



Community Engagement 2020-2021 Activity Report

Cook County Safety and Justice Challenge Initiative

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LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT



OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS OF COOK COUNTY

Dear residents of Cook County:

This report details the results of two years' worth of community engagement efforts implemented under the Safety and Justice Challenge (SJC). The SJC focuses on criminal justice reform using a racial equity lens. I am extremely proud to present these findings to all stakeholders in our county including residents of all neighborhoods, advocates and elected officials. Having a fair and equitable justice system is a major priority for Cook County and the voices summarized in this report represent the truths that will shape our ongoing efforts to reform our Criminal Justice System.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every aspect of our lives, including how we engage with our neighbors. It was challenging to meet in-person for face-to-face dialogue sessions and relying on technology to meaningfully connect with each other presents its own challenges. The pandemic also shined a light on the inequities that persist in our society, including our criminal justice system. Yet rather than silencing us, these challenges energized our community engagement efforts and sparked important conversations with our neighbors. We were vulnerable- sharing our experiences of injustice, our frustrations, our hopes and ideas.

These conversations are not easy. They take courage and can trigger memories of our most painful and challenging moments. Yet these powerful conversations will foster awareness and inspire change. They will inform our policies and how we continue to invest in the people of Cook County. Beyond collections of data and statistics, the voices and needs of those affected by the criminal justice system carry the deepest wisdom to help move us towards lasting change.

I want to thank the MacArthur Foundation for its years of generous support and technical assistance to help Cook County rise to meet "the Safety and Justice Challenge." This has been a transformative process. I also want to thank each and every County resident who participated in dialogue sessions and the members of the SJC Community Engagement team who brought this report together. Your time, commitment and your honest feedback are invaluable to this process. Through our continued partnership, we will work to address the inequities we have identified and build safe and thriving communities for all.

In gratitude,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Toni Preckwinkle".

Toni Preckwinkle
Cook County Board President

COOK COUNTY SAFETY AND JUSTICE CHALLENGE INTRODUCTION

The Safety and Justice Challenge (SJC) is a national initiative funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation which aims to reduce local jail populations and racial and ethnic disparities in the justice system. These two goals are supported by data collection at the site and initiative level, and by strategies that utilize strong community engagement for shared problem solving, information sharing, and stakeholder buy-in.

The Challenge Network represents 52 sites across 32 states, with people across the country working to identify, implement, track, and adjust strategies to successfully reduce local jail populations and address racial and ethnic disparities. Sites vary not only geographically, but in size and jail capacity, as well. For those reasons, Challenge Network sites are working on many different types of strategies across the spectrum of system decision points—from pre-arrest to system exit.

The SJC in Cook County

2015 - 2016

Cook County received two SJC planning awards to facilitate the creation of a collaborative, multi-agency approach to safely reduce incarceration rates and reduce racial and ethnic disparities.

2017

The Chicago Police Department and Cook County Health joined the SJC collaboration as stakeholders and Cook County was awarded \$1.85 million to implement 4 strategies that address the main drivers of the local jail population in the area, including unfair and ineffective practices that take a heavy toll on people of color, low-income communities, and people with mental health and substance abuse issues.

The 4 strategies implemented include comprehensive bond reform, an automated court reminder system (ACRS), diversion and deflection, and community engagement (CE).

2018

In June 2018, the JAC added a CE coordinator to their team to help increase awareness of the SJC strategies and county reform efforts. In October 2018, the JAC was awarded an initial \$75 thousand in supplemental SJC funds to implement a robust CE strategy in three communities of color with the highest return-rates from the Cook County Jail: Austin, North Lawndale, and Roseland.

2019

Cook County was invited to submit a proposal for another 2-year SJC award. Relying on data analysis from technical assistance providers, the Sheriff's Office and Office of the Chief Judge, Cook County collaboratively determined to focus its efforts on new jail reduction strategies that target points in the system with the highest rates of racial disparity.

2020

In 2020 Cook was awarded \$2.5 million to continue the county's efforts to safely reduce the jail population and reduce racial disparities. Shortly after the award, the COVID-19 pandemic pushed our system to adapt to the new reality. Stakeholders worked collaboratively to respond to this crisis and ensure that courts remained operational, including through remote court proceedings.

Even in the midst of unprecedented circumstances, county stakeholders remained committed to the SJC work. Our partners worked alongside individuals with lived experience to implement four new jail reduction strategies: Warrants, Frequently Impacted, Population Review Team, and Supporting Education and Employment Development (SEED).

