United Way of Metro Chicago

CHICAGO BRIDGEBUILDERS FUND

2026 GRANT GUIDELINES

Table of Contents

United Way of Metro Chicago Overview 3

The Challenge and Our Solution 3

Program Overview 3

Program Objectives 3

Cohort Model & Unrestricted Funding 4

Capacity Building | Engagement & Trainings 4

Relationship Building 4

Selection Criteria 4-5

Geography 5

Timeline & Key Dates 6

Reporting & Assessments 6

Mid-Year & Year-End Reporting 6

Reporting Questions 6

Assessment 7

Appendix I: Evaluation Rubric 8

Appendix II: Frequently Asked Questions 9

UNITED WAY OF METRO CHICAGO MISSION

For nearly a century, United Way of Metro Chicago has mobilized private and philanthropic support, as well as public sector resources, to build thriving communities. Our experience has taught us that lasting change happens when agencies unite – combining ideas, expertise, and resources to provide the comprehensive, wraparound services that individuals, families, and neighborhoods need to thrive.

United Way invests in partners across the region to provide unrestricted funds, which support high-quality programs that stabilize households and advance community-identified goals, including access to healthcare, stable housing, safety from abuse, access to food, legal assistance, early learning, and workforce development.

A critical part of our work is 211 Metro Chicago, a free, 24/7/365 helpline that connects residents to vital health and human services. Through 2-1-1, thousands of residents receive timely assistance every day, and the rich data generated by this service informs United Way and our partners about emerging needs, service gaps, and community trends. This connection enables us to invest strategically and respond more quickly to evolving challenges.

We achieve this mission by supporting service models that are both powerful and historically under-resourced, advancing community-driven efforts in our target geographies. At the heart of this work is building meaningful, trusting relationships between United Way of Metro Chicago and our nonprofit partners, fostering collaboration and shared impact that moves us closer to a stronger Chicago region.

THE CHICAGO BRIDGEBUILDERS FUND | CHALLENGE AND OUR SOLUTION

The Chicago BridgeBuilders Fund is United Way of Metro Chicago's philanthropic commitment to addressing the barriers faced by small nonprofits serving historically disinvested communities on the South and West Sides of Chicago and in the south suburban region.

Small nonprofit organizations that are addressing complex and critical social sector needs are often stretched thin, faced with providing day-to-day support with limited staff and resources. The Chicago BridgeBuilders Fund supports these organizations with unrestricted funding, networking and relationship building, and tailored capacity building to meet their needs and advance their long-term goals.

Objectives:

A. Improve performance and effectiveness of leaders and their organizations in the nonprofit sector through funding, capacity building, and relationships.
B. Expand the scale and reach of nonprofits through investment and visibility.
C. Foster change in the philanthropic sector to reduce administrative burdens and restrictions on grantees.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Cohort Model & Unrestricted Funding

The Chicago BridgeBuilders Fund selects a cohort of leaders from up to 10 community-based organizations aiming to expand their professional networks and organizational reach. The cohort approach fosters an enhanced collaboration and dynamic learning environment where grantees learn from each other's unique experiences, skills, and challenges leading to deeper understanding and a strong sense of belonging.

Recipients receive up to $25,000 in unrestricted funding per year for two years (2026-2027). The grant is unrestricted, so partners can use funding where it is needed most – from staffing and service delivery to organizational infrastructure and growth. United Way of Metro Chicago's role is not only to fund but also to serve as a connector, capacity builder, and partner in advancing community-led change.

Capacity Building | Engagement & Trainings

Throughout the two-year cohort there will be several capacity building sessions and workshops on a variety of topics. Cohort Members should commit to attending all academic sessions and other cohort activities throughout the grant period. Cohort members should expect to commit an average of five to eight hours per month attending and engaging in related activities during their time in the program.

Year-One: Academic Coursework

DePaul University's School of Public Service professors offer classroom instruction on topics related to nonprofit management and leadership. A total of five Academic Sessions will be held February 2026 through November 2026 in person on Fridays from 9:00 am – 1:00 pm. These academic sessions will cover topics related to Human Resources, Budgeting & Audits, Program Evaluation, Communications and Fundraising. Cohort members will receive a full calendar schedule during the Kickoff Meeting taking place on Thursday, January 29, 2026.

