



2021

IMPACT REPORT



EMERGING

LETTERS FROM OUR LEADERSHIP

Dear Friends,

The theme of this year's impact report is **Emerging**. Emerging from a pandemic that's had a hold on us for the better part of two years. Emerging from a 'she-cession' that's had alarming financial impacts on women, especially Black and Brown women, and their families. Emerging from traditional workplace policies and practices that, frankly, never worked for many of us—especially those of us who are members of groups that have been marginalized by such practices.

I'm proud to serve as Women Employed's Board Chair. This year, Women Employed has worked tirelessly to ensure all women can emerge from this pandemic stronger, better supported, and more financially secure. The challenges have been immense, but despite the barriers, we are working to put the pieces in place to "build back better."

Throughout this report, you will read about the groundwork that Women Employed is laying and the victories we have

won—including COVID relief, workplace protections for some of Chicago's most vulnerable, a workplan to close the racial and ethnic equity gaps in higher education, launching a bold new strategic plan to close the wealth gap at the intersection of race and gender, as well as developing measures to shield our own staff from the burnout so we can keep fighting the good fight.

Thank you for standing with us, and for your ongoing commitment and support. Your continued dedication of time and resources, along with word of mouth praise, allows us to continue the "good fight" to make this world more equitable.



LYNN WATKINS-ASIYANBI
Board Chair



Dear Valued Supporters,

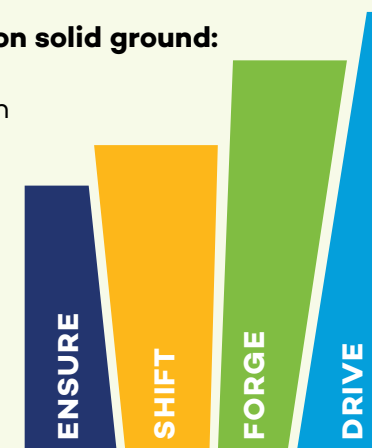
This year, the critical nature of Women Employed's work has evidenced to be as relevant as ever. We've advocated to win supports and protections working women and families need right now, and we've laid the groundwork to drive transformative change tomorrow.

In the midst of the pandemic, Women Employed launched a new strategic plan to grow the economic power of women in Illinois who are in low or unpaid work, and who are Black and/or Latina/x. Our

bold social goal is to close the wealth gap at the intersection of race and gender. This work is vitally important, and our focus on women in low-paid roles, and women who are Black and Latina/x is intentional, because it is precisely those women who have been most impacted by our current 'she-cession,' and who face the largest gaps and disparities in every area from jobs to pay equity to wealth to health outcomes.

Our plan includes four key pillars to help women emerge on solid ground:

- ▶ **ENSURE** the appropriate recognition and compensation of essential paid and unpaid work done by women.
- ▶ Radically **SHIFT** the distribution of resources.
- ▶ **FORGE** pathways to economic security, leadership, and wealth.
- ▶ **DRIVE** organizational sustainability, capacity, and excellence.



The work has already begun. And while we are just beginning, in this report you will read about the impact we are having in these areas as we build a new normal—a better normal—one that works for ALL of us.

Thank you for joining us as we emerge better than ever. Stay tuned for more ways you can help us to "build back better" and make a difference as we continue to roll out our strategic plan.



CHERITA ELLENS, President and CEO



ENSURE

Women's work is essential, whether it's holding jobs that keep our country running, or caring for family members at home. Yet so much of that work is unpaid or underpaid. For too many of us—especially Black, Latina/x, and low-paid women—the pre-COVID workplace wasn't working. To empower women and families to **emerge** stronger, we're working to create lasting, systemic change to **ensure** ALL women receive the recognition and compensation they deserve.