2021

The county continued implementation of jail reduction strategies and carried out community engagement work. Cook County applied for a \$500 thousand Racial Equity Cohort grant opportunity through the SJC. As one of the four sites selected nationally, the Equity Cohort will serve as a meaningful opportunity to deepen and sustain Cook's racial equity work through further engagement of individuals with lived experience. Funds will support Equity Cohort Fellows who will work closely with the Community Engagement Committee and Chicago Regional Organizing for Anti-Racism (CROAR).

Accomplishments

Over the past several years, Cook County public safety stakeholders have remained engaged and committed to the work of reducing the average daily jail population and decreasing racial and ethnic disparities. Cook County has built a diverse coalition of additional key stakeholders including representatives from community organizations, university research partners, mental health and substance abuse providers, the City of Chicago, Administrative Offices of the Illinois Courts, and the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority.

SJC highlights include the following:

- Launched the Automated Court Reminder System (ACRS)
- Implemented a robust community engagement inclusive of those with lived experience
- Partnered with the Westside Community Triage and Wellness Center (WCTWC) to divert those in need of mental health treatment away from the jail
- Created the Frequently Impacted strategy that connects those cycling through the jail to Peer Re-entry Navigators in efforts to meet individual needs and reduce recidivism
- Developed a Warrants strategy that addresses the influx of warrants, the existing warrants no longer being pursued by the State, and the need for proactive resolution

- Created a Population Review Team to review cases of people detained in the jail, especially for those medically complex, and to identify opportunities for pretrial release and/or opportunities to advance the case
- Established the SEED program which diverts emerging adults away from the criminal justice system through life planning skills, education & employment

As of October 31, 2021 Cook County has reduced the average daily jail population by over 31%.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT OVERVIEW

Community engagement is an essential component of sustaining criminal justice system reform and the only way to truly address the racial and socio-economic disparities. It is an approach to policy deliberation and creation that fosters commonality among government stakeholders and those directly and indirectly affected by government policies and practices. Community engagement is the catalyst bringing these divergent groups together to work collectively to create and maintain a more equitable system of justice.

Our community engagement strategy engages a multi-agency, coordinated effort seeking community input, addressing racial inequities, and integrating diversity and inclusion at all levels of decision-making. Admittedly, previous community-focused efforts have had limited scope and done little to allay distrust of the criminal justice system among highly impacted communities. Our community engagement strategy included hiring a Coordinator and three part-time community liaison workers. The goal of the staff was to enhance our community coordination efforts through the following means: by convening a diverse group of community stakeholders regularly as a committee; by implementing a dialogue-to-change model as a platform to educate and engage community members; by disseminating information about SJC reform efforts; and by seeking community input on reducing the jail population and improving the effectiveness and fairness of our criminal justice system.

Community Engagement Committee

Mission

To effectively engage a diverse group of community members and stakeholders in a sustainable manner; which will allow their voices to be used as a vehicle to create equity for marginalized communities, including people of color, individuals with disabilities and members of the LGBTQ community.

Vision

To assist the community so it becomes resilient, educated, confident and informed through transparent communication that allows for a lower rate of incarceration and increased equity within the Cook County criminal justice system.

Everyday Democracy Model

The Cook County community engagement strategy included the support of Everyday Democracy's Dialogue-to-Change Process. Everyday Democracy acted as a technical advisor to the SJC through MacArthur funding. The Dialogue-to-Change Process focuses on the belief that where people and public institutions have the will and capacity to create community-based, inclusive, equitable opportunities, and by using an equity lens, they can connect across differences, share honestly, consider diverse views, and work together to identify and offer actions toward change.

Facilitators Guide

Trained facilitators used a detailed discussion guide - developed by Cook County community residents, staff and team members - that included information and questions focused on Cook County's local jail reform measures and data outcomes highlighting racial and ethnic disparities. The purpose of the dialogues was to:

- Explore the root causes and systemic issues contributing to the over-representation and disproportionality of people of color in the criminal justice system
- Develop strategies to reduce the jail population and maintain public safety in our communities
- Allow the community to have their voices heard and to learn from the community through feedback, suggestions, and new ideas

Dialogue Sessions

To date, the community engagement process for 2020-2021 has included: 264 community residents who participated in 31 small group dialogue sessions that met over a period of 3 months in several communities (South Suburbs, Englewood, and Garfield Park) within Cook County, along with a cadre of ready-trained volunteer facilitators and recorders who are prepared to support future community engagement efforts as needed. The community engagement process also included four (4) large group community kick-off summit events and a survey that was distributed to community residents through several outreach measures and opportunities. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these events had to be held virtually via Zoom.

