



# GROWING CO-GOVERNANCE FOR A RACIALLY JUST CHICAGO

*Chicagoans are working with their city government toward a common vision for racial equity by forging a path rooted in the question, "How can we build meaningful collaboration and shared governing power to benefit all Chicago residents?"*

In a time of widespread attacks on racial equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts along with the slashing of critical resources by the federal government, local communities across the city are growing their power and creating solutions through a co-governance framework. Groups are building shared decision-making tables in partnership with their local government leaders to address long-standing problems, while pushing those leaders to deliver on their stated commitments for racial equity now, when it matters most to residents.

On June 5th, 2025, locally-based nonprofit, [Chicago United for Equity \(CUE\)](#) and the city's [Office of Equity and Racial Justice \(OERJ\)](#) convened over 100 attendees representing community groups and organizers, advocates and government officials in downtown Chicago. Together, participants reflected on [recent co-governance efforts](#), including city-wide conversations to understand residents' visions for partnering with local government, the creation of a shared definition and framework to support learning and alignment, and the launch of pilot projects to test how co-governance works in practice. These efforts helped build shared understanding

and relationships to guide and inform the next phase of racial equity efforts in the city.

This convening grew out of an initial city commitment in July 2023, made in response to Mayor Brandon Johnson's vision for a future *"where gaps between government and community are bridged to address multigenerational mistrust between city government and communities of color."*

Since then, a citywide [co-governance steering committee](#), consisting of a multiracial group of community leaders, has been working to support the design, roll-out and implementation of the framework. Guided by mutual values of power-sharing, trust and transparency, initial efforts included a series of 18 community conversations with residents to gather insights, questions and proposals to form a strong, community-owned co-governance structure and plan.

One result: a Chicago-style definition that sees 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."* At its core, co-governance responds to the questions of how communities and government can more effectively work together toward a vision for racial justice.





## Challenges and Hopes in Building Co-Governance

Due to fraught relationships and historical divides between communities of color and government, Chicagoans in attendance at the June event voiced that effective co-governance will require a deep cultural shift among all parties in how they understand, place value on, and sustain collaboration.



**For me, it's a trust thing... I would rather just put effort into creating my own solutions without having to go to the government.**

- A Community Conversation Resident Participant

To combat the historical disinvestment and marginalization experienced by generations of Black and brown Chicagoans, co-governance requires long-term investment to repair harm and broken relationships between government and residents. It also requires growing collective power among communities to better address the ever-shifting challenges of systemic racism experienced in daily life.

Nonetheless, Chicago residents are expressing willingness to try something new, as demonstrated by the level of community buy-in and participation in co-governance activities so far. Some have pointed to the city's actions to form the Office of Equity and Racial Justice (OERJ) in 2019, which centralized and baked equity and racial justice into the way the city does business. Other residents conveyed that the recent support of co-governance at the city is hitting differently, and presents a real opportunity for community groups to be respected as valued government partners to fully address the city's most difficult challenges.



**This city is not the same as it was 43 years ago. If the city is investing in this [community conversation], then we know they want to change. This is a good place to start.”**

- A Community Conversation Resident Participant

The near-term goals for the Chicago co-governance efforts include demonstrating the viability of co-governance through community-government partnership and shared ownership. Using their newly developed co-governance framework, OERJ and CUE are supporting a cluster of three [pilot projects](#). These projects will address food insecurity, gender gaps in re-entry and climate crisis mitigation at the local level. Partner groups have been awarded support for capacity-building, facilitation, and funding to help compensate residents' participation and expertise.

According to Rachel Pate, CUE's Director of Civic Programming, this work likely will need to involve unlearning the things that prevent us from living into our shared values...[and] healing from generations of civic trauma. Even if you didn't cause the trauma, you find yourself in a position where you share the responsibility for addressing it, adds Lyric Griffin, lifelong Chicagoan and Deputy Chief Equity Officer in Chicago's OERJ.



## What can we learn from Chicago for growing equitable governing power between community and government?

Even with the strong momentum generated by the co-governance framework, full commitment and integration will require both a cultural and systems change that will pose challenges. In experiencing numerous stops and starts, letdowns and fallouts over the years, leaders in the community and city government share concerns that old patterns and practices could surface and hinder the current efforts and threaten the goodwill that has been established over the past few years.

In this iteration of attempted partnership between community and city government, key questions that have surfaced include:

- *How will decision-making power be shared between government staff and community members?*
- *What mechanisms can ensure those most impacted by inequities have a real leadership voice in this structure?*
- *How can trust be built across lines of difference, considering a long history of unilateral, top-down interventions from government?*



Even with these questions, early results from these efforts have been promising as there has been increased resident buy-in, a renewed and growing interest in collaboration, along with willingness from the government to take value-informed risk. More recently, the co-governance framework has been instrumental in shaping community-government partnerships to organize for migrant justice, as Chicago has become an early testing ground for authoritarian tactics by the federal government in the form of raids and detentions targeting immigrants and communities of color, rooted in racial profiling.

Ultimately, the hope is that community-government collaboration in Chicago will strengthen over the course of the coming years and offer a co-governance structure that respects community power, builds trust and integrates community-driven practices that help produce wide-scale, material impacts for Chicagoans who have experienced the deepest impacts of racial inequities.

At a time when democratic values, practices and institutions are under severe threat across the US, co-governance is understood in Chicago as a potentially powerful offensive tool to both build and deploy community-driven, co-governing power for a multiracial democracy.