



An Exploration of Co-Enforcement and Co-Governance in Chicago:

Implications for Funding the Equitable Implementation of Laws and Policies

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Executive Summary

Building on the first phase of this evaluation, BECOME examined multiple national examples of equitable implementation efforts and synthesized early lessons from grantee partners across the HCEI portfolio, along with developing a systems map of a housing initiative in Chattanooga. Those findings illuminated key patterns that served as the foundation for the initial Theory of Change for Equitable Implementation, such as the necessity of community-rooted leadership, shared decision-making structures, and stronger accountability mechanisms between government and communities. This earlier work reiterated that policy design alone is insufficient for equity; instead, the implementation environment, relationships, and power dynamics determine whether policies benefit those most impacted. These insights informed the development of the original Theory of Change that framed equitable implementation as a systemic practice involving government actors, community organizations, and shared mechanisms for voice, accountability, and learning. The current report extends that work by examining real-world examples of co-enforcement and co-governance, which surfaced the need to revise and deepen the Theory of Change to center these strategies as the most powerful drivers of equitable implementation.

BECOME explored two case studies of co-enforcement and co-governance based in Chicago. First, the Chicago Office of Labor Standards (OLS) provides an example of a legislated and funded partnership between a designated worker advocate organization and a newly created OLS housed under the existing Chicago Department of Business and Consumer Protections. The legislation was passed by Chicago City Council in 2018 and has been persisting with increasing funding ever since. Second, the partnership between the Chicago Office of Equity and Racial Justice (OERJ) and a Chicago United for Equity (CUE) provides an emergent project to define co-governance and pilot three prototypes. This initiative began in 2023 through an agreement with the current Chicago mayoral administration and CUE.

For the purpose of this study, co-governance is an umbrella concept that champions formal and informal partnerships between an organization or coalition that represents individuals and communities directly impacted by inequity and a governmental agency that employs legislative and/or political decisionmakers. Co-enforcement more narrowly pertains to the equitable enforcement of a law or set of laws and policies through structured and funded partnerships between an organization or coalition that represents individuals and communities directly impacted by inequity and a governmental agency that employs enforcers of laws and policies. In essence, co-governance and co-enforcement are processes that engage and intersect actors inside government and those actors that

are outside government, which construct a framework of accountability that is both discerning and collaborative.

Findings from these two studies, and previous research that led to the creation of the Theory of Change of Equitable Implementation, now the Co-Governance/Co-Enforcement Theory of Change, were presented to RWJF HCEI and other grantee partners at a convening in October of 2025. Their feedback, along with what we have learned from the Chicago cases to date, have led to an updated Theory of Change that centers co-enforcement/co-governance as the most critical strategy for achieving equitable implementation.

The Chicago OLS was created through municipal legislation passed in 2018, and the office opened in 2019. Workers' rights organizations and economic justice coalitions had advocated to pass a series of labor laws, including minimum wage and paid sick leave. However, workers reported the lack of enforcement of these laws because of decentralized enforcement mechanisms and the onus falling on the workers to report and follow-through on cases with the possibility of retaliation by their employers. The OLS legislation created sustainable enforcement structures by mandating co-enforcement between the municipal agency and a designated and funded intermediary organization chosen annually through an RFP process.

Critical to the success of the OLS is the requirement to include a workers' rights organization that builds power with workers through political education, workplace campaigns, and worker outreach. The OLS takes on the role of investigating claims and has the power to subpoena as necessary. They can aggregate claims and cases to advance research on the businesses and/or sector with the most egregious record of worker rights violations. Arise Chicago, a worker rights organization, led the campaign to legislate the creation of the OLS and has been selected as the intermediary organization each year. They support workers in filing claims, sharing their testimonies, and building solidarity at workplaces with violations. Both the OLS and Arise Chicago engage in worker outreach and education.

BECOME created a systems map of OLS through document review and interviews with 6 OLS team members.

CUE and OERJ created their co-governance initiative in 2023. They began by creating a co-governance steering committee that was tasked with engaging community members, particularly those historically disenfranchised, to create a definition of and framework for co-governance in Chicago. They then accepted applications for co-governance pilot initiatives, which resulted in three initiatives that are currently receiving capacity-building training, building co-governance tables, and working together to address complex issues in their different sectors.

BECOME created a systems map of CUE's Chicago Co-Governance initiative through interviews with 14 stakeholders, including five current and past CUE staff, five current and past OERJ staff, one steering committee member, and one person from each of the three co-governance pilot teams.

Interviews across both case studies confirmed a distinct alignment with the Co-Governance/Co-Enforcement Theory of Change, while also providing a deeper understanding of the contextual

conditions for co-governance in Chicago. These findings further illuminated strategies important to the co-governance initiative, barriers encountered, and specific actions taken to address those challenges. With these two case studies of co-enforcement and co-governance, the Theory of Change was enhanced to center co-governance and co-enforcement as the primary strategy for the equitable implementation of laws and policies. The other four nodes of the Co-Governance/Co-Enforcement Theory of Change, including Trustbuilding, Visioning and Unsiloing, Experimentation and Prototyping, and Evaluation, are the pathway and an iterative process that leads toward the effective and sustainable co-governance and co-enforcement for the goal of equitable implementation of laws and policies.

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Introduction

For centuries, inequity has been embedded in the very fabric of the U.S. It has been woven into its founding documents, governing structures, economic systems, and institutional practices. The nation's development has been shaped by racialized exclusion, resource extraction, and exploitative labor practices and built systems that consistently privileged a narrow set of interests while marginalizing the vast majority. Central to this pattern has been the systematic exclusion of “everyday people,” particularly those most harmed by inequity, from the tables where decisions and policies are made. This exclusion is not incidental; it is part of a long-standing governance approach that reinforces inequity and keeps communities from shaping the systems that impact their lives.

Contemporary evidence shows that this dynamic persists. Large-scale empirical studies of U.S. policymaking demonstrate that when government decision-making operates without meaningful community leadership or accountability, it is disproportionately shaped by corporate and elite interests. Gilens and Page's landmark analysis revealed that economic elites and organized business groups exert substantial independent influence over policy outcomes, while the preferences of average citizens have “near-zero” independent effect (Gilens & Page, 2014). This imbalance is not merely a gap in participation; it is a structural condition that undermines democratic responsiveness and renders inequitable implementation almost inevitable.

For these reasons, community inclusion, co-governance, and shared accountability are not optional enhancements to policymaking; they are essential requirements. Only when communities most impacted by policy outcomes have real power through structured, resourced, and sustained mechanisms of shared governance can government policies and programs genuinely serve the people they are intended to benefit.

The opportunity: co-governance/co-enforcement as structural correctives to inequitable implementation

Co-governance is a structured and intentional approach in which government representatives collaborate in shared leadership with community members and organizations to design, implement, and evaluate policies and programs. When residents hold meaningful, equal roles in policymaking and implementation, policies are significantly more responsive to community priorities and produce more equitable outcomes. Research on participatory and co-governance processes shows that community involvement leads to improved service delivery, increased public trust, and greater

alignment between government action and residents' lived realities (Fung, 2015; Ansell & Torfing, 2021; Fontaine, 2010). Evidence also demonstrates that when communities co-produce priorities and oversee implementation, public spending more accurately reflects community needs and results in measurable gains, such as improved environmental outcomes, increased local investment, and stronger civic capacity (Fontaine, 2010; Lüchmann, 2017).

Why Chicago is a powerful learning laboratory for co-governance

Co-governance in Chicago emerged from a convergence of historical, political, and community-driven conditions. Chicago is the birthplace of community organizing, and examples abound of community members forming ad hoc groups and formal grassroots organizations to create neighborhood-level change. More sophisticated analysis emerged, especially during the Civil Rights movement in which multiracial and class-conscious alliances were formed among disparate groups, many quashed by politicians and decisionmakers eager to maintain a status quo of inequity. The city's long history of exclusion, harm, and one-directional engagement created both the need and the opportunity for shared governance. Communities most affected by inequities have traditionally been excluded from participation in government and legislative decision-making, having been engaged superficially or performatively and harmed by past policies and government actions. As one CUE/OERJ interviewee noted, the government must acknowledge its role because even if current officials did not create this harm, they have a responsibility to address it.

