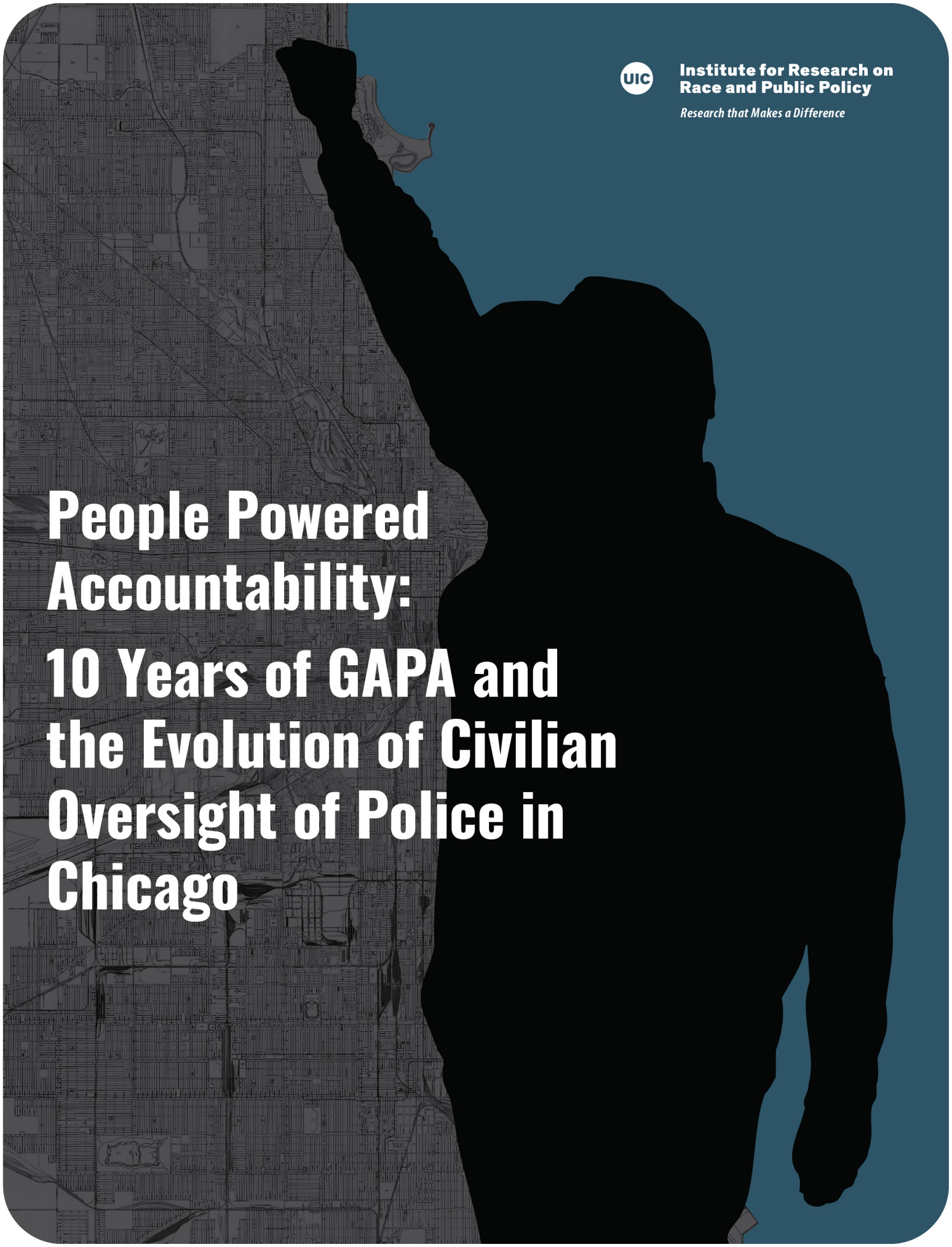


Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy
Research that Makes a Difference

People Powered Accountability: 10 Years of GAPA and the Evolution of Civilian Oversight of Police in Chicago

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DEDICATION & COMMUNITY ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This report, researched and written by the Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy (IRRPP) at the University of Illinois Chicago, is dedicated to the organizers, survivors, families, movement elders, coalition members, and communities whose work has sustained the struggle for police accountability, community safety, and community power in Chicago.

We especially honor those who have experienced police violence and misconduct, those who have lost loved ones, and those who have transformed grief, anger, and lived experience into organizing, advocacy, and demands for change. We also recognize that no form of violence exists in isolation. State violence and institutional harm do not simply coexist with interpersonal and neighborhood-level violence; they can create and intensify the conditions in which it occurs. Disinvestment, punitive practices, and institutional neglect can destabilize communities, weaken systems of support, and increase exposure to harm. Understanding violence therefore requires recognizing these harms as interconnected and mutually reinforcing, compounding across individuals, families, neighborhoods, and generations.

The history documented in these pages belongs to the generations of Chicagoans who organized long before GAPA was formed, to those who built and sustained the coalition, and to those who continue this work today. Their efforts remind us that movements for police accountability are also part of a broader struggle over whose lives are protected, whose knowledge is valued, and who has the power to define what safety means for their communities.

This report should not be understood as the story of a single organization, ordinance, or political victory. It is one contribution to a much longer collective struggle for safety, accountability, dignity, democracy, and the right of communities to exercise meaningful power over the institutions and conditions that shape their lives. We offer it with gratitude to everyone who has carried that struggle forward, with remembrance for those whose lives have been lost, and with recognition that the work remains unfinished.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ten years after the Grassroots Alliance for Police Accountability (GAPA) began organizing, Chicago has a system of civilian public-safety governance that did not exist when the coalition formed. The 2021 passage of the Empowering Communities for Public Safety (ECPS) ordinance created 22 elected District Councils and the citywide Community Commission for Public Safety and Accountability (CCPSA), giving Chicago residents new formal roles in police governance. These institutions emerged from years of organizing, community conversations, political education, coalition building, policy development, and legislative negotiation around a central question: What would it mean for Chicago communities to have meaningful power over the institutions responsible for public safety?

This report, completed by the Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy (IRRPP) at the University of Illinois Chicago, examines GAPA's first decade and the early implementation of ECPS. Drawing on 19 in-depth interviews, archival and documentary research, and a participatory analysis process, the study examines what GAPA accomplished, how those accomplishments were achieved, what changed when movement demands became formal governmental institutions, and what remains unfinished. Rather than evaluating GAPA simply by whether it passed legislation, the report asks a broader question: How is community power built, translated into institutions, and sustained after political victory?

From Community Voice to Community Power

GAPA emerged in 2016 amid a crisis of confidence in Chicago's police-accountability system following the murder of Laquan McDonald and the public release of video footage documenting his killing. Yet the coalition's work belonged to a much longer history of organizing for civilian oversight and community control of police in Chicago. For decades, residents and organizers had challenged systems in which communities could protest, testify, file complaints, and attend public meetings without possessing comparable authority over the institutions governing policing.

GAPA sought to move Chicago from community voice toward community power. Through 19 Community Conversations involving more than 1,650 residents, research into civilian oversight systems nationally, and sustained engagement with community organizations, the coalition developed a model intended to institutionalize resident participation in police governance. That work ultimately contributed to the two-tiered structure established through ECPS: elected District Councils operating

within Chicago's 22 police districts and a citywide Community Commission with significant responsibilities related to police policy, accountability, public engagement, and public-safety leadership.

Organizing as the Infrastructure of Institutional Change

One of the clearest findings from this research is that grassroots organizing made institutional change possible. Participants described GAPA's accomplishments as the product of years of relationship-building, political education, leadership development, community engagement, and sustained organizing—not simply policy expertise or legislative negotiation. Coalition members knocked on doors, organized through churches and community organizations, held public meetings, facilitated community conversations, and educated residents about police governance. Because the coalition's formative years preceded the COVID-19 pandemic, much of this work involved extensive time spent together in person. Those relationships became an important political resource when negotiations became more difficult. Coalition members did not always agree, but years of working together created a foundation that allowed disagreement without automatically fracturing the coalition.

The research also demonstrates the importance of treating community knowledge as political knowledge. Residents' experiences with policing were treated not merely as stories illustrating policy problems, but as expertise capable of identifying institutional failures and informing alternatives. GAPA created mechanisms through which individual experiences could become collective analysis and eventually policy proposals.

A Real but Incomplete Redistribution of Power

The passage of ECPS represented a substantial change in Chicago's civilian oversight landscape. For the first time, residents directly elected representatives to institutions created specifically to provide communities with an ongoing role in police governance. The Community Commission also received significant authority related to police policy, accountability, public engagement, and leadership, including the ability to establish certain policies without CPD approval. At the same time, participants cautioned against treating ECPS as the achievement of complete community control. Organizers entered GAPA with different understandings of what community control required, and the eventual ordinance reflected both the ambitions of the movement and the compromises required to secure passage.

The report characterizes the redistribution of power achieved through ECPS as real but incomplete. Authority over policing remains distributed among the Community

Commission, District Councils, mayor, Chicago Police Department, Civilian Office of Police Accountability, Police Board, City Council, and other institutions. Measured against the system that preceded it, ECPS represents a significant expansion of formal community authority. Measured against more expansive visions of community control, questions about the distribution of power remain unresolved.

From Winning Power to Governing

The early implementation of ECPS reveals a critical distinction between winning authority and developing the capacity to exercise it. District Councilors are expected to hold public meetings, engage residents, communicate with community organizations and police leadership, respond to constituent concerns, develop public-safety priorities, and perform substantial administrative work, often while balancing employment, caregiving, and other obligations. Limited resources, administrative burdens, legal requirements, uneven public awareness, and the complexity of navigating city government can constrain District Councils' ability to fully exercise their responsibilities. These challenges illustrate a broader finding: institutional access does not automatically produce community power. Formal authority becomes meaningful when institutions have sufficient resources, residents understand how to participate, community priorities can produce visible institutional responses, and elected representatives have the capacity to govern effectively.

GAPA Built More Than an Ordinance

GAPA's legacy extends beyond the passage of ECPS. The coalition developed community leaders, strengthened relationships across organizations and neighborhoods, expanded political knowledge about police governance, and helped establish the expectation that people most affected by policing should have a meaningful role in determining how public safety is governed. Participants repeatedly described building people, not only policy, as one of the coalition's most important accomplishments. Some individuals developed through this work later became District Councilors, Commissioners, candidates for public office, and leaders in other community settings. Coalition building itself was also an important outcome. Organizations with different histories, constituencies, and political perspectives learned to work together around a shared demand while continuing to debate what accountability, oversight, and community control should mean.

These accomplishments matter because movements depend on more than formal policy victories. They also depend on the political infrastructure that makes those victories possible: relationships, leadership, shared knowledge, organizational capacity, and communities prepared to defend and expand what has been won.

Strengthening the Next Phase of ECPS

The report identifies several priorities for strengthening community power through ECPS. District Councils need adequate staffing, compensation, administrative assistance, training, and communications support, while city and state leaders should examine legal and bureaucratic barriers that unnecessarily impede Councilors' ability to collaborate. Public education and outreach should become a sustained function of the system so residents understand what District Councils and the Commission do and how they can participate.

The system should also make the connection between participation and institutional action more visible and strengthen mechanisms connecting neighborhood priorities identified through District Councils to citywide deliberation and action by the Commission. At the same time, independent community organizing must continue outside government. District Councils and the Commission cannot substitute for organizations and residents capable of mobilizing participation, identifying implementation problems, developing leaders, and holding institutions accountable.

Finally, civilian institutions must be able to build functional relationships with CPD without sacrificing their independence. Leadership development and community-centered evaluation should also become permanent components of ECPS so that the system continues developing new participants and assesses not only whether formal responsibilities are completed, but whether residents understand the system, community priorities influence decisions, and participation is experienced as meaningful.

Moving Forward

GAPA's first decade demonstrates that the passage of legislation is neither the beginning nor the end of community power. The coalition spent years developing relationships, leaders, shared political knowledge, and organizing capacity before those efforts were translated into formal institutions. ECPS institutionalized some of that power, but implementation has created a new set of questions about resources, participation, independence, authority, and sustainability.

The next phase will depend not only on the powers written into law, but on the conditions that make those powers meaningful: adequately resourced District Councils, informed and engaged residents, visible connections between participation and action, strong relationships between District Councils and the Commission, independent community organizing, continued leadership development, and ongoing evaluation. ECPS remains an unfinished democratic experiment. Its long-term significance will depend on whether Chicago can sustain the community participation

and political infrastructure necessary to make civilian authority durable. GAPA's history offers a central lesson for that work: power has to be organized before it can be institutionalized—and it must continue to be organized after institutions are created.

GLOSSARY OF PEOPLE

This report was made possible by the people who generously shared their time, experiences, and reflections on the organizing and advocacy that shaped GAPA and Chicago's civilian oversight system. We are deeply grateful for their trust, candor, and willingness to contribute their perspectives to this research. The individuals below are named throughout the report; their titles and affiliations are provided to help situate their roles and perspectives within this history.

Brian Young Jr., Organizing and Policy Associate, Community Renewal Society; GAPA Organizer

Michelle Morales, President, Woods Fund Chicago; Philanthropic Support

Siobhan Peterson-Quinn, GAPA Campaign Coordinator

Joshua Coakley, Street Outreach, Target Area Development; External Executive Director, GAPA

Jackie Baldwin, Community Organizer, Jewish Council on Urban Affairs (JCUA); GAPA Organizer

Joel Rodriguez, Senior Organizer, Southwest Organizing Project; GAPA Organizer

Mecole McBride, Senior Program Officer, Pritzker-Pucker Foundation; Former GAPA Coordinator

Oswaldo Gomez, Project Manager, Former Interim Commissioner, CCPSA; Former GAPA Coordinator

Marsheda Ewulomi, Director of Family Integrity, IL Black Advocacy, Former GAPA Member

Desmon Yancy, 5th Ward Alderman, Former GAPA Member

Anna Mangahas, Project Manager, CCPSA; One Northside; Former GAPA Member

Loren Jones, Attorney, Impact for Equity

Frank Chapman, Educational Director, CAARPR; Leader, CPAC; ECPS

Aaron Gottlieb, Former Commissioner and GAPA member

Anonymous

Elizabeth Rochford, 17th District Councilor, CCPSA; Founding Member, One Northside

Deondre Rutues, 15th District Councilor, CCPSA; Activist; Chicago Neighborhood Policing Initiative

Jennifer Schaffer, 19th District Councilor; CCPSA

Aryeh Bernstein, Educational Consultant, Jewish Council on Urban Affairs (JCUA)

INTRODUCTION: WHY THIS MATTERS

Nearly ten years after the Grassroots Alliance for Police Accountability (GAPA) began organizing, the movement it helped build has entered a different stage. What began as a coalition of community organizations asking who should have power over policing, ultimately contributed to the creation of elected District Councils and the Community Commission for Public Safety and Accountability. Ideas developed through community meetings, neighborhood organizing, political education, coalition negotiations, and years of advocacy now exist, at least in part, within the formal structure of Chicago government. That transition makes this an important moment to look backward as well as forward.

Institutions often preserve the laws, official votes, organizational charts, meeting minutes, and formal decisions that mark political change. They are often less reliable at preserving what made those changes possible: the conversations held in churches and community rooms, the relationships developed across neighborhoods, the disagreements coalitions had to survive, the political education that allowed residents to enter complicated policy debates, the grief and anger that motivated people to organize, and the strategic decisions that never appeared in an ordinance.

This report, completed by the Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy (IRRPP) at the University of Illinois Chicago, was commissioned by GAPA to document that fuller history and to assess what can be learned from its first ten years of organizing and from the early implementation of the Empowering Communities for Public Safety (ECPS) ordinance. It asks what GAPA accomplished, how those accomplishments were achieved, what changed when movement demands transitioned into government, what remained unresolved, and what lessons this experience offers for the future of civilian governance in Chicago.

The purpose is not simply to determine whether GAPA was “successful” or whether ECPS “worked.” Those questions are too narrow for the history examined here. GAPA’s experience moved through nearly every stage of a community-led reform effort: defining a problem, developing a policy proposal, organizing residents, building a coalition, negotiating with government, securing legislation, and helping launch and sustain the institutions that followed. The more useful question is what this experience teaches us about how community power is built, translated into institutions, and sustained after political victory.

About the Research

This evaluation used a qualitative research design combining in-depth interviews, archival and documentary review, and participatory analysis. The IRRPP research team conducted 19 in-depth interviews with individuals identified through GAPA as having knowledge of different aspects of the coalition's work over its first ten years. Participants included individuals involved in grassroots organizing, coalition leadership, community engagement, policy development, legislative strategy and negotiation, the campaign for ECPS, District Council service, the Community Commission, philanthropy/financial supporters, and implementation of the civilian-governance system. Interviews lasted approximately 60 to 120 minutes and followed a semi-structured format. Participants were asked to reflect on GAPA's formation and development; organizing strategies; coalition dynamics; policy development; negotiations with City Hall; passage and implementation of ECPS; and the evolution of civilian governance in Chicago. Interviews also explicitly solicited reflections on both the strengths and limitations of GAPA's work, including conflicts, strategic challenges, implementation difficulties, and areas participants believed could have been approached differently.

Interview data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns as well as differences across participants' experiences and interpretations. Areas of analysis included grassroots organizing, community knowledge, political education, coalition building, community control, political power, institutionalization, implementation, public participation, and trust. Disagreement among participants was retained as analytically meaningful rather than resolved into a single account of the movement.

The interview data were supplemented by an archival and documentary review. GAPA provided the research team with a collection of organizational documents and historical materials related to its work. Researchers reviewed these materials to establish chronology; trace the development of policy proposals and organizing strategies; and contextualize participants' retrospective accounts. The research team also reviewed relevant publicly available materials, including legislation and ordinance language; government reports and records; documents produced by Chicago's police-accountability institutions; historical materials; and media coverage.

The research also incorporated a participatory analysis process. At multiple points during data collection and analysis, the research team returned to GAPA through larger meetings to present preliminary findings, discuss emerging themes, ask follow-up questions, and clarify historical and organizational context. Feedback from these meetings informed subsequent analysis and helped identify areas requiring additional investigation or interpretation. These discussions were used to strengthen the accuracy and contextual depth of the research rather than to require consensus or organizational approval of the findings.

Taken together, the interviews, archival materials, and participatory analysis provided complementary sources of evidence to enable this reconstruction of GAPA's ten-year history and to evaluate its development. Documentary materials were used to establish historical and institutional context, while interviews provided insight into how participants experienced and interpreted key events. The participatory process provided an additional opportunity to contextualize and refine emerging findings. The resulting analysis is intended to capture both GAPA's accomplishments and the tensions, limitations, and unfinished work identified across its first decade.

Community Knowledge as Historical Knowledge

A central premise of this report is that community knowledge is historical knowledge. Movement histories can easily become simplified over time. Years of organizing can be compressed into the date an ordinance passed. Coalitions can be remembered as if they always agreed about what they wanted. Policies can appear inevitable once the political struggles that produced them fade from view. And when movements succeed in creating institutions, the official institution can gradually become the dominant version of the history, obscuring the community processes, contested ideas, relationships, sacrifices, and political demands that existed before it.

Many participants expressed concern, directly or indirectly, that the history of this movement could be lost, flattened, or institutionalized without preserving the experiences of the people and communities that built it. That concern is particularly important in the case of GAPA because the coalition itself challenged conventional ideas about expertise.

Participants repeatedly rejected the assumption that knowledge about policing and public safety belonged primarily to elected officials, attorneys, policy professionals, researchers, or policing experts. They argued instead that people who experience policing in their everyday lives possess essential knowledge about how accountability systems should be designed. Residents contributed knowledge grounded in lived experience; organizers helped connect and interpret that knowledge across communities; and legal and policy experts helped translate community-defined priorities into institutional proposals. That principle shapes this evaluation as well. The organizers, residents, survivors, family members, faith leaders, advocates, and community members whose experiences appear throughout these pages are not treated merely as stakeholders commenting on a policy process. They are treated as producers of political knowledge and expertise. Their accounts tell us not only what happened, but how people understood what was happening, why particular choices mattered, where disagreements emerged, what compromises meant at the time, and what formal records alone cannot explain.

This is especially important because much of movement knowledge travels through relationships rather than official archives. Participants described knowledge about policing as something accumulated through families, neighborhoods, churches, schools, community organizations, and generations of organizing. Stories carried between people became a way of understanding institutional behavior and neighborhood experience. Existing community institutions served as repositories of history, political interpretation, trust, and as a means of organizing knowledge.

Preserving those accounts matters for more than historical accuracy. Institutional memory affects what happens next. As organizers have moved into roles as District Councilors, Commissioners, and city employees, knowledge about why ECPS was created, what communities originally demanded, and what compromises shaped the final ordinance has moved with them. At the same time, that transition creates the risk that knowledge once held broadly within a movement becomes concentrated among a smaller group of people inside institutions.

Documenting the movement's history is therefore also a way of keeping that knowledge accessible to future organizers, government stakeholders, residents, researchers, and community leaders. The stakes extend beyond GAPA. Ordinances can be amended, administrations change, and institutions evolve. Relationships, organizing knowledge, leadership capacity, and political memory can persist across those changes. One of the lessons emerging from this research is that a movement's legacy is not limited to the institutional wins. It also resides in what communities learn about how to organize, negotiate, govern, and exercise power.

How to Read This Report

This report is designed as both an evaluation and a historical record. Readers can read through it from beginning to end as a narrative of GAPA's development, but its different features are intended to make the history accessible from several entry points.

- Historical sections situate GAPA within a much longer struggle over police violence, civilian oversight, and community control in Chicago.
- Timelines identify major moments in that longer history and in GAPA's development. They provide a chronological reference for a political process that was often nonlinear.
- Participant testimonies and quotations are used extensively throughout the report. They preserve differences in perspective, language, memory, and interpretation that would disappear if the movement were described only

through a single institutional narrative. Readers will sometimes encounter accounts that do not align perfectly. Those differences are intentional. GAPA was a coalition, not a single political voice, and disagreements about reform, abolition, elections, appointments, mayoral authority, political strategy, and the meaning of community control are part of its history.

- Infographics and visual materials translate particularly complicated aspects of the story—including the structure of Chicago's civilian-governance system, the evolution from GAPA to ECPS, and key stages of the campaign—into more accessible forms. They are intended to complement, rather than replace, the historical and qualitative analysis.

The report proceeds broadly from history, to organizing, to political power, to institutionalization. The early chapters explain why Chicago produced a demand for community control and how GAPA formed. The middle chapters examine the organizing relationships, community knowledge, and ideas about public safety and accountability that shaped the movement. Later chapters trace the political struggle that produced ECPS and the transition from movement organizing into institutional governance. The final chapter looks across GAPA's first decade to identify accomplishments, limitations, lessons learned, and priorities for strengthening community power through ECPS.

Finally, the recommendations should be read as emerging from the history and experiences documented in the report rather than as a separate technical exercise. They do not propose starting over or designing an entirely new system. Instead, they ask what is necessary for the institutions Chicago has already created to better fulfill their democratic purpose. The main recommendation coming out of this report is that the next phase depends on strengthening the conditions that make formal authority consequential: adequately resourced District Councils, informed and engaged residents; stronger connections between neighborhood priorities and citywide authority; independent organizing outside government; functional but independent relationships with the Chicago Police Department (CPD); continued leadership development; and ongoing community-centered evaluation.

Ultimately, this report preserves a history while asking what that history can teach us. GAPA's story demonstrates that institutional change begins long before legislation is passed. It begins when people share experiences, interpret those experiences collectively, develop leaders, build relationships across difference, and organize enough power to make institutions respond. The passage of ECPS gave some of that power a formal institutional home, but institutionalization did not end the struggle over community power. This may be the most important reason to document this history now. As the people, coalitions, and political conditions that produced

ECPS change, future generations should not inherit only the institution. They should also inherit the knowledge of how it was built, why communities demanded it, what organizers hoped it could become, where compromises were made, what tensions remained, and what work remains unfinished. Preserving that knowledge is itself part of preserving community power.