► *Protecting Chicago Workers*

Every year roughly \$400 million in wages are stolen from Chicagoland workers by bad-faith employers. Domestic workers—who are overwhelmingly Black and Brown, women, and immigrants—are especially vulnerable. **This year, WE participated in the City of Chicago's Protecting Workers Workgroup, whose recommendations became the basis of the Chi Biz Strong Worker Protection ordinance.** This important law—which passed in June—gives the city clear enforcement authority against wage theft, raises wages and strengthens protections for domestic workers, expands use of paid sick days, and more.

► *On the Ground Activism*

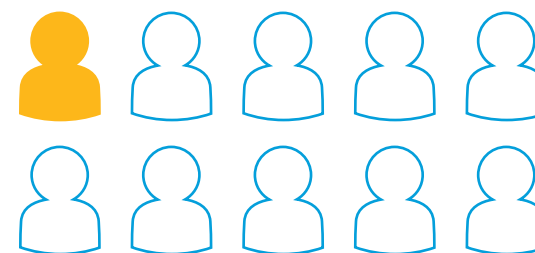
During the pandemic, at least 62 Chicago hotels laid off over 12,000 workers, some after decades of service—putting them at risk of losing years of seniority and pay increases. **WE advocated and rallied**

WE's President and CEO Cherita Ellens speaks at a UNITE HERE rally in support of Chicago hotel workers.



alongside those workers and our partners at UNITE HERE to win the **Chicago Hotel Workers Right to Return to Work ordinance**, which ensures hotel employees—again mostly women, people of color, and immigrants—can return to work when hotels reopen.

Workers who are terminated and replaced rather than “recalled” make on average 11.8% less when they get a new job. Only 1 in 10 older workers who are laid off will ever earn as much again.¹



► *Raising the Minimum*

From nursing assistants to janitors to retail workers, essential workers have risked their lives on the frontlines of the pandemic, yet many people in these jobs struggle to afford the basics. After years of advocacy alongside our partners on the Raise Chicago Coalition, this year we celebrated a major victory when **Chicago's minimum wage increased from to \$14 to \$15 an hour**, giving some 400,000 people a long-overdue raise. Moving forward, Chicago's minimum wage will automatically index, increasing at the same rate as the median wage.

► *COVID-19 Rights, Relief, and Recovery*

Overnight, COVID-19 changed the structure of work and school for millions. **WE fought to win federal relief packages** for those impacted, then developed resource guides, fact sheets, and explainers addressing the needs and concerns of workers and students. **We educated over 100,000 Illinoisans about their paid leave rights**, including a grassroots initiative that put 2,350+ info cards directly into the hands of frontline workers.

We also kept the needs and voices of working women front and center, and provided leadership in conversations about how to build a new normal that truly works for working women. We were featured in *The Washington Post*, *NBC Chicago*, *ABC 7 Chicago*, *WTTW*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *The Skimm*, *Crain's*, *WBEZ*, and more. And we joined and hosted events alongside Chicago Foundation for Women, Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership, One Fair Wage, Chicago State University, Mujeres Latinas en Acción, Congresswoman Lauren Underwood, Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton, Chef Rick Bayless, and many others.

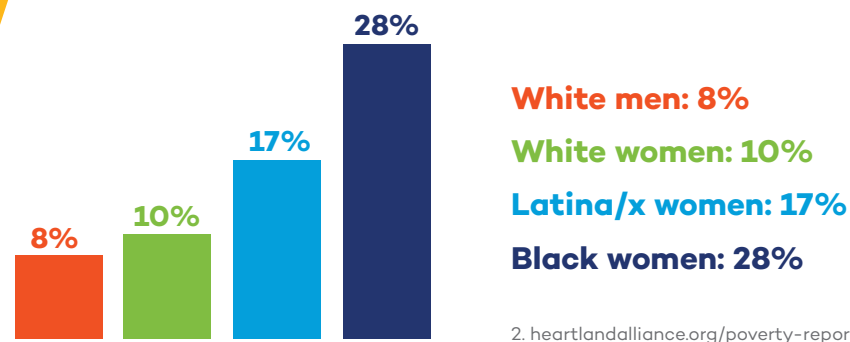


1. <https://www.commerce.senate.gov/services/files/DABB1D5E-8AE1-4DC0-9614-A93E902D105A>

