



COOK COUNTY BOARD PRESIDENT
TONI PRECKWINKLE

AND

THE COOK COUNTY COMMISSION ON
WOMEN'S ISSUES

PRESENT

The 24th Annual Peggy A. Montes

Unsung Heroine Awards Breakfast

VIRTUAL EVENT

THURSDAY, MARCH 4TH, 2021
9:30 AM - 10:30 AM

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**24th Annual Peggy A. Montes
Unsung Heroine Awards Breakfast
Thursday, March 4, 2021
9:30 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.**

PROGRAM

Welcome

Érika Maldonado, Anchor, Univision Chicago
Mistress of Ceremonies

Remarks

Audra Wilson, Chairperson
Cook County Commission on Women's Issues

Toni Preckwinkle, President
Cook County Board of Commissioners

Presentation of Awards

Érika Maldonado

Recitation of Poetry

Kara Jackson
National Youth Poet Laureate (2019– 2020)

Closing

Érika Maldonado





The Cook County Commission on Women's Issues

COMMISSIONERS

Audra Wilson
Chairperson

Vera Davis
Dorian K. Carter
Dr. Frances G. Carroll
Echelle Mohn
Kelley Nichols-Brown
Susette Lunceford
Michelle Garcia
Iris Millan
Marjorie A. Manchen
Neha Gill
Hon. Ginger Rugai
Danielle Parisi Ruffatto
Trina Janes
Michelle Kohler
Rebecca Darr
Claudia E. Ayala
Nancy Mott
Dr. Aparna Sen-Yeldandi
Andrea A. Raila





Cook County's Unsung Heroines

As an annual event in observance of Women's History Month, the Commission on Women's Issues honors one woman from each of the seventeen County districts, and an eighteenth honoree, selected by the four at-large members of the Cook County Women's Commission. All eighteen women are recognized for their vital contributions to their respective communities. This award honors women's achievements within the larger fabric of history and commemorates the powerful impact women have had on the development of our social, cultural, economic, and political institutions. The County honors these remarkable women as a way to bring their stories to light, to thank them publicly, and to celebrate the tradition of achievement and commitment to the greater good that is embodied by women leaders throughout the history of Cook County. Although their stories do not usually make the news, their contributions are truly newsworthy. These women are being recognized for using their time, talent, spirit, and enthusiasm to enrich and improve the lives of others.

Peggy A. Montes Unsung Heroine Award

Peggy A. Montes, an educator, fundraiser, leader, and champion of women's issues and rights, was the driving force behind the creation of the very first Unsung Heroine Award for the women of Cook County. As a way to recognize and honor her remarkable achievements, in 2010 the award was renamed the "Peggy A. Montes Unsung Heroine Award." On March 16, 2010, the Cook County Board of Commissioners acknowledged Ms. Montes in a special way by introducing a resolution honoring her as a true heroine and officially renaming the award in her honor.





Debra Vines

1st District

Vera Davis, Cook County Women's Commissioner
Brandon Johnson, Cook County Commissioner

Debra Vines has profoundly improved the lives of parents and caregivers of children with autism and developmental disorders.

She founded The Answer Inc. in 2007 after her infant son Jason was diagnosed with autism in response to her own questions and need for support. Her not-for-profit assists parents and caregivers navigating through social services and academic institution systems. They provide case management, referral services, recreation and resources for families. The organization hosts workshops, seminars, meetings, community events and media outreach. They work to increase autism awareness with law enforcement and the community as a whole.

Under Debra's leadership, The Answer Inc. has developed evidence-based programs with life changing outcomes. Programs include Spectrum University Tutoring Program and Music N Me. Before Spectrum University, half the participants could not recognize numbers or letters. After going through the program, participants can recognize numbers and letters; some can even write their names.

Debra gives selflessly to promote and create change in the lives of people with autism and other disabilities. She is an Unsung Heroine to the families she has aided as their loved ones reach milestones that had seemed unobtainable.





Sheila Jackson McNary

2nd District

Dorian K. Carter, Cook County Women's Commissioner
Dennis Deer, Cook County Commissioner

Sheila McNary enhances her community through her professional and personal endeavors. She was instrumental in helping the students of Village Leadership Academy change the name of Stephen Douglas Park to Anna and Frederick Douglass Park.

Sheila is a resident of North Lawndale and active in her community. She is a member of the Anna and Frederick Douglass Park Cultural Center Council and a Foundation for Homan Square Board Member. She served on the Douglass Park Advisory Council and was elected Sergeant at Arms. She is a member of the Executive Subcommittee of the North Lawndale Community Coordinating Council (NLCCC) and serves as the Chair of the NLCCC Arts and Culture Committee that hosts an Annual Arts Festival.

She runs health care staffing businesses that provide quality patient care by recruiting and training top notch staff. Because of her strong clinical pediatric nursing background and hands-on experience working short-staffed in health care settings, Sheila developed a compassionate desire to close the gaps between service needs and available clinical support.

She is President and CEO of Advanced Care Services, a HealthCare Staffing Company that specializes in short-term and permanent staffing needs in homes, hospitals clinics and other healthcare facilities. Prior to founding Advanced Care Services, she established a successful Medicare-approved Home Health Care Agency.