WHAT IS GAPA? FROM GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING TO A NEW STRUCTURE OF CIVILIAN GOVERNANCE

The Grassroots Alliance for Police Accountability (GAPA) is a Chicago-based coalition of community organizations that emerged in 2016 with an ambitious goal: to fundamentally change the relationship between Chicago residents, the Chicago Police Department (CPD), and the institutions responsible for overseeing public safety. GAPA (also referred to as "the coalition") is a broad-based coalition committed to making neighborhoods safer, improving police practices and accountability, and transforming the relationship between CPD and the communities it serves. Yet understanding GAPA requires looking beyond its formal organizational description. GAPA was not simply an advocacy organization campaigning for a new police oversight board. It developed as a citywide organizing project concerned with a larger question: What would it mean for Chicago residents—particularly residents of communities most affected by policing and violence—to exercise meaningful power over the institutions responsible for public safety?[1]

This distinction is important because several terms associated with the movement toward civilian oversight in Chicago are sometimes used interchangeably, even though they describe different things. GAPA is an organizing coalition. The Empowering Communities for Public Safety (ECPS) ordinance is the legislation ultimately enacted by the Chicago City Council in 2021 because of GAPA's work. The Community Commission for Public Safety and Accountability (CCPSA) is the seven-member citywide civilian commission created under that ordinance. And the District Councils are 22 elected bodies—one corresponding to each Chicago police district—also established through ECPS. Together, the Community Commission and District Councils constitute a new institutional structure for civilian participation in public safety and police accountability. GAPA was one of the principal organizing forces responsible for making that structure politically possible.[2]

This distinction helps explain the trajectory examined throughout this report. GAPA began outside of government, as a coalition attempting to organize residents and build political power around police accountability. Over time, some of the coalition's ideas became embedded in municipal law and governmental institutions. The story of GAPA is therefore a story about what happens when demands developed

through community organizing move from the streets and meeting rooms into formal structures of government.

The Origins of GAPA

GAPA formally emerged in 2016, during one of the most consequential periods of organizing around police reform and accountability organizing in modern Chicago history. Its formation followed the November 2015 release of video showing Chicago police officer Jason Van Dyke fatally shooting 17-year-old Laquan McDonald in October 2014. The video's release intensified longstanding public anger over police violence, misconduct, racial disparities in policing, and the perceived inability of Chicago's existing accountability institutions to hold officers and police leadership meaningfully accountable.[3]

The crisis led then Mayor Rahm Emanuel to establish the Police Accountability Task Force which, in its 2016 report, concluded that Chicago's accountability system required substantial reform and recommended the creation of a community safety oversight structure. Critically, the Task Force argued that the powers and composition of such a body should be developed through broad public participation. GAPA grew directly from efforts to answer that call.[4]

But describing GAPA solely as a response to Laquan McDonald's killing understates the historical foundations of the coalition. Chicago's struggle over civilian oversight reaches back generations. The city's official history of the Community Commission identifies repeated demands for civilian participation in police governance dating back at least as far back as the Chicago Freedom Movement of the 1960s. In 1966, Martin Luther King Jr. and the Chicago Freedom Movement called for a citizens' review board to address grievances against police. By the 1970s, activists were advocating for models of community control that included elected civilian bodies operating at the police-district level. These demands developed alongside decades of organizing against police brutality, racial discrimination, political repression, torture, and misconduct. [5]

GAPA should therefore be understood as both a product of the political crisis surrounding Laquan McDonald's death and as part of a much longer Chicago tradition. The coalition inherited questions that Chicago organizers had been asking for decades: Who should have authority over policing? What constitutes meaningful civilian oversight? Is accountability primarily about investigating individual misconduct, or should residents also influence police policies and priorities? And how can communities that historically have had relatively little institutional power over policing obtain an enduring role in public safety governance? GAPA's answer increasingly centered community power.

Building an Oversight Model from Community Input

One of GAPA's defining characteristics was its attempt to develop an accountability structure through an extensive community-engagement process rather than beginning with a predetermined institutional model.[6] The coalition organized 19 community conversations involving more than 1,650 Chicago residents. These meetings were designed to allow residents across the city to identify concerns about policing and articulate what meaningful accountability should look like. GAPA supplemented this community-engagement process with research into civilian oversight systems elsewhere in the United States. Coalition members examined the design, authority, staffing, and limitations of other oversight bodies and consulted experts about different institutional approaches. This combination of community knowledge and comparative research became central to the coalition's approach. Rather than treating residents merely as audiences to whom a completed reform proposal would later be presented, GAPA organizers attempted to incorporate community experiences into the development of the proposal itself.[7]

The process ultimately produced a model built around two levels of civilian participation. At the citywide level, GAPA proposed a Community Commission capable of influencing police policy, accountability, and leadership. At the neighborhood level, it proposed elected District Councils corresponding to Chicago's police districts. The basic logic was that civilian oversight needed both a citywide institution capable of affecting systemic policy and hyperlocal institutions capable of keeping that system connected to residents.[8] This two-tiered structure became one of GAPA's most important contributions to the eventual ECPS framework.[9]

Why District Councils Matter

The District Council concept represented an especially significant feature of the GAPA model because it attempted to locate some portion of public-safety governance much closer to residents. Rather than relying exclusively on a single downtown oversight body, GAPA envisioned a civilian body within each of Chicago's 22 police districts. Under the structure eventually created through ECPS, every police district has its own District Council consisting of three elected District Councilors, producing 66 elected positions citywide.[10]

This design reflects an important distinction between centralized civilian oversight and decentralized community participation. A single citywide commission can develop policy and exercise institutional authority, but it may remain relatively distant from everyday neighborhood concerns. District Councils are intended to provide a recurring venue through which residents could raise public safety

issues, communicate with local police leadership, develop priorities, and connect neighborhood-level concerns to the citywide Community Commission.[11]

How District Councils Are Elected

District Councils differ from many traditional police oversight structures because their members are directly elected by Chicago voters. Each of Chicago's 22 police districts elects three District Councilors. The first District Council elections were held during Chicago's municipal election on February 28, 2023, meaning Chicago voters elected 66 District Council representatives across the city.[12]

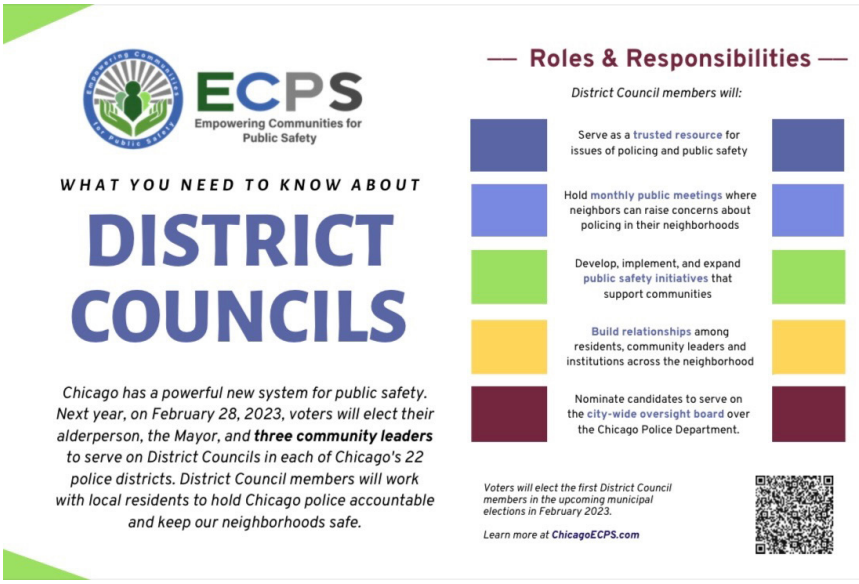
District Council elections occur as part of Chicago's regular municipal election cycle. Councilors serve four-year terms, paralleling the election cycle for the mayor and members of the Chicago City Council. Unlike alderpersons, whose constituencies are organized around Chicago's 50 wards, District Councilors represent residents according to the boundaries of the city's 22 police districts. A police district can encompass portions of multiple wards and multiple neighborhoods.[13] Each district is also led by a district commander and operates within CPD's broader command structure. Although department-wide policies apply across the city, district leadership plays an important role in setting local priorities, deploying officers, and shaping how policing is carried out within a district. As a result, residents' experiences with policing can differ considerably across Chicago's 22 districts, making the police district itself an important level at which to organize civilian participation and oversight.

The choice to make District Councilors elected officials was consequential. It established them not merely as volunteers appointed to advisory committees but as public officials with an independent democratic constituency. Their authority derives, at least in part, from voters within their police districts. The election model also embodies one of the larger ideas behind GAPA: communities should not simply be consulted about policing when government officials decide consultation is necessary. They should possess permanent institutional mechanisms through which residents can select representatives and participate in public-safety governance.

What District Councils Do

The District Councils occupy a distinctive position within Chicago's public-safety structure. They are neither miniature police departments nor misconduct-investigation agencies. They do not replace the Civilian Office of Police Accountability (COPA), the Police Board, the Office of Inspector General, or CPD's Bureau of Internal Affairs. Among their central responsibilities are:

1. **Holding public meetings.** Each District Council holds a public meeting at least once a month, where residents can raise concerns, discuss public safety, interact with Councilors, and participate in conversations concerning policing and neighborhood conditions.
2. **Building relationships between communities and police.** District Councils are expected to strengthen communication between residents and police leadership.
3. **Supporting community policing and public-safety initiatives.** Councils collaborate in the development and implementation of community-policing initiatives and help identify approaches responsive to neighborhood priorities.
4. **Identifying local concerns and setting priorities.** Because Councilors represent individual police districts, they bring neighborhood-level experiences and concerns into the broader oversight system. District Counselors also set priorities for the Commission.
5. **Serving as the local connection to the Community Commission.** CCPSA describes District Councils as the Commission's "eyes and ears," communicating information, community needs, recommendations, and strategic priorities from individual districts to the citywide body.
6. **Participating in the selection of Community Commissioners.** District Councilors play an important role in the process through which candidates for the citywide Community Commission are identified and nominated, creating an institutional connection between Chicago's elected neighborhood-level oversight bodies and its citywide civilian commission.



More important to the institutional design is the creation of permanent, elected District Councilors whose responsibilities extend beyond responding to individual incidents of police misconduct. Their ongoing presence creates the potential for sustained and preventative work around policing and public safety, rather than limiting civilian participation to moments of crisis or occasional citywide hearings. Monthly public meetings provide one forum for that work, but meetings alone do not constitute meaningful oversight and can risk becoming procedural checkboxes. One challenge for District Councils has therefore been demonstrating that they are more than another government meeting, such as CAPS or City Council, and that their role includes sustained, independent engagement with policing between meetings. How that role takes shape can vary considerably across districts because each contains different neighborhoods, public-safety concerns, political dynamics, and relationships with CPD.

The Community Commission for Public Safety and Accountability

The second major component of the system is the Community Commission for Public Safety and Accountability (CCPSA), also known as the "Commission." Where District Councils operate at the police district level, the Commission operates citywide. The Commission consists of seven civilian members who are appointed rather than directly elected, but whose selection begins with a community-driven nomination process led by elected District Councilors. One representative from each of Chicago's 22 District Councils serves on a Nominating Committee that identifies candidates for Commission vacancies; the Mayor selects commissioners from those nominees, and the City Council must confirm the appointments. This structure gives Chicago residents an indirect but institutionalized role in determining who serves on the citywide Commission. The Commission's creation represented a substantial departure from a system in which authority over major policing decisions rested overwhelmingly with the mayor, CPD, and other established municipal institutions. Among its responsibilities are significant powers involving police policy, accountability, public engagement, and the selection of public-safety leadership. Importantly, the Commission has authority to create certain policies without requiring CPD approval, giving civilians a direct role in shaping the rules that govern policing rather than serving solely in an advisory capacity. This authority became especially visible when, in 2023, the Commission identified three finalists for the CPD Superintendent position. The Commission's existence therefore gives civilian oversight a role not only in responding to misconduct but in governing the policies, institutions, and leadership that shape policing in Chicago.[14]

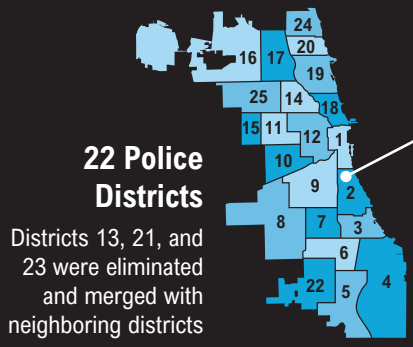
OVERSIGHT POWERS OF THE DISTRICT COUNCIL & CCPSA

District Council work with community members

1. Participate in monthly public meetings where residents work on local initiatives rooted in community concerns and priorities
2. Gather input on Police Department policies and practices
3. Work on public safety programs
4. Work to improve policing and increase accountability in the district

Local Police Districts

1. Set Priorities
2. Address and resolve community concerns
3. Increase accountability
4. Work on public safety programs



22 Police Districts

Districts 13, 21, and 23 were eliminated and merged with neighboring districts

22 District Councils

3 District Council members per district

66 District Council members

Nominate Commissioners, provide information, and propose annual priorities

Share updates and request information

Community Commission for Public Safety and Accountability (CCPSA)

7 Commissioners

COPA

1. Draft, review and approve COPA policies and goals
2. Recommend appointment and removal of the Chief Administrator

Chicago Police Department

1. Draft, review and approve CPD policies and goals
2. Recommend appointment and removal of the Superintendent

Chicago Police Board

1. Draft, review and approve Board policies and goals
2. Recommend appointment and removal of Board members

THE STRUCTURE AT A GLANCE

The distinction among the organizations and institutions can be summarized as follows:

GAPA (Organizing Coalition)

The Grassroots Alliance for Police Accountability (GAPA) is a coalition of community organizations that organizes Chicago residents to build community power and advance civilian oversight and police accountability (GAPA).

ECPS (Law)

The Empowering Communities for Public Safety (ECPS) ordinance is the legislation passed by the Chicago City Council in July 2021. It transformed years of advocacy and negotiation into municipal law (City of Chicago, 2021; CCPSA).

District Councils (Elected Local Bodies)

ECPS established 22 District Councils in Chicago, one for each CPD police district. Each consists of three elected Councilors, for 66 elected Councilors citywide. Councilors serve four-year terms and hold monthly public meetings (CCPSA).

CCPSA (Citywide Civilian Commission)

The Community Commission for Public Safety and Accountability is the seven-member citywide body created by ECPS. It exercises responsibilities related to systemic police policy, accountability, public engagement, and public-safety leadership (CCPSA).



This progression is not simply chronological. It captures a movement from informal community power to formal governmental authority.

From GAPA to ECPS

GAPA developed and advocated for its own civilian-oversight proposal beginning in the years following the Coalition's formation. At the same time, other Chicago organizations were advancing different models of civilian oversight and community control. Most prominently, the Chicago Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression (CAARPR), founded in 1973, brought a decades-long tradition of organizing against police violence and for greater community control of policing to the debate.[15] Its campaign for an elected Civilian Police Accountability Council (CPAC) took shape more specifically in 2012, following the killing of Rekia Boyd by off-duty Chicago police detective Dante Servin, when CAARPR began organizing around a model that would give elected community representatives substantial authority over policing.[16] Over the following years, CAARPR built support for CPAC through sustained grassroots organizing, eventually advancing a proposed ordinance that called for an elected, all-civilian council with significant authority over police policy, misconduct investigations, and discipline.[17] The CPAC ordinance was introduced in the Chicago City Council in 2016, while GAPA subsequently introduced its own proposal for a citywide commission and elected district-level councils in 2018.[18] Although both campaigns sought to expand civilian power over policing, they reflected different approaches to institutional design, political strategy, and the meaning of community control. In 2020, GAPA and CAARPR joined forces to develop a unified proposal incorporating elements of both the GAPA and CPAC models. That compromise became the Empowering Communities for Public Safety (ECPS) ordinance.[19]

In July 2021, the Chicago City Council passed ECPS, which established the institutional structure that exists today. The ordinance articulated several broad objectives for the new system including increasing public safety, strengthening police accountability, improving relationships between CPD and residents, ensuring that police policies respond to community needs, and giving Chicagoans a meaningful role in oversight and public-safety decision-making.[20]

An Interim Community Commission was established in 2022. Chicago held its first elections for District Councilors in 2023. In 2024, elected District Council members participated in nominating candidates for the permanent Community Commission, after which the mayor selected Commission members through the process established under the ordinance. Thus, nearly eight years elapsed between GAPA's formation in 2016 and the seating of a permanent Commission connected to the city's newly elected District Councils.[21]

GAPA in the National Landscape of Civilian Oversight

GAPA developed its proposal within a much broader national landscape of civilian police oversight. By the time the coalition formed in 2016, jurisdictions across the

United States had experimented with civilian oversight for decades, but there was no single model for how these systems should be structured or how much authority civilians should possess. The National Association for Civilian Oversight of Law Enforcement (NACOLE) identifies several common approaches, including systems in which civilian agencies independently investigate allegations of misconduct; systems in which civilian bodies review investigations conducted by law-enforcement agencies; and monitoring or auditing systems that examine complaint processes, patterns, policies, and organizational practices. Many jurisdictions combine elements of these approaches into hybrid models.[22]

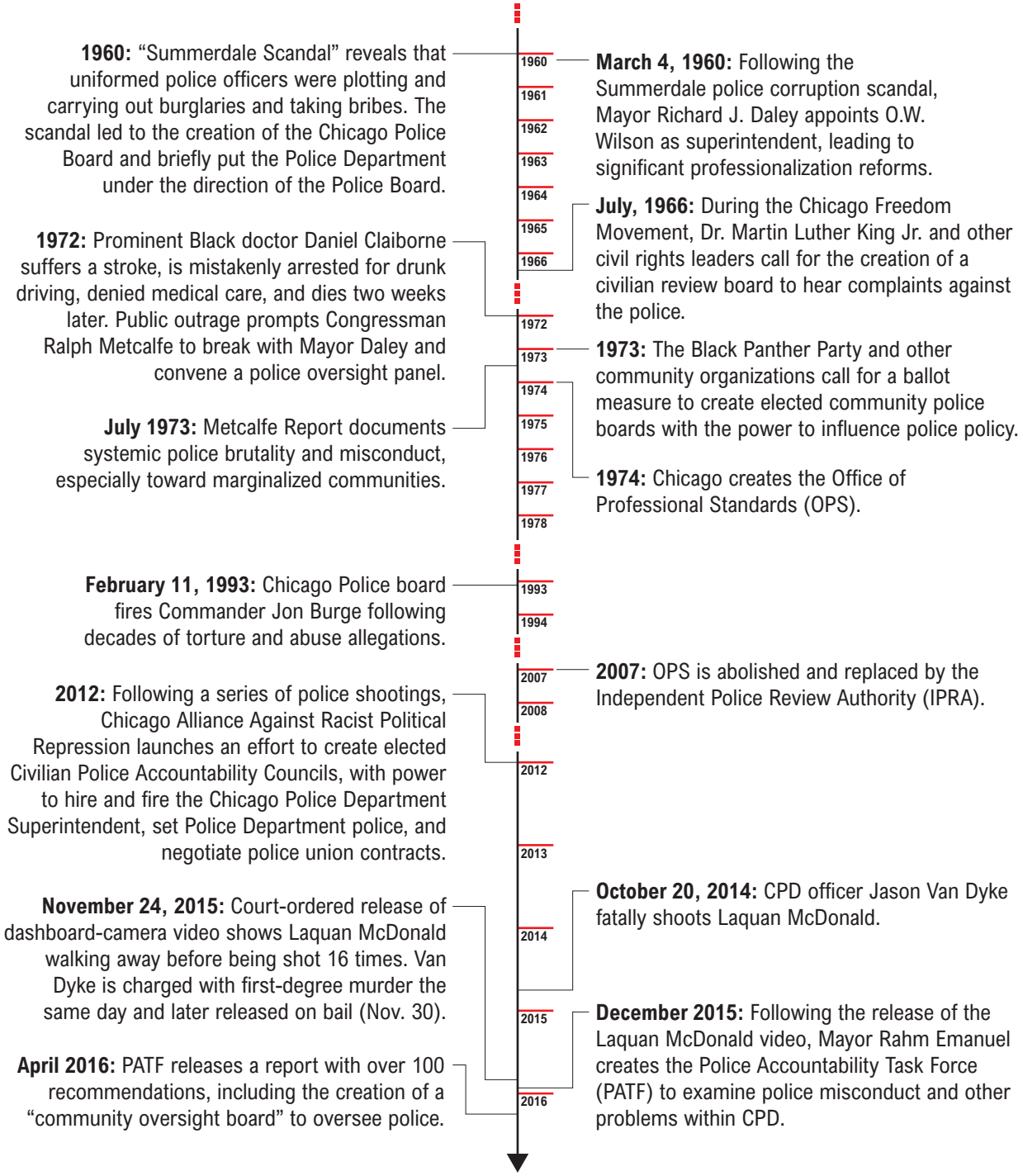
The New York City Civilian Complaint Review Board (CCRB) illustrates one prominent approach. The CCRB is an independent civilian agency authorized to receive and investigate complaints alleging certain forms of misconduct by New York Police Department officers; make findings; and recommend disciplinary action. Its investigations are conducted by civilian employees, but final disciplinary authority remains with the Police Commissioner.[23] The model therefore gives civilians an important independent role in investigating alleged misconduct while maintaining a distinction between civilian investigation and ultimate disciplinary authority.

Other cities have developed civilian bodies with broader policy and institutional responsibilities. Oakland's Police Commission, for example, oversees policies and practices of the Oakland Police Department and operates as part of a larger civilian-accountability structure that also includes the Community Police Review Agency which investigates police misconduct, and the Office of the Inspector General which performs auditing and oversight functions. The Commission's responsibilities extend beyond individual complaints to questions of police policy, practices, accountability, and discipline.[24]

Alongside 19 Community Conversations involving more than 1,650 Chicago residents in November and December 2016,[25] GAPA coalition members researched civilian oversight systems throughout the United States, considering their design, authority, staffing, and limitations, and consulting experts about different institutional approaches.[26] This work took place in a city that already had a civilian agency responsible for investigating certain allegations of police misconduct—first the Independent Police Review Authority (IPRA) and, beginning in 2017, its successor, the Civilian Office of Police Accountability (COPA), both discussed in greater detail later in this report. The proposal that emerged drew on two forms of knowledge: comparative research into existing oversight institutions and the experiences and priorities articulated by Chicago residents themselves.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE OF CIVILIAN POLICE OVERSIGHT, GAPA, AND ECPS IN CHICAGO

Major events in the development of civilian police oversight in Chicago, the emergence of the Grassroots Alliance for Police Accountability (GAPA), and the implementation of the Empowering Communities for Public Safety (ECPS) ordinance in Chicago.



1960: "Summerdale Scandal" reveals that uniformed police officers were plotting and carrying out burglaries and taking bribes. The scandal led to the creation of the Chicago Police Board and briefly put the Police Department under the direction of the Police Board.

March 4, 1960: Following the Summerdale police corruption scandal, Mayor Richard J. Daley appoints O.W. Wilson as superintendent, leading to significant professionalization reforms.

July, 1966: During the Chicago Freedom Movement, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders call for the creation of a civilian review board to hear complaints against the police.

1972: Prominent Black doctor Daniel Claiborne suffers a stroke, is mistakenly arrested for drunk driving, denied medical care, and dies two weeks later. Public outrage prompts Congressman Ralph Metcalfe to break with Mayor Daley and convene a police oversight panel.

1973: The Black Panther Party and other community organizations call for a ballot measure to create elected community police boards with the power to influence police policy.

July 1973: Metcalfe Report documents systemic police brutality and misconduct, especially toward marginalized communities.

1974: Chicago creates the Office of Professional Standards (OPS).

February 11, 1993: Chicago Police board fires Commander Jon Burge following decades of torture and abuse allegations.

2007: OPS is abolished and replaced by the Independent Police Review Authority (IPRA).

2012: Following a series of police shootings, Chicago Alliance Against Racist Political Repression launches an effort to create elected Civilian Police Accountability Councils, with power to hire and fire the Chicago Police Department Superintendent, set Police Department police, and negotiate police union contracts.