SHIFT

To achieve economic security, working women need access to financial resources that build wealth. Too many women lack the necessary resources that allow them to save for emergencies, to build up a nest egg for retirement, or even to open a bank account. Women hold nearly two-thirds of our country's \$1.7 trillion in student debt. And Black women carry the highest average amount of debt of any group of women. All of this leads to higher poverty rates for women, and especially for women of color. In Illinois, Black and Latina/x women face poverty rates two to three times higher than that of white men.

Illinois poverty rates by gender and race:²



We are working to radically **shift** the distribution of resources, so that more women—and particularly low-paid women and Black and Latina/x women—can **emerge** not just from our current shecession, but from generational cycles of discrimination at the intersection of race and gender.

► *Expanding College Affordability*

In Illinois, half of all undergraduate students at public universities who identify as Black or Latina/o/x receive a Monetary Award Program (MAP) grant. This adds up to nearly 140,000 students each year who rely on this need-based financial aid program to afford the cost of their tuition and fees. As a leading advocate for Illinois students, **WE fought hard to secure a \$28 million increase to the program** this

year, which will result in more students receiving more aid. This increase in funding brings us closer to achieving our goal: MAP grants being awarded to ALL eligible students, covering 100 percent of their tuition and fees at public universities and community colleges.

► *Equitable Funding in Higher Education*

WE celebrated a major victory this year when **Governor Pritzker signed SB815 into law, triggering the creation of a Commission on Equitable Public University Funding.** As a member of the Illinois Higher Education Network, WE helped bring attention to the racial and socioeconomic disparities that exist in access to higher education, as well as the inequitable distribution of state funds that has forced Illinois' Black and Latina/o/x students and students from low-income households to pay some of the highest college costs in the nation. The commission will work to address these disparities by researching, modeling, and ultimately recommending specific criteria and approaches for an equity-based higher education funding model for Illinois' public universities.

► *Financial Relief for Low-Income, Black, and Latina/o/x Families*

The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is an effective tool to combat poverty and inequity, as it offers tax relief to people working in low-paid jobs. But in a year



WE empowers community college students, like this one, to advocate for MAP funding with their legislators.

when the U.S. saw the sharpest rise in poverty in 50 years, with COVID-19-related unemployment hitting Black and Latina/x women the hardest, too many people are currently ineligible to receive this relief. **As a member of the Coalition to Make EITC Work, WE advocated for the EITC to be expanded to include more of Illinois' most vulnerable residents, including unpaid caregivers.** The bill came close to passing this year, and we will continue advocating for the expansion of the EITC to ensure that low-income, Black, and Latina/x women in Illinois can weather the crisis and build for the future.

FORGE

Women are consistently overrepresented in low-paid, low-opportunity jobs. And while education and training is a proven pathway to **forge** a new trajectory, there are unacceptable college completion gaps between Black and Latina/o/x students and white students in Illinois—as much as 30 percentage points! Illinois has also seen an alarming 34 percent decline in college attendance by Black students since 2013. WE is at the forefront of efforts to close these devastating gaps. To ensure every working woman can **emerge** and achieve financial independence, we must forge new pathways to economic security, leadership, and wealth.

► *Rethinking Developmental Education*

Each year, up to 60,000 Illinois students—disproportionately low-income and students of color—are placed into remediation before starting college to improve academic skills. More than 80 percent will get stuck and never complete their programs. **This year, WE built upon our long-term leadership in education policy by launching the Accelerating Student Progress and Increasing Racial Equity (ASPIRE) Project**, to reform developmental education in Illinois and increase the number of students from underserved backgrounds who graduate with a credential that has workforce value. Through ASPIRE, WE is partnering with ten Illinois community colleges to develop and test innovative strategies to determine college readiness, place more students directly into credit-bearing courses, and support their academic progress.



