

DePaul research groups lead effort for housing solutions in North Lawndale

A Chicago-based foundation is funding the data-driven project with a \$200,000 grant.

Ty Kickhaefer, Contributing Writer

The Steans Family Foundation recently awarded a \$200,000 grant to three DePaul research groups with the goal of addressing housing issues in Chicago's North Lawndale neighborhood.

The Institute for Housing Studies is one of three DePaul research groups collaborating on the project. The others are the SPARK Center and the Visual Informatics and Data Analysis Group. Each group has a different specialty, though all have expertise in data analysis.

The groups say they are using the money to build a data model that will help predict how various housing options would impact the West Side neighborhood. The Steans Family Foundation's goal is to provide better quality housing for current North Lawndale residents without gentrifying the neighborhood.

Jeremy Battle

The SPARK Center sits on floor 8 of The DePaul Center in the Loop campus on Thursday, April 23, 2026. The center first opened on Sept. 1, 2024.

"How will the housing market change in a strong economy? Or a weaker economy?" asked Geoff Smith, the executive director of DePaul's Institute for Housing Studies. "You think about future housing needs in the neighborhood based on different scenarios."

Smith said the Institute for Housing Studies contributed a vast amount of data to the project from local, state and federal sources. This included property taxes information, census data and property sales.

The SPARK Center and the Visual Informatics and Data Analysis Group teams will use their skills to crunch the data and draw conclusions from it.

LeAnne Wagner, the director of the SPARK Center, emphasized the importance of creating data models that will be easily understood by both the Steans Family Foundation and the people of North Lawndale.

"It's really incredibly important to make sure that everybody has an understanding so everybody can equally contribute to whatever that solution might be in the end," Wagner said. "Just having white papers and data isn't an effective way to communicate."

Wagner said she was unsure what the final product would look like but said it may be a website or a multimedia project. According to the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, North Lawndale has a median household income that is less than half of Chicago's average.

The Steans Family Foundation has created a multipronged plan to generate wealth in the neighborhood. In addition to finding affordable housing solutions, the foundation's other goals in North Lawndale include helping create living wage jobs, revitalizing infrastructure and preventing violence.

Projects like this give students a chance to work on solving real life problems.

Sakshi Gorkhali, a student getting their masters in data science at DePaul, works for the Visual Informatics and Data Analysis Group, also known as the VIDA lab. She said working on this housing project has given her real-world experience.

"I feel like once I joined here I came across a lot of problems I would never have faced during any of my school projects," Gorkhali said. "VIDA made me think critically about those problems and made me learn. "

Wagner believes that the model that is ultimately created for North Lawndale could be just the start of a larger housing solution.

"There's a lot of potential for the work that we're doing in North Lawndale because it's really hard to collect data in just one place," Wagner said. "We actually have data for a lot of places in the city now from doing this work, and it's very much scalable in that we could probably take it to another neighborhood and apply some of the same process."

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