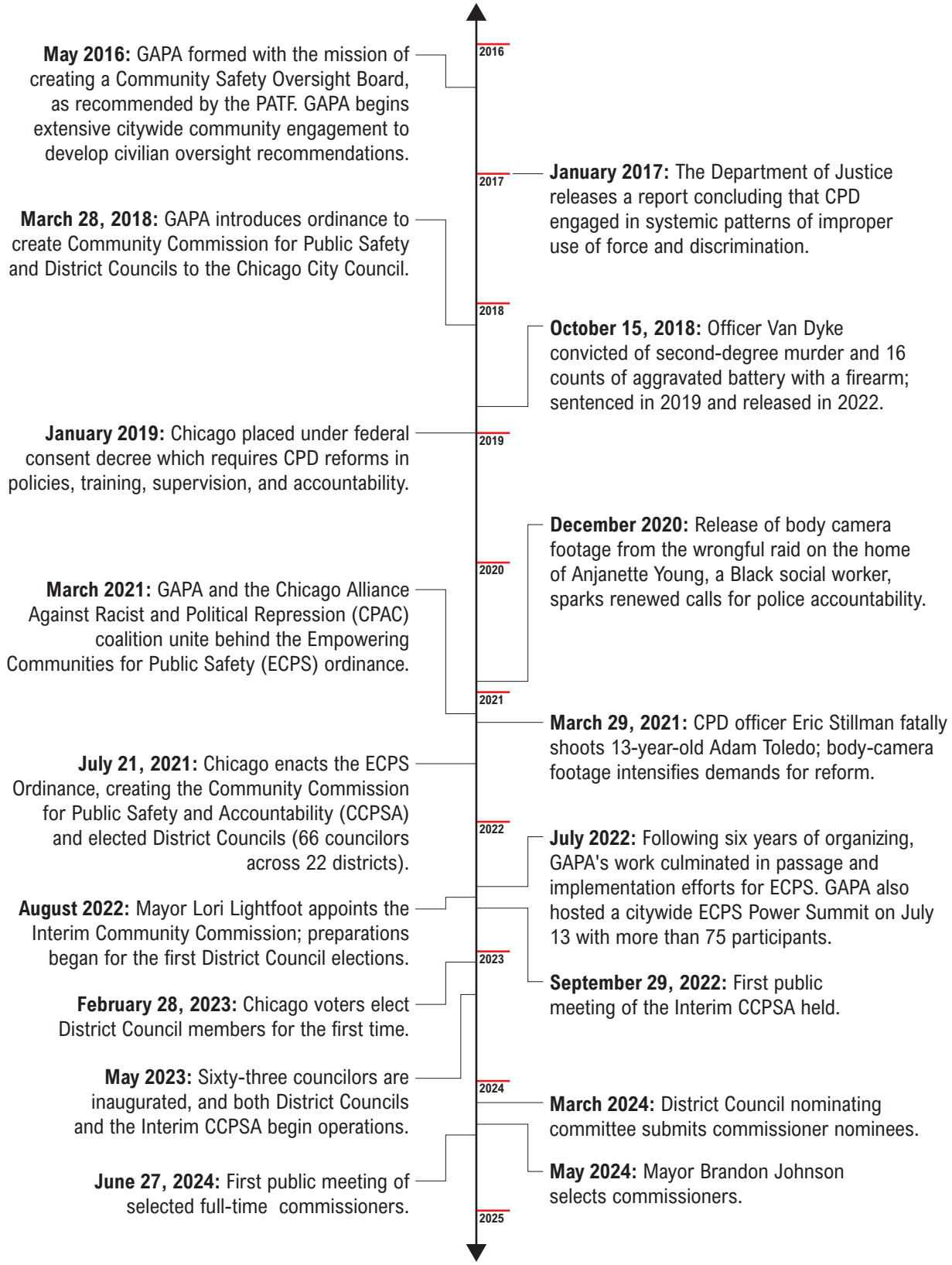
October 20, 2014: CPD officer Jason Van Dyke fatally shoots Laquan McDonald.

November 24, 2015: Court-ordered release of dashboard-camera video shows Laquan McDonald walking away before being shot 16 times. Van Dyke is charged with first-degree murder the same day and later released on bail (Nov. 30).

December 2015: Following the release of the Laquan McDonald video, Mayor Rahm Emanuel creates the Police Accountability Task Force (PATF) to examine police misconduct and other problems within CPD.

April 2016: PATF releases a report with over 100 recommendations, including the creation of a "community oversight board" to oversee police.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE OF CIVILIAN POLICE OVERSIGHT, GAPA, AND ECPS IN CHICAGO



CHAPTER 1. BEFORE GAPA: WHY CHICAGO PRODUCED A DEMAND FOR COMMUNITY CONTROL

The Grassroots Alliance for Police Accountability (GAPA) formed in 2016, following the release of the video showing Chicago Police Officer Jason Van Dyke shooting 17-year-old Laquan McDonald sixteen times.[27] The killing, and the more than year-long delay in releasing the video, generated widespread outrage across Chicago and intensified public scrutiny of the Chicago Police Department (CPD), the mayor's office, and the institutions charged with police accountability.[28] But GAPA did not emerge from this moment alone. For many of the organizers involved in the movement, Laquan McDonald's murder was part of a much longer history of police violence, racial inequality, and failed efforts to hold police accountable.

The Murder of Laquan McDonald

On October 20, 2014, Chicago Police Officer Jason Van Dyke shot Laquan McDonald sixteen times.[29] McDonald was 17 years old and from Chicago's West Side.[30] Police initially reported that McDonald had lunged toward officers while carrying a knife.[31] More than a year later, after a Cook County judge ordered its release, dashboard-camera footage showed McDonald walking away from officers when Van Dyke opened fire.[32] McDonald fell after the initial shots, and Van Dyke continued firing while he was on the ground.[33]

The circumstances surrounding the video's release became nearly as politically consequential as the footage itself. The public did not see the video until November 2015, more than a year after McDonald was killed.[34] Media reported on communications involving Mayor Rahm Emanuel's administration and raised questions about why the footage had remained out of public view and how city officials had handled the case.[35] The public response was immediate. Protesters took to the streets, political pressure on Mayor Rahm Emanuel intensified, and the credibility of Chicago's police accountability system came under renewed scrutiny.[36] For many of the people later involved in GAPA, the Laquan McDonald case confirmed concerns about police misconduct that extended well beyond the actions of a single officer. Brian Young recalled that "in terms of the Grassroots Alliance for Police Accountability, a lot of this really, really kicked off following the killing of Laquan McDonald." Oswaldo Gomez similarly recalled:

> "I think the thing that really coalesced everyone was the murder of Laquan McDonald. And a couple things became apparent when that happened: number one, you can't ignore what was caught on video, right? And the judicial system, which is one of the parts of the police accountability apparatus, was too slow. It was just too slow."

The Laquan McDonald case implicated the broader system responsible for responding to police misconduct and violence. If video evidence contradicting the official account of a police shooting could remain out of public view for more than a year, organizers had reason to question whether the institutions responsible for accountability could be relied upon to police themselves. Laquan McDonald's murder was therefore a catalyst, but it was a catalyst in a city where distrust had been produced over generations. The killing brought together concerns about police violence, racial inequality, government transparency, and the failures of existing accountability institutions. It also made the question of who controlled those institutions harder to avoid.

The Historic Roots of Community Control

> "…this movement has always had a clear political objective and that political objective is that Black people and other oppressed people of color need to have a say in who polices in their community and how their communities are policed. And that's how we define community control of the police…"
>
> – Frank Chapman

The demand for community control grew out of this history. At its core was a question about political power: Who should have a say in who polices a community and how that community is policed? For organizers such as Frank Chapman, this question connected the movement that eventually produced GAPA to a much longer Black political tradition in Chicago and nationally.

In his interview, Frank Chapman situated the struggle for community control of police within the longer history of Black political struggle in the United States. Chapman traces this history back to slavery, when policing and other forms of state authority were used to enforce racial domination, including through slave patrols charged with enforcing slave codes, suppressing rebellion, and capturing people who escaped enslavement. The period of Reconstruction after the Civil War briefly altered those political arrangements. As formerly enslaved Black people gained citizenship and voting rights, Black communities gained new opportunities to elect representatives and exercise political authority.[37] Chapman describes this period as an important, if

short-lived, example of policing being placed in the service of newly won democratic rights: "Yes, it is a historic act that policing can be used to defend the democratic gains of the people."

Those gains were systematically dismantled as Reconstruction ended. Black political power was suppressed, Jim Crow laws were established, and racial violence and lynching were used alongside formal state authority to restrict Black freedom.[38]

Community control became an explicit demand of Black political movements again during the 1960s and 1970s.[39] The Black Panther Party, for example, called for neighborhood-level institutions through which residents could exercise authority over the police serving their communities.[40] Bobby Seale (1968) described a system of elected neighborhood councils in which residents would have direct influence over the hiring and removal of officers. "Community control of the police," he argued, was necessary for the success of the Party's broader political program.

Chicago has its own long history of organizing around these questions. During the late 1960s, Fred Hampton and the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party organized against police brutality while situating policing within broader systems of racial and economic inequality.[41] Hampton was particularly influential in building alliances among groups that were often treated as politically distinct, including Black, Puerto Rican, and poor white residents.[42] His killing during a 1969 police raid became one of the starkest examples of how state violence was used to suppress Black political organizing and movements for community power in Chicago.[43]

Organizing for community control continued after Hampton's death. Building on the multiracial organizing of the late 1960s, surviving members of the Illinois Black Panther Party helped launch the Chicago Campaign for Community Control of Police in 1972.[44] By 1973, the campaign had brought together dozens of organizations in a multiracial coalition seeking to place the Chicago Police Department under the authority of elected, neighborhood-based community boards.[45] Organizers pursued this vision through a citywide ballot initiative, organizing precinct by precinct and attempting to collect enough signatures to place their proposed community-control ordinance before Chicago voters. The effort ultimately fell short. Balto (2023) attributes the defeat both to political opposition and to the enormous organizational challenge of gathering the signatures necessary to reach the ballot. In the aftermath, organizers shifted some of their strategy toward electoral politics, supporting progressive candidates who carried broader demands for community control into campaigns for public office.

While these earlier campaigns did not produce the system of community control organizers sought, they did establish an organizing tradition that would continue to shape police accountability politics in Chicago.[46] They also raised an issue that remained largely unresolved over the following decades: residents could organize

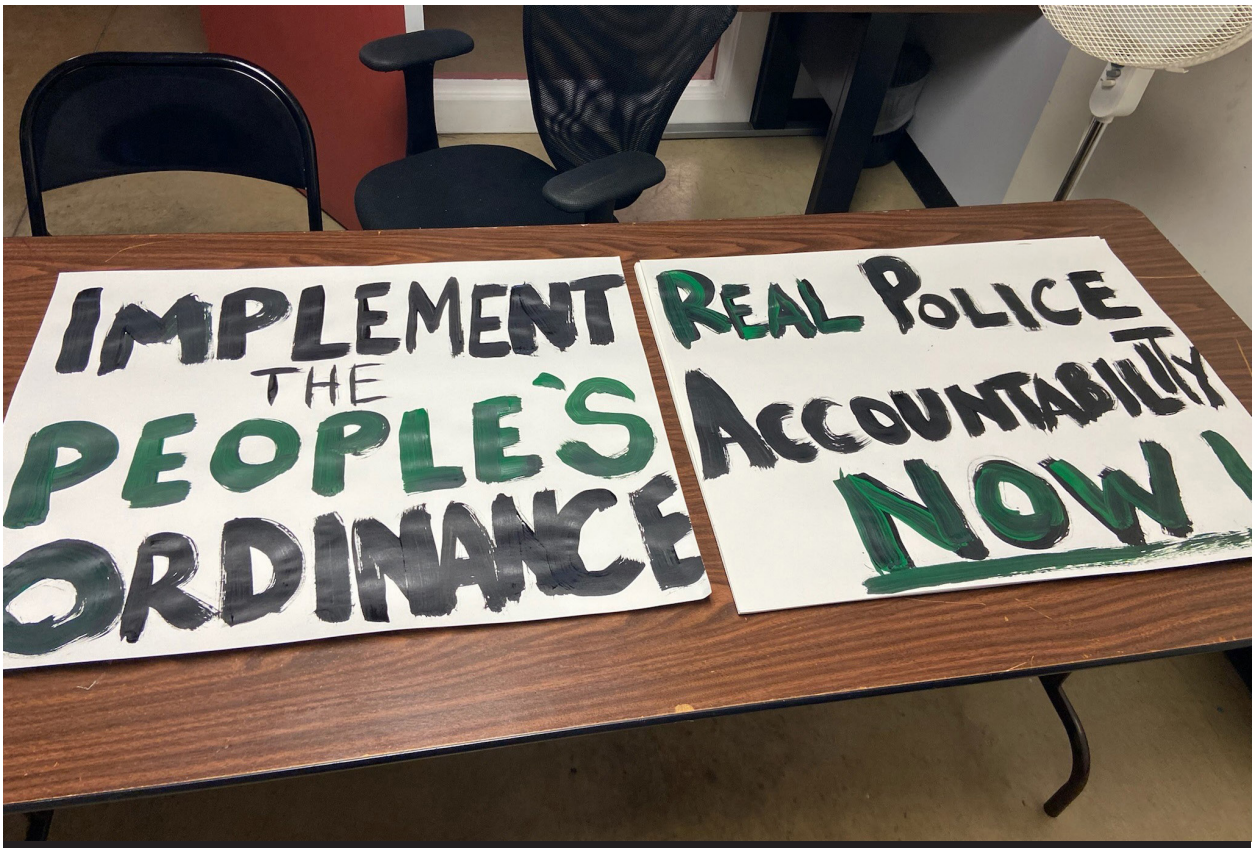
against police violence, demand investigations, and pressure elected officials, but they had few formal mechanisms for exercising power over the policies, leadership, and practices of the police department.[47] The persistence of that gap between community organizing and formal governmental authority became particularly important as Chicago experienced repeated police scandals.

Police Violence & the Limits of Accountability

The torture committed by Chicago Police Commander Jon Burge remains one of the clearest examples of the failures of the police, the courts, or policymakers in reigning in police abuse that shaped public distrust of police accountability in Chicago.[48] Between 1972 and 1991, Burge and officers working under his authority were implicated in the torture of over 125 people in police custody,[49] including practices that produced coerced confessions and wrongful convictions.[50] The extent of this pattern and practice of abuse became clearer over decades through the work of survivors, attorneys, journalists, and organizers. The Illinois Torture Inquiry and Relief Commission, created by the Illinois legislature in 2009, established a process through which some survivors of police torture could obtain judicial review of convictions allegedly based on coerced confessions.[51]

The Burge cases were significant not only because of the severity of the violence involved. They also raised questions about how such abuse could continue for years without meaningful institutional intervention.[52] Chicago repeatedly attempted to address problems of police accountability through changes to its police accountability system. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2, the city moved from the Office of Professional Standards (OPS) to the Independent Police Review Authority (IPRA) and eventually to the Civilian Office of Police Accountability (COPA). Each change was presented, at least in part, as a response to weaknesses in the system that came before it. Yet community advocates continued to raise concerns about institutional independence, transparency, investigative practices, and the concentration of final decision-making authority among the mayor, Police Superintendent, and Police Board.[53]

This history gradually widened the distance between two ideas that are sometimes treated as interchangeable: civilian oversight and community control. A civilian oversight body could employ civilians to investigate police misconduct without giving residents meaningful authority over police policy or leadership. On the other hand, organizers demanding community control sought to ensure that any group of civilians providing oversight remained close to the communities most affected by policing and had a tangible authority over policy. Conversations around such a distinction ultimately led to the question of where power over policing resided.



Protest signs made in support of the ECPS ordinance, 2020

From Police Accountability to Community Power

Under pressure to respond to the outcry over the police killing of Laquan McDonald, in December 2015, Mayor Emanuel established the Police Accountability Task Force (PATF) in response to the crisis surrounding McDonald's murder.[54] The Task Force documented significant failures within CPD and Chicago's broader police accountability system, including the disproportionate impact of policing on Black Chicagoans.[55] Among its recommendations was the creation of a Community Safety Oversight Board composed entirely of community representatives. The proposed board would oversee CPD and the city's other police accountability agencies, with its work shaped by the needs and priorities of Chicago communities.[56]

Organizers entered this moment with decades of experience confronting police violence and the limitations of previous accountability reforms, as well as a much longer tradition of organizing for community control. In this sense, the PATF recommendation provided an institutional opening for community organizations already organizing around policing and racial justice, and for demands that Chicago communities had been developing and advancing for generations.[57]



GAPA Organizing: Community members rally outside Alderman Chris Taliaferro's office, who later supported the ordinance

Organizing was never simply about winning legislation. It was about creating the conditions under which communities could govern themselves.

The distinction between another oversight body and a structure capable of exercising community power became increasingly important. Mecole McBride described the problem in terms of the absence of what she considered meaningful community oversight: "[W]e ain't had no real community oversight. It was a police board, but then that lost credibility, right? The whole police board was appointed by the mayor." Her concern points to an issue that would become central to GAPA's work: a body could be described as civilian oversight while the public remained several steps removed from deciding who served on it and how power was exercised.

Organizers were therefore beginning to ask for something different. They wanted residents to have a meaningful and permanent role in decisions about policing rather than being brought into the process primarily after a crisis had occurred.[58] Community control, in this sense, involved shifting the location of authority, rather than simply creating another opportunity for residents to provide input. That difference would eventually become central to the design of GAPA's proposal.[59]

The Limits of Federal Oversight Without Permanent Community Authority

In December 2015, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) opened a civil pattern-or-practice investigation into the Chicago Police Department, releasing its findings in January 2017. The investigation identified widespread civil rights violations and systemic deficiencies in CPD's use of force, accountability practices, training, supervision, and oversight.[60] These findings ultimately contributed to Chicago entering into a federal consent decree in 2019, which mandated reforms across numerous

areas of police practice, including use of force, accountability, training, supervision, data management, crisis intervention, and community policing.[61]

The consent decree placed CPD under federal judicial oversight and established legally enforceable requirements for reform.[62] At the same time, it did not resolve broader questions about the role of Chicago residents in overseeing the police. For some organizers, the consent decree instead reinforced the need for a separate and permanent structure through which communities could exercise oversight. As Gomez explained:

> "The calculations for a lot of people that were part of the early GAPA years was the consent decree will be something that has an ending. And we need something that is permanent. The consent decree didn't touch on things like a community oversight body."

Organizers for police accountability understood that the consent decree provided important guidelines to reform police conduct, but it did not provide a pathway for lasting federal or community accountability. Federal oversight and community control addressed different dimensions of police reform. A federal court could require CPD to change its policies and practices and hold the department accountable for meeting legally enforceable standards. Federal monitoring, however, did not provide Chicago residents with a permanent role in the city's public safety governance structure.[63]

The pace of consent decree implementation has also demonstrated the difficulty of translating mandated reforms into institutional change. Years after the decree took effect, substantial portions of its requirements remain incomplete.[64] For organizers, this reinforces a question that extends beyond the specific requirements of the consent decree: What will remain once federal oversight ends, and what role will Chicago communities have in shaping the future of policing and police accountability?

The Question of Community Control

As discussed in this chapter, GAPA emerged from a particular moment of heightened public outcry over police misconduct and violence in Chicago, but the demand for community control was decades in the making. Over the years Chicago repeatedly created new accountability mechanisms, but residents continued to have limited formal authority over the institutions responsible for policing them.[65] What emerged from this history was a critique not only of police misconduct, but of the structure of police accountability itself. Residents could file complaints. They could attend public meetings. They could protest. They could demand investigations. They could pressure elected officials. But these forms of participation did not necessarily give communities power over police policy, leadership, or the institutions charged with accountability. The demand for community control sought to address that gap.

However, not everyone involved agreed about what community control should look like. As the following chapters show, organizers disagreed over how much authority a civilian body should and could possess, how its members should be selected, how much power should remain with the mayor, and whether civilian oversight represented meaningful transformation or reform of an institution some believed required much more fundamental change. Those disagreements would become important, but they occurred within a broader shift in the politics of police accountability in Chicago. The central question was increasingly not only whether police should be subject to stronger oversight, but whether the people most affected by policing should have an institutionalized role in governing it. It was within this political and historical context that GAPA formed in 2016.

Chapter 2 turns to that formation: the shortcomings of Chicago's existing accountability institutions, the organizations and individuals that came together to create GAPA, and the negotiations required to build a coalition around a shared—but not always identical—vision of community power.

CHAPTER 2. THE BIRTH OF GAPA

By the time GAPA formed in 2016, Chicago already had a long history of institutions designed to address police misconduct and accountability. Over several decades, the city created, restructured, and replaced agencies responsible for investigating misconduct and overseeing aspects of police discipline. For many organizers, however, the central limitation of these reforms was not simply how well the institutions performed their assigned functions, but where decision-making authority ultimately remained. The events surrounding the murder of Laquan McDonald made those limitations difficult to ignore. The delayed release of the video, the stark discrepancy between the video and the initial police account, and the broader crisis of confidence that followed raised questions not only about the performance of particular agencies but about the structure of police accountability in Chicago itself.[66] The issue was no longer simply whether the city needed another investigative body, but whether meaningful



GAPA Press Conference: A leader with the Southwest Organizing Project speaks out about the need for police accountability, 2019

accountability was possible when authority remained concentrated within institutions that communities themselves had little role in governing.[67]

GAPA emerged from this context. Its formation brought together organizations with different constituencies, organizing traditions, political ideologies, and relationships to government. What initially united them was not complete agreement over the form police accountability should take, but a growing conviction that existing systems had failed to provide communities with a meaningful and durable role in police governance.[68] This chapter examines that transition. It first reviews the accountability institutions that preceded GAPA and the criticisms that surrounded them. It then uses interview data to turn to the coalition's formation, the community-based process through which GAPA developed its proposal, and the strategic and ideological differences coalition members had to negotiate as they attempted to move from dissatisfaction with existing oversight toward a new model of community power.

A History of Civilian Oversight Without Community Control

Civilian oversight of police is not new to Chicago or to the United States. Across the country, civilian review structures have taken a variety of forms, ranging from agencies that investigate individual allegations of misconduct to bodies that monitor patterns of police behavior or make policy recommendations.[69] These institutions have often emerged during periods of declining police legitimacy, particularly following highly publicized incidents of police violence.[70] Research on civilian oversight identifies several institutional features that can shape the effectiveness and legitimacy of oversight bodies, including independence from the departments they monitor; sufficient investigative and financial resources; transparency; meaningful authority; and sustained engagement with affected communities.[71] These features are particularly important because civilian oversight bodies often operate within broader institutional arrangements in which final disciplinary, policy, or personnel authority remains elsewhere.[72]

Chicago's experience reflected many of these tensions. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, civil rights organizations, community groups, and legal advocates were increasingly challenging the adequacy of the Chicago Police Department's (CPD) internal mechanisms for investigating police misconduct.[73] In 1972, Congressman Ralph Metcalfe convened a Blue Ribbon Panel to examine allegations of police abuse and the city's response to complaints of misconduct.[74] The resulting report sharply criticized the department's internal disciplinary system, concluding that civilian complaints were routinely rejected and that officials responsible for police conduct had failed to enforce adequate standards of behavior.[75] The city's response was the creation of the Office of Professional Standards.

The Office of Professional Standards (1974-2007)

In 1974, Chicago created the Office of Professional Standards (OPS), a civilian-staffed investigative body within CPD, following recommendations for a new mechanism to investigate allegations of police misconduct.[76] Its creation represented an important departure from the department's earlier approach to misconduct investigations, which had relied largely on sworn police personnel to investigate allegations against other officers. OPS assumed responsibility for investigating serious allegations of misconduct, including excessive force, police shootings, deaths in police custody, and domestic disputes involving officers.[77]

The structure of OPS nevertheless raised persistent questions about its independence. Although its investigators were civilians, OPS remained organizationally located within CPD, and its chief administrator worked under the Police Superintendent. Investigators could include former law enforcement officers, although former CPD officers were prohibited from serving in those positions.[78] OPS also lacked final authority over officer discipline. Its role was primarily investigative: it could reach findings and recommend disciplinary action, but ultimate authority over discipline remained elsewhere within CPD and the city's broader disciplinary system, including with the Superintendent and, in cases involving serious discipline, the Chicago Police Board.[79]

Critics also questioned the quality and transparency of OPS investigations. Attorneys and community advocates argued that investigations placed substantial evidentiary burdens on complainants and that relatively few complaints resulted in sustained findings.[80] OPS also lacked subpoena power and did not conduct public hearings. Although it provided periodic reports to the Police Board, the information available to the public offered limited insight into how individual findings were reached or whether complaints reflected broader patterns of misconduct.[81] These concerns were reflected in the office's outcomes. Human Rights Watch (1998) reported that OPS sustained approximately 8 to 10 percent of investigated excessive-force complaints during the mid-1990s, while critics maintained that an even smaller share ultimately resulted in discipline after departmental review and appeals.[82] Similar patterns remained visible in the early 2000s: in 2001, for example, OPS completed 2,648 excessive-force complaint investigations, sustaining 170—approximately 6.4 percent—while 1,827 were classified as "not sustained" because investigators determined that there was insufficient evidence to prove or disprove the allegation.[83] Together, these limitations contributed to a larger concern: although civilians conducted the investigations, the institution responsible for those investigations remained embedded within the police department it was charged with investigating.

The Jon Burge torture scandal illustrated both the capacity and the limitations of this model. In 1990, OPS investigator Michael Goldston conducted a broader examination of allegations involving officers assigned to Area 2, the police detective area covering much of Chicago's far south and southeast sides. The resulting Goldston Report identified dozens of alleged torture victims and concluded that abuse had occurred systematically over more than a decade. It further found that command personnel were aware of the pattern and had perpetuated it either by participating in the abuse or failing to stop it.[84] A related OPS investigation into the torture of Andrew Wilson recommended the termination of Burge and Detectives John Yucaitis and Patrick O'Hara.[85] Yet these findings did not translate into immediate accountability. The Goldston Report, completed in 1990 but not released publicly until 1992, was initially suppressed within CPD, and although Burge was ultimately fired in 1993, Yucaitis and O'Hara were acquitted of charges and remained on the force. The episode demonstrated that OPS could uncover and document serious misconduct, but its findings and recommendations remained dependent on a broader disciplinary system over which the office had limited control.