Once the reign of the second Daley (1989-2011) administration ended, newly elected Mayor Rahm Emanuel, a moderate Democrat, was mandated to represent something new in an increasingly progressive political landscape. Occupy Wallstreet provided everyday workers with a digestible class analysis. The Fight for \$15 movement, which gained considerable momentum in Chicago given the historical power of unions and the robust service industry, created even stronger coalitions among worker, immigrant, women's, and other grassroots and nonprofit rights groups under an umbrella of economic justice and a unified call to action. Hillary Clinton also ran on an increased national minimum wage, which Mayor Emanuel was obligated to match. Although not directly involved in the creation of the Chicago Office of Labor Standards, Emanuel welcomed enough ideological diversity into his cabinet that the left flank was able to negotiate one of the first and most effective OLS in the country. Mayor Lori Lightfoot, the first openly gay Black woman elected to the position, continued to add labor protections under the OLS enforcement arm, especially protections for domestic workers. She also established equity-focused units, including the Office of Equity and Racial Justice (OERJ), the Office of Climate and Environmental Equity, and the Food Equity Policy Lead, signaling a governmental commitment to addressing inequities. This established co-governance as an essential strategy for achieving shared equity goals. OERJ's newness and explicit equity mandate has made it a trusted partner, and its creation through city ordinance protects the work across administrations.

Current Mayor Brandon Johnson, backed by various unions including the powerful Chicago Teacher's Union, provided strong executive support and legitimized co-governance as a serious governmental

priority by including co-governance in his running campaign. The welcoming of co-governance strategies exists alongside a broader progressive political climate at the city and state that has made space for collaborative, equity-centered approaches. The COVID-19 pandemic and 2020 George Floyd related uprisings served as pivotal catalysts to usher in new progressive leadership. These moments made inequities undeniable and demonstrated the value of responsive, cross-sector problem-solving, such as the COVID-19 Racial Equity Rapid Response Team model, which brought diverse partners together around a problem to solve rather than relying solely on city-led solutions.

Chicago's strong civic organizing culture has enabled strong community organizing infrastructure, with decades of racial equity dialogue, community pressure, and inside-outside collaboration creating readiness for shared governance. As one CUE/OERJ interviewee emphasized, "Chicago is so prime for us to really harness the collective power of what our institutions can do as well as what our community organizations and partners can do." Community-based organizations' deep roots and trusted relationships allow them to bridge government and community effectively.

Equity-focused leadership within government further supports co-governance. Leaders with lived experience and backgrounds in community-based organizations bring shared language, credibility, and alignment. Johnson's administration in particular has brought in community-level changemakers into many cabinet positions at all levels of municipal government. The CUE Fellowship initiative contributes to this pipeline. Innovative structures that strengthen co-governance are illustrated by the Food Equity Policy Lead appointed by Mayor Lightfoot but funded by a community-based organization which fosters hybrid inside-outside roles.

Finally, funders have helped shift collaboration norms. Since the early 2000s, philanthropic requirements for cross-organization collaboration have influenced mindsets and encouraged more integrated approaches across sectors. Together, these historical, structural, and relational conditions form an ecosystem in which co-governance is both possible and welcomed in Chicago.

Purpose of this evaluation and systems mapping project

The purpose of this evaluation and systems mapping project is to examine the conditions and processes needed for equitable implementation of laws and policies and how RWJF can use its resources, from money to positionality, to support this means to the ultimate end of thriving communities.

Methology

This evaluation used a multi-method qualitative design integrating:

- Key Informant Interviews: 20 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from the Office of Labor Standards (OLS), Chicago United for Equity (CUE), the Office of Equity and Racial Justice (OERJ), Steering Committee members, and members of the three co-governance pilot teams.
- Document Review: Analysis of municipal legislation, policy documents, co-governance frameworks, program descriptions, historical context documents, and internal planning materials from CUE and OERJ.
- Systems Mapping: Using interview data, document review, and role analysis, we created two systems maps, including one for co-enforcement via OLS and one for co-governance via CUE/OERJ. We identified actors, relationships, directionality of influence, formal and informal structures, and enabling conditions.
- Grantee Focus Group: We held a focus group with over 20 grantees at the October 2025 RWJF Healthy Communities and Equitable Implementation grantee convening, capturing cross-organizational themes around trust-building, unsiloing and visioning, leadership, and enabling conditions for co-governance.
- Analytic Approach: Data were coded using thematic analysis, then synthesized against the updated Co-Governance/Co-Enforcement Theory of Change. Findings were triangulated across data sources to ensure accuracy.

Limitations include the early stage of the co-governance pilots, fast-changing political and administrative environments, and the absence of long-term outcome data. Despite these limitations, convergence across interviews, documents, and systems analysis provides strong reliability and validity for the findings presented in this report.

Results

Updated Theory of Change

“Co-governance is a problem-solving structure in which community members directly impacted by systemic racism and economic inequity work side-by-side with government representatives to share decision-making power and accountability for creating stronger policies, programs, and practices”

- City of Chicago and CUE

This updated Co-Governance/Co-Enforcement Theory of Change moves co-governance from a phase in a policy making process to the overarching umbrella for equitable implementation of laws and policies.

In interviews with co-governance and co-enforcement practitioners in Chicago, interviewees emphasized that these models are not merely procedural changes but are a necessary, long-term strategy for achieving a more equitable city. This section synthesizes key concepts and lessons that emerged from key informant interviews about co-governance and co-enforcement as structures that transform abstract equity goals into tangible, systemic change.

The goal in co-governance and co-enforcement is systems change. According to co-governance and co-enforcement interviewees, the ultimate purpose of co-governance and co-enforcement is to achieve long-term, systemic transformation that improves the lives of all residents, rather than simply addressing isolated issues. For example, in co-enforcement with the OLS, the goal is to permanently raise the standards of all workers, not to respond to individual complaints.

Participation of those most impacted is required through a power-building organization. Effective co-governance requires the direct participation of those who live with the conditions being addressed

through a base-building organization that is in direct relationship with them through community organizing and leadership development. This ensures that the decisions made are rooted in on-the-ground expertise and that the community's voice is authentically represented. This was clear in both co-enforcement and co-governance interviews. Rather than including individualized community voices through an intermittent engagement strategy, such as that seen in Chattanooga for the One Chattanooga process, a power-building organization ensures that impacted community members are already organized around trust, vision, and strategy.

A community-based organization can also mitigate distrust between community members and government agencies. For instance, interviewees about OLS explained how affected workers trusted enforcement mechanisms more because of the trust built with the CBO, allowing the municipal agency to identify and investigate violations without putting individuals at risk.

“Co-enforcement means sustained partnership around enforcement actions: identifying violations, doing workplace Know Your Rights, getting information to the OLS to begin investigations, helping with research and interviews. There has to be both an organizational side and a [governmental] agency side.”

- Interview with Dr. Janice Fine

Within co-governance and co-enforcement, power imbalances should be acknowledged and leveled. Dr. Janice Fine (2010) notes the concept of *tripartism*, “a strategy of enforcement that involves giving workers’ organizations equal standing with government and employers,” or in other instances reducing the power imbalances between impacted community members, perpetrators of inequities, and the governmental enforcement bodies. In corroboration, a CUE/OERJ interviewee also pointed out that the middle of the spectrum, where community and government can sit at a table together to work to solve a problem,” is where co-governance works.

Codifying co-governance includes ensuring funding. For co-enforcement and co-governance to function sustainably, the initiatives must be adequately funded, whether through public or private funds. In the example of the OLS, the City of Chicago has been increasing the office budget steadily since its inception in 2019, allowing for increased staff. The affiliated CBO is awarded an annual stipend, but the work is also subsidized by private funding through various foundations and other sources. While truly effective co-enforcement and co-governance structures must be allocated governmental funding, the role of foundations is critical to support necessary activities such as community involvement, expansion to experiment, and evaluative processes.

That said, funders must be intentional about how their areas of focus and funding decisions impact the pathways of CBOs. As one CUE/OERJ interviewee explained, part of setting the stage for co-governance in Chicago was the narrative shift ushered in by funder interest, “a select group of national funders... started to use that term... I was at a funder convening... I did not hear collaborative governance less than three times every single session.”

There is a danger in not defining co-governance: Leaving co-governance undefined allows it to become an opaque buzzword that, as a CUE/OERJ interviewee explained, “people just start slapping it on things. [With a definition] we actually create some definition and rigor, and through that rigor, we force a shift in culture.” Co-enforcement can be viewed as a subset of co-governance that pertains to a particular law or set of laws, such as in the case of the OLS in the co-enforcement of municipal labor protections. By creating clear definitions of these terms, systems actors can force a shift in culture and ensure the concept is not diluted.

Necessary Conditions for Co-governance

Before co-governance can take root, core conditions must be intentionally cultivated. A primary condition for co-governance to be possible is the engagement of and participation in decision-making by people and communities directly impacted by the named injustice and inequity. These community members must already be organized through a power-building organization that has already gained their trust and have built leadership development structures and pathways for community-led decision-making. Through this community-based organization (CBO), impacted community members are unified through a shared vision, shared language, and strategies for change.