Barbara Ellzey

3rd District

**Dr. Frances Carroll, Cook County Women's Commissioner
Bill Lowry, Cook County Commissioner**

For over 12 years, Barbara Ellzey's passion and love for her community have been exhibited by her spiritual guidance and creativity through her philanthropy and REACH program.

In 2009, Barbara founded Reach Leadership Program for Girls in loving memory of her mother, Thelma Lee Redmond, who succumbed to cancer in 2006. The purpose of this program is to empower girls to make positive and informed life decisions by providing year-round mentoring, enriching activities, training programs, and informative workshops. The Reach Leadership Program for Girls builds self-esteem, promotes abstinence, bully prevention, modules for healthy peer relationships, college preparation (college tours), anger management, and best practices for conflict resolution. To further impact their outlook on careers, REACH will launch She Fly's Aviation Program in June 2021. This endeavor will positively broaden the young ladies' ambitions in career options. All of this culminates into Barbara's dedication to fundraising and networking with businesses in her community i.e. her annual Big Hats Brunch.

Beyond REACH, her passion for her community outreach includes acts of philanthropy in partnering with her local women's shelter and homeless outreach initiatives. Barbara has been instrumental in the organization of 300 coat drives, a sponsoring of 500 purses filled with hygiene products, and Christmas care packages to those in need.





Linda Bair

4th District

Echelle Mohn, Cook County Women's Commissioner
Stanley Moore, Cook County Commissioner

Linda Blair has devoted her life to taking care of others. She enjoys working within her 4th District community to make a difference by creating an atmosphere of love and unity.

She loves people and is best known for the work she has done in her community. She gives of herself endlessly and abundantly to help others while also being a hardworking entrepreneur, wife, mother, grandmother, godmother and community leader.

As President of Prospereth Foundation, Linda answered God's calling to be a servant for others. Serving as Block Club President the past eight years has allowed her to connect with her neighbors. She is an active Community Representative Board Member of the Ruggles Elementary Local School Council and advocates on behalf of the students, parents and teachers for day-to-day essentials. She serves as a Chicago Alternative Policing Strategies Beat 623 facilitator and builds partnerships with the community and police district.





Vanessa Brown

5th District

Kelley D. Nichols-Brown, Cook County Women's Commissioner
Deborah Sims, Cook County Commissioner

Vanessa Brown brings her energy, compassion, creativity and leadership to everything she undertakes. She is an extraordinary organizer of community, church, civic and family activities.

As Chief of Staff for 9th Ward Alderman Anthony Beale, she has organized hundreds of events to support the community. These included feeding seniors Thanksgiving dinner, hosting Back to School picnics with school supply giveaways, holding health fairs and flu shot clinics, organizing Christmas parties for underserved children and giving away food and PPE supplies.

Vanessa serves as Secretary for Roseland Youth Center, Director for Roseland Little League and Treasurer for the Rose Foundation while also being active in her church. She has served as President of the church's Women's Ministry, Youth Group Ministry, Single's Ministry, Marriage Ministry and Missionary. She is Treasurer of the Greeters' Ministry and volunteers as an usher.

Most importantly, Vanessa is a wife, mother of three, grandmother of seven and great-grandmother. To remain close with family during the pandemic, she started weekly Zoom gatherings filled with games. She continues to be involved with her extended family and friends. In addition to all her other pursuits, Vanessa finds time for camping, dancing, jigsaw puzzles, reading and traveling.





Jacquelyne Underwood

6th District

**Susette Lunceford, Cook County Women's Commissioner
Donna Miller, Cook County Commissioner**

Jacquelyne Underwood, known as "The Nurse on the Go", has been involved in healthcare, community service and fitness for well over 40 years. Jacquelyne gives of herself without hesitation or reservation. She lives to motivate and inspire women of all ages to be their personal best.

Hula Hooping is Jacquelyne's passion. At the start of the pandemic, she launched a free online Hula Hoop class via Zoom. In addition to getting women moving and focusing on their health, she assisted with mental health care and taught "seasoned" women how to overcome technology challenges.

She is a registered nurse with a master's degree in Nursing Administration. She manages the medical care of adults and children with developmental disabilities. Jacquelyne gained hospital experience as a Floor Nurse then Charge Nurse and was promoted to Director of Nursing. She then transitioned into the community to provide Home Health and Hospice care as Director of Medical Services.

She went on to found Protect Your Temple Fitness, training and coaching women to improved health through exercise and diet. She is also the CEO/Founder of Seasoned You, empowering women aged 50 and over.

Jacquelyne believes that the work is ALL about helping others. This belief prevails in her personal life, where she is the primary caretaker for her 93-year-old mother.





Nury Ortega

7th District

**Michelle Garcia, Cook County Women's Commissioner
Alma Anaya, Cook County Commissioner**

Nury Ortega is a tireless advocate for immigrant rights.

Born in Morelos, Mexico, Nury immigrated to Chicago in 2002. She is dedicated to improving life in her Chicago community. She founded Friends of Spry and Spry Angels Group to raise funds for school art, music and sports programs. The organization also connects families to PPE, food and resources.

This mother of three is an active parent leader with Latinos Progresando, which provides assistance and mentorship to other parents. She serves as Vice President of the John Spry Elementary Local School Council and has led efforts for health and education equity.