CE ACTIVITIES AND OUTCOMES

- 35 dialogues, summits, presentations
 - 4 Summits (one in each of the three communities, South Suburbs with two)
 - 20 Five-Week Dialogue Sessions (five in each of the three communities, Englewood with two sets of five)
 - 10 Intergenerational and Emerging Adults Sessions
 - 1 presentation with Chicago Area Project
- 33 individuals attended kick-off community forums
- 264 participated across all the dialogue sessions

Community Engagement Survey Results

Surveys were given at the end of each dialogue session to measure participants' engagement in the session and their perception of the justice system, as well as how well these sessions provided a space where they felt heard.

- 90% agreed that they were given the opportunity to share their experiences and that it was a valuable use of their time
- 88% agreed that they were given the opportunity to share suggestions for improving the criminal justice system
- 89% felt that their participation was valued
- 86% felt their point of view was valued
- 86% felt that their suggestions for improving the justice system were valued
- 79% felt that their suggestions for improving the justice system will be used to make improvements
- 80% stated they understand the criminal justice system better after attending the event

COMMUNITY FEEDBACK – DIALOGUE SESSIONS

Cook County’s community-focused dialogues aimed to provide an opportunity for authentic conversation among a diverse group of community members interested in supporting systemic change to the local criminal justice system. The dialogue sessions created a safe space for individuals to share ideas and perspectives about how to best work together to improve the local jail system; to understand how the current system disproportionately impacts marginalized communities; and to brainstorm and identify the ways in which the community and system stakeholders can work on these actions together.

Challenged with COVID-19, the majority of our dialogue sessions were held on a virtual platform. Dialogue participants were able to call into sessions and continue to be a part of the conversation. Most participants were eager to share their voice and express their emotion and truth from their experiences. While using technology was a challenge that needed to be frequently navigated, the virtual dialogue sessions served as a safe space where community was able to meaningfully connect while physical interactions were not possible.

Additionally, this process helped to address specific challenges around which Cook County continues to implement strategies for reform. These include opportunities for diversion, increasing access to resources for those involved in the system, and more deeply involving those with lived experience as strategies are developed, implemented, and analyzed.

Dialogue participants included community members, parents, students, educators, county workers, ministers, city staff, those with lived experience, and a select group of volunteers who served as trained facilitators and recorders. Teams captured all the information from the conversations by recording comments and responses on large chart paper. The small, diverse dialogue groups, guided by facilitators, addressed a set of broad, open-ended questions designed to generate conversation.

The dialogue responses varied by individuals, lived experience, level of knowledge about the MacArthur initiative and/or the Cook County Community Engagement Committee, and other factors, such as: whether the person was a long-time Cook County resident from a specific neighborhood, the overall understanding of the local justice system, and ways in which the justice system may have impacted their lives or the life of someone they know.

The five-week dialogue approach provided facilitated opportunities for participants to discuss honestly their concerns, comments, and responses to a set of open-ended questions. The questions were a part of a discussion guide developed through a collective process that included several local justice system stakeholders.

NUMBERS AND NARRATIVES FOR EACH COMMUNITY

COOK COUNTY
SAFETY AND JUSTICE CHALLENGE



SOUTH SUBURBS

Harvey, Ford Heights, and Dolton

38 community members, about 8 per session, took part in 5-Week Dialogue Sessions

Information directly from community members as discussed during 5-Week Dialogue Sessions with Cook County facilitators, utilizing the Dialogue to Change model and funded by the MacArthur Foundation through the Safety and Justice Challenge

WHAT DID THEY SAY?

FEAR

The community feels unsafe due to lack of empathy from law enforcement. They feel targeted by the system.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Public Defenders, prosecutors, judges, and police need to be held accountable. They should reflect the community they serve.

TRANSPARENCY

When incidents occur, information needs to be released community-wide, particularly when police are involved; currently, police are never prosecuted.

RESOURCES

We need more policies and practices that don't allow your criminal background to hold you back.

SYSTEMIC RACISM

There is a lack of trust in the system, and a lack of cultural competency from system actors. System stakeholders need to acknowledge and address systemic bias and racism.

WHO CAME?

HOW DID THEY FEEL?

Participants completed surveys after each session, which included eight questions about their experience that related to whether they felt their contributions to this session will be heard and valued by officials, as well as general demographic information. 33 of the 38 participants completed these surveys.