Year-Two: Individual & Organizational Pro-Bono

During year two cohort members will have the opportunity to be matched with a corporate partner to complete a pro bono project centered around their organizational needs. Additional opportunities for marketing and communication planning, governance check-in with a legal partner and micro-mentoring will be available to cohort members.

Relationship Building

United Way will support cross-sector relationship building through a peer cohort model, corporate spotlight, and networking with potential funders and investors. *Grantees will also complete United Way Metro Chicago Speaker's Bureau Training. This training provides an overview of our work and informs our partner agencies on how to communicate about our partnership to external audiences.

SELECTION CRITERIA

United Way invests in partners that serve the South and West Sides of the city and the south suburbs.

When determining potential, United Way seeks partners that demonstrate organizational capacity for impact, high quality service delivery, and a strong history of achieving desired outcomes. An evaluation committee selects grantees, and additional factors may be considered during this process. This includes but is not limited to:

- CEO/ED/President's career journey and key accomplishments.
- Community-based organizations located on Chicago's South and West Sides and in the south suburban region, ideally aligned with United Way's Neighborhood Network coalitions.
- 501c3 status or fiscal sponsor.
- Budget of less than $1,000,000.

*Meeting these criteria does not guarantee funding but serves as the baseline for participation in United Way's competitive application process.

Geography

Organizations must be located and serving Chicago's South Side, West Side or South Suburban communities. Priority will be given to organizations located within the following United Way of Metro Chicago Neighborhood Network communities:

- Auburn Gresham
- Austin
- Blue Island/Robbins
- Brighton Park
- Bronzeville
- Englewood
- Far South (*City of Chicago neighborhoods encompassing Altgeld Gardens, Calumet Heights, Cottage Grove Heights, Fernwood, Golden Gates, London Towne, Morgan Park, Pullman, Roseland, Roseland Heights, Rosemoor, Washington Heights, and West Pullman*)
- Ford Heights/ Chicago Heights
- Garfield Park
- Harvey
- Little Village
- Park Forest/ Richton Park
- South Chicago

More information on the Neighborhood Network model can be found at https://liveunitedchicago.org/neighborhood-networks/

TIMELINE & KEY DATES

Dates	Grant Cycle Item
September 17, 2025	Application Opens
September 24, 2025	Application Info & Training Session
October 8, 2025	Application Closes
November 7, 2025	Funding Notifications
November 2025	Grant Agreement Released & Executed
January 29, 2026	Cohort 5 Kick Off Mixer
January 1, 2026 – December 30, 2027	Award Period

REPORTING & ASSESSMENTS

United Way has identified key indicators as measures of success for each funding focus area that help us track progress toward specific outcomes. We use a combination of data reported by grantees and information from 2-1-1 to monitor how well programs are working, find gaps, and improve our strategies. This ongoing learning process helps ensure our grantmaking stays responsive and focused on impact.

Mid-Year & Year-End Reporting

Cohort Members are required to complete an annual reporting process (Mid-Year and Year-End). The primary goal of reporting is to ensure tracking of continuous strategy improvement and gathering success stories to outline program impact.

Reporting will include a mix of narrative and metric-based questions. These questions will evaluate grantees' annual capacity building progress, the areas of support your organization found most helpful, and identify areas of opportunity entering year two and beyond.

Reporting Questions

a. What components of the Chicago BridgeBuilders Fund activities have been most helpful for you so far this year? How have they affected the way you and your organization function?

b. What topics and/or capacity-building supports would be most helpful to you and your organization's development?

c. For the questions below, please answer "Yes" if the statement applies to you and provide further description in the narrative box.
    - Because of the Chicago BridgeBuilders Fund, I have…
        - Raised more money/grown my organization's budget. Sustained money/budget. What is your plan to grow or sustain your organizations budget/health?
        - Hired more people/shifted responsibilities to other staff.

- Expanded or changed my program model.
- Improved my organization's operations and/or financial health.
- Other

d. Success Stories: Leadership Story (primary voice, often through a case study or testimonial), and Organizational Story (the organization is the storyteller, with input from leadership and internal teams).

Assessment

Grantees will participate in an assessment that will assist in prioritizing and determining the organization's capacity building area of need and to inform the technical assistance support from United Way and its academic partner.

