

BUILDING A SURVIVOR CENTRED CHICAGO

A TOOLKIT FOR
CHICAGO'S ELECTED
OFFICIALS

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In 2024, one devastating gender- based violence related headline followed another in Chicago. In November,¹ a husband killed his 54-year old wife, **Lacramioara Beldie**. In May of 2024 when 10 year-old **Jayden Perkins**,² a ray of sunshine and light, was stabbed to death by his mother's ex-boyfriend.

72 %

In June 2025, fatal homicides related to domestic violence were **up 72% in Chicago** and criminal sexual assault victimizations were up **7%** from 2024.³

1 CST Editorial Board. "Moving a Judge Is Only a Short-Term Fix for How Courts Handle Domestic Violence." Chicago Sun-Times, November 20, 2024.

2 Matthew Hendrickson, "Prosecutors Detail Disturbing History of Domestic Violence by Man Accused of Killing 11-Year-Old Jayden Perkins," Chicago Sun-Times, July 1, 2024.

3 City of Chicago, Violence Reduction Dashboard, accessed July 7, 2025 <https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/sites/vrd/home.html>.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The “Building a Survivor-Centered Chicago” Toolkit equips elected officials to **increase civic engagement with survivors** who disproportionately experience gender-based violence due to socio-economic inequalities and structural racism, and develop responses to gender-based violence based on survivors’ lived experiences. **The toolkit includes:**

Guidance on **destigmatizing the issue** of gender-based violence within your community

Actions you can take to **increase public safety** in your Ward and prevent gender-based violence

Guidance on how to **respond to survivors**, their family members, and impacted community members

Guidance on **collaborating with survivors** directly to advance Citywide policies

50%

In 2026, thousands of survivors across the City stand to lose access to critical services like housing, mental health, and community-based resources due to cuts in federal funding. Some anti-violence organizations providing these services face **50% budget cuts**.

Chicago Council Members have a unique opportunity to lead the City of Chicago and the country in demonstrating their commitment to survivors of gender-based violence by **stabilizing the budget** to increase public safety for survivors and **investing in community-based solutions** long-fought for by some of the most marginalized survivors to address the root causes of gender-based violence in our communities.

HERE'S WHAT SURVIVORS ARE SAYING IN CHICAGO

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Numerous conversations with survivors in Chicago, meetings with community members impacted by gender-based violence in the city, and a survey⁴ of almost 200 survivors of gender-based violence informed the recommendations of this toolkit. These stakeholders overwhelmingly want to see the City of Chicago **invest in the following resources for survivors:**

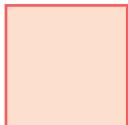


Chicago residents participating in the design of this toolkit also expressed a need for the City of Chicago to **invest in non-police interventions, community-based approaches** like workshops on gender-based violence, peer-to-peer interventions, prevention education, and economic and workplace support.

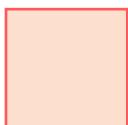
The intended outcome of this toolkit is for City Council Members to use their power and play a key role in preventing gender-based violence in our city. By equipping decision-makers and community leaders with critical data about the intersections of community violence and gender-based violence, tools on trauma-informed civic engagement, and amplifying survivors' experiences, **this Toolkit will build towards survivors having a meaningful seat and voice at the table** when it comes to advocating for and making policy decisions that directly impact them.

⁴ Healing to Action, City of Chicago Budget 2026 Survivor Survey, unpublished survey, 2025. In the survey, 76% of survivors advocated for more funding towards housing, 75% advocated for more funding towards mental health, and 80% advocated for more direct-cash assistance.

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS ALDERPEOPLE CAN TAKE



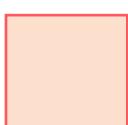
Fund non-police based interventions to address the root causes of gender-based violence in the City of Chicago



Host a gender-based violence resource fair for your constituents



Meet with community members impacted by gender-based violence in your Ward to understand their priorities and support them



Develop survivor-centered protocols to respond to and address gender-based violence in your community

ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT **AND** **THE VOICES** **BEHIND IT**



Founded in 2016, Healing to Action (HTA) is a grassroots organization in Chicago **working to end gender-based violence** by building the leadership and collective power of communities most impacted -Black and brown survivors, survivors with disabilities, immigrant survivors, LGBTQ+ survivors and low-income survivors.

Through leadership development and grassroots organizing, HTA has developed a powerful base of **survivor-leaders** that have connected with hundreds of isolated survivors across Chicago and are working to shift the narrative of “helpless victims” to powerful individuals with the expertise to lead solutions that address the root causes of gender-based violence.

THE TOOLKIT

The “Building a Survivor-Centered Chicago” Toolkit provides concrete steps for City Council members to increase direct civic engagement with the survivors in communities most impacted by gender-based violence, and provides a framework for seeing gender-based violence as a community-based violence issue. The intended outcome is to foster trust and collaboration among elected officials and survivors in order to develop policies and investments centered on survivors’ expertise that address the root causes of gender-based violence in our communities. **This toolkit:**

Amplifies survivors’ experiences

Provides critical data about the intersections of community violence and gender-based violence

Equips elected officials with tools on trauma-informed civic engagement to facilitate survivors meaningfully engaging with elected officials to advocate for and make policy decisions that directly impact them.

What informs this Toolkit

This toolkit is a result of over a decade of experience in collaborating with and centering the leadership of survivors of gender-based violence in Chicago. It is informed by Healing to Action’s time as a member of the City of Chicago Gender-Based Violence Taskforce, and interviews with survivor-leaders, Alderpeople, and parents of the Peirce Elementary School community, a community impacted by a domestic-violence related homicide. Data from the Chicago Police Department, investigative reporting, and other well-documented cases.

The Voices of Survivors

One serious tension in the development of this Toolkit was the use of storytelling about the experiences of survivors. Elected officials requested more stories of survivors of gender-based violence. But survivors had various responses to the idea of centering their stories. Some survivor-leaders like **Aurelia Aguilar**, a member of the 30th Ward,⁵ and **Dominique Ward**, a resident of Chicago,⁶ named that sharing their stories is critical to helping elected officials like Alderpeople see the reality survivors experience. Ward, a survivor who embarked on a public campaign to stop her abuser and advocate for protections for survivors of cyberstalking,⁷ shared that in her experience,

Elected officials are oblivious to our experiences. They see it on the news but somehow, they make it the victims' fault." Ward shared that after meeting with legislators in Springfield, several came up to her voicing their astonishment and disbelief in her experience. For her, this was jarring: "this is my everyday life, why do you think I'm here?"

Aguilar added, "Elected officials need to hear our stories because many of us have told only part of our story and that may not have impacted them." The impact of trauma is often a barrier for survivors to tell their stories. Aguilar shared, "the first thing I do when I tell my story is cry and it feels like elected officials don't like to hear us crying. Maybe writing down my story will be the only way they can hear it."

⁵ Aurelia Aguilar has been a Healing to Action leader since 2018 and is a current resident of Chicago's 30th Ward and former resident of the 33rd Ward. Since 2023, Aguilar has served as a member of the Survivor Leader Working Group of the City of Chicago's Gender-Based Violence Taskforce.

⁶ Dominique Ward has been a Healing to Action leader since 2024 and is a resident of the City of Chicago. In 2024, Dominique spoke publicly about her experience of abuse. Patrick Kerber, "Facebook Posts Frighten Mother, Pushing Police to Act," Chicago Tribune, July 7, 2024.

⁷ Ibid.

Other survivors expressed frustration. One HTA survivor-leader in Chicago's 24th Ward⁸ pointed out, "the stories exist – if Alderpeople don't want to see them, that's another thing." She shared how acts of gender-based violence happen daily in her community, and people are dying, impacting her community's sense of safety. Another survivor-leader resident of the 24th Ward⁹ offered, "this is degrading to have to prove ourselves and prove our stories. Why do we have to keep telling our stories?" And yet, she also sees a power in telling the story—not for elected officials, but for other survivors. "We also have to tell our stories for the survivors who need to know that someone else went through this."

One reason survivors share their stories is to dispel the victim-blaming that often accompanies a disclosure of violence. Survivor-leaders shared that in their experience, it feels like it's always on the survivor to educate the community about gender-based violence.



It's been normalized that survivors have to educate the community. If they want us to do this, why don't they give us the resources to educate them before the violence occurs instead of after the press conference?"

