

THE CONTEXT

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Understanding what it takes to make change.



Welcome to our first issue of *The Context*—an in-depth, episodic update on the realities faced by Chicago families and what we as a community can do to support them. In each edition, we will share knowledge we have learned through holistically serving our youth and families in all facets of their lives.

Today's Topic: Redefining What it Means to Show Up by Taal Hasak-Lowy

A major struggle for nonprofits is making sure our services actually reach the people most in need of support.

The dream scenario is “if we build it, they will come.” That dream plays out like this: We create the program. People come and enroll in the services. They consistently show up and do everything that they are asked to do. They attend every meeting, take advantage of every resource. And voila, success!

This ideal appeals to funders because, understandably, they want to see their dollars changing lives as quickly as possible. These expectations create an incentive for agencies to prioritize helping those who are already able to help themselves. The unintended result is that organizations may stop serving those that aren’t showing up consistently or in the “right” way.

This one-size-fits-all approach excludes a lot of people and misses opportunities to address root causes of poverty. The reality is that if you build it, they often do not come. Far too many people in need of the most support do not receive services.

Sometimes people who don’t access services are described as “hard to reach,” suggesting that they are somehow the problem. But people aren’t hiding. In most cases, we know who they are and where to find them.

What needs to change is our approach. We know the solution is our responsibility. It’s on us. Nonprofits and agencies need to invest in outreach and relentless engagement to ensure we are reaching the people who need our help.

Outreach means that service providers go into the community to build relationships and gain the trust of people who can benefit from services. It means hiring from within the community to create “credible messengers” for available services.

Relentless engagement means that if a participant fails to do what they are asked to do, we don’t kick that person out of the program. Instead, we double down and see it as a sign that the person needs more or different kinds of support.

There are countless reasons why someone may not take advantage of resources: cost, scheduling conflicts, lack of transportation, or focus on basic needs such as housing or food, or childcare/elder care. They may feel a distrust of people and systems, have had bad past experiences, or suffer from depression or other mental health struggles. Pride, shame, fear, and stigma can all stand in the way of access. All these things can prevent someone from being “ready” for the services organizations offer.

For example, many parents and caregivers do not attend their children’s parent teacher conferences. Some people may think, “those people just don’t care about their child’s education.” Based on considerable experience, I can tell you that I have never seen this to be the case.

Some people may think that the parent or caregiver has a job or other obligations that make it so that they cannot make it to the meeting. I have seen this to be the case for a few people.

More often, the reasons parents don’t attend parent-teacher conferences go much deeper. They don’t trust the teachers or the school administration. Some had negative experiences in school themselves and going into the building is intimidating. Others don’t feel like the school understands their challenges or cares about their well-being. And many fear that the school is going to tell them that their child is bad and that they are bad parents. They don’t want to subject themselves to being reprimanded.

The question is, how can we overcome these kinds of deeply personal obstacles?

The key to building change for our communities—for creating real IMPACT—is meeting people where they are, listening to them and understanding their needs and challenges, and then responding accordingly. It’s about building consistent, trusting relationships and giving each participant agency and self-determination in their own journey.

It’s on us. And it’s on funders, too, to understand that real change is individualized, not linear, and takes time.



Creating opportunities for connection builds trust and deepens the relationships between community members and the organizations that serve them.

At Friends of the Children-Chicago, outreach and relentless engagement are at the heart of our work. There is nothing a child or family can do to be dismissed from our program. We promise to walk alongside them for 12.5 years.

No Matter What.

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Watch this 7-minute video which summarizes how the people who most need support can easily be missed if nonprofits and funders don’t commit to outreach and relentless engagement.