

Chicago Tribune

CHICAGO FORWARD

Editorial: Chicago Forward — Your proposals, and hope for our youth

By The Editorial Board

Chicago Tribune

Published: Jun 14, 2020 at 5:00 am



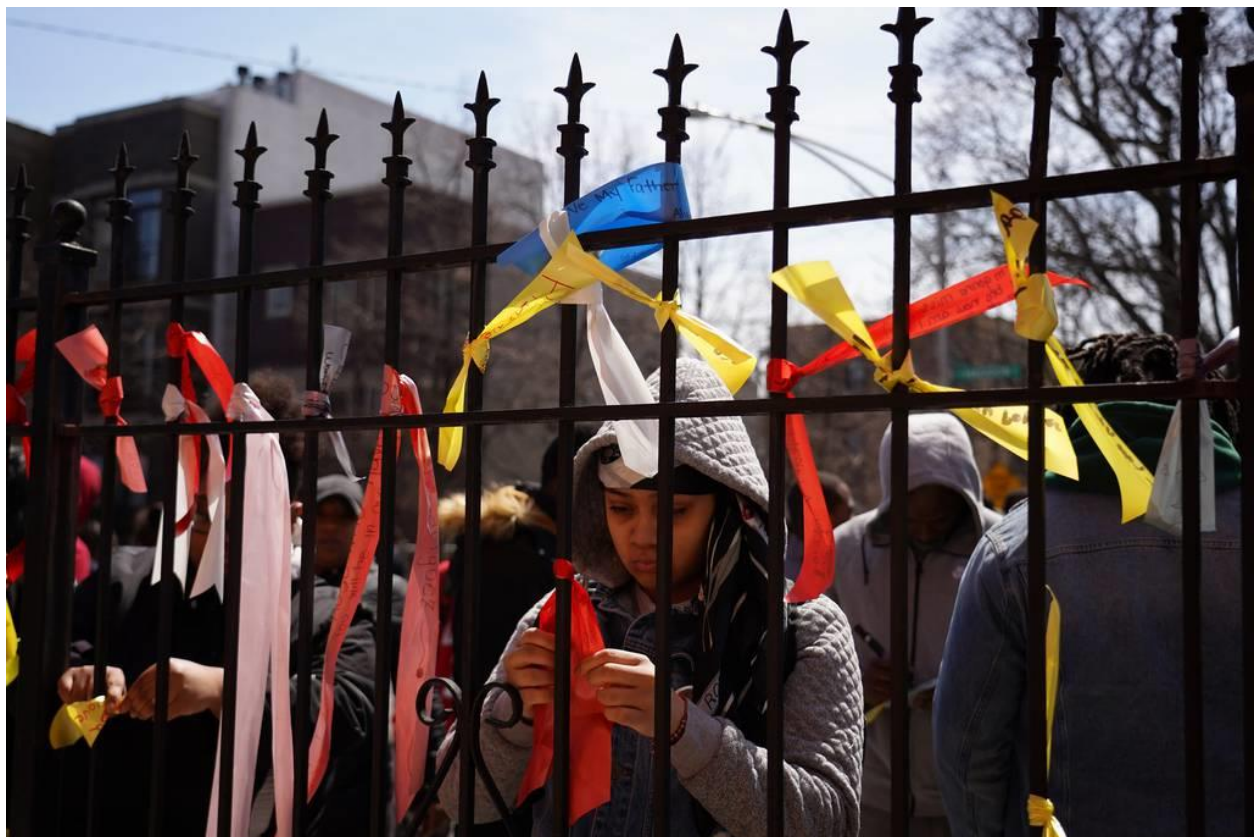
Friends of the Children mentor Chanel Dotson helps Valentine, 6, with homework after school Jan. 3, 2020 at the Oak Park Library. (Brian Cassella / Chicago Tribune)

“Ours is a city in the balance.”

That prescient observation was sent to us in late February, a seeming lifetime before the full impact of COVID-19 and George Floyd's death would be felt.

But Chicago has long been a city in the balance — a city where stark disparities in health, income and opportunity have allowed some to soar and too many to struggle. A city where the cracks in our institutional systems threaten to swallow our most vulnerable young people — now, perhaps, more than ever.

When we [introduced our “Chicago Forward: Young Lives in the Balance” initiative](#) to you more than six months ago, we had no idea how much would change in such a short span. A one-two punch to our economy and social order came quickly, first with the coronavirus pandemic and then with the national outrage over the [killing of a black man](#) under the crushing knee of a white Minneapolis police officer — two crises that have exposed just how punishing those long widening disparities are to nonwhite communities.



Jessica Vazquez ties a ribbon for her slain friend Gwain Brown, 16, outside Campos High School in the Humboldt Park neighborhood of Chicago on April 3, 2019. (E. Jason Wambsgans / Chicago Tribune)

Indeed, we are likely only at the start of our “new normal” as we inch back, masked and sanitized, into a nation grappling to come to terms with generations of racial injustice and inequity.

We’re all searching for answers. It was encouraging then to go back to the start of our Chicago Forward project, when we called on you, your employers, your organizations and your community groups to help with our mission, to offer solutions, big and small — not to the overwhelming issues of racism and injustice, but to the related and no less daunting challenge of keeping our most vulnerable young people connected by keeping them in school, on a job and on track to a healthy, productive future.



Friends of the Children mentor Keenan Palmer picks up Javier, 6, after school on Jan. 2, 2020. (Brian Cassella / Chicago Tribune)

Over these six months, you answered our call. More than 100 serious proposals came in, and we met with experts working on these issues as well as dozens of young people whose lives are at stake.