The local environment must be enabled for change through strengthening community organizing infrastructure. This is best achieved through funding and supporting community leadership development and building community member power through civically engaged power-building organizations and the coalitions formed by and with them. Even if a community is not ready to enact co-governance yet or if there is not sufficient political will for its possibility, efforts can be made to ensure there is a strong organizing and leadership infrastructure in place where people can build power, enhance their civic understanding, share ideas, and listen to each other. As one CUE/OERJ interviewee explained, this happens by “intentionally building networks that bring together diverse civic stakeholders, such as researchers, artists, organizers, and government staff. Through fellowships and other collaborative platforms, these networks help normalize the practice of working and learning together across sectors, building the relationships and shared experiences necessary to drive systemic change.”

Insights from Grantees

Insights from the convening of RWJ's grantees highlight that trust, shared understanding, relational infrastructure, inclusive participation, and enabling structures form the bedrock upon which authentic co-governance can be built.

Deep Trust-Building Across Stakeholders

Co-governance requires a level of relational depth and reliability that cannot be rushed. Participants emphasized:

- Space for 1:1 relational meetings to build connection, trust, and shared humanity.
- Opportunities for experimentation with trust, including permission to try, learn, and fail.
- Time to “move at the speed of trust,” especially for community organizations historically pressured to perform without adequate support.
- Philanthropic and institutional practices that validate community expertise and demonstrate trustworthy partnership.

Shared Values, Language, and Mission Understanding

Groups must develop a unified foundation that guides decision-making and collaboration:

- Agreement on shared values and deal breakers.
- Clear, accessible, and relatable language that all stakeholders understand.
- A common lens on context, histories, root causes, and policy impacts (e.g., “health in all policies”).
- A unifying vision and narrative strong enough to bring people together across differences.

Unsiloeing and Inclusive Ecosystem Engagement

Co-governance cannot emerge from fragmented systems. The group emphasized:

- Cross-movement and cross-community collaboration that brings together all who are affected.
- Engagement beyond traditional CBOs to include youth, elders, churches, influencers, rural residents, farmers, media, and other stakeholders.
- Structures for ecosystem-level planning, recognizing interdependence across roles and institutions.
- Involvement of multiple perspectives across political, geographic, and experiential lines.

Clear Structures, Agreements, and Backbone Support

Before shared decision-making can function, enabling structures must be in place:

- A backbone or hub organization to coordinate, convene, and build capacity.
- Clear agreements on how decisions will be made, what is acceptable, and what is not.
- Guidance or policy frameworks that enable and legitimize unsiloing across agencies.
- Dedicated spaces for ecosystem planning and conflict navigation.

Community Readiness and Capacity

Co-governance requires community power that is organized, resourced, and sustained:

- Recognition of community members as the experts.
- Capacity-building for residents to lead local change, not just participate.
- Investment in leadership development, especially for the next generation.
- Supports that strengthen human infrastructure, including rest, sabbaticals, healing spaces, and sustainability for marginalized leaders.

Commitment to Inclusive Narratives and Protection

Because co-governance disrupts power, protective cultural and narrative conditions must be set:

- Shared narratives that help communities “see themselves in each other.”
- Counter-narratives that offer compelling, unifying visions.
- Protection for groups taking risks, including social, political, or institutional.

Adequate Resources and Flexible Funding

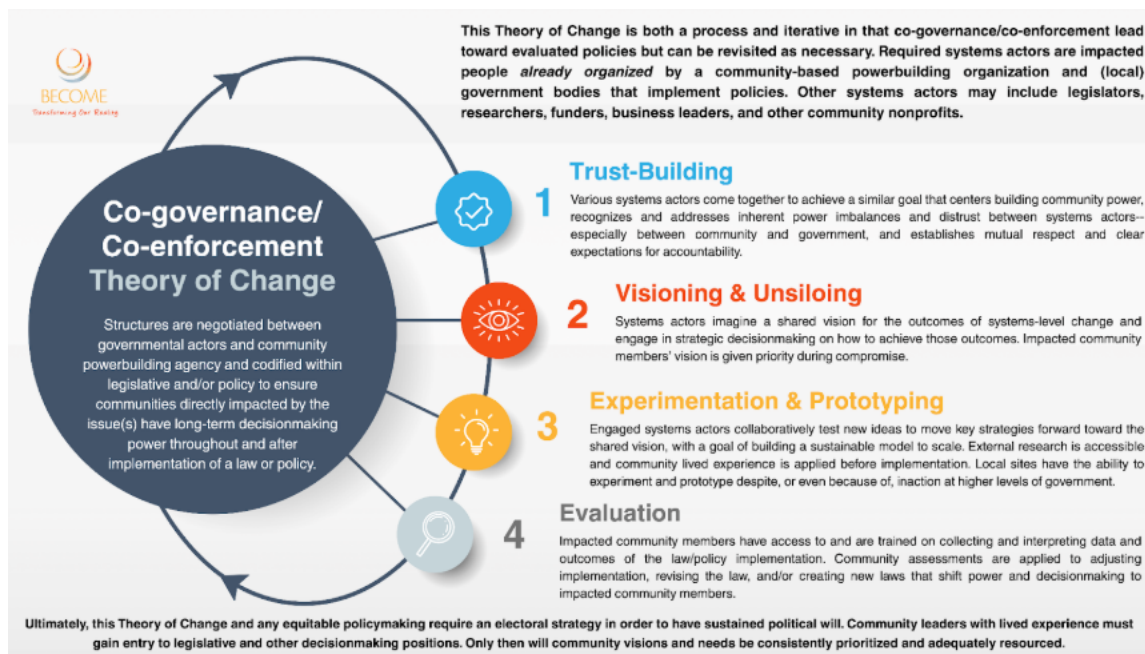
Co-governance cannot develop under scarcity or rigid performance expectations:

- Funding for basic needs, capacity, strategic leadership, and experimentation.
- Flexible resources and long-term investment that allow community actors to slow down and collaborate meaningfully to work towards lasting change.
- Philanthropic willingness to invest in innovation, unseen opportunities, and human infrastructure.

In summary, for co-governance to be possible, communities and institutions must first cultivate deep trust, shared values, relational infrastructure, and an inclusive ecosystem of stakeholders. Clear structures, backbone support, and conflict-resilient agreements need to be established. Communities must be resourced to lead, not just participate, and narratives that unify diverse groups must be strengthened. Finally, flexible and equitable funding practices must underpin all of this foundational work to enable authentic shared decision-making.

Updated Theory of Change Elements

Key themes of Trust-Building, Visioning and Unsiloing, Experimenting and Prototyping, and Evaluation consistently emerged as vital to the success of work for more equitable policies during the October Grantee Convening and in interviews with co-governance and co-enforcement interviewees. In this section, we delve into the ideas and insights from those conversations that reinforce and expand upon these foundational elements within our Co-Governance/Co-Enforcement Theory of Change. As a reminder, RWJF grantees at the convening chose to focus exclusively on trust-building and visioning and unsiloing, which speaks to the fundamental importance of both elements.



Trust-Building

Trust-building was recognized by grantee convening participants and co-enforcement and co-governance interviewees as central and fundamental to all other elements of equitable Implementation of policy, and especially to co-governance and co-enforcement initiatives. It is important to stress that in this Theory of Change, trust must *already* be established between a powerbuilding CBO and the constituencies it organizes. Here, trust-building refers to the processes in bringing together various systems-actors in order to move toward co-enforcement and co-governance strategies and structures.

“Trusting in each other's intentions can act as a compass when the path forward is unclear and the process becomes difficult.”

– CUE/OERJ Interviewee

Recognize and address power asymmetries. The purpose of co-governance and co-enforcement is to shift power toward those directly impacted. Therefore, recognizing the inherent imbalance in power at the table is part of the transparency and trust-building needed to move things forward.

This is especially true with the inclusion of governmental systems actors. Decades of top-down decision-making, superficial engagement, and harmful policies have created "civic trauma." To move forward, government actors must recognize their role in creating these inequities and demonstrate a genuine commitment to more inclusive patterns of engagement, rather than repeating the extractive practices of the past. One CUE/OERJ interviewee likened these extractive practices to being treated like “guinea pigs” and then having their time, resources, and “intellectual property” stolen with few results.

During the OLS co-enforcement process, trust was built through a reciprocal exchange of knowledge and expertise, which fostered mutual respect between government and community partners. OLS interviewees emphasized that cross-training between various actors allows community and CBO expertise to be prioritized, offsetting some power asymmetry.

Transparent and consistent communication is fundamental to building and maintaining trust. To build public trust, it is crucial for both government and community partners to maintain a constant flow of information to community members. This means moving beyond occasional updates to create a continuous dialogue about the project's status, lessons learned, and any changes in direction. As one co-governance leader emphasized, this is not a "one and done" process but a "constant iteration," explaining that "if this is something that they're committed to, then there has to be a constant communication about where they're at with this."

