

40
years

chicago
foundation
for women
unite. uplift. unleash.

A Force for **Equity.** A Funder for **Change.**

Chicago Foundation for Women

2026–2029 Strategic Plan Overview



Dear community,

As Chicago Foundation for Women steps into its next chapter, **I am honored to begin sharing our new strategic plan, A Force for Equity. A Funder for Change.** This moment is about grounding our community in who we are, what we believe, and how we are preparing to meet the future together in a rapidly shifting landscape. Over the past year, more than 200 members of the CFW community have helped shape our new strategic plan and inform the path forward.

Together, we are focused on supporting women, girls, and gender-expansive people at every stage of their lives while **mobilizing more resources** to catalyze greater impact and **engaging more people** to take action for equity. Our grantmaking will align more deeply with our values and invest where need and opportunity are greatest.

Forty years ago, our founders broke the mold, pooled their own resources, and created an institution rooted in the belief that women should not only benefit from philanthropy but also lead it. **That spirit continues to guide us today.** We believe equity should be possible and permanent, and that lasting change happens when communities closest to the challenges are trusted and resourced to lead.

Across Chicagoland and beyond, communities continue to face threats to safety, economic stability, and bodily autonomy. At the same time, grassroots leaders are organizing, innovating, and caring for one another. Rooted in trust and lived experience, these organizations are often best positioned to recognize emerging needs and respond in real time. **That is why we are sharpening our focus on investing in grassroots and community leadership,** strengthening the people and organizations closest to the work.

This overview outlines the mission, vision, values, goals, and strategies guiding our work in the years ahead and provides an overview of how our grantmaking approach is evolving.

In the months ahead, we will share additional updates, including new grantmaking guidelines and opportunities planned for summer 2026. I invite you to stay engaged as we move forward together with clarity, courage, and shared purpose.

Thank you for standing with us as we move this work forward together.

With gratitude and partnership,



Keenya Lambert

Keenya Lambert

President and CEO, Chicago Foundation for Women

Strategic Direction Overview

Rooted in Purpose, Focused on Impact

As Chicago Foundation for Women looks toward the future, we are grounding our next chapter in a reaffirmed foundation of who we are and what guides our work. Our updated mission, vision, and values reflect both our enduring commitment to gender equity and the lessons we learned from our community over the past four decades. Together, they clarify the purpose that drives us, the future we are working to build, and the principles that shape how we show up as partners, funders, and advocates for equity.

Mission

Chicago Foundation for Women invests in bold ideas, grassroots leadership, and local organizations dismantling barriers for women, girls, and gender-expansive people so that equity is possible and permanent.

Vision

We envision a future where equity transforms lives and systems, creating a world where safety is certain, dignity is honored, and choice is guaranteed.

Our Values

Collective Action

We invest in networks, relationships, and collaboration because transformation is not the work of individuals, and we build a culture grounded in teamwork, shared learning, and mutual support.

Community-Led Power

We trust that communities know what they need and amplify their leadership by listening and shifting resources while growing a culture that centers humility, accountability, and respect.

Equity

We shift power and resources to repair harm and expand access, autonomy, and opportunity while cultivating a culture that practices equity in our decisions, relationships, and daily work.

Intersectionality

We honor the interconnected realities of race, ethnicity, class, ability, sexuality, and lived experience in our grantmaking and partnerships, and we foster a culture that reflects and respects these intersections.



Gender Equity, Defined

At CFW, we define gender equity as dignity, safety, and real choice for all. It means advancing racial, economic, and social justice while empowering women, girls, and gender-expansive people as leaders in shaping their own futures. Gender equity means we have all the rights, resources, opportunities, and protections that we need to thrive.

Equity means everyone.

There can be no liberation without justice and equity for those historically excluded, including women of color, LGBTQIA+ and gender-expansive people, people with disabilities, and BIPOC communities.

Advancing gender equity also means engaging men and boys as allies and recognizing their deep connection to racial, economic, and immigrant justice.



Change requires transformation.