Anonymous HTA Leader

A common theme is that hearing the story might be uncomfortable for the elected official, and that is a barrier to their ability to learn and engage in meaningful dialogue with a survivor. But ultimately, all of the survivors agree that there's an opportunity for deeper dialogue. Ward summarized the sentiment, "A conversation needs to be had where we say 'we're survivors, we're trying to help you, you help us, and better serve us so our tax dollars are used and allocated properly."

As such, this toolkit, amplifies some experiences of gender-based violence but focuses on the expertise and unique insight survivors offered based on their expertise with the existing systems.

⁸ Anonymous, survivor leader in Chicago's 24th Ward, Healing to Action, interview by author, Chicago, 2025.

⁹ Anonymous, survivor leader in Chicago's 24th Ward, Healing to Action, interview by author, Chicago, 2025.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IS A PUBLIC SAFETY MATTER

What is gender-based violence?

The 2021 Chicago Citywide Strategic Plan to Address Gender-Based Violence and Human Trafficking,¹⁰ defines gender-based violence in the following way:

Gender-based violence (GBV) and human trafficking are not merely family matters or workplace issues. They are human rights violations and a public health crisis. GBV is an umbrella term for a range of interpersonal violence including, but not limited to, sexual harassment, sexual assault, domestic violence, sexual exploitation, and human trafficking. Human trafficking is when an individual is compelled through force, fraud and/or coercion for the purposes of commercial sex and/or forced labor. Though human trafficking is often fueled by bias-based harm, it is not exclusively gender-based violence. In order to further contextualize this plan, it's important to clearly state three things:

1

Harm fueled by someone's implicit or explicit bias against another person's gender identity is gender-based violence;

2

We are referring to gender as "a fluid concept rooted in societal and cultural expectations that encompass the diverse experiences of individuals across the gender continuum";

3

Violence is not meant to solely connote criminal law violations but also can and does include civil matters such as sexual harassment which often does not trigger criminal statutes. Certainly, violence includes but is not limited to physical acts.

¹⁰ Department of Family and Support Services, 2023 Division on Gender-Based Violence Strategy Book, City of Chicago, October 18, 2023, <https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/sites/public-safety-and-violence-reduction/pdfs/GBV%20strategic%20plan%20FINAL.pdf>. In 2021, the Chicago Mayor's Office under then-Mayor Lori Lightfoot developed one of the most comprehensive plans in the United States to address gender-based violence, centering the input from advocates and survivors most impacted by gender-based violence. Many of the initiatives outlined in the plan have come to fruition as a result of the tireless advocacy of survivors.

But survivors share that often, experiences of gender-based violence are described as “isolated incidents” and not viewed as a symptom of the “cancer that exists in our communities that starts in the home, with caregivers and youth.”¹¹ As a result, Healing to Action encourages elected officials to adopt our working definition¹² that encompasses the lived experiences of survivors and addresses the root causes:

“Gender-based violence” refers to actions against an individual or a community, intended to punish them for failure to conform with oftentimes unrealistic gendered expectations or stereotypes, interfering with a person’s bodily autonomy and self-determination. This can include physical and psychological violence by intimate partners, sexual assault, rape, human trafficking, and stalking.

It also includes physical and psychological violence against people who do not conform to traditional gender roles like gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, intersex, and gender-questioning people. **Gender-based violence impacts an entire community** surrounding a survivor, and has generational repercussions for the survivors' families and communities.

¹¹ Anonymous, survivor leader, Healing to Action, interview by author, Chicago, 2025.

¹² Healing to Action, “Our Issue,” accessed February 7, 2025, <https://www.healingtoaction.org/our-issue>.

14,000

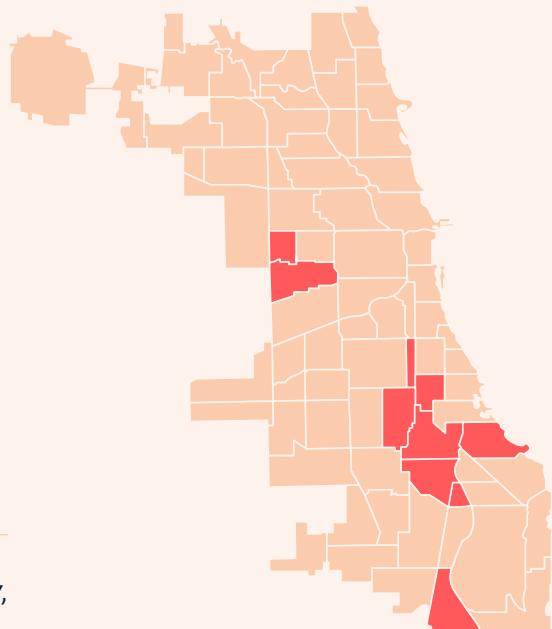
Raw data from the Chicago Police Department (CPD) Violence Reduction Dashboard shows that in 2024, at least 14,000 victims reported domestic or sexual violence to CPD. That number remains consistent from 2023 with no significant decrease.

70% 65.8%

Black Female

CPD identified 70% of the survivors as Black. 65.8% identified as female, indicating a huge disparity that GBV disproportionately is affected Black women.¹³

When looking at the 2024 data from the CPD Violence Reduction Dashboard for the rates of gender-based violence, the 10 highest-rated neighborhoods include (in order from highest rates of incidents to lowest): **Washington Park, North Lawndale, Englewood, Riverdale, West Garfield Park, Grand Crossing, South Shore, Chatham, Burnside, Fuller Park.**



¹³ City of Chicago, Violence Reduction Dashboard, accessed April 7, 2025 <https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/sites/vrd/home.html>.

16,123 CONTACTS

Data from the Illinois Domestic Violence Hotline supports the CPD data. In 2024 there were 16,123 contacts to the hotline from Chicago residents - a **26% increase from 2022** and a 52% increase from 2019, before the global COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁴ The five highest contact wards were **Ward 27, Ward 8, Ward 28, Ward 36, and Ward 17** - mostly underserved communities in the City's South and West sides.

These numbers only reflect the survivors who reported. Survivors of gender-based violence generally do not come forward because of significant societal barriers. Shame and stigma prevents many survivors from coming forward; in fact, **3 out of 4 survivors never come forward**,¹⁵ especially for underinvested communities where **Black, immigrant, LGBTQ+ and survivors with disabilities** are also experiencing poverty, poor working conditions, and lack of resources like access to high-quality health care. Lack of trust in the systems intended to support survivors is another barrier to reporting, with a disproportionate impact on Black women.¹⁶

What is clear is that existing efforts to prevent violence fall woefully short.

Despite overall homicide rates decreasing in the first quarter of 2025,¹⁷ gender-based violence related homicide rates went up 35% during that same time period, with fatal domestic violence shootings going up 114%.¹⁸ When looking at violent crime overall, domestic violence makes up 25% of all violent crime for 2025. This data shows just how endemic gender-based violence is in our community.

It is a public safety crisis that impacts the community, and requires deep and sustained investment.

¹⁴ CST Editorial Board. "Moving a Judge Is Only a Short-Term Fix for How Courts Handle Domestic Violence." Chicago Sun-Times, November 20, 2024.

¹⁵ The White House, U.S. National Plan to End Gender-Based Violence: Strategies for Action, May 2023, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/National-Plan-to-End-GBV.pdf>.

¹⁶ Michael Puente, "Chicago Police Response to Missing Black Women Blasted at City Council Hearing," WBEZ Chicago, October 23, 2024.

¹⁷ Chip Mitchell, "Chicago's Murder Drop 'Mirrors a Lot of Big Cities,' a Leading Crime Data Analyst Says," WBEZ Chicago, April 2, 2025.

¹⁸ City of Chicago, Violence Reduction Dashboard, accessed April 7, 2025 <https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/sites/vrd/home.html>.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN CHICAGO

Chicago's 40th Ward: Peirce Elementary,

2024



Gender-based violence is life altering for everyone in the community beyond the survivor. It ripples through their family, school, place of worship, their friends, their friends' families, and beyond.

One example that illustrates the depth of the impact is the murder of **Jayden Perkins** by his mother's ex-partner in March of 2024 in Chicago's 40th Ward.¹⁹ The loss of his life has continued to deeply impact his mother, his family, and the entire community surrounding Jayden. A year after his death, caregivers and children in the Pierce Elementary school are still navigating the destabilizing grief in their community.²⁰

¹⁹ Dane Placko, "Jayden Perkins Murder: Chicago Woman Seeks Justice After Son Killed by Paroled Offender," FOX 32 Chicago, March 18, 2025.

