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Chicago organizers and alders want Johnson to prioritize housing and mental health in the 2024 budget address

By Tonia Hill

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Organizers at the #BreakthePiggyBank protest in Chicago in 2020. Photo by Darius Griffin // The TRiBE

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This budget season in Chicago holds a range of emotions for community organizers, city officials and residents. It's Mayor Brandon Johnson's first one, and numerous issues are competing for his attention and funding.

For community organizers, Bethel "Shaam" Kifle of Not Me We and Jung Yoon of Grassroots Collaborative are looking for Johnson to introduce a budget that ensures that Chicagoans' basic needs are met, with specific investments in permanent housing and mental health services.

"It would be disappointing if the promises made during [Johnson's] campaign are not fulfilled. It would be disappointing if there weren't a major investment into housing, especially given how exacerbated the issues are to date," Kifle said. She's an organizer with [Not Me We](#), a grassroots group building power for poor and working-class people in South Shore.

Both Kifle and Yoon recognize that it may not be possible for Johnson to address every concern in his administration's first budget. Still, they said following through on commitments made on the campaign trail is crucial.

"I know that not everything can be done in that first year and that things take time to scale up, so we need some funding to prove that they work and continue to expand to ensure that these resources are available citywide," Yoon explained. She is the campaign director of [Grassroots Collaborative](#), which builds power with working families through strategic community-labor organizing, grassroots leadership development, civic engagement, and training.

“So disappointment looks like the status quo of balancing our budget on fines and fees, on cutting programs in favor of increasing police spending. To me, that would be very disappointing,” she continued.

For alders, budget season is one filled with anticipation and uncertainty. According to Ald. Maria Hadden, who represents the 49th Ward, City Council members are unaware of what the budget entails until the mayor’s office publicly releases it.

“Going into this first budget under a new mayor, I have some of the same anticipation and feeling like there’ll be some things reflected in the budget that are also priorities for me, but still having a level of uncertainty because you just don’t know,” Hadden said.

Housing and mental health services, along with the formation of the Department of Environment, are top of mind for Hadden.

And then there’s the question of whether Johnson’s administration will continue projects or programs approved under Mayor Lori Lightfoot’s administration, according to Ald. Walter Burnett (27th Ward). Burnett is the longest-serving City Council member. Burnett would like to see Johnson continue to fund and implement projects through Lightfoot’s [Invest South/West](#) initiative.

“Some folks [City Council members] have money in the hopper [in progress] for parks to be rehabbed or build different things like schools, infrastructure work, even affordable housing. So people want to know, are those things excluded or if it will continue on in the next budget,” Burnett said.

The TRiiBE interviewed organizers and elected officials about what they would like to see Johnson prioritize in the upcoming budget address. They highlighted key concerns such as housing, mental health services, violence prevention funding, universal basic income, environmental issues, infrastructure projects, development, and revenue options beyond fines and fees.

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At the same time, he's made moves that are concerning to organizers and community members who supported his progressive mayoral campaign. There's the city's decision to award a [\\$28 million contract](#) to GardaWorld Federal Services to build large tents for migrants despite the company's [mistreatment of migrants](#). Plus, Johnson's decision to select CPD Chief Larry Snelling as police superintendent, who's been accused of [misconduct](#) in the past.

In October, Mayor Brandon Johnson's first budget address will test his progressive bona fides. What [Budgets & Finance for 2024](#) will offer a detailed look at what Johnson's administration values and prioritizes.

"I can assure you there is a commitment to see that through," first deputy chief of staff Cristina Pacione-Zayas said, referring to Johnson's campaign commitment to invest in people. "Our policy, agenda and framework helped to organize and make sure that we were lifting up the commitments with respect to what he [Johnson] made on the campaign trail, looking at the transition subcommittee reports."

"You'll see investments, but the details are still being worked out," she added.

Though it's been just over 100 days since he assumed office, some supporters remain hopeful but want to ensure Johnson doesn't pivot from his campaign promises.

"To me, success looks like anything that starts to challenge that paradigm and starts to set out the path towards a new political reality in which all of Chicago residents' needs are met and not just the wealthy few," said Yoon.

Here is a look into some of the issues that some organizers and elected officials would like to see prioritized in the budget. They will assess Mayor Johnson based on his administration's approach to solving the ongoing humanitarian issue, his adherence to campaign promises, and his administration's approach to transparency and tackling the budget deficit.