Achieving gender equity calls for more than programs alone. It requires transforming systems, culture, social norms, and personal beliefs so that fairness and opportunity are built into how our society functions.



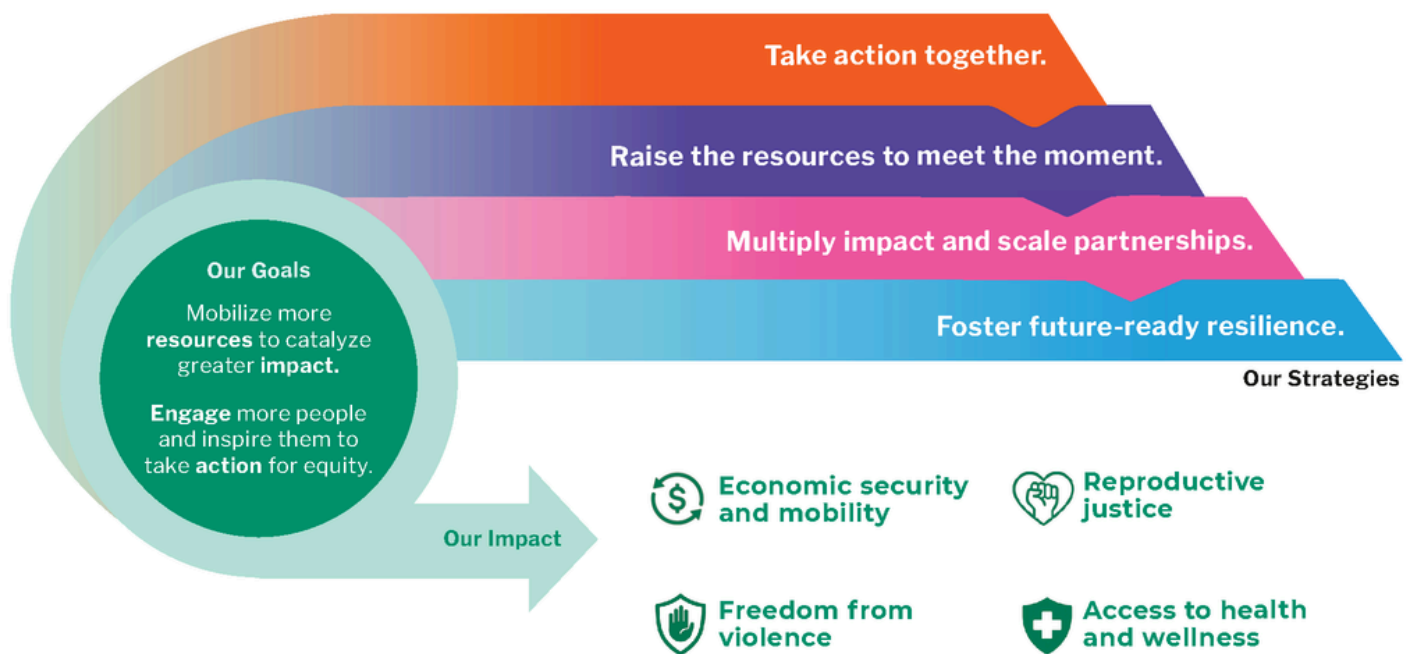
Led by lived experience.

Women, girls, and gender-expansive people are experts in their own lives and experiences. When trusted, respected, and empowered as leaders, they drive solutions that create lasting and meaningful change.



Our Direction for the Next Three Years

A Force for Equity. A Funder for Change.



Chicago Foundation for Women is uniquely positioned to coordinate resources across sectors, ensuring philanthropy is not only reactive but also proactive and strategic. When resources come in, they move back into the community to meet urgent needs and strengthen long-term solutions.

While public narratives often elevate large, one-time gifts from individual donors and private foundations, we know progress takes continued investment and relationships that endure beyond immediate needs. We bring community into the process in ways large institutions often cannot by listening closely, building relationships, and centering the voices and leadership of those closest to the work.

CFW's strategic plan is rooted in a clear purpose: to invest in bold ideas, grassroots leadership, and local organizations dismantling barriers so equity is possible and permanent.