By the mid-2000s, these concerns had become increasingly difficult to separate from broader questions about the legitimacy of Chicago's police accountability system. Low rates of sustained complaints and meaningful discipline, continuing allegations of excessive force, and high-profile misconduct cases reinforced criticism that civilian investigators alone were insufficient to ensure independent accountability. In 2007, amid renewed controversy over a cluster of highly visible police misconduct scandals in 2006 and 2007 and growing criticism of OPS, Chicago abolished the office and transferred its primary investigative responsibilities to the newly created Independent Police Review Authority (IPRA).



From OPS to IPRA (2007-2017)

In 2007, Chicago replaced OPS with the Independent Police Review Authority (IPRA). Unlike OPS, which had operated within CPD, IPRA was established as a separate civilian agency reporting directly to the mayor. The change addressed one of the most persistent criticisms of OPS by formally separating the investigation of serious police misconduct from the police department itself. IPRA assumed responsibility for investigating allegations including excessive force, police shootings, deaths in police custody, and certain other forms of serious misconduct.[86]

The creation of an independent agency, however, did not fundamentally restructure Chicago's broader system of police discipline. IPRA could investigate allegations, reach findings, and recommend discipline, but it did not possess final authority over disciplinary outcomes. That authority remained distributed among the Police Superintendent, Chicago Police Board, and other components of the city's disciplinary system. IPRA also inherited personnel and institutional practices from OPS, raising questions about the extent to which moving the investigative function outside CPD had transformed the underlying culture and practices of police accountability.[87]

Over time, IPRA's credibility deteriorated. Critics questioned the quality and impartiality of its investigations, its low rate of sustained complaints, and its handling of police shootings.[88] These concerns were reinforced by the agency's own outcomes. Between 2011 and 2015, 97% of approximately 28,500 complaints filed with IPRA resulted in no discipline.[89] Those outcomes also reflected stark racial disparities in whose complaints were sustained. The Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy (IRRPP) reviewed data by the U.S Department of Justice found that complaints filed by white Chicagoans were 3.7 times more likely to be sustained than complaints filed by Black Chicagoans and 2.8 times more likely to be sustained than those filed by Latinx Chicagoans. Although Black residents accounted for 61% of complaints, their complaints represented only 25% of those sustained; by contrast, white residents filed 21% of complaints but accounted for 58% of sustained complaints. Latinx residents filed 12% of complaints and accounted for 15% of those sustained.[90] In fact, since IPRA's creation in 2007, it had found only two of 409 on-duty police shootings unjustified, contributing to a widespread perception that formal civilian investigation rarely translated into findings against officers.[91] The Police Accountability Task Force would later conclude that IPRA had failed to establish sufficient independence and public legitimacy, and was an agency marked by inadequate investigations, insufficient transparency, poor leadership, and a lack of public trust.[92]

As discussed in the previous chapter, the 2014 police killing of Laquan McDonald became a defining test of IPRA and intensified scrutiny of Chicago's police accountability system. IPRA opened an investigation into the shooting, interviewing Van Dyke and gathering evidence while the case remained largely outside public view. The investigation unfolded against broader concerns about IPRA's independence: by 2015, the agency had investigated nearly 400 police shootings since its creation but had found only one to be unjustified.[93] Those concerns were reinforced by former IPRA supervising investigator Lorenzo Davis, who alleged that agency leadership had directed him to reverse sustained findings in several police-shooting investigations and fired him after he refused to do so.[94] Subsequent investigation by Chicago's Office of Inspector General found that Van Dyke had made false statements and material

omissions during his interview with IPRA, including falsely describing McDonald as advancing toward him and failing to disclose that McDonald had been walking away when Van Dyke approached and shot him.[95] The McDonald investigation therefore intensified questions not only about an individual officer's conduct, but about whether IPRA possessed the independence, transparency, and institutional capacity necessary to identify and challenge police misconduct effectively.

The McDonald case also exposed a problem that extended beyond the performance of a single investigative agency. Chicago had formally removed misconduct investigations from CPD and placed them in the hands of a civilian agency, yet one of the most consequential police shootings in the city's recent history still produced an official narrative that remained largely unchallenged in public until the video was compelled into public view.[96] The controversy demonstrated that structural independence on paper did not necessarily produce investigative independence, transparency, or public accountability in practice.

In the aftermath of the video's release, widespread protests and public pressure prompted Mayor Rahm Emanuel to create the Police Accountability Task Force. The Task Force's 2016 report concluded that Chicago's police accountability system was fundamentally broken and identified significant deficiencies within IPRA, including weak investigative practices, inadequate transparency, inconsistent discipline, and a profound lack of public trust.[97] The Task Force recommended replacing IPRA with a new civilian investigative agency. In 2016, the City Council created the Civilian Office of Police Accountability (COPA), which formally replaced IPRA in September 2017.



COPA and the Limits of Institutional Replacement

In 2016, Chicago created the Civilian Office of Police Accountability (COPA) to replace IPRA, with the new agency beginning operations in September 2017.[98] COPA was established as an independent civilian agency responsible for investigating some of the most serious allegations of police misconduct, including excessive force, domestic violence, coercion, improper searches and seizures, and incidents involving death or serious bodily injury. It also investigated all firearm discharges by CPD officers and other incidents within its jurisdiction. While COPA retained much of IPRA's investigative role, it was designed with greater institutional independence, including a guaranteed budget tied to CPD funding, access to independent legal counsel, stronger access to departmental records, restrictions on recently sworn CPD officers serving as investigators, and expanded public reporting requirements.[99]

COPA's creation was part of a broader restructuring of Chicago's police accountability system that took place following the murder of Laquan McDonald. The city also established a Deputy Inspector General for Public Safety within the Office of Inspector General whose responsibility was to audit and evaluate CPD and other components of the city's public safety and police accountability systems. This restructuring reflected an acknowledgment that changing the name or leadership of IPRA would be insufficient to restore public confidence in police oversight.

COPA nevertheless remained primarily an investigative body. It could conduct investigations, make findings, and recommend discipline, but it did not independently determine final disciplinary outcomes.[100] Depending on the case, disciplinary authority continued to involve the Police Superintendent and, for the most serious disciplinary matters, the Chicago Police Board. COPA therefore represented an effort to strengthen civilian investigation of police misconduct without fundamentally transferring governance of the police department to Chicago residents.

This distinction became increasingly important in the political environment that followed McDonald's murder. COPA could investigate serious misconduct; the Police Board could adjudicate disciplinary cases and exercise other oversight responsibilities; and the Office of Inspector General could audit and evaluate the accountability system. Yet none of these institutions, as originally structured, provided Chicago residents with an elected, neighborhood-based mechanism through which they could exercise sustained influence over police policy, leadership, or broader public-safety priorities.

For organizers who would become involved in GAPA, the problem was therefore not simply that Chicago lacked accountability institutions. By this point, the city had repeatedly redesigned those institutions—from OPS, to IPRA, to COPA—in an effort to strengthen civilian investigation and oversight. The unresolved question was one of power: whether residents would remain primarily complainants and observers within an institutionally managed accountability system, or whether they would have a formal role in governing policing itself. This distinction between civilians participating in an accountability system (civilian oversight) and communities possessing power within that system (community governance) would become central to GAPA's development.

From Institutional Failure to a Demand for Community Oversight

Interview participants repeatedly described the failure of existing accountability mechanisms as an important reason they became involved in organizing for police accountability. The murder of Laquan McDonald was particularly influential because it brought to the forefront concerns, like failures of accountability and the lack of institutional oversight, that many organizers had encountered separately for years. Participants' reflections point to an important feature of GAPA's formation—the coalition

did not begin from a technical discussion about the ideal design of a civilian review board. Organizers began with the recognition that institutions already responsible for accountability had not earned sufficient public trust, particularly within communities that experienced police violence most directly.

The Formation of GAPA

In April 2016, the Police Accountability Task Force recommended several changes to Chicago's police accountability system, including replacing IPRA with a new civilian investigative agency and creating a separate community oversight body with authority over CPD and the city's accountability institutions. Rather than specifying this oversight body's precise powers or composition, the Task Force recommended that these questions be resolved through broad public input.[101] GAPA formed shortly afterward, in May 2016, specifically to undertake that community-driven process.[102] Its formation occurred alongside, but separately from, the City's development of COPA. While City Council moved forward with replacing IPRA with COPA in October 2016, GAPA organizations urged the City to delay action on the proposed community oversight body until residents had an opportunity to shape its design. The Mayor's Office agreed, leaving GAPA to organize a broader community process around what such a body should look like and what powers it should possess.[103]

Early participants in this coalition included organizations with different constituencies and organizing histories, among them Asian Americans Advancing Justice, Churches United, Communities United, Community Renewal Society, Inner City Muslim Action Network (IMAN), Jewish Council on Urban Affairs (JCUA), Lugenia Burns Hope Center, Mothers Opposed to Violence Everywhere (MOVE), Organizing Neighborhoods for Equality: Northside (ONE Northside), Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP), TARGET Area Development Corporation, United Congress of Community and Religious Organizations (UCCRO), Westside Health Authority, and Impact for Equity (formerly Business and Professional People for the Public Interest, or BPI). Many of these organizations already had deep relationships within neighborhoods affected by police misconduct, violence, racial inequality, disinvestment, and other forms of institutional harm. Their organizing work in housing, education, violence prevention, racial justice, criminal justice reform, faith organizing, and other community issues shaped the kind of coalition that GAPA became. Their broader organizing base meant that they did not understand policing as an isolated policy issue. They encountered police accountability through existing work with residents whose experiences with law enforcement intersected with schools, neighborhoods, public institutions, violence, and the criminal legal system.

Mecole McBride, former GAPA coordinator, described that relationship directly. For her, work on racial inequity and criminal justice naturally led to questions about policing because encounters with law enforcement often represented a person's first point of contact with the carceral system. Jackie Baldwin connected her involvement to her experience as a teacher. She recalled thinking that other professions were expected to be accountable for actions that harmed children or community members and questioned why police should be treated differently. For Elizabeth Rochford, founding member of ONE Northside, an organization traditionally focused on organizing to advance the interests of low- and working-class residents on Chicago's North Side, involvement arose from the organization's existing campaign structure. After completing earlier organizing efforts, ONE Northside was considering its next issue when the McDonald video was released. Police accountability became the next campaign not because it had always been the organization's sole focus, but because the moment demanded a response.

These different pathways into GAPA helped make the coalition broad. They also meant that coalition members entered the work with different political histories and understandings of what accountability should mean.

Building a Model Through Community Conversations

One of GAPA's defining decisions was to develop its proposal through an extensive community-engagement process rather than beginning with a fully formed institutional



Community convenes to discuss extremism in CPS with CCPSA and other elected leaders, 2025

model developed internally. In late 2016, GAPA organizations held 19 community conversations involving more than 1,650 Chicago residents. Participants were asked to identify concerns about policing, describe what meaningful accountability would look like, and make recommendations for improving police-community relations and public safety. The process was structured through local and citywide steering committees composed of representatives from the organizations involved in GAPA. Local committees brought together community leaders such as clergy, educators, business owners, block-club leaders, and other neighborhood stakeholders. Representatives from local steering committees then participated in a citywide process in which participants compared concerns across neighborhoods, considered competing approaches, and developed common priorities.

Over the course of the process, residents generated hundreds of recommendations. These discussions eventually informed GAPA's proposed accountability structure, including a citywide Community Commission and district-level bodies that would provide residents with a local connection to the broader oversight system. The process reflected an important shift in how police reform was usually developed. Residents were not simply asked to comment on a proposal after experts or elected officials had already designed it. Community input was central to shaping the proposal itself.

This approach would later become one of the coalition's central organizing principles, but at the time, it also created a practical challenge. GAPA had to translate a large and sometimes contradictory set of community experiences into a proposed accountability structure that was politically viable, legally defensible, and capable of maintaining the coalition's commitment to meaningful community authority.

A Coalition Built Across Differences

GAPA's breadth was one of its greatest strengths, but it also meant that the coalition was never ideologically uniform. Interview participants described considerable variation in how organizations understood police reform, community control, abolition, political strategy, and the appropriate relationship between civilian oversight and mayoral authority.

Aryeh Bernstein recalled that the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs (JCUA) considered participating in other police accountability coalitions before ultimately joining GAPA, including the campaign for a Civilian Police Accountability Council (CPAC). He emphasized that the choice between GAPA and CPAC was not simply an ideological divide between organizations that supported community control and those that did not, but rather organizations differed in their approaches to coalition building, legislative strategy, member-driven organizing, and relationships with other groups.



District Councilor Rosemarie Dominguez leads a presentation at the 2026 National Alternative Response Convening in Chicago

Chicago's police accountability movement therefore included multiple visions of how community power should be built and exercised. Organizations could agree that existing accountability structures were insufficient while differing over the strategies and institutional arrangements needed to replace them.

While both GAPA's proposal and the Chicago Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression's (CAARPR) CPAC proposal challenged the concentration of authority within existing city institutions, and both sought a more substantial community role in policing, they differed over questions including how civilian representatives should be selected, what powers they should possess, and how much authority should remain with the mayor. Those differences would later become central to the negotiations that produced the Empowering Communities for Public Safety (ECPS) ordinance.

GAPA operated during a period in which broader debates about policing were changing rapidly. Some activists increasingly questioned whether improved oversight could meaningfully transform policing at all. Calls for abolition and more fundamental restructuring of public safety raised a difficult question for organizations attempting to create a new police accountability institution: could civilian oversight redistribute power, or would it ultimately reinforce the institution it was intended to hold accountable?

Siobhan Peterson-Quinn articulated this tension directly:

> "The police accountability space sometimes feels like reinforcing this traditional institution of policing rather than building towards something different. Accountability today is essential, but I think there is an argument that these guardrails perpetuate an institution that has historically caused so much harm and I struggle with that."

Peterson-Quinn's concern captures an important tension that should not be flattened into a simple reform-versus-abolition divide. Participants often understood that a core problem of their desire for community safety was one of working within existing political conditions that presented an opening for greater civilian accountability over the police while remaining aware that this institutional reform might not address the deeper sources of violence and inequality they were concerned about.

Mecole McBride similarly described coalition work as occurring among organizations with different political perspectives on policing and reform. Rather than assuming that civilian oversight would resolve the broader harms and inequalities associated with policing, GAPA chose to build an institution that could meaningfully shift power toward communities most affected by policing. For coalition members, creating structures through which residents could exercise greater authority over police policy and accountability represented a concrete step toward addressing inequality rather than reproducing the systems they sought to change. This effort to build something transformative within existing political and institutional constraints would remain a central tension throughout GAPA's history.

Another central disagreement concerned the role of the mayor. Existing accountability structures had repeatedly left substantial authority in the hands of the mayor, Police Superintendent, and mayorally-appointed bodies. For organizers calling for community control, the degree to which a new civilian institution remained dependent upon mayoral appointment became a test of whether the reform actually altered existing power relationships. At the same time, coalition members had to work within Chicago's legal and political structure. Proposals that transferred greater authority away from the mayor raised questions about legal feasibility, institutional design, and the likelihood of securing sufficient political support. These disagreements reflected different answers to a core question: How much power had to move from established city institutions to communities for the new system to represent meaningful change?

GAPA did not completely resolve that question during its formation. Instead, the coalition developed a model while continuing to negotiate the boundaries between

influence and authority; appointment and election; reform and transformation. Those unresolved tensions later became central to the political negotiations surrounding ECPS.

What GAPA Built Before Legislative Victory

It is tempting to measure the early years of GAPA primarily in relation to the Empowering Communities for Public Safety (ECPS) ordinance that eventually emerged from the coalition's efforts. Doing so, however, can obscure what the coalition had already accomplished before any legislation passed. By bringing together organizations with different constituencies and political traditions, GAPA created a sustained citywide conversation about who should govern police accountability. Its community conversations gave residents a role in defining the problem and proposing solutions. The coalition developed relationships across neighborhoods and organizations that had not always worked together. It also began translating broad dissatisfaction with existing oversight into a concrete institutional proposal.



District Councilor Dion McGill leads a rally of community members outside a CCPSA meeting to ban pretextual traffic stops

Just as importantly, the coalition created a political space in which disagreements about policing could be negotiated without requiring complete ideological agreement. Members disagreed about abolition. They disagreed about the appropriate level of mayoral authority. They differed in their assessment of competing oversight proposals and in their preferred political strategies. Those tensions did not disappear, and at times they threatened the unity of the coalition. But participants continued working together because they shared a more basic belief: Chicago's existing system did not provide communities with enough authority over policing and without community oversight, police accountability had proved ineffective. In that sense, the birth of GAPA involved more than the creation of another advocacy coalition. It marked an effort to convert a longstanding demand for community control into an institutional proposal that could be organized around, negotiated, and eventually legislated.

The chapters that follow examine how that work happened. Chapter 3 turns from the coalition's formation to the organizing practices that allowed it to build relationships, develop community leaders, and translate neighborhood knowledge into political capacity. Later chapters trace how that organizing capacity became a theory of public safety and accountability, a political campaign, and ultimately a new set of institutions.

CHAPTER 3. ORGANIZING AS THE ENGINE OF CHANGE

Across interviews, participants consistently described organizing as the force that transformed widespread frustration with policing into a sustained movement for democratic change. Rather than viewing GAPA primarily as a policy campaign or legal reform effort, organizers emphasized that the coalition's success rested on years of relationship-building, political education, leadership development, and community engagement. Before the Empowering Communities for Public Safety (ECPS) ordinance reached City Hall, organizers were building trust through door knocking, public meetings, church organizing, and countless conversations with residents about their experiences of policing and their visions for public safety. Interview participants repeatedly argued that these organizing practices were not simply strategies used to achieve policy reform; they were the foundation upon which community power was built.

Three interconnected themes emerged from these interviews. First, participants described grassroots organizing strategies—including one-on-one conversations, political education, public meetings, leadership development, and organizing through trusted community institutions—as the engine that transformed individual concerns into collective political action. Second, they consistently elevated community knowledge as expertise, arguing that residents' lived experiences and neighborhood leadership were indispensable to designing meaningful systems of accountability. Finally, organizers reflected on the often-overlooked emotional labor of organizing, describing how grief, anger, hope, and a deep sense of responsibility sustained the movement through years of setbacks and victories. Together, these themes reveal that GAPA's most enduring contribution extends beyond the creation of a new police accountability system. Across interviews, participants portrayed the coalition as cultivating a democratic organizing infrastructure capable not only of advancing police accountability, but also of supporting future struggles for housing, education, economic justice, public health, and other issues affecting community well-being.

Grassroots Organizing Strategies

One of the clearest findings to emerge from the interviews is that GAPA's success cannot be understood solely through the passage of ECPS. Participants consistently rejected the notion that the coalition was primarily a policy campaign or legal reform

effort. Instead, they described GAPA as a community organizing project rooted in relationships, leadership development, political education, and sustained engagement with residents most directly impacted by policing.

Organizing Through Relationships

For many participants, organizing began with listening rather than advocating. The foundation of GAPA was described not as a legislative strategy but thousands of conversations with residents about their experiences with policing, violence, and safety. Joel Rodriguez argued that the coalition's early strength came from the relationships each organization had already cultivated within their communities:

> "The initiation of GAPA was rooted in the relational power that each organization brought to the table[...] We have hundreds of conversations, one-to-ones, with community residents just listening to young people and listening to parents, listening to grandmothers, grandfathers about their experience[...] All organizing should have that as its foundation."

Rather than beginning with predetermined policy solutions, organizers described spending years collecting stories and identifying shared experiences across neighborhoods. Those conversations ultimately shaped both the coalition's priorities and the design of ECPS itself. Participants repeatedly emphasized that organizing was not something done *for* communities but *with* communities. Brian Young described their role simply: "I'm an organizer[...] I bring community members into it, actually build with the community[...] build leadership[...] and build community power." This understanding of organizing fundamentally shifted the coalition's approach from public outreach to shared governance.

Public Meetings as Sites of Political Education & Leadership Development

Participants also described political education as one of GAPA's defining organizing strategies. Rather than assuming familiarity with police governance structures, GAPA organizers invested significant time translating complex policy language into accessible community discussions. Legal experts worked alongside organizers to make complicated policy accessible to residents with a wide range of educational backgrounds. Mecole McBride credited the law and policy team at Impact for Equity (formerly BPI) as "unsung heroes," explaining that they translated legal concepts into everyday language while organizers carried those conversations into neighborhoods throughout the city. Rather than treating residents as audiences for information, political education became an opportunity for collective policy development.



District Councilor Rosemarie Dominguez leads a presentation at the 2026 National Alternative Response Convening in Chicago

Participants also consistently argued that one of GAPA's most enduring accomplishments was not legislation but leadership development. Joshua Coakley summarized the coalition's contribution succinctly: "We organized leaders[...] voices that never had organizing training and never had advocacy training[...] we equipped leaders in the community to empower them to be the voices of reasoning and change." For Coakley, those leadership skills extend beyond police accountability. He argued that the organizing model utilized by GAPA could be applied to housing, education, and other community struggles because "people can come together." Participants repeatedly described organizing as the process of transforming residents into decision-makers.

Organizing as the Coalition's Enduring Legacy

Perhaps one of the strongest findings across interviews is that participants consistently measured GAPA's success more by the organizing infrastructure it created rather than

by the passage of ECPS. The coalition developed neighborhood leaders, strengthened relationships across organizations, translated policy into community knowledge, and established democratic practices that continue through district councils and ongoing public participation. As one organizer observed, organizing was never simply about winning legislation. It was about creating the conditions under which communities could govern themselves.

Community Knowledge as Expertise

A defining characteristic of GAPA's organizing model was its rejection of traditional hierarchies of expertise. Across interviews, participants challenged the assumption that knowledge about public safety should originate primarily from elected officials, attorneys, policy professionals, or policing experts. Instead, they argued that people who experience policing in their everyday lives possess knowledge that is essential to designing systems of accountability. Organizing, from this perspective, was not simply a means of mobilizing residents around predetermined policy solutions. It was a process for identifying, developing, and translating community knowledge into collective political action.

Marsheda Ewulomi, former staff counsel with BPI (now Impact for Equity), articulated this principle directly: "Those who are close to the problems are the experts in the solutions." Her point was not that legal or policy expertise was unnecessary. Attorneys and other specialists, she explained, "can help and support in the room." But technical expertise was meant to serve community-defined goals rather than determine them. The distinction mattered. Residents were not brought into the process simply to react to proposals developed elsewhere; their experiences helped establish what the coalition was trying to accomplish in the first place.

Brian Young similarly rejected the idea that organizers arrive in communities possessing knowledge that residents lack. "I don't believe organizers are bringing manna from heaven to the masses who don't know what's going on," they explained. "People very much, even if they can't always articulate it, know that they're oppressed." The organizer's task was instead to help transform that existing understanding into collective power: "Can you move the energy, the anger, the frustration[...] to building collective power that can actually change the political reality for the majority of us?"

Together, these perspectives suggest a particular division of labor within GAPA. Residents contributed knowledge rooted in lived experience; organizers created spaces in which that knowledge could be shared, interpreted, and connected across communities; and policy and legal experts helped translate collectively defined priorities into institutional proposals. Expertise was therefore distributed rather than concentrated in any single group.



GAPA Coordinator Siobhan Peterson-Quinn leads a presentation on the history of policing in Chicago with young people from Chicago's Southwest Side

Neighborhood Stories & Institutions as Sources of Political Knowledge

Community knowledge did not emerge only through formal meetings. Participants described it as something accumulated over time through neighborhood relationships, family histories, churches, schools, and community organizations.

Anna Mangahas described organizing as both a privilege and a responsibility because it allowed organizers to "carry other people's stories forward." Rather than centering her own experience, she emphasized representing "regular, everyday people, salt-of-the-earth kind of people who are just working to keep a roof over their head." Throughout her interview, Mangahas recalled stories that circulated through families and neighborhoods: a Southern visitor thrown into a police lineup during his first trip to Chicago; a toddler whose instinctive response upon seeing a police officer was to raise their hands in surrender. Such stories were more than anecdotes. They represented accumulated knowledge about how policing was experienced and understood within particular communities of color that were at once overpoliced, highly criminalized and surveilled, yet also underserved, lacking in basic services and community safety.

Participants also emphasized that this knowledge was carried through institutions with long histories of neighborhood organizing. Young, for example, argued that GAPA could not be understood apart from the historical role of Black churches. "I don't think

that GAPA really exists without that," they explained. "Some of the first organizing institutions Black people had... were the Black churches." Churches provided more than meeting space. They were existing networks of trust, leadership, and political interpretation through which residents could connect contemporary concerns about policing to longer traditions of collective action.