Assessment Steps

Step 1: Orientation: United Way meets with key leaders and/or staff to discuss the capacity building assessment process and benefits.

Step 2: Capacity Building Assessment Intake: Key and/or staff members receive capacity building assessment to complete. Approximately 45-60 minutes to complete.

Step 3: Initial Analysis & Interpretation: Assesses the initial results and meet with organizational point person to discuss key findings and prioritize goals and outline recommendations.

Step 4: Outline Pro-bono Support: Set deliverables for defined capacity building needs and develop job description for capacity building services.

Step 5: Onboard Pro-bono Partner: United Way socializes pro-bono support with stakeholders.

Appendix I: Evaluation Rubric

Applicants will be assessed on the depth and detail of their responses as well as their alignment with the grant eligibility criteria.

Category	Evaluation	Example
Organizational Mission	In what ways does the organization actively address and work to counter structural disinvestment, and how is this reflected in its mission and programming?	Includes but not limited to: organization serving a historically disinvested neighborhood builds its mission statement through extensive community input sessions, an organization working to dismantle structural barriers hires staff and board members who represent the communities served, etc.
Program Quality	Describe the primary focus of the organization and programming.	Includes but not limited to: early childcare providers' network, an organization dedicated to improving bereavement care and support following pregnancy and infant loss, programming that advocates for health equity, a social enterprise providing young adults with meaningful career opportunities, etc.
Community Served	Describe the specific populations the organization serves, particularly those economically disadvantaged or underserved. Any relevant information such as the age range, income level, or geography of the populations served may be included.	Includes but not limited to: providing high quality mental health and support to Chicago's southwest side community, building the next generation of community-minded in technology.
Executive Leadership	Describe how the organization's CEO/ED/Founder's current experience makes them a strong candidate for Chicago BridgeBuilders Fund's capacity building offerings.	Chicago BridgeBuilders Fund's Academic Sessions are aimed at enhancing basic nonprofit management skills for early to mid-career leaders. The tools and resources offered may be redundant for an executive leader who already has

		extensive nonprofit experience or has obtained a degree or certificate in Nonprofit Management.

APPENDIX II: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1) **Can I apply again if I have received the grant before?**
    a. If you have previously been selected and funded, you are not eligible to apply again. However, if you have previously applied but were not selected for funding you may apply again.
2) **Who reviews my application?**
    a. Applications are reviewed by a committee of United Way staff members, current cohort members, and United Way volunteers. Each application is reviewed by two separate individuals.
3) **How can the awarded funds be used?**
    a. Funding is unrestricted and can be used for a variety of purposes to support the grantee's organizational needs. Cohort members have used funding to invest in staff training, expand programing, hire contractors or invest in technology and operational systems.
4) **What is the minimum/maximum budget to apply?**
    a. There is no minimum budget to apply, though the annual award may not total more than 30% of your total operating budget. Any organization fitting the eligibility criteria with a budget under $1,000,000 may apply. We encourage organizations with all annual budget sizes under that threshold to apply.
5) **What if my organization serves the South/West or South Suburban region but is not located in those areas?**
    a. If your organization does not have a physical location or service site presence within these specific regions, you are not eligible to apply. The Chicago BridgeBuilders Fund was designed to support organizations with a physical service presence within Chicago's South and West Sides and South Suburban region.
6) **How can I apply?**
    a. United Way Metro Chicago's grant applications are housed within eCImpact, our grant database system. You can gain access to that system using this link (https://agency.e-cimpact.com/login.aspx?org=15085). Applications must be submitted through the portal. United Way will not accept any emailed or paper applications.
7) **What do you mean by "up to $50,000 in funding"?**
    a. The maximum award amount is $50,000 ($25,000 per year for two years). If $25,000 per year is greater than 30% of your total annual operating budget, your award will be adjusted to reflect a maximum of 30% of your budget. For example, if your total annual operating budget is $30,000 then your award would be a maximum total of $10,500 with $5,250 dispersed in Year 1 and $5,250 dispersed in Year 2.
8) **Can I speak to someone at United Way before I apply?**

a. Yes, if you have any questions about or would like to speak with someone at United Way email CommunityImpact@LiveUnitedChicago.org with your request.