TRANSPARENCY IN THE CPD BUDGET AND VIOLENCE PREVENTION FUNDING

On Sept. 27, the City Council unanimously approved CPD Chief Larry Snelling as the new police superintendent. Snelling's nomination sailed through without much pushback from elected leaders or community members.

Following the City Council meeting, Snelling and Johnson [fielded reporters' questions](#), one of which was how the department would address the rise in armed robberies.

"We're working on a lot of things already, and I can tell you, the detective division, along with our officers, are doing really hard work in apprehending the subjects but also to try to prevent it," Snelling said. "Technology is going to be a huge part of this; we have to utilize technology to make sure that we're able to track these individuals and repeat offenders."



Community Commission for Public Safety and Accountability (CCPSA) interim commissioners listen as CPD Chief Larry Snelling fields questions and comments from city residents during a CCPSA meeting on Sept. 7, 2023. Photo by Ash Lane for The TRiIBE®

It's unclear whether Snelling was referring to the department's pre-existing technology, such as ShotSpotter, or if he's suggesting purchasing additional technology and whether that would require additional funding from the city.



If Snelling suggests using new technology, it's safe to assume that it would require additional dollars, Community Commission for Public Safety and Accountability (CCPSA) interim commissioner Oswaldo Gomez said.

"If we were to increase the department's use of technological equipment, the budget would definitely have to increase," Gomez said. "I don't know if that's a good thing or not. That depends on what we spend the money on."

Both Oswaldo and Terry, who's also an interim CCPSA commissioner, are looking for more transparency in the police budget so that the public has a deeper understanding of what specific line items are included in the budget so that they can be tracked. Finding specific line items within city budgets can be tricky, Gomez explained, and sometimes they can appear in other departments' budgets.

"If we say that we want to do this thing, and there is agreement on all sides that 'yes, we need to have better technology for officers to address certain situations,' then we should be able to see that identified in the budget," Terry said.

Since 2020, activists and organizers within the ongoing Black liberation movement have advocated for disinvestment in policing and instead investment in uplifting communities hardest hit by violence and poverty.

Despite calls from organizers to reallocate police dollars to community-based organizations, mental health and violence prevention programming, Lightfoot increased the police budget from \$1.7 billion in 2021 to \$1.9 billion in 2022.

"I feel like we don't have a real clear, concise, long-term data-driven plan to make the city safer," said Seventh District Police District Council member Dion McGill.

As a result, McGill says the police budget shouldn't increase until the department can produce a long-term plan to address safety.

"I feel like people think more money means there's gonna be more safety. There's no proof of that. I've not seen that," he added.

Currently, the police budget makes up **more than 30 percent** of the city's corporate fund, the largest of the city's six funds, used to fund city services and programs. Dollars from the corporate fund are used for city operations and services like the Chicago police and fire departments and more.

GoodKids MadCity (GKMC), a youth-led community organization that focuses on reducing inter-communal violence and over-policing, has been one of the leading voices calling for the police budget to be reallocated to community-run services such as violence interruption, education, mental health programs, and more through the passage of its Peacebook Ordinance.

"We know that there is money in the budget to make this happen, and so it's just a matter of getting those public dollars and not privatized dollars, and not taxpayer dollars, to pay for this," said **Miracle Boyd**, a GKMC organizer. "We shouldn't keep having to come out of our pocket to pay for things to resource our communities to substantiate ourselves."



GKMC wants to pilot the Peacebook in the 3rd, 4th, 5th and 20th wards, which includes the Woodlawn, Washington Park, Kenwood, Oakland and Bronzeville neighborhoods.

Addressing the root causes of violence holistically is something that Chicagoans support, Yoon said.

“Residents we’ve talked to are very interested in root cause solutions that are proven to reduce violence. So we’ll be looking to see what kinds of programs the Johnson administration funds in this budget.”

MENTAL HEALTH

For over a decade, organizers, residents and elected officials have pushed for the passage of Treatment Not Trauma to establish 24-hour mental-health crisis response teams within the city’s public health department and deploy them citywide.

On Oct. 4, the City Council voted to approve the formation of a working group, named [Mental Health System Working Group](#), that will develop a framework to implement Treatment Not Trauma.

Mayor Brandon Johnson has also called for the reopening of [closed mental health clinics](#). In 2011, the Chicago City Council voted 50-0 to approve former Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s first budget, which included closing half the city’s public mental health clinics. Four of the clinics were located on the South Side.

