



**COOK COUNTY COMMISSION
ON SOCIAL INNOVATION**
2024 and 2025 Annual Report



ALMA E. ANAYA
CHAIR
COOK COUNTY COMMISSION ON SOCIAL INNOVATION

February 2026

Dear Honorable President Toni Preckwinkle & Cook County Board of Commissioners:

In 2024 and 2025, the Cook County Commission on Social Innovation ("SI Commission") focused its research and strategic efforts on providing support and policy recommendations for communities in their efforts to boost economic opportunity to its most vulnerable residents. Because the past few years have had a tremendous impact on the social and economic life of the region, the SI Commission has intentionally partnered with entities such as the Cook County Bureau of Economic Development, the Cook County Land Bank Authority, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, Chicago Jobs Council, and more.

In 2016, the Cook County Commission on Social Innovation was established to develop policy recommendations focused on strengthening the capacity of the inner city and Southland of Cook County. The continuing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the current threats from the federal administration have taught us that an entity such as the SI Commission, a body that promotes economic and workforce development in Cook County, must find solutions to how we move forward as a society. The Commission has dedicated itself to identifying priority areas to support Cook County in incorporating long-term sustainability in services and programs. These priorities include re-imagining our approach to workforce development, economic development, addressing the racial wealth gap, and supporting access to government services in a way that is streamlined and accessible.

Moving ahead, the SI Commission looks forward to strengthening relationships with both Cook County agencies and external partners to achieve its goals. It seeks to be a thought partner in fostering economic and social opportunities to support the communities most in need of government services. Through these efforts, the Commission aims to develop, support, and advance policy efforts at Cook County and other levels of government with shared priorities.

Below is the 2024 and 2025 Social Innovation Commission Annual Report, which highlights the SI Commission's work and priorities.

Sincerely,

Alma E. Anaya
Chair, Cook County Commission on Social Innovation
Cook County Commissioner, 7th District

2024 – 2025 MEMBERS

ALMA E. ANAYA

7TH DISTRICT COOK COUNTY COMMISSIONER
CHAIR OF THE COMMISSION ON SOCIAL INNOVATION

MARC J. LANE

ATTORNEY AT LAW, VICE CHAIR OF THE COMMISSION ON SOCIAL INNOVATION

PETER CRETICOS

EX-OFFICIO, PRESIDENT AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF INSTITUTE FOR WORK & THE ECONOMY

VERNARD ALSBERRY JR.

MAYOR, HAZEL CREST, ILLINOIS

HARRY ALSTON

VICE PRESIDENT OF STRATEGIC PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT, SAFER FOUNDATION

SOL ANDERSON

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, I GROW CHICAGO

PATRICK BRUTUS

COORDINATOR OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, BUREAU OF ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT, SPECIAL SERVICE AREA DIVISION

KATHELEEN S. CALIENTO

PRESIDENT & CEO, CARA COLLECTIVE

RODGER COOLEY

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CHICAGO FOOD POLICY ACTION COUNCIL

KRISTI DE LAURENTIIS

SOUTH SUBURBAN MAYORS AND MANAGERS ASSOCIATION, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

WENDY DUBOE

BOARD CHAIR, THE INSTITUTE FOR NON-VIOLENCE CHICAGO

XOCHITL FLORES

BUREAU CHIEF, COOK COUNTY BUREAU OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

CHRISTYN FREEMON

FOUNDER & CHIEF SOLUTIONIST, PROJECT FORWARD

JOEL K. JOHNSON

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, TREATMENT ALTERNATIVES FOR SAFE COMMUNITIES (TASC)

JENNIFER “SIS” KILLEN

SUPERINTENDENT, COOK COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION & HIGHWAYS

HOWARD MALES

PRESIDENT, RESEARCH PROS, EDAC CHAIR

DONNA MILLER

COOK COUNTY COMMISSIONER, 6TH DISTRICT

WENDY RAYMER

DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY RELATIONS, BMO HARRIS

HAROLD RICE

PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
ASSOCIATION OF COOK COUNTY (CEDA)

SELWYN ROGERS

PROFESSOR, FOUNDING DIRECTOR, AND CHIEF OF TRAUMA CARE, UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

WILLIAM SCHLEIZER

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, THE DELTA INSTITUTE

BACKGROUND

In April 2016, the Cook County Board of Commissioners enacted Ordinance #19-1382, establishing the Cook County Commission on Social Innovation to address unemployment, economic distress, and disparities in the inner city and Southland of Cook County.

The Ordinance, entitled “The Cook County Commission on Social Innovation for Job Creation, Workforce Development, Entrepreneurship, Community Revitalization, and Industrial Development,” aimed to address inequities in the South and South Suburbs.