Nury also volunteers with the Lady of Tepeyac and Lady of Fatima food pantries. She works to curb COVID-19 in her community, an area hard hit by the pandemic, and is involved in the newly launched Little Village vaccination site.

In addition to her community activism, Nury is an Aztec dancer and a volunteer organizer of the Chinelo Fest.





Diana Mereles

8th District

Iris Millan, Cook County Women's Commissioner
Luis Arroyo, Jr., Cook County Commissioner

Diana Mireles is a tireless advocate for her community. She strives to improve her surroundings and build community relationships.

Diana started a Block Club to make her street a better place to live. The Block Club held parties and toy giveaways for children. She has made strong connections with parents and serves as a community ambassador to the 25th Chicago Police District.

When Diana saw that her local park needed repairs, she became President of the Park Advisory Council. She raised money for park events and secured sponsorships from local business owners. She implemented a basketball program called Hoops in the Hood with 30 local children participating.

Diana supports Cradles to Crayons and coordinated distribution of clothes and school supplies to children at the local elementary school.

She leveraged her network to start Las Damas de Belmont-Cragin, a women's organization. To promote equity and education during the pandemic, Las Damas created a literacy program to respond to COVID-19 school closures. Thirteen families are participating.

With the help of the North West Side Housing Center (NWSHC), Diana has accomplished many of her goals and believes that the NWSHC changes lives.





Mary Lio

9th District

**Marjorie Manchen, Cook County Women's Commissioner
Peter Silvestri, Cook County Commissioner**

Mary Lio is a resident of River Grove. Married with 3 sons, an 8th grader, a high school senior, and a recent graduate now employed, all residing at home. Mary is also the caretaker for her widowed mother.

Mary had planned to attend college when her father tragically died at 52. Mary had to put aside her educational dreams to work at the family restaurant for 18 years to help support her family.

Five years ago, she became an administrative specialist for Opportunity Knocks. OK is an organization that serves young people who have developmental disabilities in Oak Park, Forest Park and River Forest through social, recreational and life-skills programs. Mary is not just a 9-5 dedicated employee; she puts in hundreds of volunteer hours in after work programs. OK has job learning programs and recreational activities. One especially important annual event is the Softball Tournament that several OK staff, including Mary, participate in as volunteers. Mary draws many volunteers into OK's after work hours programs.

Mary is a true unsung heroine when she says "We as a community should all be able to set aside some time in our lives to be able to reach out and help others no matter what the troubles are. If everyone would take just a few minutes of their lives to reach out to someone in need, think what a wonderful world this would be".





Killian Walsh

10th District

Neha Gill, Cook County Women's Commissioner

Brigid Gainer, Cook County Commissioner

Killian Walsh defines civic activism with over 2 decades of volunteerism in her Edgewater community focusing on food and clothing drives, recycling, affordable housing, historic preservation, crime and justice reform. In 1988, at the onset of the AIDS epidemic, Killian was a founding volunteer at Open Hand and AIDS Walk Chicago.

She was raised in Old Town Chicago by parents involved in civil rights, governmental affairs and the arts. Killian became technical scientist for the USEPA, IEPA and the Chicago Department of Environment on remediation and enforcement of Superfund sites, and in Chicago landfills and recycling.

In 2018 she created the Waste Initiative, advocating rethinking of Chicago's recycling. She helps organize citywide town hall meetings to discuss landfill diversion and the future of waste management. In 2020, Killian celebrated 10 years as one of the founders of the volunteer-driven Edgewater Environmental Sustainability Project (EESP).

Killian served as Board member for the Edgewater Community Council, and President of the largest block club, Edgewater Beach Neighbors Association (EBNA). She volunteered on the 48th Ward Planning and Zoning committee making decisions on community developments. One of her community partners was 2012 Unsung Heroine Ollie Latiker. Ollie and Killian worked together to get better street lighting. They teamed up to raise funds for upgrading the Cedar Play lot with new equipment that included soft surfacing, in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), to be accessible to children with disabilities. Having already worked with another honoree, Killian is a true unsung heroine.





Sarah Dynia

11th District

Hon. Ginger Rugai, Cook County Women's Commissioner
John P. Daley, Cook County Commissioner

In November 2010, Sarah Dynia founded her own nonprofit organization, Stuffed Love. Although she was still only in eighth grade, she recognized the importance of service and how she could contribute something to help. Stuffed Love's mission is to share "that little bit of hope" through hand-stitched heart pillows to all those that need it.

Now, over 10 years later, Stuffed Love continues to distribute thousands of hand-stitched pillows each year. Stuffed Love has partnered with many organizations across the country and shared that little bit of hope with veterans, individuals with developmental disabilities, those facing economic difficulties, and more.

Currently, Stuffed Love's biggest project is with Conquering CHD, a national organization dedicated to support and advocacy for individuals and families affected by congenital heart defects. The hand-stitched heart pillows are distributed to 14 states in their Conquering CHD Kits and are used to prop up IVs, provide comfort after heart surgery, and as a treasured memento for the difficult times the family has survived.

In addition to Stuffed Love, Sarah continues to volunteer in her community through organizations like the White Sox Volunteer Corps and Hugh O'Brian Youth Leadership program (HOBY). Her most important mission is to continue sharing that little bit of hope as a volunteer, community member, and aspiring physician.