²⁰ For purposes of this toolkit, the focus will be on community members impacted by the killing of Jayden Perkins to illustrate the impact on the community more broadly.

One caregiver, whose child was friends with Jayden, described how lost she felt in supporting her child who was grieving.²¹ The caregiver described how there is a lack of visibility and understanding of what her family experiences still. In the immediate aftermath of the violence, she described being in “survivor-mode, because we were on the floor, crying every day.” Her child struggled to go to school, feeling isolated from their peers who did not have a close relationship with Jayden.

“Not only did my child lose their best friend, but they lost their sense of safety. The challenging part has been restoring their sense of safety and I have had no information or support from the school or elected officials. Everything we’ve done, we had to figure it out ourselves. It’s still really difficult for my child to see Jayden’s locker today.”

While the school offered counseling services in the immediate aftermath of Jayden's death, the impact of this level of support is unclear. Many of the caregivers at Peirce Elementary described feeling at a loss of what to do. Caregivers ended up self-organizing a WhatsApp Chat Group with over 150 people, raised over \$100,000 through a GoFundMe for Jayden's family, and sought out healing services on their own.

A leading organizer supporting Jayden's family shared that their community efforts were met with skepticism by elected officials:

“It felt like we were a source of information and not a part of the solution or problem-solving.”

A year marking Jayden's tragic death, this parent wishes there was at least some acknowledgment by an Alderperson, with greater support throughout the year. The lack of consistent support in 2024 created confusion and loss. This caregiver shared,

“It felt like our grief was suppressed.”

²¹ Anonymous, Peirce community member, Healing to Action, interview by author, Chicago, 2025

Black Women and Girls

In 2024, City Bureau and Invisible Institute published the results of a two-year investigation documenting how Black women and girls are disproportionately impacted by acts of gender-based violence in Chicago.²² The 2024 Pulitzer Prize article, "Missing in Chicago," reported that between the years of 2020-2021

30%

Black girls and women "between the ages of 10 and 20 make up about 30% of **all missing person cases** in the city, despite comprising only 2% of the city population as of 2020."²³

One of the root causes contributing to this horrifying experience by Black women and girls is gender-based violence.²⁴ Advocates and survivors of missing loved ones have called for community-based initiatives grounded in the lived experiences of communities most impacted. Shannon Bennett, the Executive Director of the Kenwood Oakland Community Organization stated,

“ Victims and victims' families need to be centered to bring recommendations. That's why I'm leery of any recommendations coming in from people who haven't had the lived experiences. Folks need to be centered in decision-making and meaningful roles.”²⁵

22 City Bureau and Invisible Institute, Chicago Missing Persons, accessed March 7, 2025.

23 Ibid.

24 J.B. Pritzker, Governor, State of Illinois, and Delrice Adams, Executive Director, Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, 2024 Task Force on Missing and Murdered Chicago Women Annual Report, prepared by Amanda L. Vasquez and Erinne Smith (Chicago: Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, 2025), <https://researchhub.icjia-api.cloud/uploads/2024%20Task%20Force%20on%20Missing%20and%20Murdered%20Chicago%20Women%20Annual%20Report...Final-250114T18393571.pdf>.

25 City Bureau and Invisible Institute, Chicago Missing Persons, accessed March 7, 2025.

Chicago's 28th Ward: Youth Gender-Based Violence, 2025

In March of 2025, another devastating headline appeared in the news – this time it was the murder of a 16-year-old girl by a 15-year-old boy in Chicago's 28th Ward.²⁶ Her death rocked her family, her school community, and her neighborhood. Social media posts²⁷ about her death pleaded for resources and support for her community. It's unclear what level of support her family or her community have received from their elected officials or city-funded resources.



In 2021, **1 in 5 high school girls** reported experiencing sexual violence in Illinois.²⁸ The gender-based violence youth experience happens beyond the construct of "domestic violence."²⁹ In 2018, the Chicago Tribune reported rampant sexual abuse of youth within CPS, the majority stemming from teacher-on-student violence. The Office of Inspector General of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) reported 1,487 cases of sexual misconduct in 2024.³⁰

The cases are egregious, from sexual assault to attempted kidnapping, but they often start with acts that are seemingly innocent, intended to establish a relationship with a child or young person with the intention of sexually assaulting them, otherwise known as "grooming." Despite the high rates of gender-based violence impacting youth, **only 36% of cases in 2024 have been investigated by the Office of the Inspector General of the Chicago Public Schools.**³¹ To youth who take the courageous act to report violence, this rate of investigation sends the message that their cases will not be taken

²⁶ Mohammad Samra, "Boy, 15, charged in beating death of girlfriend, 16, in West Side park," Chicago Sun-Times, March 24, 2025, <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2025/03/24/boy-15-accused-of-killing-girl-16-in-west-side-park>.

²⁷ @lhfirm, "Chicago's murder drop mirrors a lot of big cities," X, April 2, 2025, <https://x.com/lhfirm/status/1902439467371159606>.

²⁸ Rachel Jackson-Gordon, "Cost of Preventing Sexual Violence Well Worth the Investment," Chicago Sun-Times, April 8, 2025, <https://chicago.suntimes.com/other-views/2025/04/08/ending-sexual-violence-prevention-rape-consent-gender-equality-trump-cuts-rachel-jackson-gordon>.

²⁹ Chicago Public Schools Sexual Abuse Report, Chicago Tribune, accessed September 7, 2025, <https://graphics.chicagotribune.com/chicago-public-schools-sexual-abuse/index.html>.

³⁰ Chicago Public Schools Office of Inspector General, Annual Report: Fiscal Year 2024, (Chicago: Chicago Public Schools, 2025), https://cpsoig.org/uploads/3/5/5/6/35562484/cpsoig_annual_report_fy2024.pdf.

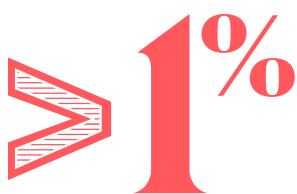
³¹ Office of the Inspector General, Chicago Public Schools. OIG Investigations of Sexual Allegations: Presentation to the Board of Education of the City of Chicago, April 9, 2025. Chicago: CPS OIG, 2025. https://cpsoig.org/uploads/3/5/5/6/35562484/oig_presentation_to_board_april_2025.pdf

seriously. Some investigations can take years before they result in any meaningful protection for students. In some situations, caregivers who are desperate for a solution opt to transfer their children to a different school, leaving the investigation all together.

Usually after tragedies like this, advocates and elected officials repeat calls for training, removing judges and police, or passing legislation to further criminalize potential harm-doers only to be followed by another horrific act of violence against a woman or LGBTQAI+³² person. But the gender-based violence that young people experience illustrates that these approaches are futile in a system that is broken beyond repair.

One potential solution survivors have long advocated for is the resourcing of **high-quality sexual health education for youth and for their caregivers through CPS.³³**

From their perspective, ensuring that both youth and their caregivers have a shared understanding of consent and healthy relationships has the potential to reduce gender-based violence for future generations. Yet prevention solutions are often the least funded initiatives.



In 2024, prevention education under the City of Chicago Department of Family Support & Support Services budget received less than 1% of the **total budget for gender-based violence.**

³² The acronym, LGBTQAI+, represents a wide range of sexual orientations and gender identities. The letters stand for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Asexual, and Intersex with the "+" indicating other identities within the community.

³³ Maya Dukmasova, "Sexual Miseducation," Chicago Reader, March 2, 2023, <https://chicagoreader.com/news/sexual-miseducation/>.

STAKEHOLDERS CURRENTLY RESPONDING TO GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

STAKEHOLDERS

There are four stakeholders that traditionally respond to incidents of gender-based violence in the City of Chicago as a matter of public safety:



The Chicago Police Department



The Department of Family & Support Services



The City of Chicago Gender-Based Violence Taskforce



Alderpeople

This section describes how these institutions approach the issue of gender-based violence and the impact it has on the community.



Chicago Police Department (CPD)

The City primarily addresses gender-based violence within the Chicago Police Department. But the institution's track record on sexual violence has sown mistrust in its ability to meaningfully respond to and reduce gender-based violence in the city.