Joel Rodriguez similarly resisted treating police accountability as an isolated policy issue. Churches, schools, housing, neighborhood stability, and public safety are interconnected parts of community life. Organizing through these institutions therefore allowed GAPA to build upon relationships and forms of knowledge that already existed rather than attempting to create an entirely new political infrastructure around police accountability.

From Community Knowledge to Policy

GAPA's emphasis on lived experience became most consequential when community knowledge moved from organizing spaces into policy development. Mecole McBride described a layered organizing structure consisting of coalition meetings, steering committee meetings, and broader community leadership meetings: "Here's what we heard. Here's what you learned. Here's what we developed. Does it seem right? Are there places where you don't understand?" This iterative process created what several participants described as community ownership of the ordinance itself.

McBride remembered "butcher paper, so much butcher paper... and markers" as organizers worked with residents to understand legal concepts, compare alternatives, and revise proposals. The significance of this process was not simply that residents were consulted. It was that consultation occurred repeatedly enough for community perspectives to influence the substance of what was being developed. Residents were not being asked to endorse a finished ordinance; organizers attempted to create a feedback loop between lived experience, coalition deliberation, and policy design.

For McBride, this process also created a form of accountability within the coalition itself. She reflected, "Even if we failed... we could still point back to the fact that we tried based off of what we heard from individuals most traditionally impacted by policing." The legitimacy of the coalition's demands therefore rested not only on whether it ultimately won a particular policy fight, but also on whether those demands remained connected to the communities from which they emerged.

Democratizing Expertise

GAPA's contribution, then, was not simply to argue that lived experience matters. Many forms of public engagement make that claim. What distinguished the organizing model described by participants was the attempt to build a process through which

lived experience could exercise influence at multiple stages: defining the problem, establishing political priorities, evaluating possible solutions, and shaping policy proposals. This approach did not eliminate the need for organizers, attorneys, researchers, or policy specialists. Instead, it reordered their relationship to community knowledge. Technical expertise could clarify legal constraints, identify institutional possibilities, or translate demands into legislative language, but it was not supposed to determine what communities needed or what accountability should mean.

Seen this way, GAPA's organizing model was itself part of its theory of police accountability. The coalition was advocating for greater democratic authority over policing while attempting to practice a similar principle internally: those most affected by public institutions should have meaningful power in determining how those institutions operate. Community knowledge was therefore not simply evidence used to justify GAPA's policy agenda. It was one of the sources from which that agenda was produced.

The Emotional Labor of Organizing

Across interviews, participants rarely described organizing as simply a job, campaign, or professional responsibility. For many, the work was inseparable from their own experiences, relationships, and sense of responsibility to their communities. They had witnessed the consequences of policing themselves as well as among family members, young people, neighbors, and people they worked alongside. Organizing therefore required more than developing strategy or mobilizing support for policy change. It meant repeatedly confronting painful personal experiences, carrying the stories of others, navigating conflict, and sustaining a belief that change remained possible despite years of setbacks. This emotional labor was largely invisible within the formal story of GAPA's policy campaign, but participants described it as fundamental to how the coalition's work was sustained.



CAARPR Educational Director Frank Chapman calls for the passage of ECPS

When Organizing Is Personal

For many participants, there was little separation between being an organizer and being a member of the community affected by the issues they were organizing around. Brian Young identified not only as an organizer but as "a Black working class person" who was "working and building in the community, and with my neighbors." As

they explained later, “When I’m not organizing, I’m still a person[...] I’m also someone who was reacting to my oppression, and someone who also had a vision of freedom for myself and for people around me.”

Young’s distinction is important because it complicates the idea that organizers simply advocate on behalf of others. The conditions motivating the work remained present after meetings ended and campaigns concluded. Organizers returned to the same neighborhoods, institutions, families, and relationships in which the consequences of policing were experienced.

Joel Rodriguez’s account illustrates the emotional weight of this proximity. He became visibly emotional when discussing the release of the video showing the murder of Laquan McDonald. “When that video finally got released[...], that ignited a firestorm,” he recalled. But Rodriguez immediately connected McDonald’s death to more personal experiences that received far less public attention. He described a young person he had mentored named Timothy who was “not involved in any gangs, not involved in any street activity,” yet was repeatedly stopped and harassed by police while traveling between school and Rodriguez’s organization. “This is just one case,” Rodriguez explained. “I can name 30 instances where my young leaders... are being harassed, they’re being victimized by law enforcement.”

The significance of these experiences was cumulative. Organizers were responding to years of stories and encounters that reinforced the urgency of the work. Rodriguez described hearing these experiences as something that “has broken my heart and it’s given me the right type of anger to take this on.” His description of the “right type of anger” captures an important dimension of the emotional work participants described: organizing did not require separating oneself from grief, anger, or frustration, but it did require finding ways to turn those emotions toward collective action.

Carrying Community Memory

Participants also described an obligation to carry experiences that were not necessarily their own. The stories community members entrusted to organizers often stayed with them long after individual conversations or campaigns had ended. As Anna Mangahas put it, “That kind of stuff... it just sticks with you.” Organizers thus became carriers of a broader community memory about policing. The stories they encountered accumulated over time and shaped how they understood both the problem and their responsibility to address it. This was not simply a strategic function of collecting testimony for a campaign. Organizers described these experiences as becoming part of their own understanding of justice, community, and political responsibility.



Community members rally outside Aldermanic offices to secure the votes needed for the passage of ECPS

For some, that sense of responsibility also extended across generations. Frank Chapman situated his involvement with GAPA within nearly fifty years of organizing connected to political prisoners, Black liberation struggles, and other movements. "I'm fundamentally an on-the-ground organizer," he explained. "I'm not satisfied unless I'm in the streets organizing people... door-to-door, rallies, workshops, conferences... whatever it takes." His explanation for this lifelong commitment was deeply personal: organizing, he said, "saved my life." Rodriguez expressed a similar sense of obligation when explaining the breadth of his work: "Where there is injustice, that's where I have to be."

Chapman's account places GAPA within a longer tradition in which organizing is not experienced as a discrete campaign with a beginning and an end. It is an ongoing practice shaped by relationships to previous movements and by a sense of obligation to continue work that others began. The emotional labor of organizing therefore involved carrying not only contemporary experiences of policing but also the history and expectations of movements that preceded GAPA.

Sustaining People & the Coalition

The emotional demands of organizing did not come only from confronting police violence or community trauma. Participants also described the work required to sustain relationships within the coalition itself. GAPA brought together organizations

and individuals with different political traditions, constituencies, strategies, and understandings of accountability. Maintaining that coalition required patience, negotiation, and a willingness to continue working together through disagreement.

Marsheda Ewulomi resisted any romanticized account of this process. "GAPA was the best training ground to have everything thrown at you," she recalled. "It was not easy. Anybody who tells you that it was easy is lying." Coalition members navigated ideological disagreements, racial dynamics, policy debates, organizational differences, and interpersonal conflict. Yet Ewulomi also emphasized their ability to return to a shared objective despite those differences: "There's a thousand ways to skin a cat. But we all have agreed that we're skinning the cat." Her account highlights a dimension of organizing that can disappear when movements are reconstructed primarily through their policy victories. Coalition maintenance was itself labor. Participants had to manage frustration and disagreement while preserving enough trust to continue working toward a common goal.

Transforming Emotion Into Collective Action

Taken together, these accounts show that the emotional labor of organizing was not separate from GAPA's political strategy, rather it helped make that strategy possible. The organizers with whom we spoke carried grief and community stories; maintained relationships through disagreement; and converted anger and frustration into sustained



Leaders of the ECPS coalition pose for a triumphant photo following the passage of the ECPS ordinance

political engagement. They also relied on care—for neighbors, young people, fellow organizers, and the communities to which they belonged—to continue doing work with often uncertain outcomes.

The emotional labor described in these interviews was not simply a personal cost of organizing. It was part of the infrastructure of the movement. Grief created urgency; memory sustained a sense of responsibility; anger could be directed toward action; and care helped hold relationships together. GAPA's organizing power depended not only on its ability to develop policy demands and build a coalition, but also on the less visible work required to keep people connected to one another and committed to the possibility of change.

Conclusion

In many ways, GAPA's most enduring achievement extends beyond the passage of the ECPS ordinance to the cultivation of a democratic organizing infrastructure rooted in community relationships, lived experience, and collective leadership. Across interviews, participants consistently described organizing as the process through which grief became action, neighborhood knowledge became policy expertise, and individual frustration became collective power. Door knocking, political education, church organizing, leadership development, and public meetings were not merely campaign tactics; they were practices that reimagined who holds authority to define public safety and shape governance.

The experiences shared by organizers reveal a movement that challenged traditional models of police reform by insisting that those most affected by policing should not simply be consulted but should lead. In doing so, the coalition strengthened relationships across neighborhoods and organizations; developed new generations of community leaders; and created structures capable of sustaining civic engagement beyond a single campaign or ordinance. Organizing emerged as both a strategy and a philosophy—one grounded in care, accountability, and the belief that communities already possess the knowledge necessary to define safety and govern themselves.

These findings suggest that GAPA's legacy lies in both institutional reform and in the democratic infrastructure it helped build. By transforming lived experience into political expertise and personal responsibility into collective action, the coalition created enduring networks, leadership pipelines, and organizing practices that extend far beyond police accountability. Participants repeatedly described a model of community power that can be mobilized to address housing, education, economic justice, public health, and other pressing social issues, demonstrating that the relationships and democratic capacities cultivated through this movement constitute a lasting civic resource.

CHAPTER 4. DEFINING PUBLIC SAFETY, ACCOUNTABILITY & COMMUNITY CONTROL

The organizing process described in the previous chapter did more than generate support for a new civilian oversight structure. It also gave organizers and residents space to debate what they were trying to change. Participants did not always use the same language or agree on how much authority communities should possess. Some spoke explicitly about community control. Others emphasized accountability, representation, transparency, or meaningful civilian oversight. Their political positions also differed, particularly over the extent to which policing itself could or should be transformed. Still, a common argument emerged across the interviews: residents should have a more permanent and consequential role in determining how public safety is defined and governed.

This chapter examines that argument. It begins with participants' understanding of public safety, then considers the distinctions they drew between oversight, accountability, and community control. It concludes by examining why GAPA's vision ultimately required institutions operating at both the neighborhood and citywide levels.

Public Safety Beyond Policing

Participants rarely described public safety as synonymous with policing. Instead, they challenged the assumption that responding to violence through law enforcement was equivalent to producing safety. Joel Rodriguez made this distinction when he said there are "layers to" safety. Rodriguez said, "You have violence that occurs within the community, but then you have violence that is happening from law enforcement." He resisted treating these as unrelated problems, as both shaped whether residents felt safe, and had to be considered in discussions about neighborhood well-being. As he put it: "Everything is interlaced. I don't see that police accountability is just one piece. Everything—it's all part of the health and the vitality of our community." Rodriguez's account reflects a broader pattern in the interviews. Participants connected safety to schools, housing, health, economic conditions, neighborhood institutions, relationships among residents, and opportunities for young people. Police accountability mattered within this framework, but it was one part of a larger set of conditions that shaped everyday life.



Members of the GAPA coalition convene on Chicago's North-side for a strategic retreat in the summer of 2024

This broader understanding also affected how participants evaluated police accountability. A system could become more effective at investigating misconduct without necessarily changing the conditions that made residents feel unsafe. For some organizers, meaningful reform therefore required asking not only whether police were being held accountable but also what role communities should have in identifying their own public safety priorities.

Participants' definitions of safety were grounded in the communities where they organized. This was particularly evident in the way they discussed the relationship between violence and policing. Residents in communities experiencing high levels of interpersonal violence could simultaneously want protection from violence and fear harmful encounters with police. These concerns were not mutually exclusive, although public debates about policing often treated them that way. GAPA's organizing process created space for those experiences to coexist. This is one reason the community conversations described in the previous chapter were important to the development of GAPA's approach. They brought people into discussions about safety from different neighborhoods, racial and ethnic groups, organizations, and political perspectives.

The resulting vision did not rest on the assumption that Chicago communities had one uniform relationship with police. Instead, it recognized the different, and occasionally conflicting, perspectives represented across the city and did its best to integrate them.

This approach complicated the idea of "community" itself. Communities contain disagreements. Residents do not necessarily share the same experiences with police, the same assessment of crime, or the same preferred solutions. A community-centered approach to public safety therefore could not simply assume that a single authentic community position already existed. It required institutions and organizing practices through which competing concerns could be expressed and negotiated. That problem would become particularly important in the design of District Councils.

Oversight, Accountability & Community Control

Interviews for this report suggested that one of the most important developments in GAPA's work was a growing distinction between civilian oversight, police accountability, and community control. The terms were sometimes used interchangeably in everyday discussion, but participants often described different levels of authority when explaining the distinction.

At its most basic, civilian oversight meant creating a role for people outside the police department in reviewing or influencing policing. Chicago already had experience with this form of accountability. As discussed in Chapter 2, civilian investigators and civilian institutions had existed before GAPA. The presence of civilians, however, did not necessarily give communities authority over policing. Accountability went further. Participants generally used the term to describe mechanisms through which police officers, police leadership, and the department itself could be held responsible for their actions. This included misconduct investigations, policy review, and consequences when standards were violated. But for many organizers, such accountability mechanisms did not fully answer the need that motivated GAPA. That need, which community control addressed, concerned power.

Community control argued that residents—particularly residents from communities most affected by policing—should have an institutional role in making decisions about police policy, priorities, and leadership rather than participating only after misconduct occurred. Frank Chapman articulated the distinction most clearly in describing the political objective of the movement: "[…]Black people and other oppressed people of color need to have a say in who polices in their community and how their communities are policed. And that's how we define community control of the police[…]" This understanding shifted the focus from reviewing the exercise of police authority to calling for specific communities to participate in governing that authority. That was a substantially different political demand.



GAPA's First CCPSA Meeting: Community and press gather ahead of the first CCPSA meeting following the passage of the ECPS ordinance, 2021

From Voice to Power

Nearly every model of community engagement gives residents some opportunity to speak. Public hearings, listening sessions, advisory boards, surveys, and community meetings all allow government institutions to receive community input. Participants' accounts suggest that GAPA increasingly came to see voice without authority as insufficient. The problem was not that public input lacked value. GAPA itself relied heavily on meetings and community conversations. The concern was what happened after residents spoke. Could residents influence policy? Could they shape the selection of police leadership? Could they establish priorities? Could they create an agenda that city institutions were required to respond to? And could they do so on an ongoing basis rather than only when elected officials invited participation? These questions distinguished community power from community consultation. They also help explain why GAPA's proposal evolved beyond the creation of another advisory body.

The coalition had emerged in a city where residents could already protest; testify at City Council; file complaints; attend Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy (CAPS) meetings in their police beat or district; and communicate with elected officials. GAPA's organizing raised a different institutional question: What would it look like to make community participation a part of the formal structure of police governance? This question went beyond whether civilians were represented within existing oversight institutions. For GAPA, the more fundamental issue was whether communities had

meaningful authority within the systems that governed policing. Existing structures could provide opportunities for residents to speak, participate, or serve in appointed positions while leaving decision-making power largely unchanged. GAPA's organizing therefore drew an important distinction between community representation and community power. That distinction would remain central throughout the campaign and eventually become one of the most difficult issues in negotiations over the ordinance.

Community Control Does Not Mean the Same Thing to Everyone

Organizers also cautioned against treating "community control" as if it had one accepted definition within the movement. Participants entered GAPA from different political traditions and differed over what community control required and how it could be achieved. Some argued that genuine community control required a more complete transfer of governing authority to residents and that preserving significant power for the mayor or existing city institutions fell short of that standard. Others believed that an institution giving communities substantially greater authority over policing could meaningfully constitute community control even if some existing governmental actors retained a role. For these organizers, accepting such arrangements was also a strategic judgment about what could be won within the political constraints of the moment, rather than a belief that community power should ideally be shared with existing institutions.

The differences between GAPA and the Civilian Police Accountability Council (CPAC) proposal made by the Chicago Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression (CAARPR) provide one example of perspectives based in different political traditions. While both sought to move Chicago beyond a system in which police governance was concentrated among the Chicago Police Department (CPD) and established political actors, they did not initially agree about how far that redistribution of power should go. Their proposals reflected different positions on elections, appointments, mayoral authority, and the powers a civilian body should possess. Chicago's eventual structure emerged through years of organizing and negotiation between these approaches rather than through the wholesale adoption of either original proposal. What united many participants was a directional commitment: power needed to move closer to communities. What remained contested was how much power should move, through what institutions, and with what relationship to existing elected authority.

Why Neighborhood-Level Institutions Matter

While community power was an accepted part of the goal, the scale of civilian oversight remained uncertain. A single citywide commission could potentially exercise significant authority over police policy and leadership, but a centralized institution could still

remain distant from residents, particularly in a city as large and segregated as Chicago. GAPA's proposal therefore developed around two levels of civilian participation: (1) A citywide Community Commission with geographically diverse membership, and (2) neighborhood-level District Councils corresponding to Chicago's police districts. The citywide body was intended to influence systemic policy, accountability, and leadership, while District Councils would provide a more local connection between residents and the broader oversight structure.

District Councils addressed a practical problem. Residents experience policing locally, as their interactions with officers, perceptions of neighborhood violence, relationships with district commanders, and concerns about public safety often develop within the neighborhoods that they and their families and friends call home. Yet major decisions about policing are generally made through centralized institutions. District Councils attempted to create a bridge between those two levels. Under the structure eventually established through the Empowering Communities for Public Safety (ECPS) ordinance, Chicago created one District Council for each of its 22 police districts, with three elected Councilors in each district. The first elections in 2023 created 66 elected positions across the city. The election of District Councilors was particularly significant to the community-power model as their position would derive from voters within the police district they represented, rather than simply being appointed by the mayor or another city official.

There are, nonetheless, limits to the control that the District Councils possess. They do not investigate individual misconduct complaints or command police officers; nor do they replace the Civilian Office of Police Accountability (COPA), the Police Board, the Inspector General, or CPD's internal accountability structures. Their role is instead centered on being a conduit and catalyst for public participation, identification of local priorities, maintaining or establishing relationships with police leadership, and as a connection to the citywide Commission. GAPA's model did not ultimately create autonomous neighborhood control of police departments. It created formal positions and recurring public institutions through which residents could participate in public safety governance at a level that had not previously existed in Chicago. That is both more precise and more limited than describing District Councils simply as "community control."

Making Participation Permanent

Another important feature of the District Council model was its permanence. As Chapter 1 discussed, organizers were conscious that moments of heightened public attention eventually recede. Protests end. Task forces issue reports and disband. Political administrations change. Even federal oversight through the consent decree was

understood as temporary. District Councils were designed differently. ECPS requires recurring public meetings in each police district, creating an institutional venue for public participation that does not depend upon a new crisis or an invitation from City Hall. This feature reflected lessons from GAPA's organizing process. The coalition had spent years creating recurring spaces where residents could discuss policing, learn about police and city policy, identify priorities, and evaluate proposals. The District Council model attempted to preserve some of that participatory infrastructure after the campaign itself ended. While, during the GAPA campaign, participation depended largely on community organizations and organizers creating spaces for residents to engage, some of those opportunities became part of municipal government under ECPS.

The transition from organizing practice to public institution is a pivotal moment in GAPA's story. It also created new questions. Formalizing participation can make it more durable, but it can also change its character. Government bodies operate under legal requirements, administrative rules, budget constraints, and political pressures that grassroots coalitions do not encounter in the same way. Whether District Councils could retain the community-centered character envisioned by organizers after becoming governmental institutions was an implementation question with which organizers had to grapple.

Connecting Neighborhood Power to Citywide Authority

District Councils alone could not address the problems that GAPA identified. Neighborhood participation would have limited effect if major decisions about CPD policy and leadership remained entirely outside the structure of the District Councils. The citywide Community Commission was intended to address that limitation. Under ECPS, the seven-member Community Commission for Public Safety and Accountability operates at the citywide level and has responsibilities involving police policy, accountability, public engagement, and the selection of public safety leadership. The Commission and District Councils therefore perform different functions within the same system: District Councils create local points of participation, while the Commission operates where citywide decisions are made.

District Councilors participate in the process through which candidates for the Community Commission are identified and nominated. The structure therefore creates an institutional pathway linking elected representatives from Chicago's police districts to the citywide oversight body. The Commission's role in the selection of the Police Superintendent demonstrates the kind of authority that organizers sought to achieve in this system. In 2023, the Commission conducted the process that produced three finalists for superintendent, from whom Mayor Brandon Johnson selected his final

pick, Larry Snelling. This division of power is not perfectly reflective of GAPA's original vision, but it does reflect the compromises that were necessary and critical in shaping the final ECPS ordinance. For participants concerned with the difference between voice and power, this kind of institutional authority was significant.

This progression can therefore be understood as a movement from knowledge to authority. GAPA organizers listened to residents, developed leaders, conducted political education, and brought community experiences into policy discussions. But recognizing community expertise does not by itself redistribute power. A government can listen carefully to residents and still retain complete discretion over what happens next. GAPA's institutional project attempted to go further by creating mechanisms through which community knowledge could enter formal decision-making. This distinction is central to understanding why participants viewed ECPS as different from previous approaches to civilian oversight. The goal was not simply to make government more receptive to community input. It was to create a durable relationship between neighborhood participation and institutions with formal responsibilities within Chicago's public safety system.

That ambition was only partially realized, and organizers differed in how they evaluated the authority ultimately granted to the Commission and District Councils. Those questions became especially important when examining implementation.

Conclusion

GAPA's work developed around a broader conception of public safety than police accountability alone. Participants understood safety as being shaped by violence, policing, housing, schools, economic conditions, neighborhood institutions, relationships, and residents' ability to influence the decisions affecting their communities. This did not lead them to abandon police accountability as a political objective. Instead, it changed what accountability was expected to accomplish. Discussions of community control raised another question: Can, and should, residents themselves possess some institutional authority over how policing and public safety are governed? Organizers did not agree completely about the answer. This remained a contested idea, particularly when organizers confronted questions about elections, appointments, mayoral authority, and the legal powers of civilian institutions. Such disagreements were central to the political negotiations over ECPS.

GAPA's institutional design reflected a common concern. A citywide civilian body alone risked remaining distant from neighborhoods. Local participation alone risked having little influence over citywide policy. The combination of District Councils and a Community Commission was an attempt to connect the two. The model that eventually became ECPS was not identical to GAPA's original proposal. It was the

product of compromise among organizers, competing community-control campaigns, elected officials, and successive mayoral administrations. Understanding what survived that process—and what was changed along the way—requires turning from GAPA's ideas to the political struggle over their implementation in law.

You have violence that occurs within the community, but then you have violence that is happening from law enforcement.

– Joel Rodriguez

CHAPTER 5. THE CAMPAIGN TO PASS THE EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES FOR PUBLIC SAFETY ORDINANCE

By the time GAPA moved from community organizing and policy development into a citywide legislative campaign, the coalition had already built much of the infrastructure described in the previous chapters. It had developed a base of residents and organizations, articulated a framework for civilian oversight, and advanced a broader vision of community power over policing. What remained uncertain was whether that organizing could be converted into enough political power to change city law.