Marci Sieracki

12th District

Danielle Parisi Ruffatto, Cook County Women's Commissioner
Bridget Degnen, Cook County Commissioner

Marci Sieracki, a Roscoe Village resident, is the Regional Leader of Lasagna Love for the city of Chicago. Lasagna Love is a grassroots organization that aims to positively impact communities by connecting neighbors with neighbors through homemade meal delivery. When Marci first heard about this initiative, she was drawn in by the power of what one simple act of kindness can do. Under her leadership, the Chicago area Lasagna Love volunteer base has grown from 17 volunteers in October 2020 to today's 450 plus volunteers who have delivered over 2,000 meals to other families in the city!

Marci is an integral part of Lasagna Love's mission to "Feed families, spread kindness, strengthen communities." Marci also serves on the leadership team as the co-Regional Director of the Midwest, where she is involved in planning for the future, in addition to managing the day-to-day aspects of running the organization. Each week she works tirelessly to match volunteer chefs with families in need, as well as to partner with other organizations to provide meals to front line workers, homeless support organizations, and seniors in need.

In addition to volunteering with Lasagna Love, Marci also works full-time as a CPA and has two daughters, ages 5 and 8, who share their mother's commitment, as she bakes and delivers lasagna for free to healthcare workers and others impacted by COVID as part of a national Lasagna Love mission movement.





Jane Balaban

13th District

Trina Janes, Cook County Women's Commissioner

Larry Suffredin, Cook County Commissioner

Jane Balaban is a tireless champion of the forest preserves and an environmental volunteer extraordinaire. Her efforts have contributed to dramatic improvements in the local forest preserves and brought together hundreds of volunteers annually who work to enrich the biodiversity of public nature preserves.

She helped found the North Branch Restoration Project to take care of the forest preserves along the North Branch of the Chicago River. After 45 years, they now have 20 sites from Chicago to Northbrook and 90 volunteer stewards. The land is visibly healthier.

Her outreach has resulted in thousands of youth volunteers who will ensure the Preserves endure for future generations. Jane connects schools, faith communities and the general public to the local natural areas that enrich their lives. She is a consummate diplomat who is beloved and respected by fellow volunteers and valued by Forest Preserve staff and elected officials who benefit from her deep commitment.

Jane is a board leader for the Nature Conservancy Illinois Chapter and chaired the Board Conservation Committee. She has been an organizer and chair of the Forest Preserves Key Stewards Committee which connects volunteer stewards across Cook County and provides a critical link between them and the volunteer management staff of the Forest Preserves. She serves on the Next Century Conservation Plan Steering Committee.

Jane is often "rewarded" by being asked to do even more work because people recognize that if Jane is in charge the work will get done and get done well.





Amy Oberholtzer

14th District

Michelle Kohler, Cook County Women's Commissioner
Scott Britton, Cook County Commissioner

Amy Oberholtzer, a Northbrook resident for over 30 years, is the Founder of CATCH: Community Action Together for Children's Health.

Before CATCH, Amy was a preschool and elementary school teacher, and served on the Northbrook Youth Commission working to amplify youth voices. Yet she found another calling when her 16-year-old daughter was battling mental illness, leaving Amy feeling alone and without support. She realized that her community needed to offer better support to parents and kids dealing with mental health issues. She called her preschool playgroup moms, found similar concerns, and CATCH came to life in Amy's living room.

In 3 years CATCH built relationships with schools, village leaders, and community members to increase awareness of mental health. Under Amy's firm commitment to the community's caregivers and youth, CATCH hosted 10 events and partnered with more than 30 local mental health professionals to present information on a wide array of topics for discussion, brought 2 documentary screenings to the community, and responded to numerous requests for help from parents looking for support.

Last January CATCH, in response to the suicide of a Northbrook teen, and noting the higher rate of teen suicides during COVID, held a virtual program to take the fear out of talking to teens about suicide and depression.

Amy is a true unsung heroine who states, "I am committed to ensuring that mental health is normalized and prioritized in our community and schools and that families are empowered to foster lifelong resilience in their children."





Mary Jo Imperato

15th District

**Rebecca Darr, Cook County Women's Commissioner
Kevin Morrison, Cook County Commissioner**

Mary Jo Imperato, a resident of Bartlett, is the Director of Human Services in Hanover Township. Mary Jo is not just a 9 to 5 governmental director; she works beyond office hours volunteering and serving in community affairs. Mary has served for over 3 years as President of the Illinois Township Association of General Assistance Case Workers and as a 10 year member of the Streamwood Kiwanis Club that assists with a food pantry and provides grants for schools, and where members are actively engaged in meaningful service programs.

Even outside of her work, Mary Jo has always focused on her community and youth services. She has devoted herself entirely to serving the needs of the community, specifically low-income residents experiencing food insecurity and requiring help in accessing benefit assistance programs.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, she has worked tirelessly to ensure the Township's bilingual Food Pantry has remained open six days per week, even adjusting to curbside pickup and home deliveries, all while the pantry has experienced a significant increase in the number of new residents utilizing the pantry.

Mary Jo has gone above and beyond improving services to the community. Her engagement in her community, dedication and enthusiasm for serving the most vulnerable truly represents how one individual has stepped up to be a valuable resource and an inspiration to many.