We introduced you to many of them — to [Javier, Caleb and Willie](#), who at 6 and 7 already are part of a unique long-term mentoring program called Friends of the Children. To [Jessica](#), the young woman who was still grieving the shooting death of a dear friend with her classmates at Campos High School. And to [Ofelia](#), whose plan to go to a university and study nursing in the fall has been derailed after the restaurant job that paid for her community college classes evaporated during the pandemic shutdown.

Young lives in the balance, each of them.



Josue Morales outside his home in Chicago's Albany Park, May 14, 2020. Morales is caring for his mother and uncle, who have both contracted COVID-19, in addition to watching over his two teenage brothers. (Chris Sweda / Chicago Tribune)

We know there are no easy solutions and that the events of this spring have brought new complications. Health precautions make it harder to get things done, and city and state budgets will be even tighter. But we see hope in each proposal we received. We can't share them all, but here are a few — some modest, some bold — that caught our attention, in part because they

deserve support from our community and in part because they might serve as models for other ideas:

- Robin Koelsch of Communities in Schools of Chicago, a dropout prevention organization, proposes the idea of window stickers as a very simple way for businesses and organizations to show they are “**student allies**” interested in creating welcoming spaces for young people. “Instead of being met with an eye roll,” she wrote, young people would see that businesses are happy to have them and that they are “welcoming to students as customers or even as employees or interns.”
- Speaking of jobs, Erica Staley, executive director of [Manufacturing Renaissance](#), told us about her organization’s two community-based programs, which serve a few dozen in-school and out-of-school youth, working to “expose, inspire and prepare them for internships and full-time **job placements in manufacturing.**” They see a need and want to expand to be able to serve hundreds, or even thousands, of young people.
- A program called [Storycatchers Theatre](#), which has been around for decades, hopes to expand their physical space. Participants are youth from the South and West sides who are or have been in the criminal justice system. In one of their programs, young people conduct empathy **workshops with Chicago Police Department** recruits — an effort that couldn’t be more important now. “They engage in constructive conversations to close seemingly large divides that exist in our city. The stories of our young people are often not heard and need to be heard.”
- Tara Ebrahimi was moved to write to us after spending time caring for her 30-year-old developmentally delayed brother and seeing the need for **adults living with developmental disabilities** to have access to better resources. “I thought I knew what was best for my brother. I often got caught in the trap of seeing only his disability, and not taking into consideration that he had values, priorities and needs that were integral to his being. I see that he has many ideas to contribute to his own care and well-being.” She proposes a multipronged initiative that, through tax credits and other incentives, would give those with developmental disabilities better access to employment with local businesses.
- Terrence Miles, the founder of [StringWizards](#), caught our eye with a short intriguing note: “I teach violin rehab to teens.” Working primarily with students at St. Ignatius College Prep, the self-funded StringWizards teaches students **marketable vocational skills** while

providing access to music education. “Several energies coalesced to create this program. Basic violin setup, cleaning, and restringing can be mastered by an interested teen. This in turn provides the individual teen and the hosting high school with a positive public service image — and maybe a summer job when countless school year rentals are returned to area violin shops.” It’s a model that could be replicated in so many ways. Bike rebuilding? Computer repair?

- The leaders of Kaboom!, a well-established organization that develops safe playspaces for kids, noted the impact COVID-19 has had in Chicago, calling it a “crisis on top of a crisis.” They propose a citywide effort to “create **more equitable playspaces** and help develop more youth leaders within the communities most impacted by decades of disinvestment stemming from structural racism.” When it’s safe for playgrounds to open again, we’d like to hear more about this.

We also challenged Chicago’s business leaders to step up and make a Chicago Forward Pledge to hire more of the city’s vulnerable youth for jobs and internships. Only a few did. We get it, there’s a lot going on right now. We still hope more will get on board, though. The Chicago Tribune Editorial Board is. We have plans for a Chicago Forward paid internship in the fall — an opportunity for an aspiring journalist from one of the city’s more vulnerable communities to spend a few months in our newsroom.

For now, many of the organizations we’ve talked with have at least some programs on hold until restrictions related to the COVID-19 crisis are lifted and it’s safer for people to meet in person. But groups such as After School Matters, Youth Guidance, [New Life Centers](#) and others are also working furiously to stay connected with their communities by phone, text and Zoom.



Ismael Calderon prepares boxes of food to be delivered to families on April 9, 2020, out of the New Life Center food distribution center in Little Village during the coronavirus pandemic. (Brian Cassella / Chicago Tribune)

We've all been knocked off balance by the upheaval in the world but the need to keep our young people on track remains critical. We had planned for this to be the final installment of this initiative, but it's too important to let it go. In 2019, about 47,000 youth ages 16 to 24 — 15% of youth in the city — were neither in school nor working, according to Thrive Chicago, a nonprofit that seeks to align the efforts of youth service providers. That number is certain to rise this year, once the effects of the pandemic and the civil unrest are measured.

What's more difficult to measure is the impact from this — and other trauma our young people experience — on the psyche of the emerging generation.

It was a group of four mental health advocates representing the Chicago Psychoanalytic Institute, Juvenile Protective Association, The Wingspan Project and Psychotherapy Action Network who, in offering their expertise in the service of this initiative, reminded us: "What these young souls don't know is that we need these 'outsiders' as much as they need us 'insiders,' the

engaged citizens of Chicago. Our city as a whole will rise or fall depending upon our success in facilitating their success. These are young lives in the balance. Ours is a city in the balance.”

Ours is a world in the balance right now. It can feel overwhelming, but we must continue to focus on our youth if we want to move Chicago forward.