Equally important is the internal transparency between the systems actors within a co-governance or co-enforcement initiative. Trust is forged by communicating openly about internal challenges, such as shifting political environments, funding delays, or strategic pivots. One CUE/OERJ interviewee highlighted this by sharing their approach, "We were always very transparent... When the climate was shifting... we didn't just say 'meeting as usual.' We'd pause and ask, 'Does this still make sense?'... letting folks know why we needed to pivot really helped build trust." This internal honesty ensures all partners remain aligned and committed, even when facing obstacles.

Trust is not a static, one-time achievement but a dynamic, iterative, and cyclical process that requires continuous effort and maintenance. This understanding requires a long-term perspective, recognizing

that foundational trust-building must come before co-governance can be implemented and that setbacks are a natural part of the process that necessitate a return to building trust.

Visioning and Unsiloing

According to grantees and interviewees, achieving co-governance and equitable policy implementation requires a foundational commitment to collective visioning and the intentional dismantling of silos between systems actors who may come from various sectors. What follows are the main concepts that emerged from the convening and interviews.

Shared language, definitions, and understandings of the co-enforcement/co-governance outcomes are required for visioning. Interviewees emphasized that bringing people together to create a shared vision requires everyone to have a shared basic foundation, including a shared language, shared definition of co-governance, and a fundamental understanding of how governmental and other systems actors function.

For the shared definition of co-governance, one CUE/OERJ interviewee emphasized that government actors “don’t get to just come in and say, this is what it is and here are the steps and let’s get going. You do have to spend some time normalizing and aligning people around shared definitions and shared understandings. You have to build the set of principles that governs the work.” People need time and space and a welcoming environment to discuss definitions and think about what those might mean in their own context. Further, to build buy-in, it is critical to have the community and various stakeholders be part of that conversation.

The CBO intermediary’s role is crucial during visioning as the communicator and advocate for community-level goals and critical understandings. The CBO will have already engaged impacted community members on foundational civic education and translated their experiences into actionable goals. In the case of OLS, the worker centers already had a clearer vision of where to go with co-enforcement because of the established relationships with workers. Visioning with the various systems actors is the process through which co-enforcement and co-governance can be imagined at scale.

Messaging and creating a shared narrative is part of a shared vision. Part of establishing a shared vision for a broad and diverse coalition is to consider who might misunderstand or oppose the co-governance strategy, and to actively provide collective messaging to address and counter potential objections. For example, in creating a shared vision for co-enforcement, those at the OLS co-built a narrative that enforcement is good for business because it addresses potential concerns from that sector.

It is important to note that the relationship between community, government, and other systems actors needs to shift from agitational to cooperational. Actors involved in co-

enforcement and co-governance should develop trusting partnerships so that conflicts can be dealt with internally, rather than going, for instance, directly to the press to exert agitational pressure on government, as insisted by an interviewee on the OLS.

Adopt an expansive, cross-sector, ecosystem-wide approach to unsiloing. While the systems actors for a co-enforcement or co-governance strategy focused on a particular issue may be more narrow, a more expansive approach should be adopted through unsiloing to include cross-movement, cross-community, and cross-sector collaborations. Primary actors must include a community representative and a government enforcement agency, at minimum. The inclusion of other interested actors ensures a broader and more sustainable initiative that can continue at scale beyond the life cycle of any particular elected official. A CUE/OERJ interviewee stated, “For CUE to have relationships, not just with OERJ, but also within these [government] departments, it helps actually to ensure that if [Chicago mayor] Brandon Johnson loses the election next year and everyone’s fired, you actually still have some continuity in the work that you’re doing.”

OLS provides a lesson in the continued expansion of the co-enforcement strategy nearly seven years after its legislative codification. The CBO intermediary Arise Chicago continues to build partnerships at the executive and legislative level in Chicago along with other worker centers in the regional labor rights ecosystem. Arise has expanded partnerships with research institutions, Cook County agencies, and other actors to continue to unsilo key actors and their interests, while expanding the scale of co-enforcement.

Experimenting and prototyping

Experimentation and prototyping are essential engines for developing and implementing equitable policies within a co-governance framework. Themes that emerged from interviews are as follows:

Local governments and municipalities have a unique opportunity - and responsibility - to become laboratories for innovation. In the face of increasing gridlock and obstructionism at the federal level, local actors can experiment and prototype in ways that meet the specific needs of their communities and ecosystems. In fact, one might see co-enforcement and co-governance as the very type of experimentation that emerges from inaction and prohibitions at higher levels of government, such as state and federal preemptions, proving that locally driven processes can model democratic and equitable outcomes in the face of governmental inaction or indifference at the state and/or federal level.

The OLS was born out of the realization that the federal and state departments of labor, and the patchwork of municipal governmental enforcement agencies, were not adequately and equitably enforcing Chicago’s hard-won labor laws. Now that the OLS has the evidence to show its effectiveness, experimentation continues. For instance, the previous Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot was able to pass and secure enforcement of domestic worker protections in 2022 that fall under the OLS.

Vanguard enforcement mechanisms are emerging outside the domain of the OLS due to the effectiveness of the agency. Arise Chicago is forging new partnerships with the Cook County Department of Public Health for enforcement of worker protections outside of Chicago through statutory regulations that allow the health department to enter workforces for random checks. These county health workers are being trained to spot workforce violations to then report to the Illinois Department of Labor. While that agency does not have the same track record as the OLS, that mechanism can fuel further innovation to develop other methods of co-enforcement. The enforcement agencies themselves also have opportunities to prototype new methods. For example, because of the increased immigration enforcement in Chicago due to federal pressure and its outsized impact on workers represented by co-enforcement partner actors, the OLS is actively engaging in employer outreach and workplace Know Your Rights, so businesses know that all workers regardless of immigration status are protected under labor laws. The OLS is also expanding co-enforcement by partnering with immigration justice organizations to support outreach to vulnerable workers in multiple languages, holding worker rights workshops in public spaces, and certifying immigration documentation for T-, U-, and other labor-related visa applications.

Building foundational scaffolding for experimentation includes adequate funding. Successful experimentation requires significant upfront work to build alignment around shared definitions and principles. This foundational scaffolding provides a clear framework to guide the design of new initiatives and, importantly, to evaluate whether pilots are successfully advancing the collective goals.

As described by a CUE/OERJ interviewee:

"When you are testing and trying new things, you're rooting it back to this alignment that you've built. So now when you have pilots, you can evaluate those pilots by asking the question of whether they're driving at the definition that you have defined together....It's rooted in your principles. And so all of those things become scaffolding to create a stronger environment for you to be able to try something new and then set you up for a reality where you get to test things. And through that testing, you build cases and case studies and essentially examples that this is not just a whimsical idea. This is something that can really work and looks like it is really working on critical issues."

Critical for experimentation is adequate funding. The OLS co-enforcement partners are able to experiment and prototype because they also have a funding relationship. Plus, the current political will at the municipality enables continued financial solvency, for now. However, smaller organizations and co-governance/co-enforcement partnerships, and especially those unfunded from the government, need sustainable support from funders. One participant at the RWJF grantee convening explained the barriers that the lack of “permission from funders to try and fail” pose for these smaller organizations. They continue that, “as it stands now smaller orgs MUST have a concrete plan and proof of success despite larger orgs being afforded years to ‘research.’” Funders need to be part of the trust-building to enable grantee and co-governance partners to prototype and experiment to meet the needs of the local communities they serve.

Experimenting requires facing challenges and recognizing mistakes. It is essential to ensure that the experimental phase is not just planning but implementing, and with experimentation comes challenges and mistakes. As one CUE/OERJ interviewee explained, “we’re not always going to be right, we’re going to make mistakes....[Co-governance] still needs to evolve and needs to evolve quickly.” Tensions also arise within co-governance and co-enforcement spaces, but that can be harnessed. For instance, with the OLS being housed at the Department of Business and Consumer Protections (BACP), the same department that oversees worker protections enforcement also oversees business licensing. This tension creates an advantageous site for enforcement but also creates challenges for maintaining integrity and trust among co-enforcement partners. Ultimately, progress cannot advance without space to learn and grow.

Evaluation

Evaluation serves as a critical catalyst and a foundational component for establishing and refining co-governance and co-enforcement models. While evaluation is placed at the end of the co-governance/co-enforcement change model, it should be returned to iteratively as a powerful diagnostic tool that reveals deep-seated systemic flaws and paves the way for improvement.

Evaluation begins at the research phase. The Chicago OLS came out of an evaluation of current labor enforcement at the municipal and state levels, alongside research of the effectiveness of two OLS prototypes in San Francisco and Seattle. Labor protection enforcement had been based on a complaint-based system that placed the onus on workers to report individually, opening the door to retaliation of all forms. This resulted in industries with the highest levels of workplace violations having the lowest number of complaints. Additionally, while Chicago did have powerful existing worker protections, these went largely unenforced and they had to rely on the general Chicago department of consumer fraud, the state department of labor, or the Illinois attorney general, all of which focused more on compliance than enforcement. This initial evaluation of system flaws, along with research of OLS in sister cities, led to the codification of a co-enforcement policy in Chicago.