Race and Gender

90%

90% of participants are Black. 2/3 are women.

67%

Ages

Over half are aged 36-45, all the rest are younger.



System Involvement

The majority have a family member involved in the criminal justice system.



37.6/40

On a 40 point scale, participants scored 37.6 feeling that their voices were heard and valued

91%

feel their suggestions will be used to improve the justice system

97%

indicated they would like to attend future SJC events



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COOK COUNTY
SAFETY AND JUSTICE CHALLENGE



ENGLEWOOD

79 community members, about 8 per session, took part in two sets of 5-Week Dialogue Sessions

Information directly from community members as discussed during 5-Week Dialogue Sessions with Cook County facilitators, utilizing the Dialogue to Change model and funded by the MacArthur Foundation through the Safety and Justice Challenge

WHAT DID THEY SAY?

INHUMANE

System is not representative or equal, and is actively harmful for communities. All people in the system treat us as inhuman.

INEFFICIENT

Even the parts of the system designed to help such as the Public Defender work for profit, not people. System parts do not work together effectively.

EDUCATION

Need for education for the community on the system and how it functions, and how the community can expect to move through it so they can better understand how to change it.

RESOURCES

Need for community-based resources, rather than resources going to the system, and ensuring these resources are effective. Need for resources upon release and exit strategies. A lack of resources in the community adds to generational harm.

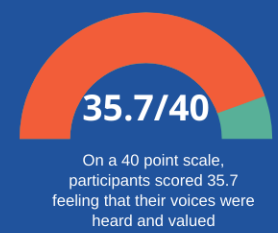
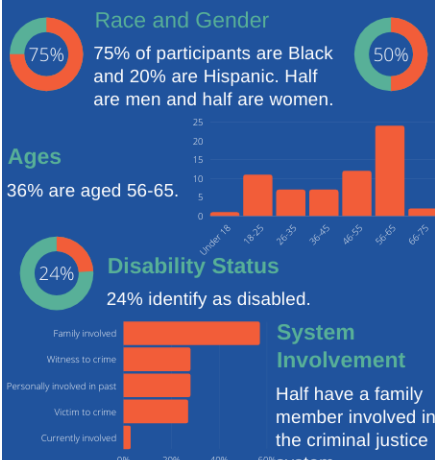
SYSTEMIC RACISM

Systemically racist and biased against people in poverty. Poverty affects all aspects of your involvement with the system from policing to representation to sentencing. A lack of housing increases time involved in the system.

WHO CAME?

HOW DID THEY FEEL?

Participants completed surveys after each session, which included eight questions about their experience that related to whether they felt their contributions to this session will be heard and valued by officials, as well as general demographic information. 67 of the 79 participants completed these surveys.



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COOK COUNTY
SAFETY AND JUSTICE CHALLENGE



EAST AND WEST GARFIELD PARK

57 community members, about 11 per session,
took part in 5-Week Dialogue Sessions

Information directly from community members as discussed during 5-Week Dialogue Sessions with Cook County facilitators, utilizing the Dialogue to Change model and funded by the MacArthur Foundation through the Safety and Justice Challenge

WHAT DID THEY SAY?

HOPELESSNESS PUNITIVE

There is a feeling of hopelessness, particularly for Black men as the system is set up for them to fail and to create a permanent underclass in a vicious cycle of poverty.

The system is punitive rather than rehabilitative, and this punishment continues even after you get out of the system as there are no resources in or out of the jail.

EDUCATION RESOURCES

The community needs education on how the system works. Special programs are created just for show and the education we receive on the system ends up being wrong, so nothing ever changes.

Right now the system and resources to help system-involved individuals are scattered and confusing. We need a one-stop-shop to help people get housing, jobs, and other resources that people need to stop their system involvement.

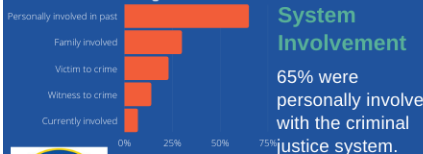
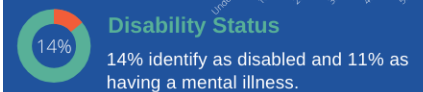
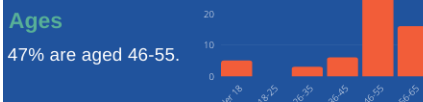
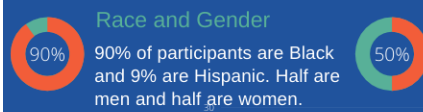
SYSTEMIC INJUSTICE

Whole neighborhoods are criminalized due to poverty and race. We have no choice in how to respond to the system and the public defenders are still part of the overall biased system and force plea deals on the innocent and falsely accused.