In May of 2025, ProPublica in collaboration with WBEZ and the Chicago Sun-Times published a report documenting over 300 allegations of sexual misconduct and abuse by police officers within the department.³⁴ Often, investigators downplayed and ignored these accusations, leaving officers to continue their abuse.³⁵ Civilian oversight groups like the Civilian Office of Police Accountability (COPA) found cases closed without full investigation.³⁶ Reports have also shown that over 90% of reported sexual violence related crimes in Chicago do not result in arrests.³⁷

³⁴ María Inés Zamudio and Dana Brozost-Kelleher, "Chicago Police Dismissed a Recruit's Claims That a Colleague Sexually Assaulted Her. Then He Was Accused Again and Again," ProPublica, May 22, 2025, <https://www.propublica.org/article/chicago-police-officers-sexual-assault-allegations>.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ NBC News, "A Vanishingly Small Number of Violent Sex Crimes End in Conviction," NBC News, accessed September 8, 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/specials/sex-assault-convictions/>.



The lack of accountability by police for its own actions undermines trust in the institution. Less than 31% of survivors³⁸ actually report to the police for fear they might be criminalized themselves.

Many families of individuals missing due to gender-based violence found themselves feeling revictimized by the Chicago Police

Department.³⁹ This leaves thousands of survivors, especially some of the most marginalized survivors, looking for community based resources for healing and accountability each year.⁴⁰

Despite advocates and survivors expressing concern at the increased level of investment in law enforcement responses in lieu of other strategies to stop gender-based violence, **City officials continue to prioritize funding CPD positions as the primary intervention strategy for addressing gender-based violence.**⁴¹ In 2024, Mayor Brandon Johnson's administration, with the approval of City Council, increased CPD's budget by \$90M adding 400 new civilian positions. This Citywide expansion included hiring 44 victims' services specialists to serve in each police district.⁴²

In learning about these numbers, one of the Peirce parents reflected, "I'm not a survivor, so I don't know what survivors' needs look like, but the police budget doesn't seem like it does much to prevent domestic violence or support survivors so a bunch of the budget going there doesn't make any sense to me."⁴³

38 "What to Expect if You Report Assault or Abuse to Law Enforcement," RAINN, accessed September 10, 2025, <https://rainn.org/reporting-sexual-assault-to-law-enforcement/what-to-expect-if-you-report-assault-or-abuse-to-law-enforcement/>.

39 City Bureau and Invisible Institute, Chicago Missing Persons, accessed March 7, 2025.

40 "Dismissed: An Investigation of Chicago Sex Crime Arrests & Convictions," NBC Chicago, August 22, 2024, <https://www.nbcchicago.com/news/local/dismissed-chicago-sex-crime-conviction-rate-investigation/3440060/>; Madeleine Behr, Too Little, Too Late? The CPD's Response to Sex Crimes, Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation, October 2020, <https://www.caase.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Too-Little-Too-Late-CPDs-Response-to-Sex-Crimes.pdf>.

41 Tonia Hill, "Is the Johnson Administration Listening to Gender-Based Violence Support Groups?" The TRIIBE, January 17, 2024, <https://thetriibe.com/2024/01/is-the-johnson-administration-listening-to-gender-based-violence-support-groups/>.

42 Ibid.

43 Anonymous, parent at Peirce Elementary, Healing to Action, interview by author, Chicago, 2025.

CPD Victim Services

The intended role of CPD's Victim Services is to facilitate the referral process for survivors who report domestic violence to the police and connect them with services. Victim Services advocates review case reports to identify victims and do the following:

Immediate crisis support and safety planning

Obtain orders of protections/navigating the justice system

Liaise between victims and detectives

File Crime Victim Compensation applications

Refer to community-based providers⁴⁴

56%

In the first quarter of 2025, CPD reported that only 56% of survivors out of 2,252 victims⁴⁵ who made a police report were connected with services through the Victim Services Program.

The purpose of the program remains unclear, with many advocates and survivors expressing concern that the Victim Services program duplicates existing services that already refer survivors such as the **IL Domestic Violence Hotline**. Most recently, organizations like **Healing to Action** and **KAN-WIN** have developed peer-to-peer models with survivors of gender-based violence who share resources and **provide support to isolated survivors in their communities**. All of these community-based programs and interventions provide survivors the opportunity to connect with resources without having to file a police report. By requiring engagement with the police, CPD's Victim Services fails to connect to some of the most marginalized survivors.

⁴⁴ City of Chicago, "Gender-Based Violence," accessed May 7, 2025, <https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/sites/community-safety/home/GenderBasedViolence.html>. Victim Services presented this information at the City of Chicago Gender-Based Task Force meetings in March and April of 2025.

⁴⁵ City of Chicago, Gender-Based Violence Taskforce, Pre-decisional Meeting Notes (Chicago, IL, April 10, 2025), <https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/sites/public-safety-and-violence-reduction/pdfs/GBV%20Formatted%20Notes%204.10.25.pdf>



Department of Family & Support Services (DFSS)

In 2015, DFSS began housing the Division on Domestic & Gender-Based Violence after former Mayor Rahm Emanuel's administration dismantled the Mayor's Office of Domestic Violence and moved it under the purview of DFSS. "The primary goal of the Division on Gender-Based Violence (DGBV) is to enhance the safety and increase the well-being of survivors of gender-based violence through delegate agencies that provide direct services. DFSS is focused on raising awareness about and preventing gender-based violence (GBV), coordinating access to information, and providing impactful services."⁴⁶ **In 2025, the Division on Domestic & Gender-Based Violence funded the following strategies:**⁴⁷

Prevention	GBV Prevention Education (Public) GBV Training (Front Line Staff)
Crisis Response	Emergency Financial Assistance Multi-Disciplinary Team GBV Rapid Rehousing GBV Hotel Program DV Shelter DV Coordinated Response
Support Services for Survivors	Counseling and Advocacy Services Youth Impacted by GBV Resource & Information Advocates Legal Services
System Supports	Supervised Visitation & Safe Exchange Chicago Children's Advocacy Center InfoNet
Other	DGBV Administrative Costs

⁴⁶ Department of Family and Support Services, 2024 ARPA Mid-Year Impact Book, City of Chicago, November 21, 2024, https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/fss/supp_info/2024%20DFSS%20ARPA%20Mid-Year%20Impact%20Book.pdf.

⁴⁷ Department of Family and Support Services, 2023 Division on Gender-Based Violence Strategy Book, City of Chicago, October 18, 2023, https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/fss/supp_info/DV/2023%20Division%20on%20Gender%20Based%20Violence%20Strategy%20Book.pdf.

In 2025, the total funding towards gender-based violence through DFSS is **\$21,313,091.00** – less than half of the \$90M allocated to the Chicago Police Department civilian positions. Over a quarter of funding is from the American Recovery Plan Act of 2021 which expire at the end of 2025.⁴⁸



The City of Chicago Gender-Based Violence Taskforce

As a result of the City-wide Strategic Plan to Address Gender-Based Violence in 2021, the City of Chicago, under then Mayor Lori Lightfoot, launched a Gender-Based Violence Taskforce⁴⁹ that was codified by ordinance in April 2023.⁵⁰ The purpose of the Taskforce is to create a “whole of government approach to address the root causes of gender-based violence.”⁵¹ The ordinance further clarifies that the Taskforce shall advise the Mayor on how to:

Enhance coordination of prevention and intervention efforts among City departments and with key outside organizations focused on preventing gender-based violence and human trafficking;

Improve law enforcement response to gender-based violence;

Shift cultural norms on what constitutes gender-based violence and human trafficking and its acceptability;

Collect, analyze, and use data and research to enhance gender-based violence and human trafficking intervention efforts;

Create alternate responses to gender-based violence and human trafficking outside of the criminal justice system; and

Reform policies that perpetuate or create opportunities for gender-based violence and human trafficking.⁵²

48 H.R. 1319, 117th Cong. (2021), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/1319>.

49 City of Chicago, Citywide Strategic Plan to Address Gender-Based Violence and Human Trafficking, October 2023, <https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/sites/public-safety-and-violence-reduction/pdfs/GBV%20strategic%20plan%20FINAL.pdf>.

50 City of Chicago, “Gender-Based Violence,” accessed April 7, 2025, <https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/sites/community-safety/home/GenderBasedViolence.html>.