Set clear expectations and methods of accountability. OLS and CUE/OERJ interviewees emphasized the importance of co-creation and decision-making together, from setting expectations and strategies to deciding on “performance metrics jointly for accountability and progress.” These performance metrics establish a baseline to evaluate the development of co-enforcement and co-governance processes as well as the final policy and enforcement outcomes. As one interviewee stated, “strategic enforcement happens with all parties in the room learning together.” Evaluation provides a learning framework.

Evaluation can be both formal and informal. In the case of OLS, continuous evaluation of co-enforcement mechanisms is largely achieved through joint case management between the enforcement agency that manages specific claims and the intermediary CBO that gathers documents, trains workers, and reinforces enforcement through workplace campaigns and education. These co-enforcement partners meet regularly to ensure quality control of cases and build research around repeat offenders and industry-wide statistics. CUE/OERJ co-governance initiative interviewees did not speak much to evaluation because the pilots are still in early stages. However, they did emphasize that BECOME’s evaluation work as part of this systems-mapping exercise is invaluable so that they can continuously learn, adjust, and respond to the data to maximize the knowledge and opportunities that are created by the co-governance pilots. Whenever possible, evaluation that includes the participation, knowledge, and expertise of individuals directly impacted should be built into accompanying policy mandates, as has been done with OLS. However, these strategies can be instituted throughout the co-governance process informally, as well.

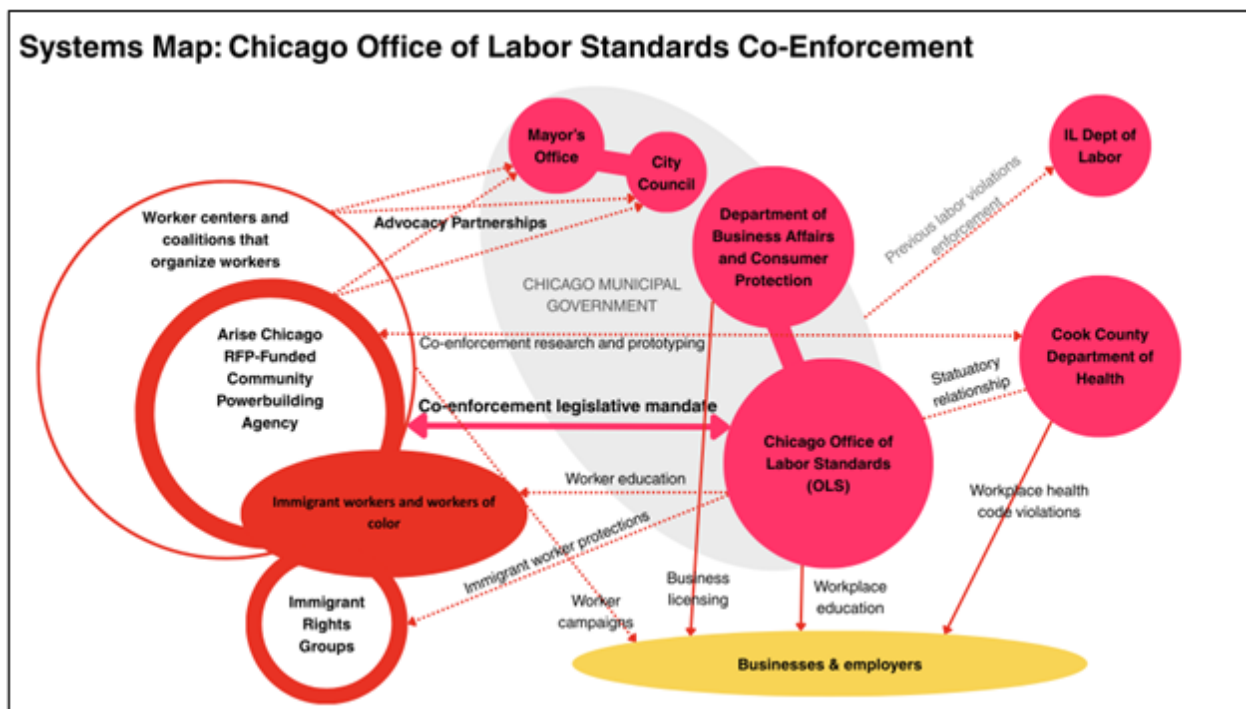
Case Study 1: Co-Enforcement with the Chicago Office of Labor Standards

The Chicago Office of Labor Standards was established in 2018 through an ordinance passed through City Council, and began operations in 2019. Its purpose is to enforce existing and new labor protections, such as the minimum wage, earned sick time, fair workweek, and domestic worker protections.

Previous to the OLS, non-union workers who experience workplace exploitation were required to individually report violations to the City's BACP, which would then either refer the case to the general office of consumer fraud, the Illinois Department of Labor, or another agency. These offices were generally focused on compliance rather than enforcement. The onus of reporting was put on the worker, who had to potentially face retaliation and retribution by their employer. It is no surprise that industries with the highest levels of workplace violations also have the lowest reporting rate by workers. With the establishment of the OLS, workers gained an office dedicated to the protection of workers housed within the department that issues business licenses (i.e., BACP), allowing licenses to be revoked for repeat or egregious offenders.

The OLS was created through evaluation of the lack of enforcement of workplace protections. The policy was spearheaded by Arise Chicago, one of eight worker centers within the Raise the Floor coalition. Started as a faith-based organization defending immigrant workers, Arise has expanded its reach into powerful municipal and state-level policy advocacy and worker power-building that spans across the worker rights and immigration justice sectors.

The systems map below illustrates the relationships between salient systems actors within the co-enforcement mechanism of OLS. Formal relationships between systems actors are drawn with a solid line, such as that connecting OLS and Arise Chicago because of the legislative mandate and the relationship between BACP and OLS with businesses because of statutory oversight. Informal relationships between systems actors are drawn with a dotted line, such as advocacy relationships between nonprofit organizations and municipal decisionmakers. The relationship between OLS and the Cook County Department of Public Health is also depicted with a dotted line because they are not formally connected in enforcement but can use their distinct statutory powers to identify workplace violations and enforce labor protections.



The OLS policy was written with a legislative mandate to have labor protections co-enforced with a community-based organization representing and advocating alongside workers, which is critical to its lasting impact. Each year the OLS releases an RFP for community co-enforcement partner; Arise has won the award each year and is given a budgeted amount for co-enforcement.

Workers experiencing workplace violations can report them in various ways, including calling 311 to access city services, calling or emailing the OLS directly, or filing a complaint through an intermediary organization such as Arise or another worker center. The OLS investigates claims and has subpoena power to gather evidence. OLS partners with Arise, especially if the complaint originates there, to help gather documentation and testimony, research additional violations at the workplace, and support workplace campaign organizing through enforcement efforts. Aside from case management and aggregate research and reporting of compiled cases against the worst offenders, with the support of OLS and research partners, the work of Arise has not fundamentally changed. The worker center continues to educate workers on workplace and other Know Your Rights, still organizes workers in workplace campaigns to build power and enforce worker protections collectively, and experiment with further policy initiatives.

The OLS has expanded its scope with increased funding and a director more open to experimentation and outreach. In addition to direct enforcement of labor protections, outreach and community education is also a primary activity, especially with increased federal immigration presence. The OLS has held education workshops with employers to stress compliance. To enforce domestic worker protections, some of the most vulnerable and difficult to reach workers, it partnered with Chambers of Commerce to hold [“Your Home is Someone’s Workplace”](#) education campaigns.

The OLS also partners with immigrant rights organizations to educate workers and employers that all workers, regardless of immigration status, are protected by existing labor laws. Information is provided in twelve languages and advertised in public spaces, such as in CTA trains and buses. The OLS also certifies documents that support worker-related immigration protections, such as T-Visas for survivors of human trafficking, U-Visas for survivors of serious crimes, VAWA (Violence Against Women Act) recipients for survivors of domestic and intimate partner violence, and DALE or Deferred Action for Labor Enforcement, a recent and powerful protected status for immigrant workers engaged in worker campaigns against exploitative employers.

After the sustained efficacy of OLS, Arise has continued prototyping by partnering with the Cook County Department of Public Health in supporting labor protections enforcement outside the jurisdiction of the City of Chicago and the OLS. Health departments have statutory rights to enter workplaces for health code violations. Through the Healthy Work Collaborative, worker centers, researchers, government representatives, and other systems actors are learning from one another to create goals and strategies that create systems-level change for the most precarious workers. Through this collaborative, health department employees are being cross-trained to identify workplace violations during a health visit. One OLS key informant noted, “The system is obviously created for injustice and chaos and is not meant to enforce laws to help workers.” This type of experimentation on the part of community power-building organizations and forward-thinking government enforcement agencies has the ability to mitigate “equity decay”, or the decreasing presence of equity over time in the enforcement of policies, through intentional and strategic co-enforcement and co-governance partnerships.