For the 2024 budget, organizers like Yoon are looking for the administration to provide additional funding for the already existing CARE ([Crisis Assistance Response and Engagement](#)) program.

The two-year pilot program began in 2021, and there are two types of models: the co-responder model, which includes a police officer, paramedic and mental health professional, and a nonpolice or alternate model, which includes a paramedic and mental health professional. Each group responds around the clock to mental health calls in select neighborhoods in the city.

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"We would like all of that money to go towards the alternate response teams for the mental health professionals and workers responding to those calls," Yoon said.

This summer, the CARE program was expanded to include the 24th Police District, which falls in Hadden's ward, and she views that as a plus. She'd like to see the program expand its service hours in support of the Treatment Not Trauma ballot referendum.

An increase in investment would help support more staffing and service hours for the CARE program, said Hadden.

"So I think looking for those investments in the mental health crisis response teams that help to serve more Chicagoans is going to be a win for me," Hadden said.

For calls where a Chicago police officer is dispatched, Yoon said those funds should come out of the CPD's budget.

MIGRANTS, HOMELESSNESS, AFFORDABLE HOUSING

One of the biggest issues at play is the influx of migrants, the lack of affordable housing and homelessness. Homelessness has long been an issue in Chicago.

A 2023 report from [The Chicago Coalition for the Homeless](#) estimates that the number of city residents experiencing homelessness is 68,440, an increase of four percent from 2020 to 2021. Surging housing prices play a significant role for people who experience homelessness.

On top of that, the U.S. is still experiencing [inflation](#), and some Chicago neighborhoods have become less affordable for low-income residents. The DePaul Institute of Housing Studies attributes affordability to the loss of two and four-flat buildings that are no longer available due to foreclosure, vacancy or abandonment.

“Once the building is lost, it is difficult to replace. The convergence of these different dynamics has exacerbated affordability pressures and points to the need for strategies supporting the preservation of this critical Chicago housing type,” the DePaul Institute of Housing Studies [report](#) reads.

Then, add in the more than 17,000 migrants fleeing political and socio-economic strife in Central America, which has further illuminated the city’s housing crisis.

With all this at play, organizers and political leaders want affordable housing investments supporting longtime residents and new arrivals because housing is connected to basic needs, Kifle said.

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Explainer: Here’s what you should know about Chicago’s response to the influx of migrants



Chicago has welcomed asylum seekers from South and Central America for more than a year. The TRiiBE has outlined important information about how city leaders are handling the humanitarian crisis and what to anticipate in the coming the months.

"Mental health and reopening the mental health centers are important. Investing in our youth and youth employment is important. But if you don't have somewhere to lay your head, it impacts those areas negatively. So I think we have to address people's basic needs first," Kifle added.

Chicago's timely response to house and assist new arrivals has unearthed **pre-existing tensions between Black and brown people**.

"I would love to see money dedicated towards long-term homelessness prevention and support," said Second District Police District Council member Alexander Perez.

"I would like to see the same energy applied to the migrants and asylum seekers applied to the folks and residents that are here and have been asking for some of the same amenities and support," he continued.

Hadden told *The TRiiBE* she is looking for continued investments to sustain programs and services that address affordable housing and homelessness.



Chicago advocates staged a demonstration at City Hall ahead of Mayor Lori Lightfoot's 2023 budget address to the Chicago City Council on Oct. 3, 2022. They are urging the mayor's administration to adopt a long-term plan to support the thousands of people who are experiencing homelessness. Photo by Ronald Browne. Photo provided.



In Hadden's ward, which includes Rogers Park and portions of West Ridge, about 75 percent of residents rent. She pointed to the single-room occupancy (SRO) housing developments as a program that's worked to house people who are low-income or experiencing homelessness.

"Last year, we got to see some initial funding put towards a program to help our SROs that provide a key housing niche for people. They have their own room, bathroom and space," Hadden explained.

SROs are buildings with five or more single-room occupancy units for low-income people. There were once 81 SRO buildings, but that number has steadily declined, and now there are 40.

The program Hadden is referring to is called the [Single Room Occupancy Preservation Loan Program](#). The Chicago City Council voted to approve this \$5 million loan program in 2022 under Lightfoot.

SROs, Hadden added, have played a significant role in the city's housing landscape, but the program hasn't seen as much investment.

"I want to see continued investments in affordable housing more broadly, in communities like Rogers Park," Hadden said.

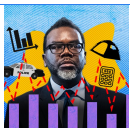
Tonia Hill is a multimedia reporter for The TRiBE.



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