51 Department of Family and Support Services, 2023 Division on Gender-Based Violence Strategy Book, City of Chicago, October 18, 2023, <https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/sites/public-safety-and-violence-reduction/pdfs/GBV%20strategic%20plan%20FINAL.pdf>.

52 City of Chicago, “Gender-Based Violence,” accessed April 7, 2025, <https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/sites/community-safety/home/GenderBasedViolence.html>.

Members of the Taskforce are appointed by the Mayor every two years and participate in quarterly meetings to discuss issues related to gender-based violence and make recommendations to the Mayor's Office. The Taskforce, composed of 21 appointees, has three subcommittees as of 2025: Alternative Responses, Shifting Cultural Norms, and a Survivor-Leader Working Group.⁵³

For 2024-2026, the Task Force has identified the following focus areas

Priority #1: Shifting Cultural Norms

The first objective under this priority is supporting the administration to shift the public's understanding of gender-based violence and human trafficking from an "individual" or "interpersonal harm" to an understanding that gender-based violence, including human trafficking, are forms of community violence that impact everyone in the City of Chicago.

The second objective under this priority is advising the City of Chicago to invest in preventing GBV and human trafficking by enhancing the coordination, capacity, and expertise of the Chicago Public School system through the district-wide implementation of interactive and accessible Caregiver Workshops within CPS's Parent University Networks that aim to increase practices of consent, reduce transphobia and anti-LGBTQAI+ sentiments, and give caregivers the tools to promote healthy relationships.

Priority #2: Alternative Responses

In alignment with the Johnson administration's "Empower the People" pillar, the Task Force recommends the City invest in alternative responses to policing for survivors of gender-based violence.

The term "alternative responses" has often been used to describe response-based resources for survivors like rapid-rehousing, economic support, legal assistance, and mental health services. **The subcommittee is broadening what "alternative**

53 "ALSO Hosts Community Violence Intervention (CVI) Advocacy Meeting on Chicago's Northwest Side," Metropolitan Peace Initiatives, September 19, 2023, <https://metropolitanpeaceinitiatives.org/also-hosts-community-violence-intervention-cvi-advocacy-meeting-on-chicagos-northwest-side/>.

responses” means based on survivors’ input. For example, the subcommittee has started exploring community-based interventions similar to that of the violence interrupter model in Chicago such as peer-to-peer and community health worker models. Peer-based models already led by organizations like Healing to Action, Mujeres Latinas en Accion, Un Nuevo Despertar, and KAN-WIN, have shown promising results in reaching hundreds of people to destigmatize the issue of gender-based violence in the City, and support isolated survivors to disclose violence and connect them to resources.

These peer models are powerful because they address the stigma and shame that prevent individuals from coming forward and disclosing violence or seeking support. The violence interrupter model is a great example of how these initiatives, centered in community, can actually work to reduce gender-based violence.⁵⁴ The vision of this priority is for the City of Chicago to invest resources for survivors who need it and ultimately work towards preventing gender-based violence and saving lives.

Priority #3: Survivor Leadership to Address Gender-Based Violence

In 2023, the Survivor-Leader Working Group (SLWG) was created as a subcommittee of the Task Force with 16 survivor-leaders, a diverse and representative group of survivors most impacted by gender-based violence across Chicago’s neighborhoods.

One key distinction of this governance body compared to the other municipal stakeholders addressing gender-based violence is that survivors are at the table advising the priorities and recommendations of the Task Force. For instance, the current priorities of the Task Force have been shaped by members of the SLWG. And in 2025, members of the SLWG developed a Survivor Bill of Rights that is currently in the process of being incorporated into formal recommendations of the Task Force. This structure shows the most promise in ensuring that policies implemented by the City of Chicago are grounded in the realities that survivors of gender-based violence experience.

54 Jahdziah St. Julien, “Community-Based Violence Interruption Programs Can Reduce Gun Violence,” Center for American Progress, July 14, 2022, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/community-based-violence-interruption-programs-can-reduce-gun-violence/>.

THE SURVIVOR BILL OF RIGHTS

- 01 The right to dignity** – in interactions with law enforcement, social services, and those who support survivors of gender-based violence
- 02 The right to be recognized** – always consulted, provided a seat at the table, empowered as leaders in our communities
- 03 The right to be understood** – to be provided resources in the correct language, to be connected with culturally-competent services, to be treated with fairness and compassion in a preferred language and method of communication
- 04 The right to autonomy** – to be the decision maker, to choose the services that provide comfort and empowerment, and to disengage or reengage within the limits of the law, without prejudice and with support
- 05 The right to advocacy** – to receive it, to provide it (or not), to determine our own level of comfort or need, consistency and timeliness in communication
- 06 The right to priority access** – to agencies with emergency funds and updates resources for family support, including resources for children
- 07 The right to be heard** – to be offered a platform amplified by the City in all stages of decision-making and policy development
- 08 The right to transparency** – the right to know what the City is doing to support survivors



Aldermanic Responses to Gender-Based Violence

Alderpeople are elected by their Ward constituents to represent them on Chicago's City Council and have generally two spheres of responsibilities: "Citywide Duties" and "Ward Services".⁵⁵

Under the "Citywide" sphere of responsibilities, Alderpeople may propose and vote on ordinances, and the city budget. Alderpeople can also call subject matter hearings and usually serve in one of the several committees within the council.⁵⁶ Some Alderpeople might serve as the chairs of those committees but the chairs are generally selected by the Mayor and have significant influence over their respective committees.⁵⁷

Under the "Ward Services" sphere of responsibilities, Alderpeople steward the everyday services of their Ward, engaging with their constituents directly, and addressing their infrastructure and public safety concerns.⁵⁸

Ward Level Responses to Survivors

In 2024, **Dominique Ward**⁵⁹ publicly spoke out against her abuser after he used online platforms to send people to follow her in-person.⁶⁰ Ward spoke with elected officials, police, and the media to find justice and accountability for her abuser. After the Chicago Tribune reported Ward's case, Alderpeople moved quickly to pass an ordinance addressing cyberstalking and online harassment without consulting her about the ordinance.

55 Heather Cherone, "WTTW News Explains: What Exactly Does a Chicago Alderperson Do?" WTTW News, June 25, 2024, <https://news.wttw.com/2024/06/25/wttw-news-explains-what-exactly-does-chicago-alderperson-do>.

56 India Daniels, "What You Need to Know About Chicago City Council," City Bureau, October 18, 2022, <https://www.citybureau.org/newswire/2022/9/14/what-to-know-about-chicago-city-council>.

57 Ibid.

58 Heather Cherone, "WTTW News Explains: What Exactly Does a Chicago Alderperson Do?" WTTW News, June 25, 2024, <https://news.wttw.com/2024/06/25/wttw-news-explains-what-exactly-does-chicago-alderperson-do>.

59 Dominique Ward has been a Healing to Action leader since 2024 and is a resident of the City of Chicago. In 2024, Dominique spoke publicly about her experience of abuse. Patrick Kerber, "Facebook Posts Frighten Mother, Pushing Police to Act," Chicago Tribune, July 7, 2024.

60 Ibid.

In reflecting on her advocacy experience, Ward expressed the urgency of elected officials **meeting with survivors directly impacted and listening to what they need before acting** to truly understand the impact of gender-based violence on public safety.



She experienced at least once where an elected-official refused to meet in-person. “There was so much pushback to having an in-person meeting. The official wanted to send us their media people **but they wouldn’t show up to the table themselves. I don’t even know if elected officials would necessarily understand the issue even if they sat with a real victim. Unless the violence happens to them personally, they might think ‘these women are love struck.’ I want them to know that I wanted to walk away, I just wasn’t allowed to and it should be everybody’s right to walk away.”**

Ward’s experience underscores the inherent shame and stigma survivors experience that is deep within our culture. “Why don’t they just leave” is often a question rooted in a myth that blames the survivor for their experience when the reality is far from that. By meeting directly with survivors, elected officials not only work to dispel the myth, but they provide an opportunity for survivors to tap into their expertise and drive community-based change to address the root causes of gender-based violence.

Ward Level Responses to Community Impacted by Gender-Based Violence

Often after a horrific act of gender-based violence, family and community members create public fundraisers for the impacted families.⁶¹ The case was no different for **Jayden Perkin’s family.** Parents at Peirce Elementary organized and raised over \$114K to support Jayden’s family.⁶²

⁶¹ “Family of Murdered Portage Park Woman Raising Funds for Funeral,” Block Club Chicago, November 23, 2024, <https://blockclubchicago.org/2024/11/23/family-of-murdered-portage-park-woman-raising-funds-for-funeral/>.

