



An Update on Willie's Warriors Leadership Initiative: **Returning to Our Roots in Community Leadership**

As CFW enters its next strategic chapter, we will sunset the Willie's Warriors Leadership Initiative as part of a refinement of our focus on strengthening community leadership through grassroots organizations, which means the program will not host additional cohorts moving forward. This decision was made with care and deep appreciation for what the program has meant to so many, and it reflects the direction of our new strategic plan.

Part of CFW's approach has always been a willingness to reevaluate our role to ensure communities can lead. In recent years, this reflection included our involvement in the Englewood Women's Initiative (EWI), which reinforced an important lesson for CFW: **our strongest role is not to manage community initiatives but to resource them.**

By stepping back from implementation and focusing on funding and partnerships, we strengthened our commitment to trust-based philanthropy. We reaffirmed that communities closest to the challenges lead the most effective solutions.

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.

Black leadership remains deeply important and valued in this work. Today, 55 percent of CFW's grantmaking portfolio supports Black women-led organizations. This commitment continues through trust-based grantmaking, strategic partnerships, and targeted leadership support.

A Legacy of Bold Leadership

Willie's Warriors was launched to address a clear gap. Black women and gender-expansive leaders were already at the forefront of civic leadership and movement building, yet they often lacked spaces designed to address the unique challenges that arise at the intersection of race and gender. These achievements reflect the strength of the leaders who participated and the community they built together.

7 Cohorts

of Black women and gender-expansive leaders building community across Chicago.

\$175K Awarded

through the Willie T. Barrow Emerging Leaders Award, funding that supported Black-led organizations.

\$1.1M Invested

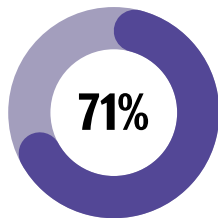
in support of leadership development and programming.

127 Leaders Supported

across sectors, including education, government, healthcare, and more.

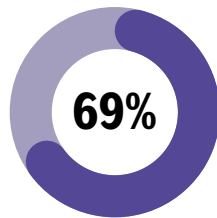
Reflections from Warriors

Over the past seven years and across seven cohorts, the program supported 127 Willie's Warriors alums who are now part of a powerful cross-sector network of socially and civically engaged leaders across Chicago. Here is what alums shared about the impact of the program:



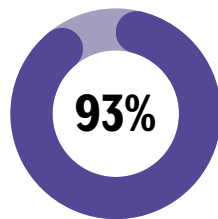
Confronted Bias

Warriors challenged gender and racial bias within their institutions.



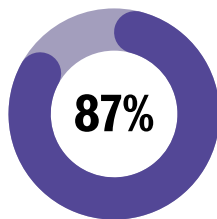
Advanced Their Leadership

Warriors reported gaining leadership skills that advanced their careers.



Cultivated Community

Warriors said the program provided a supportive community.



Expanded Their Network

Warriors grew their community of Black women and gender-expansive leaders.



Looking Ahead

Rev. Willie Taplin Barrow's life and leadership embodied courage, justice, and community power. The Willie's Warriors program was created in her honor and carried forward her belief that leadership rooted in community can transform systems and lives. Honoring Rev. Barrow's legacy means ensuring our work continues to build collective power and evolve to meet the needs of the moment.

The program strengthened leadership across Chicago and created a network of leaders committed to equity and justice. Honoring Rev. Barrow's legacy means ensuring that our work continues to evolve in ways that build collective power and respond to the needs of the moment and the future. As CFW continues implementing our new strategic plan, we remain committed to learning from the leaders and partners who have shaped this journey.

In the months ahead, we will continue to share updates on our strategic direction, including new grantmaking opportunities and partnerships that strengthen investments in grassroots organizations and leadership across Chicago.

We are deeply grateful to the Willie's Warriors alums, facilitators, partners, and supporters who helped bring this program to life and whose leadership continues to shape the movement for gender equity.



Acknowledgements

The Willie's Warriors Leadership Initiative was made possible by the vision, generosity, and commitment of many people who believed deeply in investing in Black women and gender-expansive leadership across Chicago.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to **Pat Carey, Amina Dickerson, Deborah Harrington,** and **Willie Taplin Barrow Leadership Institute and Museum** for their leadership and support in bringing this initiative to life and sustaining its growth. We are also deeply grateful to the **John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation,** members of the **African American Legacy Fund at The Chicago Community Trust,** and the **late Rev. Calvin S. Morris,** whose partnership and belief in the importance of this work helped strengthen the program's foundation.

Our deepest appreciation goes to the **seven cohorts of Willie's Warriors** whose leadership, courage, and commitment to justice shaped this program into the vibrant network it is today. We are also grateful to the many alums who continued to stay engaged, support one another, and contribute to the broader movement for gender equity across Chicago. We are equally thankful to the many additional donors and partners whose generosity helped support and sustain this work over the years.

Finally, we thank **all members of the Willie's Warriors Advisory Board,** whose guidance, wisdom, and dedication helped steward the program and support each cohort of leaders along the way.

Together, you have helped build a powerful legacy of leadership, connection, and collective impact that will continue to inspire our work and our community for years to come.