

OUR neighborhood

Evanston-Northwestern
Community News
Fall 2021

NEWS

City, University Pilot Guaranteed Income Program

Since 2015, Northwestern has contributed \$1 million to the city of Evanston in support of projects jointly agreed upon by the mayor and University president. Last year marked a turning point in Northwestern's understanding of its obligation to be a good neighbor, as it shifted the program's focus to address the needs of those left at the margins of society. The Racial Equity Fund was designed to meet those needs; funds were dedicated entirely to dismantling systemic barriers faced by historically marginalized communities.

One 2021 initiative is \$300,000 in seed funding for a guaranteed income pilot program to provide direct financial assistance to low-income Evanston households, offering monthly cash payments to supplement the existing social safety net.

"My office is committed to working with the city and our community partners to make sure this program is successful," says Dave Davis, executive director of Northwestern's neighborhood and community relations office. "We hope that these cash payments, paired with the myriad of other wraparound services, will help people get through these challenging times while still maintaining their dignity."

Those selected for the program will receive \$500 per month for a year. According to Cicely Fleming, alderwoman for the city's



Ninth Ward, the program hopes to begin issuing payments by the end of the year to three groups of residents: seniors 62 and above, people between ages 18 and 24, and undocumented residents. Applicants' incomes must be below the poverty level.

The first year's grant allows funding for 150 people, Fleming says, and a team of Northwestern researchers will help select the recipients. Applicants must provide proof of residency and income verification, and faculty will assess the program's effectiveness.

Going beyond the basic assistance of food stamps, Fleming says the program will allow recipients "to do things they need to do that they don't have cash on hand for. You might get a childcare subsidy, but you still don't

have enough for a copay. People don't go to the doctor because they're afraid of bills. There are so many costs that federal and local support programs don't cover."

Because Illinois law does not consider payments from such programs as income, Fleming notes that participants won't lose most other government benefits. "That's huge, because you still might not have enough to cover all your costs," she says. "We don't want to get them kicked off."

"It's totally unrestricted, so we're not going to monitor how people use their funds. Even people with lower incomes do things like buy birthday gifts. There's no shame in their situation, and we trust them to make the best decisions for their family."

Racial Equity and Community Partnership Grant Recipients

In June, Northwestern announced the first recipients of its Racial Equity and Community Partnership grants program, which provides \$500,000 to support efforts to solve systemic problems of racial inequity in local neighborhoods. An anonymous alumnus has committed to donate an additional \$100,000 for each of the next five years.

Eleven organizations received incubator grants, which provide coaching and support from Northwestern's Center for Diversity and Democracy to develop ideas that address racial inequity and prepare the organizations to build partnerships that will attract further investments.

Ten organizations received partnership grants, supporting projects that work to dismantle structural racism through collaborations with Northwestern faculty, students, and staff.

Here's how two awardees are using their grants.

INCUBATOR GRANT



KRENICE RAMSEY

*Cofounder,
Young, Black & Lit*

Tell us about Young, Black & Lit.

We're an Evanston-based nonprofit, begun in 2018, that provides books featuring Black characters to pre-K through eighth grade youth and their families at no cost. We partner with schools to provide students with one book per month during the school year and five more during the summer to increase their access to literature in the home. We also donate up to 100 books per month to schools and organizations serving low-income children across the US.

Why did you start this organization?

It came from my own personal frustration. I was looking for books for my nine-year-old niece's birthday, specifically those that featured little Black girls. I could not just walk into a bookstore and find shelves full of books with Black characters.

I made a donation to Family Focus of 50 children's books. But I thought I couldn't be the only one who had this problem and maybe we could do something more. We started by making small 50-book donations to local organizations and schools. We've since grown pretty organically and are super excited about this grant.

Why is representation in children's literature important?

Representation in media generally, and especially in children's books, is essential. When children are able to see themselves and their cultures and families reflected in what they read, they feel valued. It also gives

children the opportunity to see into cultures that are different from theirs and understand there are similarities and differences to appreciate.

Books are an opportunity to give children a voice and allow them to see themselves in a way that makes them feel important. All children deserve to see themselves represented—not just in stories about civil rights heroes, which are important, but in average, everyday stories sharing the varied experiences of underrepresented people.

What will the grant help you do?

Initially, I set up an Amazon wish list and people bought books that I could distribute. Now we have relationships with publishers and we rely on grants and donations to purchase directly from them.

We'll be putting this grant toward our Lit Year program to help expand the number of schools we're able to reach. In 2020, the first year of Lit Year, we were in six schools in Evanston and a couple in Chicago. Our goal is to get to 15 to 25 schools in the next two years. Because we subsidize part of the cost, this grant will help us reach more students.

This racial equity grant and partnership is important—as a born-and-raised Evanstonian, I know Northwestern is the first introduction to a university for many Evanston children. It's important for the University to maintain these community relationships, and I think it's their responsibility. I applaud them for doing this.

Beyond the grant, they are also providing us with tools, resources, and education to make sure we're making a meaningful impact in the community. We'll have five sessions led by a Northwestern professor to help us evaluate the efficacy of our program.

PARTNERSHIP GRANT



**LAMENTA “SWEETIE”
CONWAY, MD, MPH**
*Founder and
executive director,
I Am Abel*

Tell us about I Am Abel.