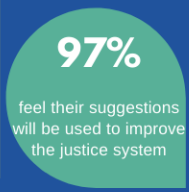
WHO CAME?

HOW DID THEY FEEL?

Participants completed surveys after each session, which included eight questions about their experience that related to whether they felt their contributions to this session will be heard and valued by officials, as well as general demographic information. 57 of the 57 participants completed these surveys.



On a 40 point scale, participants scored 34.5 feeling that their voices were heard and valued



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INTERGENERATIONAL AND EMERGING ADULTS

90 participants took part in 11 specialized dialogue sessions for Emerging Adults (1 in the South Suburbs, 3 in Englewood, 1 in Garfield Park) and Intergenerational groups (2 in the South Suburbs, 1 in Englewood, 2 in Garfield Park, and 1 through the Chicago Area Project).

Information directly from community members as discussed during these dialogue sessions with Cook County facilitators, utilizing the Dialogue to Change model and funded by the MacArthur Foundation through the Safety and Justice Challenge

WHAT DID THEY SAY?

INHUMANE

Dehumanizing, oppressive, and lacking empathy, particularly for people with mental health needs. A permeating sense of fear and distrust in the system. Conditions in the jail itself are also inhumane.

EDUCATION

The system is confusing and the community needs education on how it works. The system is confusing on purpose to keep the community down. Education should start early and continue throughout the community.

ACTIVISM

Community needs to band together and demand change or nothing will happen; we need to hold all parts of the system accountable so they cannot just blame other parts of the system. We need community activism and involvement.

RESOURCES

Need financial investments in community-based, small organizations rather than big governmental ones that have ties to the system. Resources need to be equitable and should prioritize mental health.

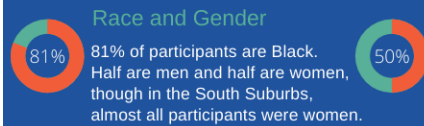
SYSTEMIC CORRUPTION

The system is intentionally racist and corrupt as it originated from slavery. System actors are just cogs in a machine that don't work for the people. The system is rigged through money and racism.

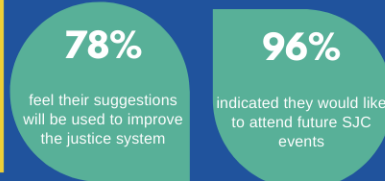
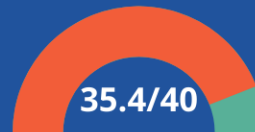
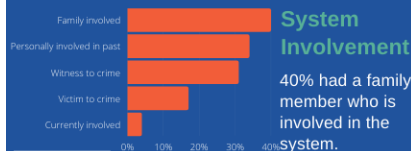
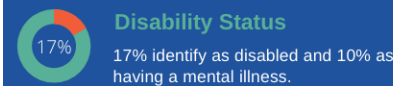
WHO CAME?

HOW DID THEY FEEL?

Participants completed surveys after each session, which included eight questions about their experience that related to whether they felt their contributions to this session will be heard and valued by officials, as well as general demographic information. 90 participants completed these surveys.



Ages
The Chicago Area Project had the most participants under 18, but all sessions included several young folks.



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Community Recommendations for Change:

Police:

- Ban excessive force
- Investigate corrupt police immediately and have consequences
- Bias and cultural competency training
- Police should not be able to arrest students in schools without parents being present
- Have police officers live in the community that they serve
- Have more community policing where officers live in and can relate to community

Public Defenders:

- Work alongside rather than forcing plea deals

Jail:

- Stop treating those incarcerated like animals, the conditions of the prisons are inhumane

Judges:

- Remove biased judges
- Allow score cards or report cards for judges

Community:

- Restorative Justice programs
- Make it mandatory for youth who are being released to have mentors
- Choose leaders for our systems and communities more effectively; better education about elections
- More Black people who live in our communities need to be at the policy table
- Programs such as coffee with cops, judges tour around neighborhoods, etc.
- Addressing concerns via a radio show

General:

- Stop locking up Black males for small crimes
- Create accessible, immediate pathways so that non-violent offenses and misdemeanors will not show on your background
- Change how the system penalizes people for a lack of understanding and education of the criminal justice system. Understanding what's going on in court is confusing and it's designed to be like that
- Allow people to be redirected instead of incarcerated, especially those who are not a threat to society
- Make all parts of the system accountable to the community
- Have policies rewritten for the judges, prosecutors and the entire system

Common Themes from Dialogues

From the data that came out of each of the small group sessions, recurring comments, responses and concerns were aligned to reveal patterns across groups. This process allowed for both organization and description of the data which helped to inform the interpretation of the overall alignment and meaning of the comments, responses, and concerns expressed by community residents.