Guided by our mission, vision, and values, we are aligning our work to mobilize more resources and engage more people in advancing gender equity through collective action. Gender equity requires systems change, sustained investment, and community-led solutions. This strategy strengthens CFW's ability to move power and resources where they are most needed.

Strategies Guiding Our Next Chapter

Take action together.

Our strength is in our community, and our power is collective.

For more than four decades, the people who stand with CFW have been the driving force behind our impact. We will continue to grow and activate this network of changemakers united by a commitment to gender equity. By elevating the work of our partners locally and contributing to movements nationwide, we aim to inspire action that reaches far beyond philanthropic dollars.



Multiply impact and scale partnerships.

Partnerships are our path forward.

By continuing our trust-based relationships with grassroots organizations, we will deepen support for the leaders closest to the work. Working through local coalitions and national partners, we will help advance policies, shift systems, and design programs with staying power.

Raise the resources to meet the moment.

To meet the moment, now and ahead, requires **increased, flexible, and reliable capital.** With stronger, more sustained funding, CFW can respond at the speed of community needs and remain committed to the long-term work that lasting change demands.



Foster future-ready resilience.

Turbulent times call for resilient organizations.

This moment calls us to adapt, evolve, and lead with clarity. We will strengthen CFW's operational foundation so we can meet today's challenges and prepare for tomorrow's opportunities. This includes evolving our internal capacity by investing in the people, practices, and tools needed to carry our mission forward.

Our Grantmaking Approach

For more than 40 years, Chicago Foundation for Women has invested in grassroots organizations advancing gender equity across our region, and that commitment remains unchanged. **Today, our focus is twofold: to better align our work with our values and strategies and to invest where there is the greatest need.**

We continue to prioritize community-based organizations because they are adaptable and responsive, innovative and nimble, and deeply connected to the communities they serve. These organizations are often best positioned to identify emerging needs and shift as conditions change.

We trust these leaders to know what their communities need and how to achieve it. Our role is to ensure they have the resources, stability, and support to lead. We ask a simple but powerful question: ***What becomes possible when these organizations are fully funded and fully supported?***

Returning to Our Roots and Role in Community

As we look ahead, our greatest shift is in how we focus our investments. Rather than supporting individual leadership pathways alone, CFW's new strategic plan calls us to focus more deeply on community leadership embedded within grassroots organizations. This includes deepening our investment in our grantee community and ensuring the leaders advancing gender equity have the resources, stability, and support needed to sustain and scale their impact.

While CFW has long supported leadership development across sectors, moving forward, we will center our resources on nonprofit community leaders and organizations leading this work on the ground. As a result, this evolution will require thoughtful programmatic shifts, including the conclusion of the Willie's Warriors Leadership Initiative, to ensure our resources are fully aligned with this direction. This approach allows us to deepen our impact by investing directly in the infrastructure and capacity of our grantee partners.

In the months ahead, we will share additional updates, including new grantmaking guidelines and opportunities planned for summer 2026. We look forward to continuing this work alongside our partners and welcoming organizations to apply as these opportunities become available.





What to Expect Next

We are sharing what we know now to support transparency, reduce uncertainty, and ensure our community is grounded before future updates to grantmaking guidelines, funding opportunities, or implementation plans are released. As this work continues to take shape, additional details will be introduced in phases, allowing us to learn, listen, and move forward in partnership with the communities we serve.

In the months ahead, Chicago Foundation for Women plans to introduce new grantmaking opportunities beginning in summer 2026, and we warmly welcome organizations to apply. Updated guidance and information will be shared as timelines and processes are finalized.

We recognize that change can bring both questions and opportunities. Our commitment is to approach this transition with care, accountability, and collaboration. We will continue engaging our partners, communicating openly, and adapting as we learn together. As always, our community remains at the center of how we move forward.

Stay Connected

We invite you to stay engaged as this next chapter unfolds.



Visit our website for updates, sign up for our newsletter, and follow Chicago Foundation for Women on social media to learn about upcoming opportunities, events, and ways to take action alongside us.