Elva Serna

16th District

Claudia E. Ayala, Cook County Women's Commissioner

Frank Aguilar, Cook County Commissioner

Elva Serna is a resident of Berwyn, and has over 20 years of human capital empowerment experience in leadership development. Elva joined the Erie Neighborhood House, a nonprofit with free public resources for children and youth, mental health and community wellness, adult education and training, and legal services, which empower residents to build lasting, stable communities.

At Erie, Elva started as a Computer Literacy Instructor and was quickly promoted to the Technology Careers Coordinator. Elva advanced their Technology Education Program by teaching, creating, and developing Erie's Technology and Professional Development curricula for adult learners.

Elva advanced as Community Engagement Specialist recruiting health promoters and community navigators to conduct outreach, trainings, and workshops to build leadership skills, knowledge, and job readiness within the immigrant community. Elva is an instinctual leader working directly with Latinx communities through direct services and engagement that brings diverse immigrant communities together. She focused on helping undocumented residents, who were too fearful to share personal information on the 2020 Census, to participate so that their children would be counted.

She mentors with passion, guiding her clients and Erie volunteers to strengthen and elevate their leadership. Elva's services translate into quality free public programs placing the immigrant and low-income community as a priority. Elva has inspired Erie volunteers to help Erie clients develop language and computer skills, focus on health, and mentor students to help them develop good study habits as they move from middle school to high school and explore college and career options.





Josephine Coleman

17th District

Nancy Mott, Cook County Women's Commissioner
Sean Morrison, Cook County Commissioner

Josephine Coleman is a resident of Des Plaines, an Irish immigrant, devoted wife and adoptive mother of 2 children, who proudly calls America her family's new home. She became a dedicated Girl Scout leader, empowering young girls to become self-reliant, lead activities, learn and work as teams.

Josephine was elated and astonished with Chicagoland's generosity towards her fundraising campaign for a Northern Ireland victims support center. The center's mission focuses on the recovery needs of victims, victim and witnesses rights, and addresses the harm caused by sexual, domestic and hate crimes. Her new community helped raised \$87,000!

Josphine set out on a campaign to raise approximately \$27,000 for a child with intractable epilepsy at Children's Memorial Hospital to cover medical expenses.

When the global pandemic hit the USA, Josphine started sewing in response to the outcry for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Single handedly, she started sewing face masks with materials she solicited from her neighbors. Their response was overwhelming as she obtained bags of clean sheets and elastic from the community and the Salvation Army. While maintaining her home and children's remote learning, she worked 7 days a week on a \$50 kid's sewing machine and produced over 7,000 masks for the Salvation Army, American Indian Reservations, care workers and the homeless. She then focused on food pantries, homelessness and the Navajo Nation. Josephine solicited socks, hand warmers, soap, toothpaste, toothbrushes and winter hats, and together with her new community distributed 600 care packages.





Sameka Ducette Gates

At-Large District

Andrea Raila, Cook County Women's Commissioner
Dr. Aparna Sen-Yeldandi, Cook County Women's Commissioner
Audra Wilson, Chairperson, Cook County Commission on Women's Issues
Toni Preckwinkle, Cook County Board President

Sameka Gates was born and raised in the Woodlawn community. Her early education and exposure to creative opportunities were experiences that helped her become the force she is today. Sameka is now a resident of Humboldt Park, a single mom, raising her 11 year old daughter and 5 year old son and assisting them in their remote learning.

Sameka teaches 7th grade social studies and is also the Local Student Council Chair at Suder Montessori Magnet in the Austin community. She is the Founder of Girls Are P.E.A.R.L.S., an organization that helps middle school girls develop leadership skills and learn the importance of service. Sameka established P.E.A.R.L.S. to create a safe space for girls, while exposing them to opportunities outside of their environment, and providing a platform to amplify their voices.

With the help of many volunteers, Sameka has hosted a community clean-up, assisted with a 2020 graduation photo shoot of graduates, and coordinated a Back to School event with other community partners in the Austin community.

Sameka partnered with the Aurora Interfaith Food Pantry and with her dad, gave away more than 800 bags of food to families in-need in the underserved Englewood and Hermosa neighborhoods. Sameka paid for a truck to transport the food from Aurora; transport that required several round-trips over multiple hours.

Sameka is always looking for ways to empower and broaden the scope of students of color. She keeps in touch with former students to lend them guidance. Sameka is a true unsung heroine.





Audra Wilson, Chairperson

Audra Wilson is President and CEO of the Shriver Center on Poverty Law, an Illinois-based organization that litigates, shapes public policy, trains, and convenes multistate networks of public interest attorneys to make equal justice and economic opportunity a reality. Audra began her legal career as a Welfare Advocacy Staff Attorney with the Shriver Center 20 years earlier, where she focused her work on food security issues and advocacy for low-income working families. Prior to returning to Shriver, Audra was the Executive Director of the League of Women Voters Illinois and served as the Deputy Chief of Staff for United States Congresswoman Robin Kelly in the Second Congressional District of Illinois for five years. She also spent seven years on the faculty at Northwestern University Pritzker School of Law as an Adjunct Professor and Director of Diversity Education and Outreach. In addition to launching several major diversity initiatives, Audra developed and taught a seminar analyzing the history of U.S. welfare programs and impact of social attitudes on contemporary welfare policy. Audra also served as the Deputy Press and Policy Director on Barack Obama's U.S. Senate campaign.