⁶² WGN-TV Digital Team, “Community Raises Over \$114K for Family of 11-Year-Old Boy Fatally Stabbed on North Side,” WGN-TV, March 15, 2024, <https://wgntv.com/news/chicago-news/community-raises-over-114k-for-family-of-11-year-old-boy-fatally-stabbed-on-north-side/>.

One of the parents working on the fundraiser shared that they felt suspicion from their Alderperson. **“It felt like my Alder wondered whether we, as parents raising funds for Jayden’s family, were taking advantage of his family. I was so insulted and enraged, it felt like his office was going to try to educate me on how I needed to support Jayden’s family.”**

The only resource this parent observed being coordinated by elected officials in their Ward and decision-makers like the Chicago Public Schools was a week of grief counselors for the school and flyers with referrals for services. To this parent, it felt like constant institutional failures.

“To me, it felt like just another discarded, Black, body.”

Community members like this parent want an empathetic, consistent, and action-oriented response. “I want to see tangible results, clear communication like debriefing with the community, and a phone call especially because there’s no excuse to not get a follow-up phone call from this Alderperson with an offer of support when I was coordinating these efforts. I held fundraisers for him, I campaigned for him. Our kids went to nursery school together. This is someone who I thought I knew personally so this experience really impacted my ability to trust them.”

As members of their Ward communities, it is critical for Alderpeople to prioritize the relationships with community-members and show sustained and authentic commitment to survivors and community members impacted by gender-based violence.

Citywide Responses to Gender-Based Violence

Despite the widespread impact of gender-based violence in the city, in 2024 Chicago's City Council members considered cutting \$2M of direct cash assistance for survivors of gender-based violence in order to balance a \$17.1B budget. Survivors opposing the cuts to City Council members ultimately led to the continued funding of the survivor cash-assistance program.

City Council members have had a mixed record as a whole on the issue of gender-based violence. While City Council members did pass an ordinance to codify the Gender-Based Violence Taskforce in 2023 and allocated funding from the American Recovery Plan Act (ARPA) for victim services, the efforts of the Council continue to fall short.

One reason City Council members' efforts miss the mark is because of the focus on policing as a solution despite evidence to the contrary. For instance, during the subject matter hearing on the crisis of missing Black Women and Girls, survivors and their family members shared how time and again, the institution of the police failed

them.⁶³ Data corroborates that cases of missing Black women and girls stay open **four times longer by the Chicago Police Department.**⁶⁴ And yet, in the same year, City Council members approved a budget that allocated more than \$2.3 million to fund salaries for 44 new positions with the Chicago Police Department to respond to survivors of gender-based violence.



Gender-based violence falls squarely within an Alderperson's "Citywide" and "Ward" spheres of responsibilities because it is a public safety issue that affects not just the survivor, but everyone surrounding the survivor in the community.

⁶³ India Daniels, "What We Heard at City Council's Hearing on Chicago's Missing Black Women Crisis," City Bureau, October 30, 2024, <https://www.citybureau.org/newswire/2024/10/30/newswire-missing-persons-public-safety-hearing>.

⁶⁴ Mayor Johnson to Join We Walk for Her March for Missing Black Women and Girls," Block Club Chicago, June 5, 2025, <https://blockclubchicago.org/2025/06/05/mayor-johnson-to-join-we-walk-for-her-march-for-missing-black-women-and-girls/>.

STAKEHOLDERS

At the Ward level, Alderpeople have the opportunity to deepen their efforts on gender-based violence by consistently meeting with survivors and community members directly impacted, hosting workshops on gender-based violence in their Wards, leading resource fairs for survivors of gender-based violence, providing resources on their websites for survivors, and following through on providing continued support for survivors and communities.

As members of City Council, **Alderpeople have the power to ensure that policies and budgeting priorities** at a Citywide level center strategies survivors are directly advocating for, and that work towards preventing the violence from happening in the first place. This means investing in community-based strategies recommended by survivors, following recommendations provided at subject matter hearings, and holding follow-up meetings with survivors who testify, **recognizing them as the key stakeholder and expert.**

THE MISSING STAKEHOLDER: WHAT SURVIVORS REALLY WANT

Often in the aftermath of a horrific incident, elected-officials push policies to close "loopholes" to "protect" survivors from "slipping through the cracks."⁶⁵ But these laws do little to prevent the violence from happening.⁶⁶ In 2025, rates of gender-based violence continue to increase at a disproportionate rate compared to other forms of violence in the City of Chicago.⁶⁷

The experiences and data illustrate that law-enforcement centered policies miss the mark on what survivors want in their communities to address gender-based violence.⁶⁸

In 2025, the Gender-Based Violence Taskforce of the City of Chicago issued a survey where, almost 200 survivors of gender-based violence shared their priorities and recommendations for the City's 2026 budget. Survivors overwhelmingly support funding **housing, mental health services, and direct-cash assistance initiatives.**⁶⁹



- 65 One example is Karina's Law, passed in IL in 2025. Ben Szalinski, "Pritzker Signs 'Karina's Law' to Remove Guns from Domestic Violence Situations," Capitol News Illinois, February 10, 2025, <https://capitolnewsillinois.com/news/pritzker-signs-karinlas-law-to-remove-guns-from-domestic-violence-situations/>.
- 66 An example is the removal of a judge in a domestic violence court: Ravi Baichwal and ABC7 Chicago Digital Team, "Cook County Judge Moved Off Domestic Violence Cases After 2 Suspects Allegedly Kill Woman, Child," ABC7 Chicago, January 17, 2025, <https://abc7chicago.com/post/cook-county-judge-thomas-nowinski-moved-off-domestic-violence-cases-2-suspects-allegedly-kill-woman-child/15808133/>.
- 67 City of Chicago, "Violence Reduction Dashboard," accessed June 8, 2025, <https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/sites/vrd/home.html>.
- 68 Crossetti Brand, who was convicted of murdering 10-year old Jayden Perkins had been released from a 16 year sentence in prison prior to the murder. While much of the advocacy has focused on the release of Brand, there is little questioning of the fact that he should have been rehabilitated after a 16 year sentence. The advocacy around the parole board was not informed by the community impacted by Jayden's death, including his mother.
- 69 Healing to Action, City of Chicago Budget 2026 Survivor Survey, unpublished survey, 2025. In the survey, 76% of survivors advocated for more funding towards housing, 75% advocated for more funding towards mental health, and 80% advocated for more direct-cash assistance; The Network: Advocating Against Domestic Violence, Measuring Safety: Gender-Based Violence in Illinois 2023, October 2024, [<https://the-network.org/document-library/#measuring-safety-2023>] <https://the-network.org/document-library/#measuring-safety-2023>

MISSING STAKEHOLDER

Several survivors voiced a need for **non-police interventions, community-based approaches like workshops on gender-based violence, peer-to-peer interventions, prevention education, and economic and workplace support**. Survivors have particularly named various economic supports needed including entrepreneurship support and economic safety nets like childcare access. Survivors with disabilities are advocating for access to economic empowerment resources like job placement. These resources ultimately promote self-determination and work towards preventing gender-based violence by embedding networks of support into the community that are accessible to the most marginalized survivors.

Elected officials frequently look to advocacy organizations or organizations that work with survivors on the ground. While that input is important, the advocacy organizations are limited by the services they themselves provide. For example, if an organization provides rapid-rehousing, their advocacy might likely center that strategy given the population of survivors connecting with them.

To ensure that the most impacted, most isolated survivors have meaningful input, elected officials can consult directly with survivors who have navigated these broken systems and know exactly what their community needs to both respond to and prevent gender-based violence in their communities.

This can happen proactively in engaging with survivors in the community, building trusting relationships, and seeking their expertise to advance policies that center their experiences. By approaching policy advocacy this way, elected officials will get closer to addressing the root causes of gender-based violence that will, in the long-term, reduce incidents of gender-based violence in their communities and increase public safety.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ELECTED OFFICIALS TO RESOURCE GENDER- BASED VIOLENCE

Assess Your Team's Readiness to Center Survivors

An initial step is assessing the skillset and capacity of the office of an elected official to develop meaningful relationships with survivors and center survivors in policy-making. Through the **Survivor Centered Assessment Tool**, a baseline can be established that helps identify the kind of information and training needed by the team to collaborate with survivors in addressing gender-based violence.