ASPIRE Project Partner Colleges

Black Hawk College: Moline
Heartland College: Normal
Illinois Central College: Peoria
Kaskaskia College: Centralia
Lake Land College: Mattoon
Lewis & Clark College: Godfrey
Prairie State College: Chicago Heights
Richland College: Decatur
Shawnee College: Ullin
Waubonsee College: Aurora

► *Collaborating Cross-Sector to Close Equity Gaps*

To forge pathways to success, we must close racial equity gaps that keep so many from reaching their education goals. And Women Employed can't do that alone. Our higher education expertise allows us to collaborate across sectors to drive change. This year, **WE worked with the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus to pass an Education Omnibus Bill (HB2170) to increase racial equity in Illinois higher education.** In addition, WE President and CEO **Cherita Ellens served on the advisory committee for the Illinois Board of Higher Education's (IBHE's) strategic plan**, which prioritizes post-secondary credential and degree attainment, closing equity gaps, and improving affordability and access to higher education. And **Chicago State University asked us to join their Equity Working Group (EWG)**—a group of 45 multi-sector leaders from across Illinois—which identified critical actions to close gaps and enable Black students, families, and communities to thrive. Read the EWG action plan: bit.ly/ILEquityWkGroup.

► *Supporting Student Parents*

Nationally, more than 1 in 5 college students are parents—and most are women. They juggle the demands of raising children alongside school and, often, work. In Illinois, few institutions collect information about these students, making it difficult to understand and meet their needs. This year, **WE championed—**



WE's Sarah Labadie speaks at the signing ceremony for the Education Omnibus Bill (HB2170).

and helped win!—the Student Parent Data Collection Act, which requires institutions of higher education to collect and report data about student parents—an important first step in better supporting their success.

► *Bringing Career Foundations to the Virtual Classroom*

Career pathways foster success for adult and non-traditional students by helping them build skills, develop an academic plan and a clear route to certification, and ultimately access better jobs. But creating and implementing effective programs can be a challenge for community colleges and community-based organizations, which often have limited resources—and the sudden increase in virtual learning due to COVID-19 presents new challenges. This year, **WE digitized our Career Foundations curriculum to meet the needs of providers engaging students remotely**, and we led free online trainings to help them access and use the digital curriculum effectively.

DRIVE

To be most successful in our external work to create systemic change, it's crucial WE attend to our *internal* practices as well. WE leveraged this unprecedented year to take a fresh look at how we can **drive** best practices in our own organization so we can create long-lasting sustainability, and **emerge** more effective and more equitable.

► *Focusing Our Strategic Direction*

Change requires strategy. Just before the pandemic, Women Employed began work on a new strategic plan. But COVID-19 changed the game. And women—especially low-paid and Black and Latina/x women—were at a disadvantage. As we entered our first-ever ‘shecession,’ we needed to reimagine our planning and do something bold and transformative.

So, we focused on the next eighteen months, knowing the landscape may change significantly in that time. Our efforts center Illinois’ most economically marginalized women—women in low or unpaid work, and women who are Black and/or Latina/x. They are most impacted by the crisis. They face the most bias and systemic barriers. For these women, ‘work’ never

worked. **Our strategies will grow the economic power of women and help close the wealth gap at the intersection of race and gender.**

Our plan has four pillars, reflected in this report: **ensure** the appropriate recognition and compensation of the essential paid and unpaid work done by women by winning paid leave, ending the subminimum wage,

and championing caregiving supports; **shift** the distribution of resources by expanding access to work-related asset and wealth-building tools, reducing women’s student loan debt, and increasing women’s income and asset generation; **forge** new pathways to economic security, leadership, and wealth by improving racial equity in higher education and strengthening career pathway systems; and **drive** organizational sustainability, capacity, and excellence by growing and stewarding resources, embedding a culture of equity and inclusion, investing in our staff, and ensuring we’re race-forward.