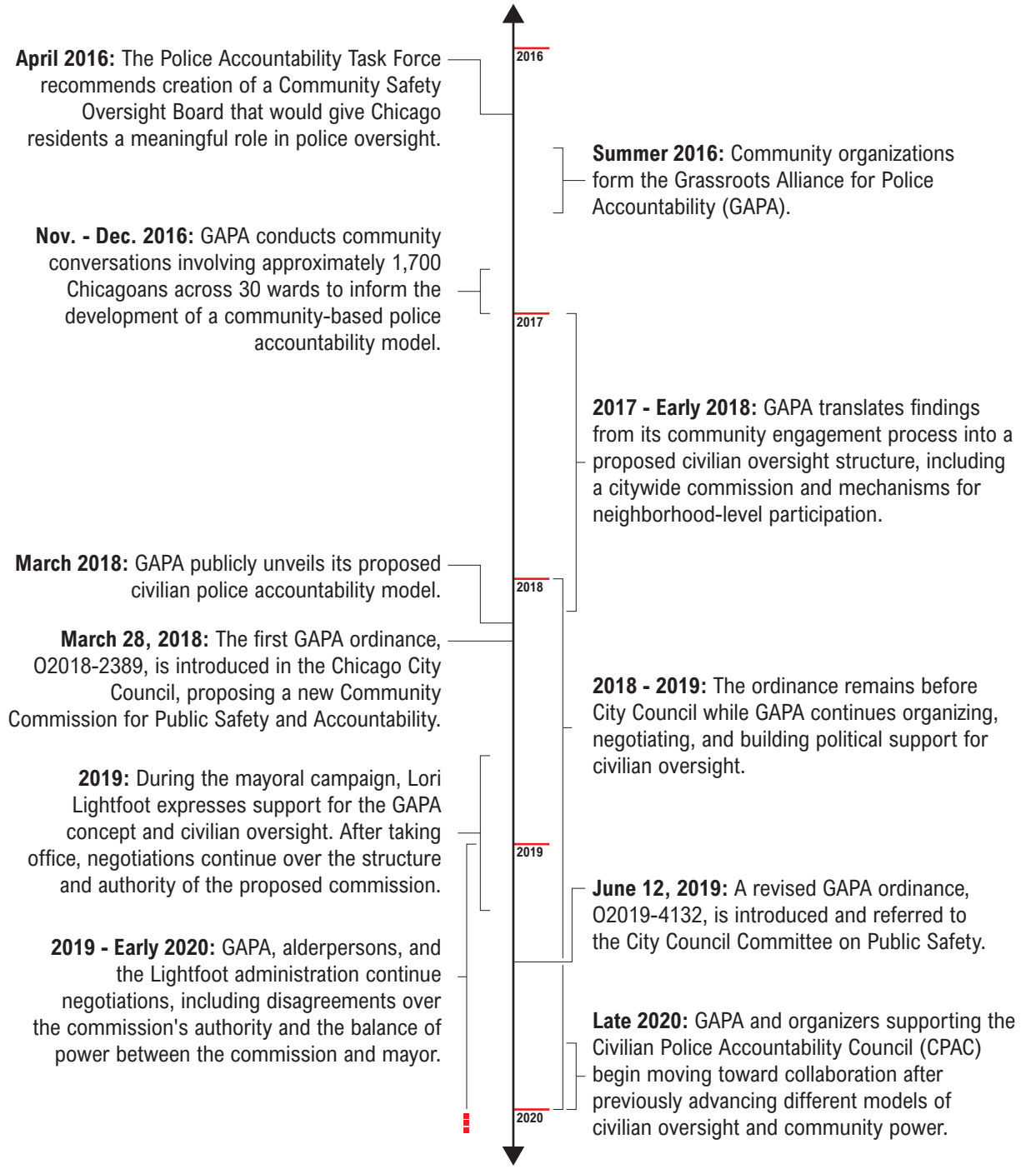
The campaign for the Empowering Communities for Public Safety (ECPS) ordinance became a prolonged struggle over precisely that question. In the years following Laquan McDonald's murder, few city leaders could plausibly maintain that Chicago's police accountability system required no reform. The more consequential disagreement concerned who would exercise authority within whatever system replaced it. How much power would remain with the mayor? What authority would civilians hold over police policy and leadership? How would residents select the people empowered to make those decisions? And could organizations advancing different models of community control build enough collective power to force legislation through the City Council?

The campaign unfolded through several overlapping struggles. Organizers confronted resistance from successive mayoral administrations, navigated disagreements within GAPA, and negotiated substantial differences between GAPA's proposal and the Civilian Police Accountability Council (CPAC) model advanced by the Chicago Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression (CAARPR). They also had to decide which compromises were necessary to move legislation forward and which would undermine the redistribution of power they had spent years demanding.

ECPS ultimately emerged from neither persuasion nor compromise alone. Participants instead described a cumulative process through which organizers changed the political conditions surrounding civilian oversight. GAPA built a constituency around community power; coalition relationships allowed organizations to negotiate without fragmenting; GAPA and CPAC eventually consolidated competing campaigns into a broader political formation; and ward-level organizing translated that collective power into commitments from alderpersons. By the final stage of the campaign, organizers had acquired something they had not possessed at the beginning: enough votes in City Council to make continued resistance from City Hall increasingly difficult.

This chapter traces that transformation. It examines how a movement organized around community power learned to exercise political power—and how years of organizing outside government ultimately created the leverage necessary to build a new institution within it.

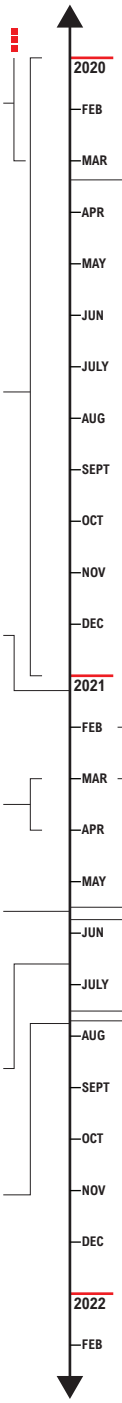
LEGISLATIVE TIMELINE



The most important thing was when GAPA and CPAC came together.

– Aaron Gottlieb

LEGISLATIVE TIMELINE



2019 - Early 2020: GAPA, alderpersons, and the Lightfoot administration continue negotiations, including disagreements over the commission's authority and the balance of power between the commission and mayor.

March 10, 2020: The Public Safety Committee considers O2019-4132 but holds the ordinance in committee rather than advancing it to the full City Council.

2020: Negotiations between GAPA and the Lightfoot administration stall, particularly around the commission's authority over CPD policy and leadership.

Late 2020: GAPA and organizers supporting the Civilian Police Accountability Council (CPAC) begin moving toward collaboration after previously advancing different models of civilian oversight and community power.

January 5, 2021: The Public Safety Committee considers substitute versions of both the GAPA ordinance (SO2019-4132) and CPAC ordinance (SO2019-8058) but holds both proposals in committee.

Feb. – March 2021: GAPA and CAARPR/CPAC negotiate a unified civilian-oversight proposal combining elements of their respective models.

March 2021: The coalitions announce the Empowering Communities for Public Safety (ECPS) proposal.

May 19, 2021: Ald. Carlos Ramirez-Rosa invokes City Council Rule 41, signaling an effort to discharge SO2019-4132 from committee and bring the proposal before the full City Council.

May 21, 2021: A new substitute version of SO2019-4132 is presented in the Public Safety Committee as the GAPA legislative vehicle evolves into the joint ECPS proposal.

May 26, 2021: Mayor Lightfoot introduces her own civilian-oversight proposal, O2021-2143, creating a competing legislative approach to civilian oversight.

June 18, 2021: SO2019-4132 is again held in the Public Safety Committee as negotiations over the final ECPS structure continue.

July 14, 2021: Ramirez-Rosa again invokes Rule 41, announcing his intention to call the ECPS ordinance for consideration at the July 21 City Council meeting.

July 21, 2021: The Chicago City Council passes SO2019-4132, the Empowering Communities for Public Safety (ECPS) ordinance, by a 36–13 vote, establishing the Community Commission for Public Safety and Accountability and three elected District Council members in each of Chicago's 22 police districts.

July 20, 2021: Following negotiations between the ECPS coalition and the Lightfoot administration, the Public Safety Committee votes 12–8 to recommend the compromise ordinance for passage.

City Hall & the Question of Power

From its earliest stages, GAPA's campaign brought organizers into conflict with the mayor's office. The disagreement was not simply over whether Chicago needed stronger civilian oversight. In the aftermath of Laquan McDonald's murder and the broader crisis of confidence in the Chicago Police Department, the need for reform had become increasingly difficult for city leaders to dismiss. The more consequential question was who would have the authority to shape policing once those reforms were created. GAPA's proposals challenged a political structure in which substantial authority over police policy, leadership, and accountability had historically remained concentrated in the mayor's office.

Participants traced this conflict to the aftermath of the Police Accountability Task Force. In its 2016 report, the Task Force recommended the creation of a community oversight body and emphasized that its development should include substantial community participation. For GAPA organizers, that recommendation created an opening to push beyond reforms focused primarily on investigating individual cases of police misconduct. They envisioned an institution through which residents could exercise a more meaningful role in shaping the policies and leadership of the broader police accountability system.



GAPA Press Conference: A leader with One Northside speaks in support of the ECPS ordinance, 2019

Mecole McBride recalled that organizers quickly became concerned that the Rahm Emanuel mayoral administration would implement other Task Force recommendations while resisting the transfer of authority implied by community oversight. As she remembered it, the recommendation was that the new structure should be "led by and informed by community." Yet she believed the administration moved in "the exact opposite" direction by attempting to develop an oversight structure that remained closely controlled by City Hall. The distinction mattered. From the perspective of organizers, creating a civilian body did not necessarily redistribute power. If the mayor retained substantial control over who served on the body, what authority it possessed, and how its decisions interacted with CPD and other accountability agencies, civilian oversight could be established without fundamentally changing who governed policing. The campaign therefore became concerned not only with the existence of an oversight institution but with its independence, composition, and governing authority.

The election of Lori Lightfoot in 2019 initially appeared to create a different political environment. Lightfoot had chaired the Police Accountability Task Force and campaigned for mayor as a police-reform candidate. Her election therefore raised expectations among some advocates that the city might finally move toward the kind of civilian oversight envisioned in the years following the 2016 Task Force report. Interview participants, however, described the relationship with the Lightfoot administration as increasingly contentious as negotiations moved from general support for civilian oversight to specific questions about how much authority the mayor would relinquish.

One organizer recalled that negotiations repeatedly stalled around precisely these questions. From his perspective, proposals supported by the administration preserved too much mayoral authority and provided communities with too little independent power. The conflict was therefore not primarily over whether Chicago would have civilian oversight, but over how consequential that oversight would be. Who would influence the selection of police leadership? Who would shape CPD policy? What authority would the new civilian body exercise independently of the mayor? And what role would residents themselves have in selecting the people empowered to make those decisions?

That organizer argued that the administration's position changed only after organizers demonstrated that they had assembled enough support in City Council to move legislation despite mayoral opposition. His account points to an important lesson organizers drew from the campaign: participation in negotiations was not the same as political power. Access to City Hall gave organizers an opportunity to advocate for their proposal, but it did not necessarily give them the leverage to determine the outcome. That leverage had to be built outside the negotiating room.

Seen in this way, the conflict with City Hall was not simply an obstacle encountered on the path toward ECPS. It helped clarify what was at stake in the campaign. Under both the Emanuel and Lightfoot administrations, organizers confronted the limits of reforms that expanded civilian participation without substantially redistributing governing authority. Their response was to build an independent political base capable of changing the terms of negotiation itself. The question increasingly became not whether the mayor's office would voluntarily agree to relinquish power, but whether organizers could build enough collective power to make continued resistance politically untenable.

Negotiating Without Being Divided

Resistance from City Hall did not lead GAPA to reject negotiation. Organizers continued meeting with elected officials, engaging the mayor's office, and revising elements of their proposal throughout the campaign. They understood that passing an ordinance would ultimately require working through the same political institutions whose concentration of power they were attempting to challenge. The strategic problem was how to negotiate without allowing the process itself to weaken the coalition.

That challenge was particularly important because GAPA was not politically uniform. Member organizations represented different constituencies and organizing traditions and had different relationships with government, funders, legal advocates, and elected officials. Those differences shaped how organizations assessed political risk, strategy, and compromise. Some had longstanding relationships with City Hall, while others relied more heavily on grassroots organizing and public pressure. Maintaining a common position therefore required more than agreement on the general need for civilian oversight; it required organizations to prevent their differences from becoming a source of political vulnerability.

Participants recalled moments when they believed the Lightfoot administration attempted to exploit those differences. One organizer described the concern directly: "There were a few moments[...] the mayor was trying to pick us off. And we saw from a mile away what she was doing." Separate negotiations with different coalition members created the possibility that individual organizations might accept agreements that weakened the bargaining position of the coalition as a whole. GAPA responded by emphasizing communication and coordination across organizations. Individual groups could maintain their own political relationships, but those relationships could not substitute for a collective negotiating strategy.

The relationships built during the coalition's earlier years proved critical to maintaining that coordination. Much of this relationship-building occurred before the COVID-19 pandemic, when coalition members spent years meeting together in person,

developing policy, engaging residents, and debating what meaningful community authority should look like. The time spent sharing physical space allowed members to develop relationships and familiarity that extended beyond formal coalition meetings. That history did not eliminate disagreement, but members say it created a stronger foundation for navigating it. Trust and communication became political resources, allowing organizations to disagree internally without allowing outside actors to determine the coalition's position.

Coalition unity was therefore more than an expression of solidarity; it was a source of leverage. City Hall was in a stronger position when organizations could be negotiated with separately, while organizers were stronger when elected officials had to contend with a coordinated coalition. That lesson would become even more important as GAPA confronted divisions beyond its own membership. The broader police-accountability movement remained divided over what community power should look like, particularly between GAPA and advocates of the Civilian Police Accountability Council (CPAC). Moving toward ECPS would require applying the same principle on a larger scale: building collective political power without first requiring complete agreement.

Competing Models of Community Control

The challenge of maintaining unity extended beyond GAPA itself. GAPA was one part of a broader police-accountability movement in Chicago, and organizations within that movement did not always agree about what meaningful community authority over policing should look like. The most consequential differences emerged between GAPA and the campaign for a Civilian Police Accountability Council (CPAC), led by the Chicago Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression (CAARPR). Both sought to reduce the concentration of authority over policing within City Hall, but they approached the question of community power from different starting points.

CPAC emerged from CAARPR's longstanding campaign for community control of police. The CPAC proposal introduced in City Council in 2016 envisioned a substantial transfer of authority from existing city institutions to an elected civilian body. Earlier versions of CPAC would have replaced the Police Board and the Independent Police Review Authority (IPRA) and given elected civilian representatives significant authority over police policy, leadership, misconduct investigations, and discipline.[104] Although the proposal evolved over time, its underlying theory of power emphasized direct democratic control: communities most affected by policing should elect representatives who could exercise meaningful authority over the institutions responsible for policing them.

GAPA shared the premise that residents needed considerably more power within Chicago's police-governance system, but proposed a different institutional structure. Its model grew out of the community conversations conducted after the coalition's formation in 2016 and ultimately centered on a two-tiered system of neighborhood-level District Councils and a citywide Community Commission. Residents would elect representatives at the police-district level, while those representatives would help shape the selection of a citywide body with authority over police policy, leadership, and the broader accountability system. Rather than replacing institutions such as COPA and the Police Board, GAPA sought to create a new layer of community governance capable of influencing and overseeing the institutions already responsible for policing and police accountability.

The difference between the proposals was sometimes described as a distinction between community control and community oversight.[105] That distinction captured an important disagreement, but it can also overstate the distance between the two campaigns. GAPA was not proposing a purely advisory civilian body, just as CPAC was not concerned only with the investigation of individual misconduct complaints. Both campaigns challenged a system in which Chicago residents—particularly residents of communities most affected by policing—possessed relatively little formal authority over the policies, leadership, and institutions governing the police department. The disagreement centered instead on how that authority should be structured, how directly it should be exercised, and how much power should remain within existing institutions of city government.

Those differences had practical consequences during the legislative campaign. Participants described debates over whether members of the citywide oversight body should be directly elected, how the Police Superintendent should be selected or removed, what authority civilians should exercise over CPD policy, and how much discretion should remain with the mayor. These were not minor technical disagreements. They reflected different assessments of what was necessary to make civilian authority meaningful and what kinds of institutional arrangements could realistically be enacted and sustained.

They also produced different assessments of political strategy. Some organizers worried that accepting too much mayoral authority or weakening particular powers could produce an oversight system that appeared transformative without meaningfully redistributing power. Others worried that insisting on provisions unlikely to survive legal scrutiny or obtain sufficient support in City Council could result in no legislation at all. The question was therefore not simply whether organizers were willing to compromise. It was whether compromise would move the movement closer to community power or institutionalize a version of oversight too weak to accomplish what years of organizing had demanded.

Importantly, the distance between the two proposals did not remain fixed. As the campaigns continued, both models evolved. By 2020, CPAC had moved away from some earlier provisions that would have replaced existing accountability institutions and increasingly focused on civilian authority over policy, leadership, and the accountability system.[106] GAPA, meanwhile, continued to advocate for elected District Councils and substantial authority for a citywide commission. The proposals remained distinct, particularly in their approaches to elections and the distribution of authority between communities and City Hall, but they increasingly occupied overlapping institutional terrain.

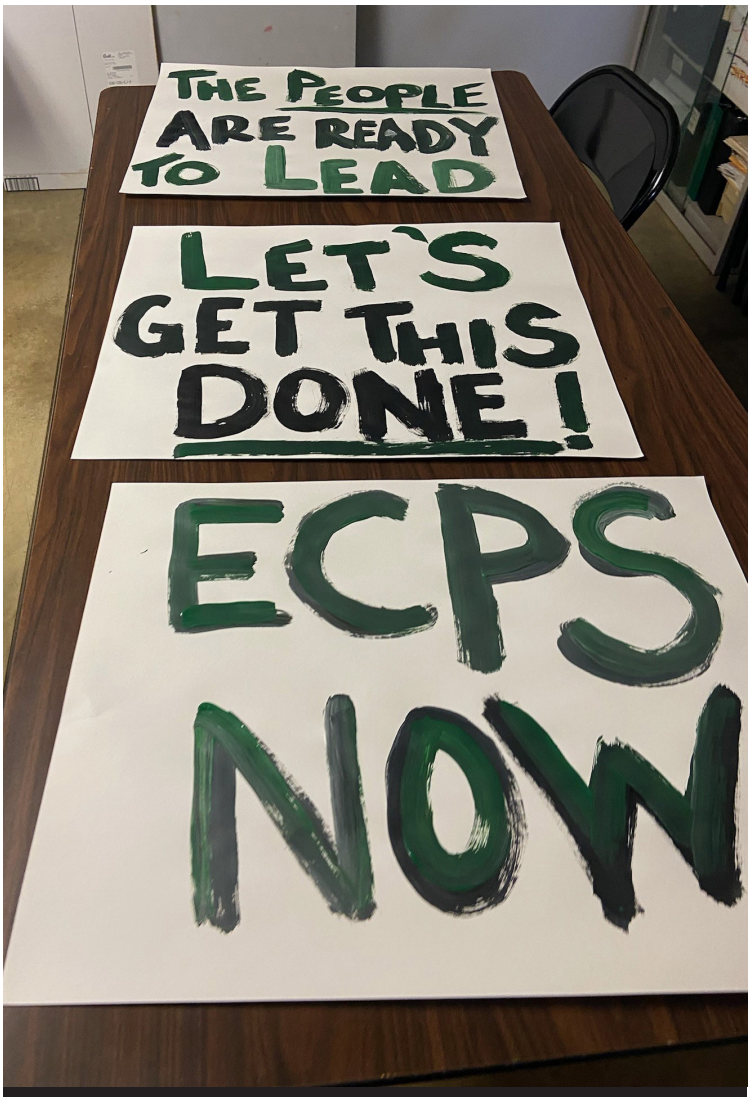
The significance of these disagreements is therefore easy to mischaracterize. They were not simply a conflict between a more radical demand for community control and a more moderate demand for civilian oversight. They represented competing theories of how movement demands should be translated into governing institutions. CPAC placed greater emphasis on transferring authority directly to elected civilian representatives. GAPA sought to build community power through a combination of neighborhood elections, citywide governance, and authority embedded within the existing accountability system. Both were attempting to answer the same fundamental question—how communities could exercise meaningful power over policing—but they had not yet agreed on a common institutional answer.

By the later stages of the campaign, however, another question became increasingly difficult to avoid. Whatever their substantive differences, neither coalition had succeeded in passing its ordinance independently. As their proposals moved closer and resistance from City Hall continued, organizers had to consider whether maintaining separate legislative campaigns was strengthening the movement or limiting its political power. That question would eventually provide the opening for the GAPA–CPAC convergence.

Convergence: From GAPA and CPAC to ECPS

The convergence of GAPA and CPAC marked a turning point in the campaign. For years, the two coalitions had pursued different proposals for transferring power over policing to Chicago residents. By the later stages of the campaign, however, they confronted a shared political reality: neither proposal had been able to move through City Council independently. Maintaining separate campaigns increasingly risked allowing disagreements within the police-accountability movement to limit the political power of both.

The political environment of 2020 increased the urgency of overcoming those divisions. The murder of George Floyd and the protests that followed intensified demands for police reform while drawing new organizations and organizers into



Signs made in support of the ECPS ordinance, 2020

Chicago's police-accountability movement. Oswaldo Gomez, who became involved in GAPA during this period, recalled seeing coalition expansion as necessary to moving legislation forward. Rather than continuing to pursue separate proposals, he remembered asking, "why don't we go and pass this in collaboration with a bigger coalition of other groups?" For Gomez, the connection between coalition building and legislative power was direct: "We brought everyone together and passed the ordinance with overwhelming support."

Convergence did not require GAPA and CPAC to resolve every disagreement about community control. Instead, organizers increasingly recognized that remaining divided imposed its own political costs. Aaron Gottlieb, a former District Councilor, identified the decision to come together as the moment when passage began to appear possible: "The most important thing was when GAPA and CPAC came together[...] We didn't always agree, the two coalitions, but we all agreed that we were frustrated with Lori [Lightfoot], and that got us to come together. I think that is when... it was clear that we could win." Continued resistance from the Lightfoot administration gave the coalitions a shared political problem, while years of unsuccessful parallel campaigns demonstrated the limits of pursuing separate legislative strategies.

The unified proposal that emerged from this process became Empowering Communities for Public Safety (ECPS). It was not simply a renamed version of either GAPA or CPAC. The two-tiered structure central to GAPA remained, combining elected representation in each of Chicago's 22 police districts with a citywide Community

Commission. At the same time, the unified proposal reflected the broader movement's insistence that civilian participation carry meaningful authority over police policy and leadership rather than function primarily in an advisory capacity. ECPS was therefore a negotiated institutional framework built from overlapping, but not identical, visions of community power.

More importantly, convergence changed the political constituency behind the ordinance. As long as GAPA and CPAC advanced competing proposals, elected officials could point to disagreement within the police-accountability movement over what civilian oversight should look like. A unified campaign made that argument more difficult to sustain and brought previously separate organizing networks behind a common legislative demand. Grassroots organizations, faith groups, labor organizations, legal advocates, and neighborhood-based groups could now direct their relationships with residents and elected officials toward the same objective.

Convergence therefore mattered not because it eliminated disagreement, but because it transformed disagreement from a source of fragmentation into something that could be managed within a common campaign. GAPA and CPAC had not arrived at an identical theory of community control. They had instead determined that enough common ground existed to organize together. In doing so, they created a broader and more coordinated political base than either campaign had possessed on its own. The next question was how much of their shared demand for community power could survive the compromises necessary to turn that coalition into legislation.

Compromise Without Losing Demand

Bringing GAPA and CPAC together did not resolve the difficult questions surrounding institutional design. If anything, convergence made those questions more immediate. A unified coalition still had to negotiate internally over the structure of ECPS and externally with City Hall over how much authority the new system would possess. Organizers understood that passing legislation would require compromise. The more difficult question was how much the proposal could change without losing the redistribution of power that had motivated the campaign in the first place.

Participants did not describe compromise as inherently inconsistent with organizing. They recognized that no coalition was likely to secure every provision of its original proposal and that questions involving appointments, elections, police leadership, policymaking authority, and mayoral power would inevitably be negotiated. What mattered was the distinction between changing the institutional form of the proposal and weakening its underlying purpose. Particular provisions could be revised; the more fundamental demand was that residents gain an enduring and meaningful role in governing policing.

One organizer captured the stakes of that distinction: "From an organizer perspective, it's better to fail in a way that strengthens our organization than to succeed in something that undercuts us." Passage alone, in other words, was not sufficient to define success. Organizers were wary of winning an ordinance that created the appearance of civilian oversight while leaving the basic distribution of authority unchanged. Each compromise therefore had to be evaluated against a larger question: would the resulting institution actually give communities power they had not possessed before?

The elected District Councils became particularly important to preserving that demand. Whatever compromises were made elsewhere in the ordinance, elections created a direct democratic connection between residents and the new oversight structure. Community participation would not depend entirely on mayoral appointments or invitations from existing institutions. The final ordinance still left significant authority with the mayor and distributed power across the Community Commission, CPD, COPA, the Police Board, and other parts of city government. ECPS therefore fell short of complete community control. But it preserved a formal and durable place for residents within the governance of policing.

Compromise was therefore not simply a concession made at the end of the campaign; it was part of the coalition's political strategy. Organizers had to distinguish between the particular institutional arrangements they preferred and the larger demand they were unwilling to abandon. Their willingness to negotiate the former while protecting the latter made a unified ordinance possible. But determining what the coalition could accept was only half of the problem. Meaningful compromise also required enough political leverage to force City Hall to concede authority in return. By the final stage of the campaign, the question was whether organizers could convert the community power they had spent years building into the form of leverage that could change those negotiations: votes in City Council.

When Organizing Became Votes

By the final stage of the campaign, the central question was no longer whether organizers could make a compelling case for civilian oversight. It was whether the community and coalition power they had built could be converted into enough votes to move legislation through City Council. The campaign increasingly focused on individual alderpersons, with coalition members organizing constituent outreach, public testimony, meetings with elected officials, and direct pressure within individual wards.