Implement Strategies to Connect with Survivor Constituents

After identifying areas for growth for the team, begin implementing strategies to **make your office accessible to survivors** and community members impacted by gender-based violence.

Tactics for increasing your skillsets and capacity include: attending sexual assault crisis intervention trainings, participating in events by anti-violence organizations and survivors in your Ward or neighboring Wards, meeting with organizations building peer-based interventions like Healing to Action, Mujeres Latinas en Accion and KAN-WIN to learn directly from their survivor-leaders, meeting individually with subject matter hearing participants, and meeting with the members of the Survivor Leader Working Group of the Task Force.

A second step is to open conversations about the issue of gender-based violence with your constituents. Shame and stigma are a significant barrier for individuals to talk about gender-based violence, so creating quarterly or bi-annual community forums or health fairs on issues related to gender-based violence facilitated by community-based organizations or survivor-leaders in your community can begin destigmatizing the issue. In creating these events, it's critical to provide resources like childcare, transportation support, refreshments, and access to other resources to remove the barriers survivors often face in attending community-based events that could offer support. **See Guide for Proactively Engaging Survivors in the Community.**

Third, have resources available on your website and discuss the issue there. One of the caregivers interviewed for the toolkit shared, "I always go right to the alderperson's page when I have an issue." It is critical for Alderpeople to have readily available, local resources for community members impacted by gender-based violence.

Learn about the Systems Survivors are Forced to Navigate

This Toolkit provides an overview of some of the stakeholders interfacing with the issue of gender-based violence but there are so many other layers to the system. From courts, to police officers, to advocacy organizations, there are so many systems survivors need to navigate. If it's difficult for policy experts to understand the landscape of responses and resources, imagine what it might be like for a survivor who is in crisis.

It's critical for elected officials to understand how disjointed these systems are, and how survivors experience these systems. Elected officials like Alderpeople have the opportunity to meet with the Mayor's Office, the Deputy Mayor of Community Safety, the Gender-Based Violence Taskforce, the Chicago Police Department, the Department of Family Support & Support Services, and others, to assess whether and how these bodies are centering survivors' experiences. Alderpeople can invest in resources that are accessible to survivors and center their vision in working to both respond to and prevent gender-based violence in the community. [See Guide to Assessing Survivor-Centered Policy Advocacy and the Survivor Bill of Rights.](#)

Model Transparency and Accountability

Alderpeople hold a critical relationship with the people of Chicago. Constituents need to know they can trust their ability to lead in times of crisis, especially when it's a crisis that has devastating effects on the community for generations.

It's critical for Alderpeople to engage in efforts to prevent gender-based violence. Alderpeople could start by understanding the baseline level of gender-based violence within the Ward. This data can be obtained by reviewing Chicago Police Department reports of sexual assault/ domestic violence, and reports of sexual abuse and assault within Chicago Public Schools within the Ward. In the spirit of transparency, this data can be shared with Ward constituents and community-discussion forums could be held in partnership with a community-based organization to learn more about the needs of the community to reduce the violence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Alderpeople can also center survivors in policymaking and developing the City budget. For instance, the information in this report could be used to advocate for the City to invest in piloting prevention programs like city-wide peer-to-peer programs, prevention education programs for both youth and their caregivers like comprehensive sexual health education, and community-based workshops that work to shift the cultural perspectives around gender-based violence. By advocating for prevention measures for youth and adults, Alderpeople will demonstrate a strong commitment towards promoting a culture of consent and healthy relationships for all of their constituents.

Alderpeople can also proactively share protocols for supporting survivors in their Wards in the aftermath of violence. Their offices can start by sharing their assessment results and the steps they are taking to improve their offices' responses to gender-based violence. Alderpeople can also hold bi-annual meetings with trauma-informed support to seek suggestions for improving processes in responding to gender-based violence in their communities. Lastly, City Council members have the power to hold quarterly committee hearings with key stakeholders, including survivor leaders, to work towards improving the City's responses.

Alderpeople are in the best position to collaborate with survivors, and lead their communities in preventing and reducing gender-based violence in Chicago. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this Toolkit, elected officials can learn from survivors' expertise and begin working to center survivors' vision for what is possible.

Every single person deserves safety - in their homes, walking down the street, at school, or at work. This is what public safety means.

In order to make this a reality, strategies proposed by survivors of gender-based violence that reflect their lived experiences of navigating these broken systems, must be centered and invested in. That means:

- 1 **Listening to survivors most impacted**
- 2 **Initiating conversations about gender-based violence in your community**
- 3 **Investing in survivor-led and survivor-centered responses focused on community-based interventions like peer-to-peer based interventions in addition to housing, direct-cash assistance, and mental health support**

**EVERY SINGLE
PERSON DESERVES
SAFETY**

WORKSHEETS + ASSESSMENTS

SURVIVOR-CENTERED ASSESSMENT TOOL

A Engagement & response to GBV

1. What forms of gender-based violence exist or have been reported in your ward?

Check all that apply

Catcalling

Dating violence

Domestic violence

Family-based sexual abuse

Sexual harassment at work

Sexual assault

Rape

Bullying against gender non-conforming people

Other

2. Within the last year, how many meetings did your team hold to discuss topics connected with gender-based violence?

3. Within the last year, how many meetings did you hold with survivors to discuss gender-based violence and related issues?

4. Within the last year, how many meetings did you hold with community-based organizations to discuss gender-based violence and related issues?

5. Within the last year, how many meetings did your team attend around issues pertaining to gender-based violence held by community members or community-based organizations?

6. Within the last year, how many meetings has your team had with the Chicago Police Department related to responding to or preventing gender-based violence?

7. Within the last year, how many incidents of gender-based violence in your ward did your team actively support? _____

8. What kind of support has your team provided to survivors of gender-based violence in your Ward?

Check all that apply

Public statement

Policy/advocacy

Direct support to the family

Short-term resources to the community impacted

Long-term resources to the community impacted

Coordination with CPD

Coordination with CPS

Coordination with Department of Family & Support Services

Coordination with the Chicago Department of Public Health

Referral to a community based organization

Other

All of the Above

None of the Above

9. What resources does your office have to remove barriers so community members can attend?

Check all that apply

Childcare

Public transportation support

Transportation support for people with disabilities

Food or light refreshments

Simultaneous interpretation services

Access to interpretation equipment

B Youth

1. Within the last year, how many meetings has your team had with the Chicago Public Schools in your ward related to responding to or preventing gender-based violence? _____

2. What is the number of sexual abuse cases within the Chicago Public Schools in your district?

3. What resources has your team provided to your ward to prevent youth gender-based violence?

4. Within the last year, has your team engaged with youth that may be impacted by gender-based violence? If yes, what was the result?

Yes,

No

c Communications

1. What informs your talking points on GBV?

2. Does your website have any resources for survivors of GBV?

Yes

No

3. Does your team promote resources for GBV on social media?

Yes

No

D

Capacity to Support Survivors

1. Within the last year, have you and your team participated in the 2-hour gender-based violence (GBV) training offered by DFSS's Division on Gender-based Violence?

Yes

No

2. Within the last year, has your team had a Trauma 101 training?

Yes

No

3. How many of your staff have professional training or experience working on the issue of GBV?

4. How many of your staff have professional training or experience working with survivors of GBV?

5. What is your team's protocol to support survivors who come forward in your ward?

6. What is your team's protocol to support community members impacted by gender-based violence in your ward?

7. Which gender-based violence community-based organizations does your team have relationships with?

GUIDE FOR PROACTIVELY ENGAGING SURVIVORS IN THE COMMUNITY

Objective: This template is intended to engage with Ward community members about the issue of gender-based violence. Survivors often have a hard time identifying their survivorship or feel like they are unable to disclose the violence. Holding a community-based workshop around the issue of gender-based violence in partnership with identified peer survivor-leaders or community-based organizations that center survivors can create a space of trust for survivors to identify the violence and come forward to trusted individuals in their communities.

