Legends of Lawndale



How would relationships change if we replaced fear with trust? How would whole communities change? On the West Side of Chicago, the Chicago Making Connections (MC) coalition asked these questions and chose safe places to play as the change lab. On the West Side, where rates of violence are high and economic investment and employment opportunities are limited, poverty and trauma are widespread, especially among the community's youngest residents. With a vision of men and boys of color feeling a sense of belonging, ownership, and safety in a thriving community, MC has created safe environments for play, mentorship, and community action. As lifelong members of the community, MC coaches and mentors model positive social and emotional wellbeing through the afterschool program Legends of Lawndale, where sports and play foster healthy relationships in the North Lawndale neighborhood.

Health promotion is complex because community members associate Mount Sinai Hospital, a lead partner of MC and a Level 1 trauma center, with violence. Often, social workers and healthcare providers become involved after violence has occurred. When the MC coalition reached out to community members, residents made it clear that they wanted more than medicine: they wanted the hospital to get involved before violence occurs. As a result, Sinai sought leadership from the young men of color most affected by violence to design a program to catalyze change, which is implemented by mentors and coaches from the community and guided by Sinai's behavioral health experts. When asked about mental health, residents agreed: it's much easier to talk to a man who plays basketball with me than go to a therapist.

MC Team Lead Becca Krauss is a psychotherapist at Sinai. Advancing mental health requires clinical expertise and recognition that wellbeing happens at a community level. When violent crime is common, so are trauma and toxic stress which play out in settings like classrooms and playgrounds. This is why the work is moving outside Sinai's hospital to places like Mason Elementary School, where 9- to13-year-old Legends of Lawndale participants can engage in safe play supervised by adults who care about their emotional wellbeing. Sinai staff train mentors and coaches in trauma-informed care to give men the tools to model positive masculinity while situating mental distress experienced by the boys within the social conditions of their life – like recognizing that an emotional outburst on the basketball court often has more to do with an unsafe home environment than a bad pass.

In the gym, these episodes quickly deescalate because everyone involved in Legends of Lawndale, from the clinical support staff to the youngest fourth graders, are equipped to communicate their needs, identify the source of their emotions, and problem-solve together.

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Engaging these Legends in an authentic way requires careful consideration of their lived experiences shaped by their identities and communities. The Youth Board of Directors, a team of 15- to 21-year-old young men from the community, translate the trauma-informed trainings into activities and practices – no one is better equipped to address the emotional needs of young people on the West Side than themselves. They have designed strategies that emphasize unity, mutual support, health, wellbeing, and a sense of belonging, always centering on the joy of playing together. The group convenes in squad circles at the beginning of each session, inviting each young person to be their authentic self without fear. And the work is spreading – a Youth Board of Directors in the Little Village neighborhood has recently recreated this safe play environment to continue MC's goal of strengthening mental wellbeing outside the walls of Sinai.