We are focused on increasing diversity in healthcare, partnering with major academic centers for our physician mentoring pipeline program. Underrepresented minority students can start when they are sophomores in college and join us at any point afterward.

Physicians help us with clinical programming, professors teach students the “language” of medicine, and we help students study for the MCAT to get into medical school. We identify high-quality students defined not by grades but by commitment.

“Abel” refers to being our brother’s keeper—our philosophy is that we are all responsible for the success of one another

Why did you start this organization?

It represents my story in many ways. I grew up in Englewood, which is nationally known—and not for the best reasons. I wanted to be a doctor because I used to watch Marcus Welby on TV and think, I can do that. I didn’t even have a doctor—I didn’t go to one until I was 16, when my mother got health insurance.

I ended up meeting two Black men, one an educator and one a biochemist. They were beacons of light and told me that if I wanted to be a doctor, I was going to be a doctor. That

was the first time I received that affirmation from someone who had the ability to say it truthfully.

I took the MCAT a few times but didn’t do well. Then, through a special summer program, I met icons and heroes who helped make sure kids who truly dreamed of becoming doctors could make it happen. That was the summer I needed. I did really well on the MCAT, and when I applied to med school, I actually got in.

Why is representation in healthcare important?

To tackle healthcare disparities, we have to increase diversity so people feel valued in their healthcare experience. It’s sad when you go to the doctor and you can’t talk to someone who you feel can understand you.

People tend to care about the places where they live—most Black and brown people return to serve the communities where they grew up. Multigenerational professionals—from engineering to medicine to law—are commonly seen among particular ethnicities but not in Black or Latino families. Black men make up just 2 in 100 practicing doctors and Black women about 3 in 100, but the Black population is 14 percent.

We always say that when you don’t have a seat at the table, you aren’t on the menu. It’s very important that our voice is heard.

What will the grant help you do?

You can’t get into med school without the right grades and MCAT scores. That was a stumbling block, because we know standardized test scores are tied to parental

income. A lot of our students study for the test while working full-time, and test-prep programs can cost up to \$8,000.

We ran our first 11-week MCAT Intensive Program at Northwestern last summer, providing coaching and test-prep materials and a stipend so students could study full-time without having to work. Next year we’ll also have a developmental program for younger students, because we’ve recognized that most of our students need more time to prepare.

I’m extraordinarily thankful to Northwestern for believing in our mission and understanding the importance of increasing diversity in education as a way to decrease disparities in healthcare. It’s unique to find entities who see and understand that it’s important to empower communities to be a part of their own solutions.

Interviews have been edited for length and clarity.

TO APPLY for the next round of grants, visit northwestern.edu/communityrelations/about/request-for-proposal.html.

Summer STEAM Activities for Evanston Youth

Evanston's first Summer Fest, a seven-week STEAM program, took place this year at Butler Park, giving middle school children the chance to explore everything from flying drones to woodworking.

Supported by Northwestern's School of Education and Social Policy (SESP) and the Digital Youth Network, the initiative was a community-wide effort by the McGaw YMCA and the Evanston Parks and Recreation Department.

The STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and math) activities were designed "to spark creativity, build social skills, and help create an environment where such activities are as commonplace as basketball," says Nichole Pinkard, associate professor of learning sciences. "It's a unique collaboration among Evanston organizations to bring programming to the Fifth Ward, which has the city's largest population of children of color."

SESP faculty designed learning activities, such as SportSense creator Marcelo Worsley's program wherein youth playing

sports could track their own health data via wearable sensors. Some activities led by local entrepreneurs included podcasting, with Meleika Gardner of Evanston Live TV, and learning to DJ, with Evanston's Corey Bless.

"We wanted to socially expose students to STEAM in a way that's not school," says Miranda Standberry-Wallace, SESP community engagement and relations manager. "Students could choose the activities that interest them."

Activities were led by college-age "STEAM-bassadors" and mentors from the city's youth employment program. SESP researchers trained the mentors.

Butler Park Summer Fest ultimately served more than 500 youth and families in partnership with community organizations, civic leaders, minority-owned businesses, churches, and neighbors of the park.

"We had community folks participate—just people coming from their houses," Standberry-Wallace says. "Enthusiasm was phenomenal."

Staff profile Robin R. Means Coleman



Robin R. Means Coleman has joined Northwestern as vice president and associate provost for diversity and inclusion and chief diversity officer.

A nationally prominent and award-winning scholar of communication and African American studies, Coleman focuses on media studies and the cultural politics of Blackness. She also holds a tenured

appointment in Northwestern's School of Communication and courtesy appointments in Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences.

"I am deeply honored to join Northwestern University," Coleman says. "I have the great privilege of working with members of the University's campuses to advance the strategic goals of further improving campus climate, fostering belonging, increasing diversity, and evidencing accountability.

"Together, we will work to make the experiences of every Wildcat even better and ensure that we all thrive."



CONNECT WITH US

Our monthly email newsletter includes important community updates. Email Shayla Butler at shayla.butler@northwestern.edu to sign up.

Do you have a business or non-profit in Evanston? We can help increase your visibility, facilitate connections to the Northwestern community, and find student volunteers.

For details, visit northwestern.edu/communityrelations or contact Dave Davis, executive director of the Office of Neighborhood and Community Relations, at dave.davis@northwestern.edu or 847-467-5762.