Agenda topics might include:

Promoting a culture of consent in the community

Understanding gender-based violence and its impact in the community

Gender & diversity related topics

Youth related gender-based violence (i.e. Teen dating violence)

Caregiver focused workshops with tools to discuss healthy relationships with youth

Sexual Assault Awareness Month (April)

Domestic Violence Awareness Month (October)

Gun violence and its connection with gender-based violence

Know Your Rights about sexual harassment

Know Your Rights related to domestic violence and sexual assault

Agenda topics might include:

Educational community workshops

Educational community forums with panel presentations

Healing or Peace Circles

Interactive art workshops

Intergenerational workshops with teens and their caregivers

Resource fairs to promote healthy relationships or reduce gender-based violence

Memorials

Sample Educational Meeting Agenda

30 min Brief introduction of alderperson and facilitators

30 min Icebreaker that allows individuals to gauge their level of awareness of understanding of gender-based violence

45 min 45-minute discussion helping individuals explore the concept of gender-based violence

45 min Closing with a healing activity

Resource Checklist to Ensure Survivor Participation

- Provide simultaneous interpretation in English, Spanish or other languages in your Ward for these events
- Provide childcare for these events
- Provide food or light refreshments
- Provide a crisis advocate on-site so that individuals who are triggered by the experience can meet individually with the advocate if needed
- Partner with community-based organizations who co-facilitate with survivors in the community. This is incredibly powerful for community members to witness other community members discussing gender-based violence. Organizations include: Healing to Action, Survivors Know, Latino Union of Chicago, Chicago Women's Health Center, Sexpectations, and others
- Provide resources for mental health, housing, legal support, and direct-cash assistance at the community event (i.e. flyers, or a tabling event)

GUIDE FOR ENGAGING WITH INDIVIDUAL SURVIVORS

Objective: If your team engages with survivors directly, it is of the utmost importance to create a safe and trusting space for survivors. This means ensuring survivors are the owners of their experience and their stories, providing clarity as to what you can and cannot do, and ensuring survivors leave your office with clear and concrete steps that are followed through.

Ideas to keep in mind in meeting with survivors:

Believe survivors and their experiences

Survivors are **powerful** individuals, not helpless victims

Meetings should focus on what the **survivor needs**, not on them disclosing their story

Use language that **affirms** their experience and avoids blaming them (i.e. "Why didn't you come forward earlier? Why didn't you go to the police?")

Depending on their journey, it's possible they need a warm handoff to **referral resources**

Trust is critical and is established by following through on realistic commitments that your office can make

Create many **points of choice** for survivors throughout the meeting and beyond to empower them

Trauma impacts how survivors might tell **their stories**; things like dates, timelines, or anything related to establishing chronology is really difficult for survivors to ascertain; focus instead on understanding the issue first and recognize you might need a follow-up meeting to secure that information

Prior to Meeting...

- Understand what the survivor might need to feel safe or supported during the meeting (i.e. childcare, interpretation, transportation support, privacy, etc.)
- Identify what support a survivor has available after the meeting (i.e. a session is scheduled with a therapist after the meeting, or they have a friend they can meet with to provide emotional support, etc.)
- Inform survivors that they do not have to share their entire story if they don't want to, the purpose of their meeting is to understand their goals
- Ask them if they need any immediate resources before meeting and share a list of referrals that your office has developed relationships with

During the Meeting...

- Listen to what the survivor is asking you and focus on that request
- Questions should be limited to the issue the survivor is seeking support in, not questions asking for more details of the violence experienced
- If the survivor wants to share their story, ask them when and how they want to share it
- Use open-ended questions like "tell me about the time..." or "how did you experience x?"
- If you notice signs of distress (i.e. crying, deep breathing, shut-down, etc.), pause and ask the survivor what support they need and whether they want to continue
- Clearly identify the commitments you can and cannot make and explain why
- Thank the survivor for trusting you and identify commitments you've made
- Provide specific timelines for following up and follow through

After the Meeting...

- Follow up is crucial to establishing trust. Follow up directly with the survivor and update them on the progress of any commitments
- If any opportunities arise to create policy related to the experience of violence (i.e. a call for creating an ordinance or policy around their issue, etc.), inform them of that and ask them if and how they want to get involved
- Identify any additional immediate needs and follow through with commitments
- Assess the impact in the community and provide resources like healing circles in the immediate aftermath of the incident
- Provide resources for the community in the long-term
- Check in with the survivor in the short and long-term to ensure that support is still being received

GUIDE FOR COMMUNICATIONS: USING SURVIVOR-CENTERED LANGUAGE

In the aftermath of gender-based violence, press releases, news articles, and other public communications have used the following language below in the left column.

This language, while well intentioned, has a **harmful effect on understanding** the impact of gender-based violence and perpetuates the shame and stigma that prevent survivors from coming forward. For instance, calling gender-based violence an “isolated incident,” or “domestic in nature,” minimizes the impact of gender-based violence in the community. It also relieves the community of any accountability for the harm that has occurred. Similarly, language such as “saving the next person” presumes the conditions of gender-based violence are impossible to change and implies that survivors do not have self-determination.

Instead, **language that affirms the humanity of the survivor**, that imparts the impact of the violence on the community, and that highlights the power of a survivor is recommended. Phrases like the examples in the right column. Shifting the language used to describe gender-based violence is just one small part of broadly structuring centering survivors.

Harmful Language

“

The victim and suspect are believed to have been known to each other and CPD has shared that the homicide was likely domestic in nature.”¹

Affirming Language

The victim grew up in Chicago, attended the local Chicago Public School, went to church, and lived with their family.

1. April 13, 2025 Public Safety Statement issued in the 40th Ward.

Harmful Language

“

Police said they believe the shooting was an isolated incident resulting from a domestic dispute, and there is no threat to the community.”²

Affirming Language

Police said they believe the shooting resulted from a domestic dispute in the community. Elected officials will be hosting a community healing circle for all community members impacted by this loss.

“

As essential services for domestic violence victims are threatened by funding cuts, advocates don't know how they'll save the next person.”³

A fragile network of essential services for domestic violence victims is threatened by funding cuts.

2. <https://www.cbsnews.com/chicago/news/berwyn-shooting-domestic-dispute-clinton-avenue/>
3. <https://blockclubchicago.org/2025/05/20/as-chicagos-domestic-violence-crisis-deepens-victims-suffer-in-silence/>

Sample Press Release in the Aftermath of Gender-Based Violence

MONTH XXth, YEAR

PUBLIC SAFETY STATEMENT FROM ALDERPERSON XXXXXX REGARDING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE HOMICIDE ON THE 2700 BLOCK OF W BALMORAL AVE

At approximately 11:30 PM last night, April 12th, CPD received a 911 call reporting a stabbing on the 2700 block of W Balmoral. Police responded and the victim, a 29-year-old woman, was transported to the hospital, where she was pronounced dead. CPD has located the suspect and has taken him into custody.

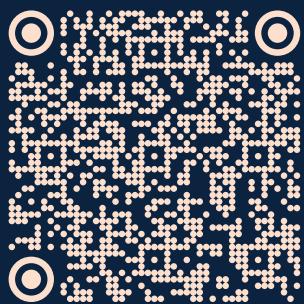
Our office will stay in touch with the impacted Ward members, the Chicago Police Department and State's Attorney's Office and will share updates if available in our newsletter.

The impacts of violence extend beyond the immediate victim to family members, friends, neighbors, and other community members. Our office has partnered with a community-based organization to provide a community healing circle and resources on [DATE] for impacted Ward members. Light refreshments, transportation support, and childcare will be provided to support attendance. Please register [here](#).

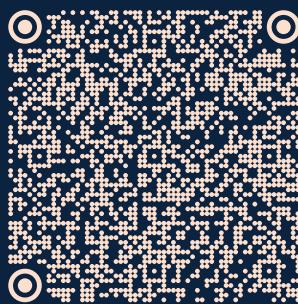
If you need immediate support, please call the **24/7 Illinois Domestic Violence Helpline** at **1-877-863-6338**. For additional mental health support, you can call 211, visit the **City's UnSpoken page**, or call the **National Alliance on Mental Illness Chicago** Helpline at **833-626-4244** (833-NAMI-CHI). Attached is a list of local mental health services and rape crisis centers located near or in our Ward.



For additional resources to support survivors in your community, please check out Healing to Action's Resource Guide:



ENGLISH GUIDE



SPANISH GUIDE

**FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT US AT: WWW.HEALINGTOACTION.ORG
FIND US ON BLUESKY, INSTAGRAM OR FACEBOOK @HEALINGTOACTION**