► *A More Equitable Work Environment*

WE strives to model excellence as an organization and as an employer. COVID-19 created challenges, and also an opportunity to improve our practices. **We shifted to better accommodate the needs of our team and ensure we are a workplace where everyone can thrive.** That included offering more flexible work schedules, increased ability to work from home and assistance setting up home offices, investments in digital collaboration tools, and many opportunities for input from all staff at every level.

We also moved our physical office to 1 E. Wacker Drive (Suite 3110), and in addition to the increased functionality and beauty of the new space, this move embodies our

Our new office includes enhanced building security, a staff wellness room, technology to support hybrid collaboration, and beautiful river views throughout.

commitment to provide staff the flexibility of a hybrid work model while saving critical funds we can put right back into our programs to have even greater impact.

► *A Commitment to Racial Equity and Inclusion*

Equity is so core to WE, it’s reflected in our tagline: “WE pursue equity for all.” That means looking at our own work culture. **This year, we partnered with Soar Strategies as part of an ongoing effort to evaluate racial equity and inclusion at WE.** We held listening sessions with current and former staff. We audited our salaries and made adjustments to ensure our pay is equitable. And we created action steps for continued change. While we’re not perfect, we strive to be better. And we’re in it for the long haul.



Thank You

We are grateful for all our corporate partners, foundation funders, and individual donors who made a gift between July 1, 2020—June 30, 2021.

Due to space constraints, we are not able to list all of our generous supporters. Heartfelt thanks to all of you for helping us to emerge stronger than before.

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Lynne and Ricky Weber
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Janet and Philip Rotner
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Marilynn and Ron Grais

In Honor of Lisa Pattis

Kate Maehr and Sam Pickering
Mindy Circus

In Honor of Janet Rotner

Louise Lane
Merle Gordon

In Honor of Cherita Ellens and Lisa Pattis

Joyce Coffee

In Memory of Elizabeth (Liz) Beckham

Angela Hubbell

In Memory of Darlene Stille

Wilma Stevens



BUILDING A LEGACY OF IMPACT

In 2001, Mary Gardner moved to Chicago to become Director of Risk Management for a national chain of department stores. The role was “eye opening...From the in-store employees to the corporate office employees who left home at 4 a.m. for work, I witnessed the challenges and came to understand the underlying realities many women faced at home and on the job.”

When she was introduced to Women Employed and invited to join the Board, Mary was enthused. She recognized that WE’s “approach to systemic change and process-oriented progress” was a great match with her risk management background! “During the years I’ve been involved, I’ve continued to be impressed with the forward-thinking programs and policies supporting women—fair scheduling, equal pay, access to financial aid, the career pathways programs, just to mention a few.”

As the grandmother of two bi-racial girls, Mary’s commitment to WE’s intersectional approach is personal. Ensuring a better future for them is one reason she chose to designate Women Employed as a beneficiary in her IRA. She’s optimistic, “because Women Employed rallies individuals; corporations; educational institutions; and government to continue working for racial equity, educational success, equal pay, and fair workplaces.”

Because of Mary Gardner and other donors like her, Women Employed will be here to continue the fight well into the future. **Thank you, Mary.**

What will your legacy be? Ensure a more just future where ALL women, no matter their race or socio-economic background, have equitable access to increase their economic power. Make a legacy gift to Women Employed through your will or living trust, retirement account, or life insurance policy. When you do, we’ll welcome you as a member of WE’s legacy society, *Generations Circle*.

For more information, email Linda Ballard at lb Ballard@womenemployed.org, or call her at (312) 448-7647.

INVESTORS FOR CHANGE

With the generosity of our *Investors for Change*, who make unrestricted gifts of \$1,000 or more annually, Women Employed is able to pursue the best opportunities to improve workplace conditions and build pathways to higher education so more women can succeed economically.