Vera Davis, 1st District

Vera Garner Davis is a retired educator from Chicago Public Schools. Since retirement, she has worked with several organizations that provide needed services to the community. She is a member of Carey Tercentenary African Methodist Episcopal Church where she serves as President Pro Tem of the Steward Board and has served in many other capacities including Christian Education Director and Sunday School Superintendent. She has sat on the boards of Loretto Hospital Foundation, Family Focus Foundation, Illinois Hunger Coalition, Illinois Partnership Office Advisory Council, Hands Up Recovery and The University of Chicago Advisory Committee for Cancer Research. She is married to the Honorable Danny K. Davis, Representative of the 7th Congressional District of Illinois.





Dorian Carter, 2nd District

Dorian K. Carter is Special Assistant to the Chairman and CEO John W. Rogers, Jr., of Ariel Investments. Commissioner Carter serves her community through an unwavering commitment to improving the lives of women and girls. In 1999, she co-founded The Glass Slipper Project, a 100% volunteer program that provides impoverished junior and senior high school girls with proper attire to attend their prom. Since its creation, the Glass Slipper Project has dressed more than 35,000 girls throughout the Chicago region. In addition to her efforts on behalf of The Glass Slipper Project, Dorian also serves on the Local Advisory Board for New Leaders. Commissioner Carter is a member of The Cook County State's Attorney's African American Advisory Council. She is also a member of The Links, Inc.

Dr. Frances Carroll, 3rd District

Dr. Frances G. Carroll is a retired educator and former principal of the Nancy Jefferson Alternative School located in the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center. Commissioner Carroll is a current member of the Life Member Youth Guidance Board of Directors, a Trustee at the University of Illinois, a member of the Illinois Board of Higher Education, and a Central Region Representative to the International Connection Committee. She has served on the Program Planning Committee to assist in the selection of the public meetings and partnered with community groups in planning health fairs for her district. Dr. Carroll assisted Cook County in the planning of domestic violence legislation, the County Child Care Initiative, collected cell phones for victims of domestic violence, and lobbied for equal pay for women.





Echelle Mohn, 4th District

Commissioner Echelle Mohn is the Director of Technology for the Calumet Public School District 132. An educator with over 27 years experience and passionate about computer science, Commissioner Mohn helped develop a challenging curriculum to teach students technological and financial literacy skills. She established Founder of Future Innovative Technologies (FIT), a professional development group that encourages youth and young adults to create socio-economic development equity spaces through entrepreneurship. She is an active member of her community, serves as Chair for the Lindblom Math & Science Academy Parent Advisory Council and is Founder and President of the South Deering Manor Community Association. She serves her church as a member of the Media Ministry, Church in Society, and Financial Consortium Council. Her three sons, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Kevin, Jr., are her greatest pride and joy.

Kelley D. Nichols-Brown, 5th District

2018 Unsung Heroine recipient Kelley D. Nichols-Brown is the Director of the Chicago Heights Public Library with a master's degree in Library and Information Science from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. She is also a combat war veteran who served in the United States Army Reserve from 1990 – 2002. Since 1991, Kelley has worked in public and academic libraries and has implemented many successful programs which she has presented to the Illinois (ILA) and American (ALA) Library Associations. For nearly a decade, Commissioner Nichols-Brown has been an active participant of Supreme Martial Arts Academy, LLC (SMA), a taekwondo school co-owned and operated by her husband and six sons. SMA has competed in state and national tournaments and does community outreach at libraries, schools, and community centers. Kelley continues to be an advocate for literacy, youth, local talent, and the less fortunate by implementing innovative programs and collaborating with other community organizations.





Susette M. Lunceford, 6th District

Susette Lunceford has 20+ years of experience as a human resources professional. She currently serves as Director, Training and Development at a Chicago-based insurance company. Over her career Susette has been an advocate for equal employment opportunities in the workplace. Prior to her current role she served as an independent consultant and designed and taught workforce entry programs for individuals in underserved communities. Susette and her husband focus many of their volunteer efforts by participating in organizations that assist youth gain access to educational resources. She holds a bachelors degree from Andrews University, a MBA from the University of Illinois at Chicago, and a MA from Roosevelt University.

Michelle Garcia, 7th District

Michelle Garcia has been working for Access Living as the Latino Community Organizer since 2009. Her work focuses particularly on educating and collaborating with the Latino community about disability rights and services. Through her work she has had the opportunity to collaborate with other Latino groups and organizations that work within the Latino Community, which has helped expand their knowledge about disability-related issues. She is the coordinator of a Latino advocacy group called Cambiando Vidas, whose mission is to create social change within the Latino Community. As a Community Organizer, Michelle is responsible for increasing the number of Latino leaders with disabilities; as well as raising awareness of disability issues and how they intersect with issues such as immigration and healthcare within the Latino community. Her work includes planning numerous educational forums and events in different areas of the city, to educate Latinos with disabilities about disability rights and services.





