NEIGHBORHOOD NETWORK STORY

FREEDOM TO ASPIRE: DRIVING WORKFORCE AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

United Way of Metro Chicago
neighborhood network INITIATIVE

"When one door closes, another one opens."

The story of the Aspire Center begins with a closing – the shuttering of Emmet Elementary School in 2013 as part of sweeping school closures across Chicago. Ten years later, local leaders broke ground in the Emmet parking lot. After two years of construction, on Juneteenth, June 19, 2025, United Way of Metro Chicago joined hundreds of residents at Madison and Central to celebrate a rebirth – the grand opening of the Aspire Center for Workforce Innovation.

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>
> **DARNELL SHIELDS**
> **Executive Director,**
> Austin Coming Together

Austin residents, nonprofit leaders, government officials, corporate partners, and philanthropic investors spilled out from under a white tent on what used to be the school's parking lot, now a manicured lawn with walking paths and young trees. All leading the way to the sprawling Aspire Center campus. The morning sun glistened off the grand main entrance – a three-story glass atrium connected to Emmet's refurbished red brick. The new merging with the old.

Darnell Shields, Executive Director of Austin Coming Together, addressed the crowd of friends and supporters before cutting the ribbon – and ushering in the "era of aspire."

"Today we are no longer victims of disinvestment. We are victors in the fight for equity, justice, and healing," Darnell said. "We are not just opening a building. We are opening new doors of possibility."

The possibilities are endless. The Aspire Center will be a hub for workforce training, education, and economic empowerment. The joint project of Austin Coming Together and the Westside Health Authority houses both nonprofits, plus Jane Addams Resource Corporation, a BMO bank branch, the Cook County Public Defender, and Legal Aid Chicago.



The $47 million investment fulfills key components of Austin's Quality of Life Plan, "Austin Forward. Together." A vision created by the community, for the community, under the leadership of Austin Coming Together and United Way's Austin Neighborhood Network.

"Through the Austin Neighborhood Network, United Way of Metro Chicago works alongside Darnell Shields and Austin Coming Together, plus leaders from business, philanthropy, government, and nonprofit, to bring the community's vision to life," said Sean Garrett, President and CEO of United Way of Metro Chicago. "The opening of the Aspire Center is one example of the impact of the Austin Neighborhood Network in action and one step toward true community transformation, built from and led by Austin residents."

September 29, 2025

In its first five years, the Aspire Center is projected to create 50 new jobs, help increase the incomes of more than 500 Austin households, and facilitate financing for new businesses or property for more than 250 residents.

None of this would be possible without the support of partners like BMO, the lead philanthropic investor of the Aspire Center and a founding partner of United Way's Neighborhood Network Initiative. BMO opened a branch within the Aspire Center in October, providing financial education, coaching, and banking services to help Austin residents make real financial progress.

"BMO believed in the vision for the Aspire Center and its promise for the Austin community from the beginning, which is why we became a cornerstone philanthropic funder to the project," said Darrel Hackett, U.S. CEO, BMO, and United Way of Metro Chicago board member. "Witnessing its journey from concept to groundbreaking to grand opening has been truly inspiring and is a shining example of neighborhood-led transformation that aligns with our purpose to 'Boldly Grow the Good in business and life.' We look forward to deepening our commitment to the Aspire Center and driving progress for the people of Austin with the opening of our BMO branch."

JOIN US!

Donate today and help build a stronger Chicago region where all our neighbors can thrive.

In addition to the commitment of its anchor tenants like BMO, the Aspire Center was made possible by collaborative funding of multiple partners, including more than $5 million from United Way of Metro Chicago, the single largest investment in the organization's history.

Austin's residents raised $20,000 for their own wallets. Because they believed in the Aspire Center and the power of investing in their neighborhood. "This is just the beginning," Darnell said, as he charged everyone to keep the momentum going.

"Keep showing up in Austin, on the South and West Sides, and in the communities that have been long overlooked. There's great power in these places," Darnell said. "This isn't just a building. It's about our freedom to aspire, our freedom to dream, and our ability to walk in that freedom boldly every single day."