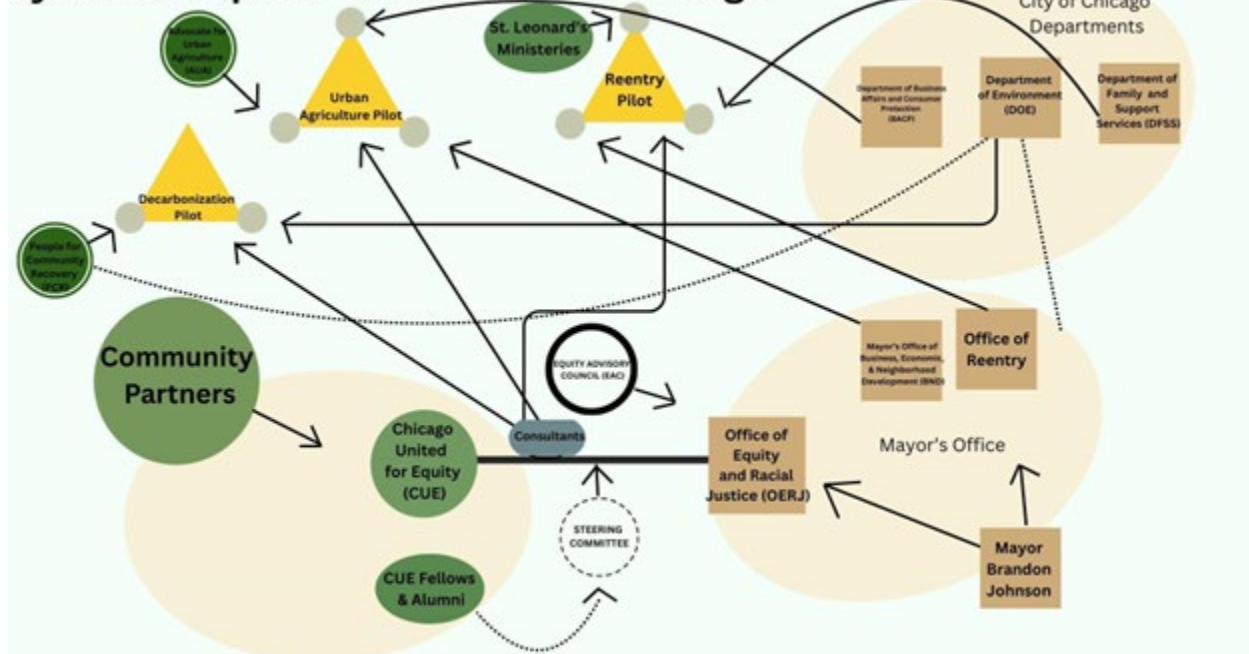
Case Study 2: Co-Governance with CUE and OERJ

Chicago United for Equity (CUE) and the City of Chicago's Office of Equity and Racial Justice (OERJ) have been in relationship since before the creation of the co-governance initiative, and even before OERJ was created in 2019 by the Lightfoot administration. Throughout that relationship, co-governance had been a consistent topic of discussion between OERJ and CUE leadership and staff.

In 2023, building on the momentum following Mayor Johnson's inclusion of collaborative governance in his mayoral transition report, OERJ and CUE launched a Co-Governance initiative. The initiative kicked off with a large convening to discuss the idea of co-governance in Chicago. Next, the initiative put together a diverse Co-governance Steering Committee that led the drafting of the [Chicago Co-Governance Framework](#). To create the Framework, Steering Committee Members met with national partners, City of Chicago government-community partnership tables (i.e., groups the city convenes for co-governance around specific areas and goals), and convened residents in 18 Community Conversations. Three pilot co-governance initiatives were selected from six or seven applications in spring 2025. The pilots receive a year of training, which began in September, and will receive technical support through March 2027. For further details on the Co-Governance Initiative's background, timeline, and pilots, see [Appendix I](#).

Co-Governance Systems Map Overview

Systems Map: Co-Governance in Chicago



This systems map presents a current snapshot of Chicago's Co-Governance Initiative, illustrating how government departments, community-based organizations (CBOs), advisory bodies, and pilot tables relate to each other at this moment. Squares represent City departments, circles represent community-rooted actors, triangles represent the three pilot tables, and line styles

highlight whether relationships are formal, emerging, or temporarily inactive. Thick solid lines indicate strong, formal, institutionalized partnerships; thin solid lines represent active working relationships; dotted lines show informal, emerging or currently inactive connections; and arrows depict the direction of influence or authority.

At the center is the formal co-leadership between CUE and the OERJ. Their relationship is shown with a thick solid line to reflect an active Memorandum of Understanding and shared responsibility for guiding, coordinating, and supporting the Co-Governance Initiative.

Direction, Leadership & Accountability: Mayor, OERJ, and the Equity Advisory Council

Mayor Brandon Johnson → OERJ (Directional Influence)

An arrow from the Mayor to OERJ indicates that the Mayor is giving approval rather than providing frequent direction. OERJ's placement adjacent to but distinct from the Mayor's Office clarifies its role as the operational convener of co-governance, in partnership with CUE, rather than part of the Mayor's Office.

Equity Advisory Council (EAC) & Steering Committee

The Selection Committee co-designed the pilot selection process. The Advisory Committee participated in the final selection process. The Advisory Committee was engaged early in selection, but their later participation shifted to voluntary due to limited compensation budget, while the Steering Committee played a key role in shaping the overall selection approach.

Represented as a solid circle, the EAC remains active at this time across the Mayor's equity agenda. Its functions include:

- Providing high-level strategic direction and oversight to OERJ.
- Serving as an accountability body for equity-centered priorities.
- Co-designed the selection process for the Steering Committee (nine community-based trusted individuals).

An arrow from EAC → OERJ highlights this directional influence.

The Steering Committee is shown with a dotted outline to signal that it is not active at the moment but is structurally significant. The dotted circle communicates a paused status rather than dissolution.

Central Operational Partnership: CUE & OERJ

CUE and OERJ share a thick solid connecting line, indicating a formal, institutionalized partnership. They jointly:

- Convene the pilots
- Support the implementation of co-governance practices
- Bridge community insight with government decision-making

- Serve as core strategic partners guiding the design, alignment, and evolution of the co-governance work

CUE Fellows & Alumni - Network Influence + Accountability

Represented as a circle connected to CUE, the Fellows and Alumni network includes many individuals active across the system (including members of the Steering Committee, government agencies, CBOs, and the EAC). While not a direct causal pipeline into government, this network strengthens shared language, shared equity perspectives, and cross-sector relationships that shape the broader ecosystem.

They function as:

- A relational network that spans government and community actors
- An accountability force strengthening equity culture and practice across the initiative

Government Departments and Pilot Teams

Government departments appear as squares. It is important to note that the pilot work is driven by specific staff teams, not full departments. Pilot triangles connect to pilot teams, which sit within departments such as:

- Department of Environment (DOE)
- Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS)
- Mayor's Office of Business, Economic, & Neighborhood Development (BND)
- Mayor's Office of Reentry

Community-Based Organizations (Circles)

CBOs appear as circles to reflect their relational, community-rooted work. They include:

- People for Community Recovery (PCR)
- St. Leonard's Ministries
- Advocates for Urban Agriculture (AUA)

These CBOs serve as co-equal partners on the pilots, with connections based on longstanding advocacy, issue-area leadership, or historical collaboration.

The Three Pilot Triangles

Each triangle represents one of the selected pilots, which will run through an 18-month period extending to early Spring 2027. While the organized curriculum runs through Summer 2026, CUE/OERJ will support their pilot journey across the full duration.

1. Chicago Equitable Decarbonization Pilot

Partners: Department of Environment (DOE) + People for Community Recovery (PCR) (pilot team)

Focus: Developing an updated and community-informed decarbonization policy plan.

Notes: PCR's deep environmental justice history informs the table's direction.

2. Returning Resident Service Provision (Reentry) Pilot

Partners: Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS) + St. Leonard's Ministries + Mayor's Office of Reentry (pilot team)

Focus: Strengthening reentry provider coordination and co-designing neighborhood-based investment strategies.

Notes: This table shifts longtime funder-provider relationships into true co-governance.

3. Urban Agriculture Pilot

Partners: Advocate for Urban Agriculture (AUA) + Mayor's Office of Business, Economic & Neighborhood Development (BND) (pilot team)

Focus: Designing a comprehensive Urban Agriculture Plan.