Our purpose and mission as a Commission is to make actionable policy recommendations to help achieve the following goals:



- (1) To strengthen the capacity of the inner city and the Southland and, generally, of the County to work cooperatively with relevant stakeholders to create, scale, and sustain innovative social programs;**
- (2) To build the capacity of nonprofit organizations and government agencies to pursue entrepreneurial ventures in the inner city, the Southland, and the County; and**
- (3) To attract investment and philanthropic funding to the inner city, the Southland, and the County to support these ventures.**

Furthermore, the Commission serves as a resource for the County’s agencies and departments in a common cause to promote the Southland and the County’s data-driven social innovation ecosystem in collaboration with other relevant actors. The Commission is a laboratory that convenes diverse interests and expertise within and across sectors to facilitate cooperation and co-create innovative solutions to social problems.

This annual report captures the work accomplished in the 2024 and 2025 calendar year.

2024 AND 2025 UPDATES & POLICY PRIORITIES

ECONOMIC GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT BY COOK COUNTY GOVERNMENT

The Cook County Bureau of Economic Development

The Cook County Land Bank Authority

The Cook County Bureau of Asset Management



Cook County is one of the fastest-growing counties in the United States with respect to population and economic development. One tool to encourage such development is the use of tax incentives. Cook County property tax incentives encourage private business investment, employment, the revitalization of properties, and rehabilitation of landmark buildings. Tax Incentives typically aim to stimulate business growth by encouraging people to invest in vacant land and dilapidated buildings, which can lead to increased productivity, job creation, and introduce new revenue through the collection of property taxes. Access to tax incentives can drive business owners to create new businesses and expand current operations, leading to continuous economic growth.

A second tool to promote economic growth and development is the Cook County Land Bank Authority. Established in 2013, its mission is to identify vacant, abandoned, tax delinquent, and foreclosed property and restore these parcels back to a productive and sustainable use. When properties are identified, they are sold for the purpose of rehabbing the parcel. This has translated to over \$31.3 million in long term delinquent property taxes returned to the rolls and an estimated \$221 million in community wealth that has been created in neighborhoods and municipalities throughout Cook County. From businesses to residential housing, the Cook County Land Bank has transformed the livelihood of neighborhoods and residents by providing opportunities to land and buildings that did not previously exist.

Lastly, the SI Commission heard from the Cook County Bureau of Asset Management. As the Bureau responsible for the ownership and maintenance of Cook County properties, their mission is to provide essential public services in spaces that are accessible to all. By way of feasibility studies, the Bureau of Asset Management is undergoing a comprehensive analysis to understand the optimal use of several buildings, including the county's criminal courthouses, the Department of Corrections, warehouses, medical buildings, and currently vacant parcels in communities such as Oak Force in the south Suburbs or Logan Square in the Northwest Side of Chicago. While in the beginning stages, these studies present opportunities to engage personally with community members and understand how Cook County real estate can meet the needs of residents. ADA accessibility, storage, safety, and long-term sustainability are all areas that must be taken into consideration.

The SI Commission will continue to advise these three county agencies to ensure it can be successful in meeting its long-term goals of affordability, workforce development, housing, community benefits, and boosting economic development. A strength of the SI Commission is to ensure that social and economic development is equitable and made accessible to our most vulnerable residents.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Chicago Jobs Council

Chicago Botanic Garden

Illinois Center for Employee Ownership



Unemployment is a growing phenomenon in the United States. Barriers such as criminal backgrounds, digital skills training, lack of broadband/internet access, etc., contribute to growing unemployment rates. The significance of workforce development lies in its potential to enhance individual career opportunities, foster economic growth, and ensure organizational success. The SI Commission heard from the Chicago Jobs Council, the Chicago Botanic Garden, and the Illinois Center for Employee Ownership, on the most pressing challenges facing job seekers today and what barriers need to be addressed to help residents secure employment opportunities.

One of the most pressing challenges facing economies today is the mismatch between workers' skills and the skills demanded by employers. This "skills gap" can lead to labor shortages in critical sectors like technology, healthcare, and advanced manufacturing. By investing in workforce development, government and businesses can ensure workers have the skills to meet current and future job demands. Tailored training programs, apprenticeships, and certifications can help fill skill shortages, ensuring that businesses can find qualified employees and workers can pursue stable, well-paying careers. A prime example of a public-private partnership working to generate new jobs is the Windy City Harvest, a program of the Chicago Botanic Garden, funded by private and public dollars. Windy City Harvest hosts multiple job trainings, apprenticeships, and incubators available to residents that do not have educational degrees, often have a criminal record, or simply need employment close to their place of residence throughout the south, west, and southwest side of the city of Chicago.

