] just need the money, not [just] to talk about the money. Organizations need that check. Somebody get it done.*

Efren, Blocks Together, 08/04/2022

Alma and Efren are both expressing that grantors should allow CBOs to manage the funding as they see best fit instead of creating tedious grant processes, deliverables, and limitations. Since CBOs are the primary vehicle for community outreach and sharing of resources with residents, especially those most vulnerable populations, they need the autonomy and funding to execute their operations and programs as they envision. If postsecondary institutions and foundations are going to partner with CBOs, they must recognize that CBOs are systemically underfunded and must respect the decision-making and future direction of their continued groundwork.

Participants shared many critical examples of how colleges and universities can be key partner organizations by supporting CBOs to meet the demand for a just transition in Chicago. Santiago calls on institutions of higher education to:

*... help [residents] get their education. There's a lot of people around here that would love to get their GED. Even better, they would love to get their high school diploma.*

Santiago, LVEJO Alumni, 08/03/2022

We see that in many communities of color, the educational attainment level is lower than their affluent counterparts. Without educational skills and credentials, residents are limited in their economic opportunities and unable to qualify for green skill jobs. As a result, those residents who do not hold at least a high school diploma cannot enter the workforce and enroll in certification programs that colleges and universities offer. This educational barrier creates severe challenges for recruiting these community residents to enter the green workforce. Aliyah from SOUL shared:

*If colleges and universities really want to step up... let's attract individuals with an entrepreneurial mindset. Then give them the tools [education and training] that we really need.*

Aliyah, SOUL Focus Group, 08/08/2022

Both Santiago and Aliyah argue that colleges and universities can be better actors in moving the just transition agenda forward by providing communities with a breadth of green learning opportunities, from the basic educational needs to access to postsecondary certifications and advanced degrees and skills needed to enter the green workforce. In addition to being more accountable to communities as educational providers and partners, Sofia from LVEJ0 goes on to say that postsecondary institutions could also grant communities access to their campus resources. She articulates that colleges have an abundance of resources.

*They have empty classrooms. I don't understand why we can't host our solar program at UIC instead of in a crowded space. No offense to the space. But you know, these are the opportunities I think that the university can really lend itself to. They're not using all these classrooms all the time. Community organizations [should be able to] use these classroom spaces [and to] use these resources.*

Sofia, LVEJ0 Focus Group, 08/15/2022

Participants in our case study are challenging postsecondary institutions, politicians, and philanthropists to take a bolder stance and act on their commitment to address environmental justice issues in Chicago. To truly implement a New Green Learning Agenda, university partners must play a more active role in addressing environmental racism in communities of color while simultaneously providing the education to advance the just transition movement.

# Conclusion

**Achieving a just transition for communities of color in Chicago is more than offering green skills training or creating green jobs. It is also about addressing long-standing issues of environmental racism, economic underinvestment, and relationships of extraction by politicians and industries. By extension, achieving a just transition for communities of color in Chicago also means centering community needs, health, and wellbeing, and investing in the CBOs that know and understand these struggles and have established relationships of trust with and care for the communities they serve.**

Surfacing these common narratives, however, does not give license to postsecondary institutions to step in and act like community-based organizations where relationships of distrust and exclusion are predominant. Postsecondary institutions seeking to co-create and partner with communities and CBOs must be prepared to spend time and resources to repair relationships and to be willing to be held accountable to serving community needs.

Importantly, this also entails respecting the autonomy and self-determination of communities, and recognizing the central role that CBOs play in the education and training ecosystem of historically marginalized communities in Chicagoland as well.



# Endnotes

- 1 [www.city-data.com/neighborhood/East-Side-Chicago-IL.html](http://www.city-data.com/neighborhood/East-Side-Chicago-IL.html)
- 2 Though in conventional terms the Humboldt Park neighborhood has been considered between Western Avenue, Pulaski Road, North Avenue, and Chicago Avenue. The area west of Pulaski until Kenton Avenue is also considered West Humboldt Park.
- 3 [www.city-data.com/neighborhood/Humboldt-Park-Chicago-IL.html](http://www.city-data.com/neighborhood/Humboldt-Park-Chicago-IL.html)
- 4 The place where the strike took place was named Camp Cesar Chaves Chavez after the organizer of migrant farm workers. [www.areachicagoarchive.wordpress.com/2019/02/18/contested-space](http://www.areachicagoarchive.wordpress.com/2019/02/18/contested-space)
- 5 According to a report published in June 2020 by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP)
- 6 [www.cookcountysheriff.org/data/jail-population-february-13-2020](http://www.cookcountysheriff.org/data/jail-population-february-13-2020)
- 7 [www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/385.html](http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/385.html)
- 8 [www.worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/dolton-il-population](http://www.worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/dolton-il-population)
- 9 Interviewee names are pseudonyms.