Notes: Builds on long-term relationships via the Food Equity Council.

Consultants Supporting Pilots

Consultants appear on the map as a general category, connected by thin dotted lines from CUE/OERJ to each pilot to reflect:

- Flexible, project-specific support
- Varying levels of engagement across pilots

Concluding Analysis: Key Levers Shaping the Co-Governance Initiative

Political Will: Mayor Johnson's commitment to collaborative governance and the City's prioritization of equity provide essential support for OERJ. OERJ's placement within the Mayor's Office allows it to convene interdepartmental meetings, deliver equity trainings, and cultivate citywide familiarity with co-governance. Earlier co-governance tables formed during the COVID-19 response further illustrated the model's potential and created momentum.

Cross-Sector Working Relationships: The long-standing partnership between CUE and OERJ has been foundational to the Initiative's design and launch. Additionally, the Decarbonization pilot builds upon years of collaboration between PCR and what is now the DOE.

CUE Fellowship: Launched in 2017, the CUE Fellowship brings civic leaders together to build shared language, racial equity grounding, and cross-sector relationships. This network fosters collaboration, strengthens accountability, and per CUE/OERJ interviews has had meaningful influence across the ecosystem; notably, approximately 20% of Mayor Johnson's transition team during the first three months were CUE Fellows or alumni.

Continued Evaluation of the CUE and OERJ Co-Governance Initiative

As the co-governance initiative and BECOME's evaluation progress, we will analyze the successes and challenges of the pilot programs. A key part of this analysis involves assessing the alignment of these pilots with the community-created Co-governance Framework. This evaluation will provide an opportunity to integrate evaluation, a critical element of the Co-Governance/Co-Enforcement Theory

of Change, into this co-governance initiative. The findings and recommendations will not only inform the future of the co-governance initiative but also enhance the broader Co-Governance/Co-Enforcement Theory of Change and further inform RWJF future funding strategies.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Recommendations for RWJF's Funding Strategy

To support co-governance and co-enforcement to ensure the equitable implementation of laws and policies, we recommend that RWJF invest in the following approaches to create healthier community and government relationships that anchor mutual accountability and promote power-sharing and community-based solution-building.

Break-Down Barriers to the Co-Production of Justice Through Democratic Engagement, Collective Imagination, Experimentation, and Accountability

- Fund grantees that are working on each of the elements of the Co-Governance/Co-Enforcement Theory of Change: Trust-Building, Visioning and Unsiloing, Experimentation and Prototyping, and Evaluation. Funding for these elements can be across a variety of issue areas and entry points.

Seed Activities that Promote Transparency and Relationship Building: Co-Governance Emerges at the Speed of Trust

- Fund community organizations and collaborations that are trusted in the community to engage in community organizing, advocacy, and that can represent the community in working with government actors, with the goal of working towards or continuing work with these actors in shared leadership.

Recognize and Support Internal Relationship Building and External Pressure and Accountability: Co-Governance is an Inside and Outside Enterprise

- Fund positions that enable co-governance strategies to succeed in both government agencies and nonprofit organizations so that they both have the staff they need to set co-governance strategies up for success. Funding these roles is a way to support both inside and outside strategies for promoting strong co-governance strategies.

Support the Building of Organizational Muscle and Organizing Capacity Across the Civic Infrastructure

- Fund research, trainings, and capacity building to strengthen the ecosystem of actors needed to successfully implement co-governance and co-enforcement strategies such as: trainings for local government and community-based organizations on how to work together, funding

intermediaries and technical assistance providers who can train and coach organizations engaged in co-governance and co-enforcement, funding fellowship opportunities to build the pipeline of young people willing and interested in working in government and community organizations. These strategies can be funded to help groups prepare for new co-governance and co-enforcement strategies or to build the capacity of initiatives that are already underway.

Scale-up Opportunities to Share and Replicate Promising Practices Emerging from Lessons Learned with Regional and National Audiences

- Fund and coordinate convenings to share learnings about co-governance and co-enforcement nationally and regionally across various entry points and issue areas.

A Hospitable and Sustainable Policy and Political Environment is Essential to Nurturing Co-governance

- Fund C4 political advocacy, lobbying and campaigning work to advance policy agendas and political campaigns that support community health, power sharing and community driven solutions, particularly those that incorporate co-governance and co-enforcement strategies to create the context and ecosystem for co-governance and co-enforcement strategies to succeed.

Many of the grantees that RWJ has already funded under the equitable implementation portfolio will continue to be relevant to the strategies recommended above. For example, the work happening in housing to promote the right-to-council and tenant rights may fall into trust-building. The work on fines and fees might fall into funding experimentation and prototyping of co-governance strategies. The work happening around municipal courts could fall into convenings to share learnings about co-governance strategies. The co-governance research could fall into supporting the ecosystem.

We also recommend that RWJF use its political capital to publicly promote and encourage other funders to join in funding democratic and justice-oriented civic practices. A collective and sustained philanthropic effort is an important point of leverage for advancing new mental models and narrative change work that will lay the foundation for shifting power to communities, which is a vital component of co-governance and co-enforcement strategies. This will require a shared language and power analysis, long term investment in communities, and building co-governance and co-enforcement strategies into policy to promote equitable implementation and healthier communities.

Conclusion

The findings from this evaluation and systems mapping effort underscore that co-governance and co-enforcement are not isolated strategies, but essential and evolving structures for achieving equitable implementation of laws and policies. Across interviews, historical analysis, and convening reflections, a consistent message emerged: the equitable implementation of policy depends on building and sustaining relationships of trust; strengthening power among those most impacted; and creating the infrastructure that enables communities and government to share responsibility, decision-making authority, and accountability.

Chicago's examples provide compelling evidence of what is possible when community-rooted organizations and governmental actors collaborate through formalized, well-resourced partnerships. The Office of Labor Standards demonstrates how legislated co-enforcement, when paired with a power-building organization, can transform enforcement systems, scale effective innovations, and reduce inequities that have persisted under traditional compliance models. Likewise, the CUE/OERJ co-governance initiative illustrates how shared leadership, cross-sector collaboration, and intentional alignment can shift civic culture and generate new capacities within government and community ecosystems.

The strengthened Theory of Change highlights that co-governance and co-enforcement are the culmination of an iterative process grounded in trust-building, visioning and unsiloing, experimentation and prototyping, and evaluation. These elements form the connective tissue that allows shared governance structures to emerge authentically and sustainably, especially within contexts shaped by historical inequities and fragmented systems.

For RWJF, these insights offer a roadmap for advancing more equitable and effective policy implementation nationwide. The Foundation's investments can help nurture the civic infrastructure, relational foundations, and enabling environments needed for co-governance to flourish. This includes supporting community organizing and leadership development, strengthening internal governmental capacity, resourcing long-term experimentation, and promoting cross-sector learning that accelerates the spread of promising practices.

Ultimately, co-governance and co-enforcement represent a shift toward a more democratic, accountable, and health-promoting public sphere, where communities most impacted by inequitable policies help shape, guide, lead, and oversee the systems that affect their lives. By investing in the conditions and practices outlined in this report, RWJF can profoundly contribute to a growing national movement toward shared governance that can produce more just outcomes for all communities.

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Appendix

CUE/OERJ Co-Governance Initiative Background and Timeline

CUE/OERJ Co-Governance Background

A few elements of influence that led up to the Co-Governance initiative are outlined below, including the friendship and shared values between the initial leaders of CUE and OERJ, the CUE Fellowship program, and co-governance practices as led by OERJ that began as a response to COVID-19 crises.

- The founder of CUE and the first Chief Equity Officer of OERJ worked together before OERJ was created. Their friendship and collaboration in work, based on shared values, was solidified co-leading the CUE Fellows program and bringing a lawsuit and organizing against the National Teachers Academy (NTA) closure, which they won.
- Leadership of both CUE and OERJ had experience working in government and community settings.
- The founder of CUE was on Lightfoot's transition committee and Johnson's transition team.

The CUE Fellowship program has also influenced the establishment of co-governance in Chicago. The CUE Fellowship began in 2017 to bring civic leaders together to foster a shared language, shared racial equity perspective, and to foster relationships and collaboration. According to interviewees, CUE Fellows have had influence in the following ways:

- 20% of Mayor Johnson's transition team in the first three months were CUE Fellow alumni.
- Multiple former and current OERJ staff were either CUE fellows or supported the implementation of the CUE Fellowship.
- According to multiple interviewees, the CUE Fellowship shows Fellows the value of co-governance. As one interviewee explained of the CUE Fellowship, "You have folks who are researchers, artists, organizers, government, et cetera, and you begin to normalize what it means to work together, what it means to learn together, what's the value of it". Another interviewee explained "Chicago United for Equity was always an effort to really think about how to bridge government to be a more responsive and accountable force for communities of color. And partnering with government, working alongside government was important..."
- The CUE Fellows sometimes function, in part, as a pipeline and accountability mechanism to government, as one interviewee described, "I've had CUE Fellows tell me 'I would've never gone into government if it wasn't for CUE, because before I did the Fellowship, I didn't think that there was anybody like me in government or people that believed the same things as me in government.' And by meeting other people through the fellowship space who they believed in and they trusted it, and they said, these are good human beings, they could finally see

themselves taking that role...” It is important to note, though, that the same interviewee also explained that “there are going to be times when if you really work in service of the people, you might have to leave that [government] job to say something about what's going on. And there have been people who have taken jobs in government from the CUE Network and then had to leave and said, these are not the values that I hold.”