This strategy drew on the organizing infrastructure built during the previous several years. Organizations within the ECPS coalition brought different geographic bases, constituencies, and political relationships to the campaign. Neighborhood

organizations could mobilize residents in particular wards; faith organizations could activate congregations and longstanding community networks; and labor and advocacy organizations brought their own memberships and relationships with elected officials. Coordinated around a common ordinance, these networks allowed the coalition to make support for ECPS visible not simply as a citywide demand, but as a demand coming from the constituents that alderpersons represented.

As commitments accumulated, the relationship between organizing and negotiation began to change. Earlier in the campaign, organizers could mobilize public support and participate in negotiations while still depending heavily on the mayor's office to allow legislation to move forward. A growing City Council majority created an independent source of leverage. Each additional aldermanic commitment reduced the coalition's dependence on mayoral support and increased the political costs of continued opposition.

One organizer identified the accumulation of a City Council supermajority as the moment when this shift became unmistakable. Reflecting on Mayor Lori Lightfoot's opposition to the legislation, he recalled:

> "She was elected claiming that she was in favor of police accountability. But it became very clear that she was the major obstacle to getting this passed, until such point as it was clear that we had organized a supermajority of alders[...]. Once she realized that there was a supermajority, she quickly did a turnaround."

The significance of that moment extended beyond the mayor's response. It demonstrated that the coalition had developed the capacity to move legislation without relying primarily on City Hall's willingness to embrace its proposal. Years of community meetings, political education, neighborhood organizing, and coalition building had created constituencies that could now be mobilized around specific aldermanic votes. The convergence of GAPA and CPAC expanded those constituencies and coordinated them around a single legislative demand. Organizing had become votes.

That transformation also changed the conditions under which compromise occurred. Organizers still had to negotiate over the final structure of ECPS, but they were increasingly negotiating over an ordinance with a viable path toward passage rather than asking the administration to permit legislation to advance. Political leverage did not originate in the negotiating room; it had been built outside of government and carried into it through the accumulation of aldermanic support. By the final negotiations, the campaign had therefore moved from demanding that city government create meaningful civilian authority to demonstrating that organizers had assembled enough political support to force the question before City Council. The community power GAPA had spent years building had acquired an institutional expression: a legislative majority. The remaining question was what that majority would ultimately put into law.



GAPA Organizing: Protest outside city hall in support of the ECPS ordinance, 2020

The Passage of ECPS

On July 21, 2021, the Chicago City Council passed the Empowering Communities for Public Safety (ECPS) ordinance, bringing years of organizing, coalition building, and negotiation to a legislative conclusion. The ordinance was neither GAPA's original proposal nor that of CPAC. It was a negotiated framework shaped by the convergence of the two campaigns, negotiations with the Lightfoot administration, and the compromises required to secure a City Council majority. ECPS created a new two-tiered structure for civilian participation in police governance: elected District Councils corresponding to each of Chicago's 22 police districts and a citywide Community Commission for Public Safety and Accountability. Each district would elect three councilors, creating 66 elected positions across the city. District Councilors would hold public meetings, engage residents around policing and public safety, and connect neighborhood-level participation to the citywide oversight system. Their creation institutionalized an idea that had been central to GAPA's organizing from the beginning: residents should have a permanent role in conversations about policing and police policy rather than participating only in moments of crisis or at the invitation of city government.

The Community Commission created a second level of civilian authority. Rather than functioning solely as an advisory body, the Commission received formal responsibilities related to police policy, public engagement, and the selection and oversight of key public-safety leadership. Commissioners would not be directly elected citywide, as some advocates had sought, but the elected District Councils would give residents a role in the process through which commissioners were selected. The final structure therefore reflected both the ambitions and compromises that had shaped the campaign.

Passage was significant because it moved civilian participation beyond demands for greater transparency, improved misconduct investigations, or additional opportunities for public input. ECPS created elected neighborhood institutions and a citywide body with formal authority within Chicago's police-governance system. Years of organizing around community knowledge, democratic participation, and community power had been translated into a governing structure. But passage did not resolve the larger debate that had animated the campaign. ECPS established new forms of civilian authority without transferring complete control over policing to communities. The ordinance therefore represented both a significant institutional victory and a compromise. Understanding what the campaign achieved requires distinguishing between the power organizers succeeded in moving to communities and the authority that remained elsewhere in city government.

What Was Won—and What Was Not

Participants rarely described the passage of ECPS as the completion of the struggle for community control. The ordinance represented a meaningful redistribution of authority, but it also reflected the limits of what organizers were able to secure through the political process. Understanding the significance of ECPS therefore requires holding both parts of that outcome together: the campaign created new forms of community power while leaving substantial authority within the institutions organizers had spent years attempting to change.

What was won was consequential. For the first time, Chicago residents would directly elect representatives to institutions created specifically to give communities an ongoing role in police governance. The 22 District Councils established a permanent neighborhood-level infrastructure for public participation, while the Community Commission created a citywide body with formal authority within the police-accountability system. In this respect, ECPS responded directly to one of GAPA's central concerns: that communities possessed knowledge about policing and public safety but lacked institutional power to act on that knowledge. The ordinance moved



ECPS press conference, 2020

community participation beyond opportunities for input and toward a formal role in governance.

That transfer of power, however, had clear limits. ECPS did not establish complete community control over CPD. The mayor retained substantial authority, the Community Commission was not directly elected citywide, and responsibility for policing and accountability remained distributed among the Commission, the mayor, CPD leadership, COPA, the Police Board, City Council, and other institutions. Rather than replacing the existing system, ECPS inserted new forms of civilian authority into it.

For organizers who understood community control as a longer-term political project, passage was therefore an important achievement rather than an endpoint. Measured against the more expansive visions advanced during the campaign, ECPS fell short. Measured against the system that preceded it, however, it represented a substantial expansion of elected representation and formal community authority within Chicago's police-governance system. Both assessments are necessary to understand what the campaign accomplished.

Passage also changed the question facing the movement. For years, organizers had asked whether communities could win a formal role in governing policing. After ECPS, that role existed. The challenge was now to determine what could be accomplished through it. The movement had won an institution; it still had to determine whether that institution could become the vehicle for community power organizers had envisioned.

Conclusion

ECPS did not pass simply because the political case for civilian oversight became more persuasive. It passed because organizers changed the political conditions surrounding that demand. GAPA built a constituency around community power, sustained a coalition across organizational differences, found common ground with a competing model of community control, and ultimately translated years of neighborhood organizing into votes in City Council. The campaign demonstrates an important distinction between access and power: organizers had participated in negotiations for years, but their position changed most significantly when they developed political leverage independent of City Hall.

The convergence of GAPA and CPAC was central to that transformation. The two campaigns did not resolve every disagreement about what community control should mean. Instead, they determined that complete ideological agreement was less important than building enough collective power to advance a shared legislative demand. Coalition building expanded the constituencies behind civilian oversight and made it increasingly difficult for elected officials to treat divisions within the police-accountability movement as a reason for inaction. That collective power became consequential when organizing became votes. Community meetings, political education, neighborhood relationships, faith networks, advocacy organizations, and years of coalition building created constituencies that could pressure individual alderpersons. As those commitments accumulated, the balance of negotiations shifted. The coalition was no longer simply asking City Hall to accept its vision of reform; it had built a viable path toward enacting it.

ECPS remained a compromise. It did not establish complete community control, nor did it fully realize either GAPA's or CPAC's original proposal. But it moved community participation from a demand made outside government toward an authority embedded within government itself. Chicago residents gained elected neighborhood representation and a formal role in the governance of policing that had not previously existed. Passage therefore resolved one question while opening another. GAPA and its allies had demonstrated that community organizing could produce institutional power. They now had to determine what could be accomplished with that power once the movement became responsible, in part, for governing through the institutions it had fought to create. Chapter 6 examines that transition from movement to institution and what became of the vision for community power once ECPS entered the everyday work of governance.

From an organizer perspective, it's better to fail in a way that strengthens our organization than to succeed in something that undercuts us.

– Organizer

CHAPTER 6. FROM MOVEMENT TO INSTITUTION

The passage of the Empowering Communities for Public Safety ordinance changed the nature of GAPA's work. Before ECPS, the central challenge was to build a coalition, develop an oversight model, organize residents, negotiate with elected officials, and create enough political pressure to pass legislation. After passage, the challenge became institutional: the movement now had to help build the structures it had spent years demanding.

Participants described this transition as both an accomplishment and a source of new difficulties. ECPS created institutions that had not previously existed in Chicago—22 elected District Councils, comprising 66 District Councilors, and a citywide Community Commission for Public Safety and Accountability. But creating those bodies in law did not mean that they would immediately function as organizers had envisioned. They had to be staffed, funded, administered, understood by residents, and integrated into a municipal system that already included CPD, COPA, the Police Board, the Inspector General, the mayor's office, and City Council. Joel Rodriguez recalled the shift from victory to implementation: "Winning was monumental for us. This was huge. 66 elected positions, a 7 member commission—that's huge, it's a massive undertaking."

The excitement of passage was quickly followed by the realization that implementation would require a different kind of work. Rodriguez recalled that "we had to quickly transition into implementation," even as many organizers were exhausted from the campaign itself. The interviews for this report suggest that this transition is central to understanding ECPS. The ordinance created new opportunities for community participation, but it also exposed the difficulties involved in translating a movement's political aspirations into the routines, rules, and constraints of government.

Building a New System From the Ground Up

Passing ECPS created new institutions, but it did not create the administrative capacity necessary to make them function. Participants described the period after passage as a second phase of institution-building in which multiple elements had to be developed at once: elected offices, staff positions, administrative procedures, bylaws, meeting structures, election processes, and mechanisms connecting the District Councils to the citywide Commission. Joel Rodriguez recalled that organizers quickly realized

passage was not an endpoint: “We couldn’t just applaud that we won. We needed—there was more work.” In his assessment, implementing ECPS may ultimately have required as much work as passing it.

Part of the difficulty was that there was little precedent for what organizers and city staff were trying to build. ECPS had created a new form of civilian governance in Chicago, but the ordinance could not anticipate every procedure, staffing need, or administrative decision required to operate it. Anna Mangahas recalled that the new department had to develop basic infrastructure while simultaneously carrying out the responsibilities established by the ordinance. “There was no orientation handbook for our executive director,” she explained, “like, this is how you set up your city department.” Staffing, communications, legal compliance, scheduling, community outreach, and support for District Councilors all emerged as immediate needs. The challenge, as Mangahas put it, was deciding whom to hire first when “you need everybody.”

For participants who moved directly from organizing into implementation, the transition was especially immediate. Oswaldo Gomez went from advocating for the ordinance to serving on the interim Commission and later working within the new city structure. He described taking on different roles, including helping the department “get off the ground.” Organizers who had spent years debating what community governance should look like were now confronting a different set of questions: how meetings should operate, how staff should support elected Councilors, how responsibilities should be divided, and how the new institutions should interact with the rest of city government.

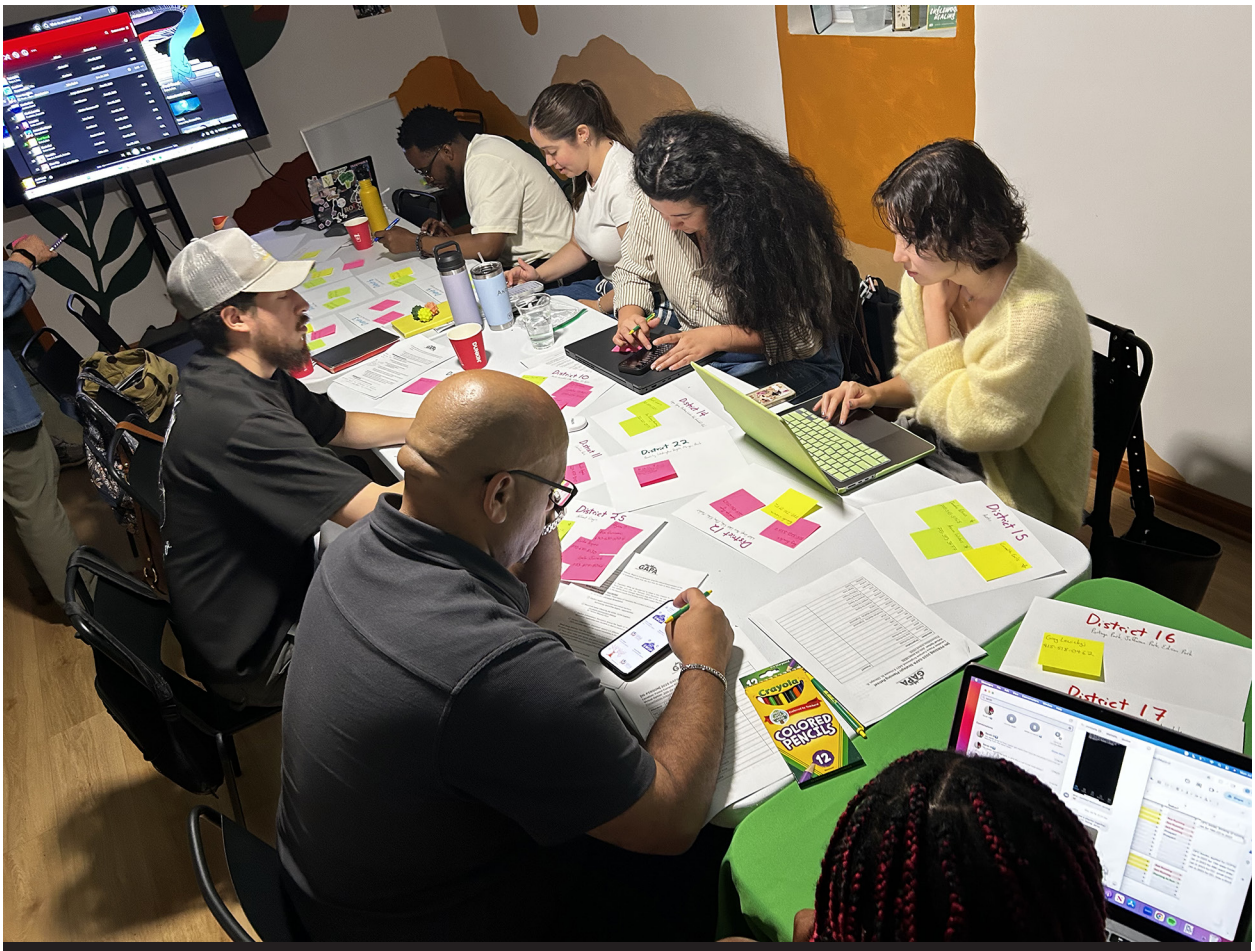
As a result, some of the most important early accomplishments were also the least visible. Mangahas pointed to milestones such as “having your first meeting, voting on your bylaws, and voting on your yearly calendar.” These actions might appear routine within an established government agency, but they represented significant progress for an institution that had no existing administrative structure. Authority created by ordinance had to be converted into procedures through which that authority could actually be exercised.

The absence of an established playbook also created some room for experimentation. Because many practices had not yet hardened into routine, those involved in implementation could shape how ECPS operated in practice. The early years therefore became a period of learning as well as construction. Participants were discovering not only whether the institutional design worked, but what administrative structures were necessary to make it work. The experience revealed an important distinction between institutional design and institutional capacity. Winning ECPS established new authority in law; implementation required building the infrastructure necessary to exercise that authority. The movement had succeeded in creating an institution. It now had to learn how to make that institution govern.

The Unexpected Demands of District Council Service

One of the clearest challenges to emerge during implementation was the amount of work required of District Councilors. ECPS created 66 elected positions intended to give residents a direct role in neighborhood-level public-safety governance. In practice, participants described the positions as requiring considerably more time and administrative labor than organizers had anticipated when designing the ordinance. Desmon Yancy reflected, "The commissioners do a lot of work and I think that we underestimated how much work it would be."

The demands extend beyond attending meetings or engaging residents around policing and public safety. Councilors may also be responsible for preparing materials, maintaining contact lists, communicating with residents, coordinating meetings, and distributing information. Elizabeth Rochford described how these routine administrative responsibilities can consume time that might otherwise be spent on substantive



GAPA organizers convene at Peace Campus in Englewood to construct a relationship network of potential District Council candidates ahead of the 2027 election cycle

community engagement and public-safety issues. For Councilors who also have full-time jobs, family responsibilities, and other obligations, the workload can be difficult to sustain, particularly given the modest compensation associated with the position.

These challenges point to a larger issue of institutional design. Creating elected opportunities for community participation does not necessarily make those opportunities equally accessible. If meaningful service requires substantial amounts of undercompensated labor, residents with greater flexibility, financial resources, or institutional support may be better positioned to serve than those without them. Representation therefore depends not only on who can run for and win elected office, but also on who has the time and resources necessary to govern once elected. Adequate staffing and compensation are consequently more than administrative concerns. They shape the accessibility of community governance itself. District Councils were designed to bring residents who are closest to neighborhood public-safety concerns into formal decision-making structures. If the demands of serving make sustained participation difficult for people with work, caregiving, or other responsibilities, the institution risks creating barriers for some of the same residents it was intended to empower.

The early experience of District Councilors therefore revealed a challenge that was difficult to see when ECPS existed primarily as an institutional design: creating a seat at the table is different from creating the conditions that allow people to occupy that seat effectively. For community governance to be meaningful, elected authority must be accompanied by the resources, staffing, and support necessary to exercise it.

From Outside Pressure to Inside Responsibility

Institutionalization changed not only what GAPA was trying to accomplish, but also the position of many of the people who had helped build the movement. Before passage, GAPA and its allies operated primarily outside government. Organizers mobilized residents, challenged political leaders, negotiated with city officials, and pressured existing institutions to change. After ECPS, some of the people most familiar with the ordinance became District Councilors, Commissioners, or city employees responsible for making the new system work. The movement had succeeded in creating positions of community authority, and its own organizers were among those best prepared to occupy them.

For those who moved into government, the transition created a different relationship to the institutions they had previously pressured from the outside. Oswaldo Gomez described the change plainly: “Now I’m part of the actual system, right? So now I actually work for the city of Chicago.” Yet he continued to understand his role through an organizing framework, emphasizing his belief that “community

power creates better policy and solutions." The challenge was no longer simply to demand that government respond to community priorities, but to determine how those priorities could be advanced from within a municipal structure governed by formal rules, administrative procedures, institutional hierarchies, and competing responsibilities.

This transition should not necessarily be understood as organizers abandoning movement work for government. In many respects, it was an intended consequence of the campaign. GAPA had spent years arguing that people with deep community knowledge should have meaningful roles in governing public safety. ECPS created opportunities for exactly that to occur. Organizers and community leaders brought into the new institutions knowledge that government itself did not possess: an understanding of why particular provisions had been included, what compromises had been made during negotiations, what communities had demanded, and what organizers believed the new structure was supposed to accomplish.

But the movement of organizers into government also created a tension that participants recognized. The people best positioned to implement ECPS were often the same people whose departure could leave gaps in the organizing infrastructure outside it. When experienced organizers became Councilors, Commissioners, or city employees, their knowledge did not disappear; it moved. Government gained people with deep knowledge of the movement and the ordinance, while movement organizations risked losing some of the relationships, experience, and institutional memory that had allowed them to organize independently of government.

This mattered because ECPS did not eliminate the need for outside organizing. The new institutions still required resources, public participation, political support, and accountability. Someone still had to organize residents, advocate for stronger implementation, and pressure government when the new structure fell short of the movement's expectations. The success of the campaign therefore produced a new organizational problem: how to place movement leaders inside institutions of power without weakening the independent community infrastructure necessary to hold those institutions accountable.

The transition from outside pressure to inside responsibility was therefore not simply a change in personnel. It altered the relationship between movement and government. ECPS created a pathway for community knowledge to enter formal governance, but it also raised a longer-term question about where the movement's knowledge and accountability would reside as leadership changed over time. The challenge was not only to bring organizers into the institution, but to preserve enough organizing capacity outside it that community power would not become dependent on the continued presence of particular individuals within government.

Bureaucratic Rules and Democratic Practice

Moving from movement organizing into government meant learning to operate under rules designed for public institutions rather than grassroots coalitions. One of the clearest examples involved the Illinois Open Meetings Act, a law designed to increase transparency into government meetings by instituting requirements such as prior notice of meeting dates and locations and opportunities for public comment when discussing business. Because each District Council has three members, two Councilors constitute a quorum. Participants explained that this limits when and how Councilors can discuss council business outside a formally noticed public meeting. Desmon Yancy described the issue as something that had been "right in front of our faces and we didn't see it" when the structure was being designed.



Commission support staff present on the role of District Councilors at a CCPSA meeting

The practical consequences were significant. In a grassroots campaign, organizers could meet informally, talk through disagreements, develop strategy, or prepare for upcoming meetings in small groups. Once elected, District Councilors could not necessarily reproduce those same practices. A conversation between two Councilors about council business could constitute a meeting subject to public notice and other legal requirements. Siobhan Peterson-Quinn described how this could require Councilors to schedule additional public meetings simply to plan regular meetings or work through issues together. Jennifer Schaffer similarly explained that her District Council holds weekly special meetings so Councilors have a legally compliant space to conduct that work.

The difficulty was not that participants opposed transparency. Open-meeting requirements exist precisely because public officials should not conduct government business beyond public view. Rather, the experience revealed a tension between two forms of democratic practice. The organizing culture that helped produce ECPS depended on frequent communication, informal relationship-building, collective problem-solving, and the ability to work through disagreements before making decisions. Public-administration rules prioritize a different democratic value: ensuring that deliberation and decision-making by elected officials remain visible and accessible to the public. Once organizers became public officials, they had to reconcile both.

The Open Meetings Act therefore illustrates a broader consequence of institutionalization. Bringing community power into government does not simply give organizers a new venue in which to continue doing the same work. It changes the conditions under which that work can occur. Practices that were ordinary—and often essential—within a grassroots coalition acquire different legal and administrative meanings when exercised by elected officials. Community governance becomes subject to requirements concerning notice, quorum, records, procedure, and public accountability that movement organizations do not encounter in the same way. This does not mean that bureaucratic rules necessarily undermine community power. Many exist to protect the same democratic principles that motivated the creation of ECPS. But the experience of District Councilors demonstrates that institutionalizing participation creates tradeoffs that are difficult to anticipate when designing an institution from the outside. Rules intended to make government more transparent can also make some of the informal collaboration associated with grassroots organizing more difficult.

The challenge, then, is not to choose between transparency and community governance. It is to build institutions capable of sustaining both. ECPS brought community representatives inside government, but doing so required them to learn a different form of democratic practice—one in which exercising community power also meant accepting the legal responsibilities and constraints that come with public authority.

Political Resistance After Passage

Passing ECPS did not eliminate the political and institutional forces that had constrained civilian oversight during the campaign. The ordinance created new forms of community authority, but those institutions entered a public-safety system in which power was already distributed among the mayor, CPD, police unions, accountability agencies, City Council, and other actors. Brian Young cautioned against treating the creation of District Councils and the Community Commission as evidence that power had already been fully redistributed. "The police still have a lot of power," they argued, adding that "the system protects the power."

Participants pointed to police contracts, arbitration, political resistance, and longstanding institutional norms as continuing constraints on what civilian oversight could accomplish. These constraints were not necessarily failures of implementation. Many reflected sources of authority that ECPS had never fully displaced. Frank Chapman, for example, continued to view the ordinance through the broader struggle for community control and remained critical of compromises that left substantial authority outside directly elected civilian institutions. From this perspective, passage changed the balance of power without resolving the underlying contest over who ultimately governs policing.

Political resistance also took on a different form once ECPS became responsible for governing. During the legislative campaign, opponents could argue against creating the new structure. After passage, the debate increasingly concerned whether the structure was effective, legitimate, and worthy of continued political and financial support. One interview participant worried that problems within an individual District Council could be used to discredit the broader police accountability system. A conflict among three Councilors or a poorly functioning council could therefore carry significance beyond one police district if it became evidence for a larger argument that community governance itself did not work. This placed unusual pressure on a young institution. District Councils and the Commission were expected to build administrative capacity, learn how to govern, develop relationships with residents and existing agencies, and demonstrate results at the same time. Established institutions have routines, staff, resources, and political relationships accumulated over decades. ECPS had to develop many of those capacities while its legitimacy was still being tested. Early implementation problems could therefore become political problems before the new institutions had fully developed the capacity to address them.