Iris Millán, 8th District

Commissioner Millán is the District Director of Intergovernmental Affairs at City Colleges of Chicago. She is a passionate advocate for immigration, hunger, education, and women's issues, among other causes. Iris serves on the boards of nonprofit and civic organizations and she recently completed her fellowship in the Illinois Women's Institute for Leadership Training Academy. Iris holds a MA in Higher Education Leadership and a BA in Political Science, both from Northeastern Illinois University. Iris is a devoted mom, a passionate community organizer, and a proud Mexican immigrant. She lives in the Humboldt Park neighborhood of Chicago with her loving partner, Eddie, and their two children. They are a proud Mexican and Puerto Rican household.

Marjorie A. Manchen, 9th District

Marjorie A. Manchen is the executive administrator of the Office of the Mayor, Village of Schiller Park. She is also the Village Clerk of River Grove, has achieved designations as a Certified Municipal Clerk from the International Institute of Municipal Clerks and a Registered Municipal Clerk with the Municipal Clerks of Illinois. Additionally, Commissioner Manchen has been an attorney with the law offices of Smith & Smith, concentrating her practice in domestic relations, guardianships, probate and other family law matters, as well as municipal work. Commissioner Manchen was admitted to the U.S. Supreme Court in 2018 and was a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) in Kane County, IL, where she represented abused and neglected children.





Neha Gill, 10th District

Neha is the Executive Director at Apna Ghar since August 2013. She has led consultations, trainings, advised local and international NGOs, government officials, and UN agencies on providing services to survivors of gender-based violence. In 2014, policies and procedures for survivors of gender-based violence that she helped establish were formally adopted by the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq. Neha has extensive cross-cultural experience having worked on gender issues in East Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Latin America. She received her Master of Science degree in International Public Service with certificates in Public Policy and International NGO Management from DePaul University in Chicago, and a bachelor's degree in International Relations from Knox College in Galesburg, IL.

Ginger Rugai, 11th District

Ginger Rugai served as a Chicago Alderman from 1990 to 2011. Commissioner Rugai began her career as an English teacher at Queen of Peace High School. Before becoming Alderman, she served as Assistant Director of the Beverly Area Planning Association, a member of the Illinois Senate Staff and Administrative Aide to State Senator Jeremiah Joyce. She was elected for her first term as Alderman in February 1991 and re-elected four times. Alderman Rugai was appointed to former Mayor Daley's Task Force on Women's Health and the Cook County Commission Women's Issues. She is also active in the Mercy Home for Boys and Girls Leader Council. She received her BA and MA from Loyola University and a Doctor of Public Policy (HC) from Saint Xavier University. Ginger and her husband, Ado, have three children and nine grandchildren.





Danielle Parisi Ruffatto, 12th District

Since beginning her career, Danielle Parisi Ruffatto has passionately represented those who otherwise would not have access to an attorney. In her current position as the Domestic Violence Legal Clinic's Director of Emergency Services, Danielle supervises the attorneys and Client Support Coordinator in the Emergency Services Division, and represents survivors of domestic violence Order of Protection cases. Previously Danielle served as the Director of Pro Bono and Training, managing DVLC's interns and volunteers and overseeing staff training, and worked as a DVLC staff attorney, representing clients in Order of Protection and Family Law cases. Danielle is an adjunct professor at DePaul University College of Law. She received her BA, with honors, from DePaul University in 2001 and her JD from the University of Illinois in 2004.

Trina Janes, 13th District

Trina Janes was appointed by Commissioner Larry Suffredin and represents the 13th County Board district. Commissioner Janes is a native of Evanston and now lives with her family in Skokie. She is a consultant with Haymarket Public Strategies. Commissioner Janes is a graduate of Evanston's public schools, Bates College and the Kellogg School of Management. She served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco and is past president of the Chicago Area Peace Corps Association and past Executive Committee member of the National Peace Corps Association. Commissioner Janes' most important role is being the mother of two energetic boys. She co-founded a Cub Scout Pack, coached their soccer team and is active with the PTA.





Michelle Kohler, 14th District

Drawing on her nearly 25 years of expertise in marketing and business strategy, Michelle is CMO and partner of Audira Labs, a corporate leadership firm. With global marketing experience earned working at a wide range of companies including The Pampered Chef, Shure Inc., RollingStone.com, and various startups, Michelle believes in the power of a good story to inspire and connect people with their passions. This carries throughout all her work: both professional and volunteer.

As the daughter of an IL public school teacher, Michelle is passionate about public education and has been honored to serve as a District 28 School Board member for the last six years and current Board Vice President. In addition to her elected position, Michelle is the Communications Director for the Democrats of Northfield Township. She has delved into issue-specific work as a part of the Northbrook Working Families Coalition, a group created to help increase the minimum wage and bring sick leave to Northbrook workers, and is a member of Moms Demand Action.

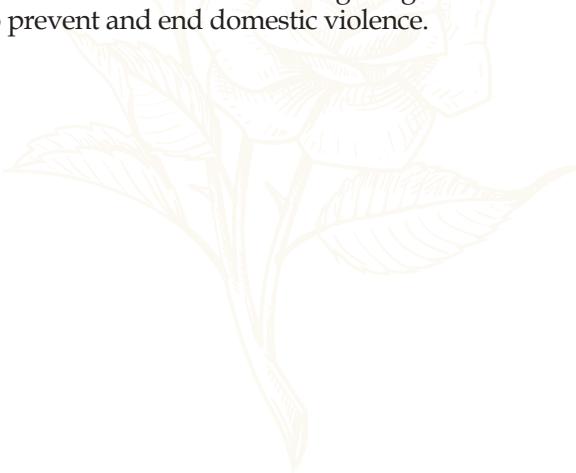
Outside of work, Michelle enjoys exploring the world, listening to her Von Trapp-like family of musicians perform, and spending time with her husband and two children as they try to figure out how to make the dogs behave.