Patterns in the data were used to identify broad themes and priorities as expressed by the dialogue participants. These themes reflect the features of participant perceptions and/or experiences that the data presented as relevant to the questions asked in the discussion materials.

Data analyzed from each of the small-group community discussions produced several broad themes and concerns. Outcomes suggest that community participants hold strong perceptions about the local justice system, which emerged as the following themes:

1. Need for education in the community about the system and all its parts
 - a. We cannot change what we do not understand
2. Need for community-based resources
 - a. Fund smaller organizations with closer connections to the communities they serve rather than big, impersonal organizations
3. The system is systemically racist and is in fact designed to be that way. Change must be system-wide, not just focused on isolated areas
 - a. Need for system-wide accountability
4. The system causes pain and dehumanizes those involved; people are not numbers
 - a. Need for a human-centered approach grounded in empathy, cultural competency and healing from trauma

2021 CULMINATION

Cook County Action Summit

The second annual Cook County Action Summit was held on Saturday, October 9, 2021, at Chicago State University. The Action Summit was the culminating event for the community engagement work conducted throughout 2020 and 2021. The event brought local leaders into the Dialogue-to-Change process. They met face-to-face with small groups of residents to discuss criminal justice and challenges faced by communities most impacted by the justice system.

The event was attended by over 65 individuals including 50 community members as well as government leaders such as Illinois State Supreme Court Justice, P. Scott Neville, Cook County Public Defender, Sharone Mitchell and Cook County State's Attorney, Kim Foxx. Government leaders initiated the event by speaking to their policy priorities and the vital role community participation plays in creating equitable change. After lunch, leaders joined residents for structured small-group dialogue sessions. They discussed common themes that emerged from the dialogue sessions that took place over the past year.

The dialogue that followed centered on how racism continues to be present in our criminal justice and law enforcement practices. Groups also discussed how crucial representation is and how ongoing engagement and conversations between officials and those directly impacted by the justice system are needed. At the end of the event, representatives from each dialogue circle shared insight from their discussion with the larger group and notes from the discussions as well as surveys were compiled.

"I'm realizing that I am making a difference," shared Joseph Russell, a Garfield Park resident with lived justice system experience who attended and spoke on behalf of his group. "I'm a person who committed crimes, but today, I'm on the other side of the coin. I want to thank the liaisons who ran the dialogue sessions. I was able to express myself about what is really going on in the community. And now, it's about seeing this get to the next level with our youth."



Remarks from local leaders and small group dialogue with residents and leaders.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STAKEHOLDERS

Public Safety and County Agencies:

- Circuit Court of Cook County, Office of the Chief Judge (OCJ)
- Cook County Justice Advisory Council (JAC)
- Cook County State's Attorney's Office (SAO)
- Law Office of the Cook County Public Defender (PD)
- Cook County Sheriff's Office (CCSO)
- Clerk of the Circuit Court of Cook County
- Juvenile and Adult Probation Departments
- Cook County Health and Hospitals (CCH)

Community Members

- South Suburbs (Harvey, Ford Heights, and Riverdale)
- Englewood
- East and West Garfield Park

Community Partners:

- Access Living
- Adler University, Institute on Public Safety and Social Justice
- Alumni Association
- Bobby Wright Health Center
- Bridging the Gap
- Chicago Beyond
- Chicago Bond Fund
- Chicago Housing Support
- Chicago Police Department (CPD)
- Community Renewal Society
- Cook County Southland Juvenile Justice
- CTC Glory of the Latter House Ministry
- Habilitative Systems
- Hartgrove Behavioral Health
- Heartland Alliance
- Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority (ICJIA)
- Illinois Justice Project
- Justice System Partners
- Lawlor Consulting group
- Lawndale Christian Legal Center
- Mikva Challenge
- National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)
- North Lawndale Community Coordinating Council
- North Lawndale Employment Network
- Ombudsmen High School
- Reassemble Education & Training
- Safer Foundation
- Stay Lite Youth Program
- Treatment Alternatives for Safe Communities (TASC)
- Uplift Harvey
- WestCare