- There is a current CUE fellow on one of the Co-Governance pilot teams.

In 2020, OERJ’s COVID-19 Racial Equity Rapid Response Team (RERRT) served as the first major example of co-governance in action. OERJ set up the table for RERRT. The table included OERJ, staff from different City of Chicago government departments, hospital and community health workers, and community leaders from Austin, Auburn Gresham, and South Short. As one interviewee explained “They came together and every single day the city shared data that we had access to and they devised the plan to get resources to those who needed it most. And it was a very pivotal and very successful initiative of government and community working together.” In a moment of crisis, bringing together people from different sectors to solve a problem worked effectively. According to one interviewee, “The success of this collaboration showed that co-governance was a replicable practice that could be formalized and institutionalized.” Another interviewee described it as “the first example of co-governance where we shared a table, a problem and power.” The experience informed the creation of the Community Safety Coordination Center (CSCC), which applied similar collaborative structures to violence prevention, treating community violence as a public health crisis.

CUE and OERJ’s Co-Governance Initiative Timeline

Their co-governance initiative included the following steps so far:

- **September 2023: CUE and OERJ kicked off the initiative** with *Exploring Co-Governance, a convening for Chicagoans in government and community to reimagine leadership*, welcoming 100 attendees.
- **April 2024:** Launched Co-Governance Steering Committee applications
- **June 2024 Co-governance Steering Committee members selected:** CUE, OERJ, and the Equity Advisory Committee selected nine Co-governance Steering Committee members, who were tasked with attending planning meetings and convening community conversations with historically excluded residents that would lead to the draft of the City of Chicago’s Co-Governance Framework.
- **September – October 2024 Local Government-Community Partnership Tables focus group:** OERJ, CUE, and Co-Governance Steering Committee members met with established tables that bring together city of Chicago government employees and community members to discuss how they understand co-governance and to hear their lessons learned. These tables included the City of Chicago LGBTQ+ Advisory Council, City of Chicago Environmental Equity Working Group, City of Chicago Mayor’s Youth Commission, and City of Chicago Mental Health System Expansion Working Group.
- **October 2024 Community Conversations Launched:** Co-Governance Steering Committee members held 18 Community Conversations, engaging 224 Chicago residents.
- **October 2024 National Conversations Held:** CUE, OERJ, and the Co-Governance Steering Committee members met with Race Forward, PolicyLink, and Partner for Dignity & Rights to learn from their experiences in co-governance.

- **February 2025 Launched Public Comment on the Co-Governance Framework**
- **April 2025 Released the Co-Governance Framework**, which defines co-governance as “a problem-solving structure in which community members directly impacted by systemic racism and economic inequity work side-by-side with government representatives to share decision-making power and accountability for creating stronger policies, programs, and practices”. The Framework also outlines values and pathways for the initiative. This framework was the outcome of the Co-Governance Steering Committee’s community convenings, community conversations, and national conversations.
- **April 2025 Opened applications for Co-Governance pilot initiatives.** Teams with at least one member from the Chicago government and at least one from a community organization, who already had a relationship, were welcomed to apply.
- **June 2025 Hosted second convening and announced pilot initiatives:** The second convening introduced the definition and framework along with the pilot initiatives, which were selected in a process determined by the Steering Committee. The Equity Advisory Committee participated in the selection process.
- **September 2025 Pilot initiatives monthly training sessions began.** Pilot teams receive a monthly training, including some steps and recommended resources from Race Forward’s [Co-governance Tool for a Multi-Racial Democracy](#).
- **Pilots are currently putting together their co-governance tables**, bringing together additional members to work in collaboration towards their goal. Training runs through summer 2026, and technical support continues until March 2027.

It is also helpful to note that some of the founding figures in this initiative, having left their original positions at CUE and OERJ, are still involved in the Co-Governance initiative.

- The co-founder of CUE is currently on the Equity Advisory Council that advises OERJ how to advance equity in Chicago in quarterly public meetings, and serves as an advisor to one of the co-governance pilots. She currently works at PolicyLink.
- The first Chief Equity Officer of OERJ currently works for Race Forward on co-governance and created the document that the Co-Governance initiative is using as a foundation for their training curriculum. Her co-author was the former Deputy First Equity Officer of OERJ, and she is also serving as an advisor to one of the pilot teams.

The Three Co-governance Pilots

Out of about six or seven submissions, three projects were selected to pilot from fall 2025 through summer 2026. These three pilots will test the Co-Governance Framework while working towards drafting policy plans to become integrated structures of Chicago government. The pilots are as follows:

1. **Chicago Equitable Decarbonization**
 - a. *Table goal:* Use the table to revise the Hazel Johnson Cumulative Impacts Ordinance, which was introduced in April 2025 but has not seen much traction, then build awareness and support for the city council to pass the ordinance.
 - b. *Pilot members:* Members are from the Department of Environment (DOE) and People for Community Recovery (PCR).
 - c. *Partner relationship:*

- i. The DOE was dissolved under Mayor Emmanuel, then Lightfoot created an Office of Climate and Environmental Equity (OCEE) in 2020, and then when Johnson reestablished the DOE in 2024, the OCEE was folded into the DOE.
- ii. PCR participated in the City of Chicago's Building Decarbonization Policy Working Group (CBDPWG), which was convened in 2021 to create equity-centered strategies to reduce carbon emissions from the city's buildings sectors. The CBDPWG released a report in October 2022.
- iii. PCR was a strong advocate for the reestablishment of the DOE.
- iv. PCR facilitates bi-weekly calls with DOE and other grassroots organizations to coordinate strategies to advance other Chicago environmental programs, such as the Green Homes Chicago and the Clean and Affordable Buildings Ordinance.

2. Returning Resident Service Provision (e.g. Reentry)

- a. *Table goal:* The goals are to better connect reentry providers with one another, and to create tables in five different neighborhoods to decide how to invest \$100,000 from the Mayor's Office of Reentry for reentry services in each neighborhood.
- b. *Pilot members:* A staff member from the Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS), a staff member from Saint Leonard's Ministries, and a staff member from the Mayor's Office of Reentry.
- c. *Partner relationships:* Up until the Co-Governance Initiative, the relationship between DFSS and Saint Leonard's Ministries has been that of funder and funded, respectively. The Mayor's Office of Reentry joined the initiative after the pilot application was accepted.
 - i. The Office of Reentry, which sits in the Mayor's Office, was established in 2024 under Johnson, and is led by a systems-impacted individual.
 - ii. The funding decisions for reentry services brought to this co-governance initiative came after the pilot was accepted into the Co-Governance initiative.

3. Urban Agriculture

- a. *Table goal:* The goal of the Urban Agriculture pilot is to create a comprehensive Urban Agriculture plan.
- b. *Pilot members:* The partnership includes a staff member from the Mayor's Office of Business and Neighborhood Development, a staff member from the Department of Business Affairs and Consumer Protection (BACP), and two individuals from Advocates for Urban Agriculture (AUA), a Chicago CBO that focuses on food access, local economies, community wellness, and climate resiliency in Chicagoland, and primarily serves working class residents on Chicago's south and west sides.
- c. *Partner relationships:* The three entities represented on this pilot have a long-standing relationship from co-leading the Chicago Food Equity Council's (FEC) Urban Agriculture Subcommittee. Lightfoot launched the FEC in 2022 by executive order, structured as a partnership between government staff, community food leaders, urban agriculture leaders, and public health experts.
 - i. It should be noted that the main staff person at BACP has since been moved to the Department of Housing (DOH). Our understanding is the their position at the BACP was

- for a contracted amount of time and no longer has funding. At the time of data collection, a replacement for the BACP individual [CS2] had not been finalized.
- ii. An individual mentioned in an interview was a staff member for the Greater Chicago Food Depository (GCFD) who also worked at the Mayor's Office as the Food Equity Policy Lead. The GCFD funds her position, but she has a desk at the Mayor's office and emails for both. An interviewee noted this position has been very valuable because they are someone who understands and deeply cares about the issues, they have a foundation and are connected to the community organizations doing this work, and have become a key liaison connecting community organizations to government.



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