People with criminal records also face enormous challenges with accessing good jobs. Expanding the eligibility criteria to expunge or seal records can play a significant role in improving employability, reducing recidivism, and promoting economic inclusion. Many individuals with criminal records face challenges in securing employment due to the stigma and legal obstacles associated with their past offenses. By providing opportunities for expungement and sealing, and advocating for "Ban the Box" efforts, society fosters personal rehabilitation and enhances the overall workforce by enabling qualified individuals to contribute to the economy.

Workforce development is not limited to employees securing good jobs. Workforce development also includes empowering employees to engage in employee ownership. The SI Commission heard from the Illinois Center for Employee Ownership (ILCEO), the state's leading resource for education, guidance, and support on employee ownership. Through education, outreach, and partnership, ILCEO promotes models that preserve businesses, protect jobs, and build community wealth. In Cook County, there are more than 17,000 employee owners. While slowly growing, shared ownership models can be revolutionary for employees who otherwise would not have access to long term capital.

The SI Commission will continue to promote workforce development in Cook County and ensure residents have opportunities to explore the workforce market. Ensuring residents have access to the job market and have the tools they need to success is crucial in helping the economy grow and expand.

COMMUNITY VIOLENCE INTERVENTION AND MASS INCARCERATION

Crown Family School at the University of Chicago

Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago

Chicago-Kent College of Law, Illinois Institute of Technology

Revolution Institute



Violence intervention is much needed in today's society. Violence intervention is an evidence informed approach that aims to break the cycle of violence by working with high-risk individuals and communities. Recognizing the early signs of violence is essential for addressing and preventing its recurrence. Early intervention and education are critical to promoting healthy development and conflict resolution. Violence prevention operates across multiple levels, including the individual, family, community, and policy systems. By understanding these levels and formulating appropriate strategies, developing new policies, reducing violence, and fostering safer environments is possible.

While early intervention is critical, the reality still exists where communities of color are subjected to the cycle of criminalization and incarceration. Mass incarceration continues to be a deeply troubling trend in the U.S. Mass incarceration refers to the disproportionately high rates of imprisonment, especially among African Americans and Latinos. This has been an ongoing issue that escalated in the 20th century due to policies such as the “three strikes” law and the war on drugs. The increase in the mass prison population has caused the U.S. to be home to the most extensive prison systems in the world. Incarcerated individuals face higher rates of physical and mental health issues. Many of them have pre-existing conditions such as substance abuse, HIV, hepatitis, and cognitive disorders, which tend to worsen in prison life.

Yet, for individuals currently incarcerated, there are still opportunities for restorative justice and violence intervention. Reforms include reducing harsh sentencing practices and reducing the overreliance on punitive measures. The SI Commission also discussed alternatives to incarceration, especially for young people. For juvenile probation, recommendations include incorporating performing art projects with local arts professionals as part of the rehabilitation process. Violence intervention for individuals currently incarcerated should focus on rehabilitation rather than punishment.

Once individuals are released from prison, there continue to be obstacles in obtaining critical services, including employment, housing, and education. Without access to these opportunities, the cycle of poverty and criminalization only deepen. The Revolution Institute is an organization currently working on state legislation to address the obstacles for formerly incarcerated individuals, providing rental subsidies, housing navigation, re-entry navigation/case management, and more. With the support of government, agencies can create transitional and permanent housing units for people with criminal records, resulting in lower recidivism costs and greater social stability for returning residents.

The SI Commission will continue to bring efforts forward to reduce the harmful effects of mass incarceration and strategize how to address racial disparities by way of legislative change. Providing a bridge to resources, listening to incarcerated folks, and advocating for changes in laws and policies can help tackle these issues.

CONCLUSION



The Cook County Commission on Social Innovation heard from numerous speakers on the greatest challenges facing the second largest county in the United States. Although these challenges reflect inequities and barriers, partnership and a commitment to shared equity is necessary to drive change. Throughout 2024 and 2025, the SI Commission served as a hub for presenters to share their work, exchange information, present innovative ideas, and receive feedback on what is possible. The SI Commission served a laboratory, convening a broad and diverse array of interests and expertise within and across various sectors. Looking ahead, we expect to continue discussing workforce development, economic opportunity, food access, and reducing the harms of the criminal legal system.

Approaching 2026, the SI Commission will continue to serve as a resource and think tank to county government, providing policy recommendations with the goal of creating, scaling, and sustaining innovative social programs. The SI Commission will continue working to ensure communities throughout the county – but especially the Southland – have access to the economic, social, and policy tools needed to achieve equity and opportunity for all.