Rebecca Darr, 15th District

Born and raised in Alton, Illinois, Rebecca Darr completed her undergraduate degree at the University of Illinois. Prior to joining WINGS, she lived in San Jose, CA, working with homeless families and as the director of a nonprofit alternative school for abused children and adolescents. While in California, she earned her master's degree in clinical psychology. Rebecca Darr joined WINGS as Executive Director in 1999 and was named the Chief Executive Officer in 2014. Under her leadership, the organization has become one of the largest agencies in the state of Illinois providing services and housing to homeless women and children, and to victims of domestic violence. In 2005, WINGS built and opened the first and only domestic violence shelter in northwest Cook County and over the years added 30 units of transitional and permanent housing to allow women and children sufficient time to heal from the trauma of abuse. On Valentine's Day in 2016, WINGS opened the first new domestic violence shelter in the city of Chicago in over a decade. Darr serves on several other boards and state-wide coalitions as part of her effort to advocate for stronger legislation and increased resources to prevent and end domestic violence.





Claudia E. Ayala, 16th District

Claudia Ayala is a published author, award-winning community organizer who has led many grassroots and political campaigns at both the local and national level as a citizen, advocate, union leader, political advisor and strategist. She is outspoken, strong-minded, and passionate about community driven policy.

Claudia immigrated to the U.S from Mexico City and experienced the challenges young women of color faced in the footprints of environmental injustice and discrimination at an early age. She created personal resilience to overcome these psychological, and social struggles of those directly impacted by issues such as job access, women's rights, choice of body, education choice, LGBTQ rights, labor disputes, and inclusion and diversity cause campaigns.

Claudia Ayala is the founder of The Goaldiggers Network, a group of women self-defining their identity. She captures her experience through her hashtags campaigns and independent blog and appearances.

In 2018 she launched her own political strategy company CEA Consulting to increase representation of Latina female candidates in public office.

Currently, she serves the City of Berwyn as Administrative Manager, Office of the Mayor, for the City of Berwyn. Claudia has been instrumental in the delivery of bilingual (English/Spanish) COVID-19 communications and citywide alerts. Claudia serves in this role along with an all female, women of color administration.





Nancy Mott, 17th District

For many years, Nancy Mott has been a tireless advocate for victims of domestic violence and human trafficking. Nancy's passion to help women and girls victimized by domestic abuse lead her to complete an intensive 40-hour Domestic Violence Training and founded the Domestic Violence Outreach Ministry (DVO). DVO Ministry's mission is to provide support, guidance, counseling, and education for the prevention of domestic violence through community resources, advocacy and outreach programs, with emphasizing October as Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

Nancy has led the effort in the southwest suburbs to raise awareness of the prevalence of both domestic violence and trafficking in these communities. DVO Ministries provides resources in January, recognized as Human Trafficking Awareness Month. She organizes events, speakers, and other outreach to shine a light on problems that people are often unwilling to admit exist.

Working closely with the Archdiocese of Chicago, she presently serves on the Catholic Charities Parish Outreach Committee Southwest Region in Blue Island. Nancy volunteers with other Catholic Churches coordinating the care for the elderly, sick and homebound with hospitality and food, with P.A.D.S. a homeless shelter and Respect Life Committee.





Andrea Raila, At-Large

Andrea is the CEO, founder of Andrea Raila & Associates, a 25-year public policy and tax consulting firm. Andrea works to advance women in the financial field through career mentorship and women internships, such as paid positions for Loyola Gannon Scholars in the Gannon Center Women in Leadership Program. She concentrates support to disadvantaged Cook County women, girls, and the juvenile and women's justice systems. She has served on the board for the Chicago Legal Advocacy for Incarcerated Mothers (CLAIM) playing a pivotal role in their merger into the Cabrini Green Legal Aid (CGLA). Andrea is nationally recognized for her tax and public policy expertise. She has volunteered as a Women's Commissioner for 10 years and serves on Mundelein College Alumnae Board at Loyola University and the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce's Tax Committee. She is a proud mother of three: two daughters, one in high school, and one in college and a son just embarking on a career in film.

Dr. Aparna Sen-Yeldandi, At-Large

Dr. Aparna Sen-Yeldandi has worked over two decades in public and private sectors in the areas of teaching, information technology, university research and strategic planning. During her tenure in the City of Chicago and Chicago Housing Authority, she has worked with many human services agencies and spearheaded many inter-governmental projects. Commissioner Sen-Yeldandi is the former Executive Director of Apna Ghar (Our Home), a human rights organization working to end gender violence. Commissioner Sen-Yeldandi served as a Co-Chair on the Board of Chicago Metropolitan Battered Women's Network. She also serves on the advisory council of Women's Economic Justice. Commissioner Sen currently works for the State of Illinois in her role of Executive Management.





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