ANNE LADKY LEADERSHIP FUND ♦

Thank you to these donors who founded the fund in Anne’s honor and to those who have designated the total or a portion of their gift to the fund. All donations support initiatives aimed at increasing WE’s impact on the conditions facing women in low-paid occupations and building our movement by engaging next-generation leaders as activists for women’s economic justice.

NANCY B. KREITER ADVOCACY FUND*

Special thanks to the donors of this fund that supports Women Employed’s work to strengthen federal equal opportunity policies.

GENERATIONS CIRCLE

Thanks to our supporters who have included Women Employed in their estate plans, future generations of women will have meaningful opportunities to achieve their aspirations for themselves and their families.

ELEVATE, OUR MONTHLY GIVING COMMUNITY ☆

Elevate is a passionate and determined group of monthly supporters on a mission to improve the economic status of women and remove barriers to equity. Make a monthly gift and join people just like you, giving anything they can to prove how unstoppable we are when we work together!

DEDICATIONS

Honor a loved one with a gift in their name to Women Employed for a birthday, anniversary, or other special occasion. Donations in memory of a special person honor their life and continue their legacy. The tribute gifts noted are donations of \$150 and above.

For more information on these special giving opportunities, call Linda Ballard at (312) 448-7647 or visit womenemployed.org

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The Working Lunch

Thank you to all of you who supported and celebrated with us at *The Working Lunch* – Virtual Edition on May 25th, where we featured leaders committed to championing economic equity and fundamental and systemic change at all levels, including our honorees, the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus, SEIU Healthcare IL IN MO KS, and The Pattis Family Foundation; our keynote speaker Congresswoman Lauren Underwood; and special guest Illinois Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton. Watch our event recap at womenemployed.org/twl2021



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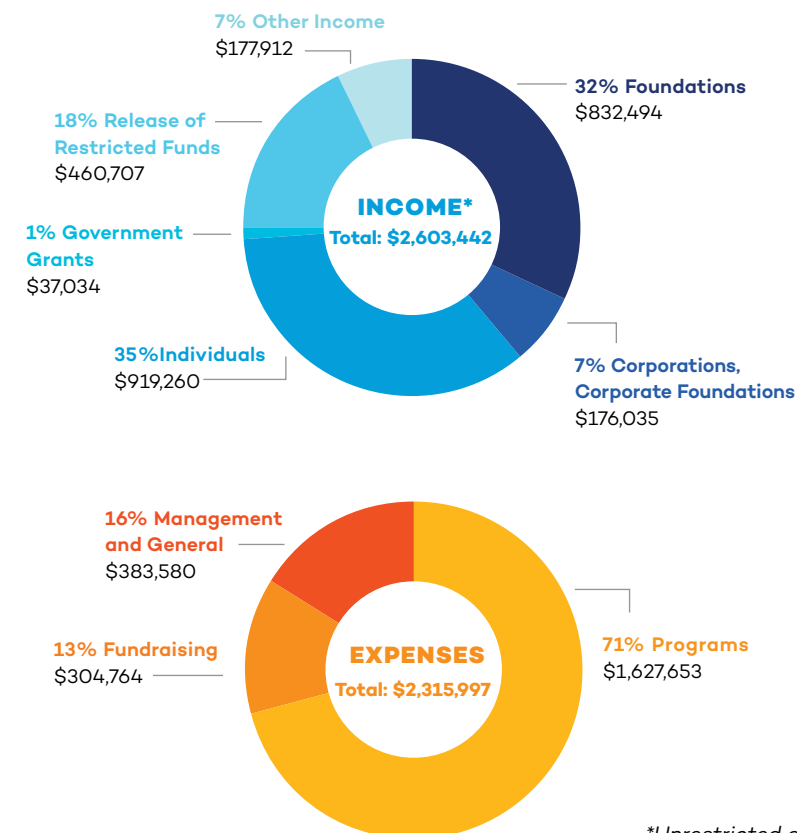
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