The experience reveals an important distinction between winning authority and securing it. Passage gave community governance a formal place within Chicago government, but legislation alone could not guarantee that the new institutions would have the resources, legitimacy, or political support necessary to exercise that authority

effectively. Nor did it eliminate the actors and institutional interests capable of limiting or contesting civilian power. The political struggle surrounding ECPS therefore did not end when the ordinance became law; it moved into implementation. That shift helps explain why organizing remained necessary after the legislative victory. If the new institutions were going to survive early difficulties, secure adequate resources, maintain public support, and expand their capacity to exercise the authority they had won, they would continue to need constituencies outside government willing to defend and strengthen them. Passage had changed what GAPA was organizing for, but it had not eliminated the need to organize.

Implementation Requires Organizing

The challenges of the early implementation period reinforced a lesson participants returned to repeatedly: legislation does not implement itself. Passing ECPS created new institutions and formal authority, but making those institutions function required staffing, resources, public education, administrative support, and continued political attention. Siobhan Peterson-Quinn captured the difference between campaigning and implementation: "Implementation is not sexy. And so there's less resources. But it's more complicated."

This created a familiar problem for a movement that had spent years organizing toward legislative victory. Political campaigns looking to pass legislation often treat passage as the finish line, after which attention, funding, and organizing energy move elsewhere. ECPS demonstrated the limitations of that assumption. Peterson-Quinn instead described passage as "the starting line of the relay race." The ordinance established what the new institutions were supposed to do; implementation determined whether they would develop the capacity to do it.

For GAPA, this meant that the coalition's role did not disappear after passage. It changed. Before ECPS, GAPA organized to create an institution. After ECPS, part of its work became organizing to make that institution viable. Participants described the coalition continuing to employ organizing staff, support District Councilors, advocate for resources, elevate council priorities to the Community Commission, and help residents understand and participate in the new system. The object of organizing had shifted from winning ECPS to strengthening the conditions under which ECPS could work.

Continued organizing also helped preserve a connection between the new institutions and the movement that created them. As organizers moved into positions as District Councilors, Commissioners, and city employees, an independent organizing infrastructure remained important outside government. District Councils and the Commission could exercise formal authority, but organizations outside

those institutions could continue mobilizing residents, advocating for resources, identifying implementation problems, and applying political pressure when necessary. Institutionalization therefore did not eliminate the need for movement power outside government; in some respects, it made that independent capacity more important.

This relationship complicates the idea that legislative or other organizing movements succeed once their demands become law. Establishing an institution through organizing creates new possibilities for exercising power, but it also creates new responsibilities for sustaining that power. Without continued organizing, formal authority can be weakened by inadequate resources, limited public awareness, political resistance, or declining participation. The durability of ECPS therefore depends not only on the ordinance itself, but also on whether constituencies continue to understand, use, defend, and demand resources for the institutions it created.

Implementation thus became another phase of organizing rather than a departure from it. The tactics and targets changed, but the underlying task remained similar: building the relationships and collective capacity necessary to make community power consequential. Passage gave that power an institutional form. Organizing remained necessary to ensure that the institution stayed connected to the communities it was created to serve.

Institutional Change and Cultural Change

The passage of ECPS changed Chicago's formal structure of police governance relatively quickly. District Councils could be created, Commissioners selected, responsibilities established, and new procedures written into law. Participants emphasized, however, that changing an institutional structure was different from changing the culture surrounding it. The ordinance could establish civilian authority, but it could not determine whether that authority would be understood, accepted, or treated as legitimate by the people and institutions expected to operate within the new system.

Oswaldo Gomez described this as one of the central challenges facing ECPS. "Culturally, cementing this as part of the greater landscape of civilian oversight is gonna be the big battle," he explained. His concern reflected the vulnerability of institutional reforms to changes in political leadership, police administration, public opinion, and the broader political environment. ECPS had secured a formal place for community participation within city government, but participants understood that the long-term significance of that change would depend partly on whether civilian governance became an accepted and durable part of Chicago's public-safety system. That process required more than acceptance of ECPS in the abstract. Police officials, District Councilors, Commissioners, city administrators, elected officials, and residents

entered the new system with different expectations about what civilian oversight should accomplish and how much influence community representatives should possess. Those relationships could not be fully specified in an ordinance. They had to be negotiated through repeated interactions: District Councils working with police districts, residents bringing concerns to Councilors, the Commission exercising its authority, and existing institutions learning how to operate alongside newly created civilian bodies.

Institutionalization therefore involved two related but distinct forms of change. The first was structural: creating offices, assigning authority, and establishing formal opportunities for participation. The second was cultural: making community governance a normal and legitimate part of how public safety decisions are made. ECPS accomplished the first through legislation. The second could only develop through practice.

Community Trust Has to Be Earned

The distinction between institutional and cultural change was especially visible in participants' discussions of community trust. ECPS created new opportunities for residents to interact with public-safety institutions, but participants did not assume that creating those opportunities would automatically repair relationships shaped by longstanding distrust of police and government. An institution can create a venue for participation; it cannot create trust by statute.

Participants offered different assessments of what had happened during ECPS's early years. Desmon Yancy described the initial period as "kind of rocky," noting that some within CPD viewed the new structure as another layer of bureaucracy or oversight. At the same time, he saw examples of District Councilors, police districts, community organizations, and residents beginning to develop new working relationships around neighborhood concerns. He described ECPS as a "new entry point for democracy"—a structure through which residents who previously lacked a formal role in police governance could enter conversations about public safety.

Siobhan Peterson-Quinn offered a more cautious assessment. Asked whether ECPS had already transformed relationships between communities and police, the answer was simple: "No. Not yet." Rather than contradicting Yancy's account, that response illustrates the difference between creating an opportunity for new relationships and demonstrating that those relationships have fundamentally changed. ECPS may provide a new democratic entry point without immediately overcoming the histories and experiences that shape whether residents trust the institutions on the other side of it.

Trust develops through what people experience after that entry point is created. Residents have to see that participation matters, that their concerns are heard, and that engagement can produce visible consequences. Police officials and other public institutions likewise have to learn how to respond to civilian bodies whose authority did not previously exist. Repeated interactions can build legitimacy, but they can also reinforce distrust if residents participate without seeing evidence that their involvement influences decisions.

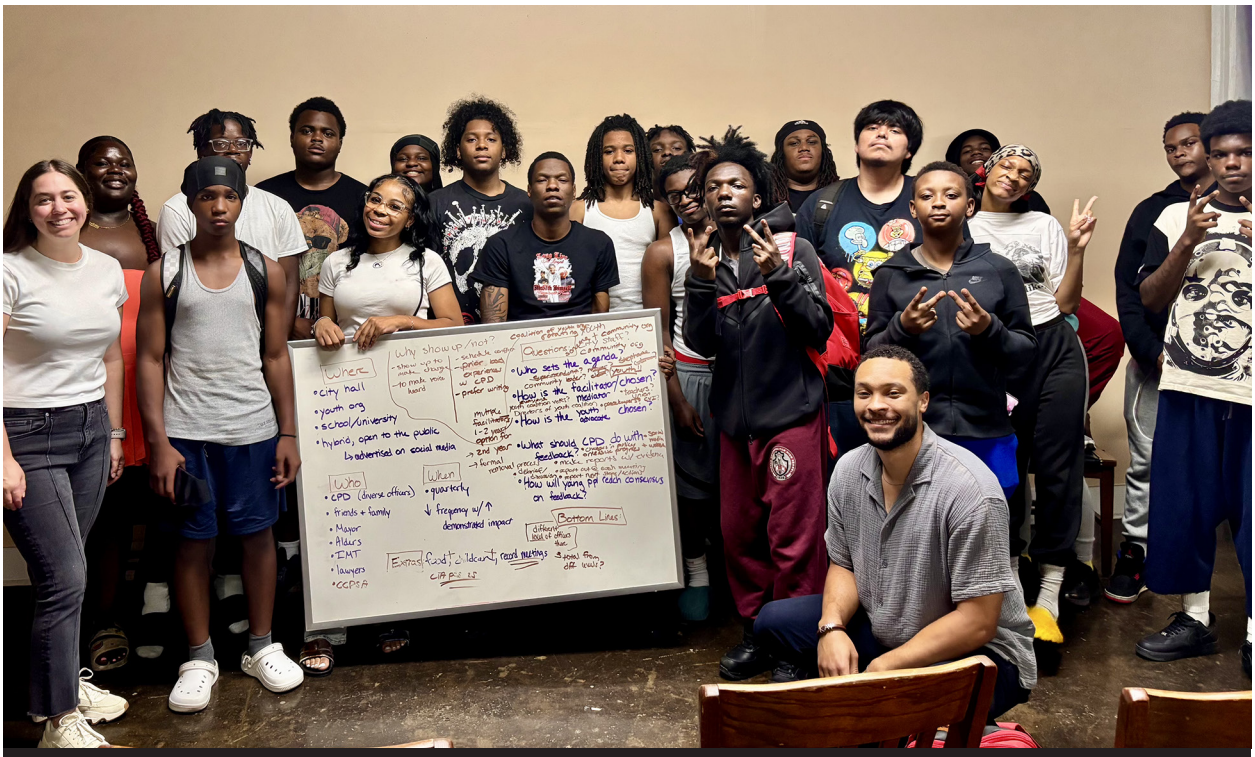
The early experience of ECPS therefore suggests that formal access is a necessary but insufficient condition for community power. District Councils can create recurring spaces for participation and the Commission can provide civilians with formal authority, but the legitimacy of those institutions ultimately depends on what residents experience through them. The longer-term test of ECPS is not simply whether communities have been given a place within the governance structure, but whether participation through that structure comes to feel consequential.

In this sense, cultural change is slower than institutional change because it cannot be accomplished through an ordinance alone. ECPS created the conditions under which different relationships among residents, police, and city government might develop. Whether those possibilities become durable forms of trust depends on what the institutions do, how existing systems respond to them, and whether communities come to see the new structure as a meaningful source of influence over public safety.

Public Awareness and Participation

The democratic potential of ECPS depends not only on the authority given to District Councils and the Community Commission, but also on whether residents know those institutions exist and understand how to participate in them. Anna Mangahas emphasized the continued need for public education about District Council meetings, elected Councilors, and opportunities for residents to engage. Loren Jones similarly identified citywide education as an important part of sustaining the new structure. Creating opportunities for participation has limited value if the communities those opportunities were designed for do not know how to access them.

Participants cautioned, however, against evaluating participation solely through meeting attendance. Siobhan Peterson-Quinn noted that District Councils can connect residents with organizations and programs addressing mental health, youth mentoring, substance use, housing security, violence prevention, and other neighborhood concerns. A relatively small meeting may still produce meaningful relationships or connect residents to resources. The impact of participation may therefore accumulate through interactions that are not captured by attendance numbers alone.



GoodKids MadCity-Englewood partner with Impact for Equity on a summer youth engagement series focused on the consent decree

The larger question is whether residents experience participation as consequential. Public awareness can bring people into meetings, but sustained engagement is more likely when residents understand what District Councils can do and see some connection between their participation and what happens afterward. If residents are repeatedly invited to participate without understanding where their input goes or whether it influences decisions, ECPS risks reproducing one of the problems GAPA originally sought to address: formal opportunities for community input without corresponding community power. Participation should therefore be understood as more than presence. The challenge is to create a visible pathway between resident engagement and institutional action. ECPS created new entry points into public-safety governance; their democratic value depends on whether residents can use those entry points to exercise meaningful influence.

A New Entry Point Into Public Leadership

Participants also identified a less anticipated consequence of ECPS: the creation of new pathways into public leadership. Chicago has relatively few neighborhood-level elected offices through which residents can gain direct experience in governance. District Councils created 66 such positions specifically focused on policing, violence

prevention, public safety, and community engagement. Peterson-Quinn described the result as a potentially "remarkable bench" of residents developing experience in public leadership, while Desmon Yancy similarly pointed to younger people entering leadership through the District Councils and Commission.

This development connects the institutional phase of ECPS to the leadership-building work that preceded it. During the campaign, GAPA invested in developing residents as organizers, advocates, and participants in public debates about policing. ECPS created formal offices through which some of that community knowledge and leadership capacity could be exercised inside government. In this sense, movement infrastructure began to become institutional infrastructure. The relationship is not automatic. District Councils can function as meaningful leadership pipelines only if residents continue to seek office, Councilors receive adequate support, and the positions provide genuine opportunities to influence public-safety governance. The workload and resource challenges described earlier in this chapter are therefore directly connected to the institution's leadership-building potential. An elected office cannot serve as an accessible pathway into public leadership if only people with sufficient time and resources can realistically sustain the work.

Still, the creation of these positions represents an important expansion of what community power can produce. ECPS did not simply give residents additional opportunities to speak to government. It created positions through which residents themselves could become public officials, develop governing experience, and potentially carry that experience into other forms of civic leadership. Whether that leadership pipeline develops over time remains an open question, but its existence represents one of the clearest ways in which GAPA's investment in community leadership acquired an institutional form.

The Central Tension of Institutionalization

The early experience of ECPS does not support a simple conclusion that the new system has either succeeded or failed. The ordinance produced meaningful institutional change. Chicago now has elected District Councils across all 22 police districts, a citywide Community Commission, recurring public meetings, and new mechanisms through which residents can participate in conversations about policing and public safety. At the same time, implementation has revealed constraints involving staffing, compensation, administrative workload, public-meeting requirements, political resistance, public awareness, and uneven participation.

These findings point to the central tension running through the institutional phase of GAPA's work. Institutionalization gives movement demands durability. Elected offices, formal authority, and responsibilities established in law are more difficult to

disregard than temporary advisory bodies or opportunities for public comment. ECPS gave community participation a place within the structure of government rather than leaving it dependent entirely on the willingness of political leaders to invite residents into decision-making. But institutionalization also changes the conditions under which community power operates. Once movement demands enter government, they become subject to budgets, staffing, administrative law, electoral cycles, transparency requirements, municipal hierarchies, and relationships with existing institutions. The informal communication and organizing practices that helped build the movement cannot always be reproduced inside government. Community leaders who once pressured institutions from the outside may become responsible for administering them from within. And formal opportunities for participation must compete with the practical realities of residents' time, resources, knowledge, and trust.

Institutionalization therefore creates both durability and constraint. The same process that gives community power a formal place in government also subjects that power to the rules and limitations of governing. The relevant question is not whether those constraints mean ECPS has failed. It is whether the institutions can develop enough capacity, legitimacy, and connection to communities to exercise the authority they have been given while preserving the democratic purpose that led organizers to demand them. That question becomes increasingly important as the movement's founding generation becomes less central to the everyday operation of ECPS. The long-term durability of community power cannot depend entirely on the continued involvement of the organizers who remember why particular provisions were created or what compromises produced them. For ECPS to endure as more than a formal structure, the principles behind it must become embedded in institutional practices, community expectations, and an outside constituency capable of continuing to demand that the system remain accountable to its original purpose. The movement's challenge did not disappear when it entered government. It changed form.

Conclusion

The passage of ECPS transformed the work of GAPA and its allies. Before its passage, organizers were primarily concerned with building enough community and political power to create new institutions. After its passage, the challenge became making those institutions function. That transition revealed something the legislative campaign could only partially anticipate: winning authority is different from developing the capacity to exercise it.

The early years of implementation demonstrate that institutionalizing community power requires more than creating elected positions or assigning formal responsibilities. It requires resources that allow residents to govern, administrative

structures that translate authority into practice, continued organizing outside government, relationships that make civilian governance legitimate, and meaningful opportunities for residents to see their participation produce consequences. ECPS created the institutional conditions for community power, but the strength of that power depends on what develops within and around those institutions over time.

This distinction complicates any simple assessment of whether ECPS has "worked." The more revealing questions are what parts of GAPA's organizing vision survived institutionalization, what changed once community power entered government, and what conditions are necessary to keep the new institutions connected to the communities they were created to serve. ECPS demonstrates that movements do not stop changing institutions once legislation passes. The work continues through the less visible processes of implementation, governance, participation, and institutional maintenance.

The final chapter steps back from those implementation questions to consider what ten years of GAPA reveal more broadly: what the movement accomplished, which tensions remain unresolved, and what its experience can teach us about the possibilities and limitations of building community power through civilian oversight of police.

Winning was monumental for us. This was huge. 66 elected positions, a 7- member commission— that's huge, it's a massive undertaking.

– Joel Rodriguez

CHAPTER 7. REFLECTIONS AFTER 10 YEARS: ACCOMPLISHMENTS, UNFINISHED WORK & LESSONS LEARNED

Nearly ten years after GAPA formed, its impact cannot be assessed solely by asking whether the coalition succeeded in passing an ordinance. By that measure, the outcome is clear. Chicago now has a civilian oversight structure consisting of a citywide Community Commission for Public Safety and Accountability and 22 elected District Councils that did not exist when GAPA began organizing in 2016. Residents now have formal avenues for participating in discussions about policing and public safety, and community representatives occupy positions within Chicago's public safety governance structure.

Interview participants, however, rarely evaluated GAPA's work in these terms alone. They also talked about people who became organizers and public leaders; relationships built among organizations that had not previously worked together; changes in how residents understood police accountability; and a political shift toward the idea that communities should have some authority over the institutions responsible for public safety. At the same time, they were clear about the limits of what had been achieved. District Councils remain under-resourced; public awareness is uneven; longstanding distrust has not disappeared; and police and established political institutions continue to hold substantial power. The result is not easily categorized as either success or failure.

GAPA succeeded in changing Chicago's institutional landscape and in making community power a more central part of the city's police accountability system. It did not resolve the larger struggle over who governs policing, nor did the passage of the Empowering Communities for Public Safety (ECPS) ordinance guarantee that the institutions it created would operate as organizers envisioned. A ten-year assessment therefore requires looking at both what GAPA built and what remains unfinished.

What GAPA Accomplished

The most visible accomplishment of GAPA is the institutional structure created through ECPS. Chicago now has 22 elected District Councils with 66 elected Councilors and a citywide Community Commission for Public Safety and Accountability, giving



GAPA Press Conference: GAPA organizers and community members hold a press conference to pressure the mayor to support the ECPS ordinance, 2019

residents formal roles within a police governance system in which community authority had previously been far more limited. However, evaluating GAPA solely through the institutions it helped create understates the broader effects of nearly a decade of organizing. GAPA's ability to win institutional change depended on the people, relationships, and political capacity developed through years of organizing. At the same time, ECPS created new spaces in which that leadership and community participation could continue. GAPA's legacy therefore lies not only in the policy it helped pass, but also in the political infrastructure built through the process.

Building People, Not Only Policy

One of the clearest accomplishments identified by participants was GAPA's investment in community leadership. As earlier chapters showed, organizers spent years holding one-on-one conversations, convening community meetings, conducting political education, and creating opportunities for residents to take increasingly active roles in

the campaign. These activities were necessary to develop GAPA's policy agenda and build support for ECPS, but participants also described leadership development as an outcome in its own right.

Michelle Morales explained, "I don't think I ever heard anyone really talk about having community conversations until GAPA started doing them." The importance of those conversations was not simply that GAPA collected residents' opinions. They created an expectation that people most affected by policing should participate in defining the policies intended to govern it. Residents were not being asked only to respond to proposals developed elsewhere; they were being brought into the process of deciding what accountability and community power should look like.

Joel Rodriguez similarly emphasized the range of people GAPA intentionally brought into that process, including young people, parents whose children had experienced police violence, pastors, teachers, and residents with longstanding experience working on public safety. Some of the people developed through this effort later became District Councilors, Commissioners, candidates for public office, and leaders in other community settings. The leadership-building work of the campaign therefore extended beyond the immediate objective of passing an ordinance.

This may be one of GAPA's more durable accomplishments. Ordinances can be amended, political administrations change, and institutions evolve. The knowledge, relationships, and organizing experience developed through a campaign can persist across those changes. GAPA's experience suggests that one measure of a movement's success is not simply whether it secures in implementing a policy or transforming the public conversation on an issue, but in whether more people leave the campaign with the knowledge and capacity to participate in public life than before they entered it.

Coalition Building Was an Outcome, Not Just a Strategy

GAPA's coalition building was similarly important both as a means of winning ECPS and as an accomplishment of the campaign itself. Over time, the coalition brought together organizations working across neighborhoods, racial and ethnic communities, faith traditions, and more. The eventual convergence of GAPA and the Civilian Police Accountability Council (CPAC) campaign expanded that network further, bringing organizations with different histories and theories of community control into a shared legislative effort.

As demonstrated in this report, coalition building created political leverage. A broader and more coordinated constituency made it possible to organize across wards, pressure alderpersons, and ultimately build the City Council support necessary to pass ECPS. Looking back on the campaign, however, participants also emphasized what remained after that legislative strategy had served its immediate purpose:

relationships among organizations and organizers that had not always approached police accountability in the same way. Those relationships are significant precisely because they were not built through ideological uniformity. GAPA's history included disagreements about elections and appointments, mayoral authority, legal strategy, institutional design, and the meaning of community control itself. The convergence with CPAC came only after years in which the two campaigns advanced different proposals. The accomplishment was therefore not that those differences disappeared. It was that organizers developed enough trust, shared purpose, and political infrastructure to act collectively despite them.

GAPA's experience suggests that durable coalition building does not always require agreement about an ultimate endpoint. In some cases, coalitions can develop around agreement on a political direction while organizations continue to hold different visions of how far change should eventually go. The capacity to remain organized through those differences became part of what GAPA built.

Changing the Terms of Police Accountability

GAPA also contributed to a less tangible but consequential change in how police accountability was discussed in Chicago. Civilian accountability mechanisms existed before GAPA, but those institutions were largely organized around questions of misconduct investigation, discipline, and review. GAPA pushed a broader question into the center of the debate: not only how police should be held accountable after misconduct occurs, but who should have power to shape the institutions, policies, and priorities governing public safety in the first place.

That distinction was central to GAPA's organizing. Community members were not positioned solely as complainants, witnesses, or members of the public entitled to provide input. The coalition argued that communities possessed knowledge about policing and public safety that should translate into an ongoing role in governance. ECPS gave that argument an institutional form through elected District Councils and the Community Commission. Participants have seen possibilities within those institutions that extend beyond traditional misconduct oversight. District Councils have taken up issues involving immigration enforcement, alternative responses to 911 calls, mediation, violence prevention, and other community concerns. Oswaldo Gomez described the councils as potential "labs" in which different approaches to public safety could be discussed and developed. This does not mean that every District Council has embraced the same vision of public safety or that ECPS has transformed policing across Chicago. Rather, the structure created a new institutional location from which residents can raise questions that previously had fewer formal pathways into police governance.

The significance of that shift is therefore partly about what questions government can now be expected to answer. Police accountability no longer has to begin and end with whether an officer violated policy after a particular incident. Residents can also ask what public safety priorities should be, how police policy should be developed, who should influence the selection of leadership, and what alternatives to police-centered responses should be considered. GAPA helped move those questions from movement demands outside government toward questions within the governance of public safety itself.

The Redistribution of Power Is Real but Incomplete

The accomplishments of ECPS should not be overstated. The ordinance redistributed formal authority, but it did not establish complete community control over policing. ECPS created elected neighborhood bodies, established a citywide Commission, and gave civilians formal roles in areas of police governance that had previously been more heavily controlled by existing city institutions. At the same time, substantial authority remains with the Chicago Police Department (CPD), the mayor, City Council, collective bargaining processes, and other parts of municipal government.

Brian Young captured this tension in reflecting on what ECPS achieved. They described the structure as an important advance while emphasizing that communities still do not possess the level of democratic authority they believe is necessary: "We don't 'all the way' have the power." After pointing to continued police power and other institutional constraints, they returned to a straightforward conclusion: "The people need more power. That's it." Participants like Young regarded ECPS as a meaningful accomplishment without treating it as the realization of everything GAPA or the broader movement had demanded. Calling the reform merely symbolic would overlook the elected institutions and formal authorities that now exist because of the campaign, while calling it complete community control would overlook how much authority remains elsewhere.

The most accurate conclusion is that ECPS changed the distribution of power without settling the struggle over power. The coalition demonstrated that sustained community organizing could alter who has formal standing within the governance of policing. It built leaders, relationships, political capacity, and institutions that did not previously exist. But those accomplishments also led to questions of whether formal access will become substantive community power, whether the institutions can retain public trust, and whether the organizing principles that produced ECPS can survive as the system matures. Those questions provide the basis for the lessons that follow.

Lessons from Ten Years of GAPA

GAPA's ten year history offers lessons that extend beyond the particular institutional structure created through ECPS. The campaign moved through nearly every stage of a community-led reform effort: defining a problem, developing a policy proposal, organizing residents, building a coalition, negotiating with government, securing legislation, and helping implement the institutions that followed. Looking across those stages reveals that building community power is not a single political accomplishment. It requires different forms of organizing before, during, and after institutional change.

The lessons that follow emerge from both GAPA's accomplishments and the difficulties organizers encountered along the way. They concern the difference between institutional access and meaningful power; the limits of legislation in producing trust; the importance of planning for implementation; the continued need for community organizing after passage; the relationship between civilian oversight and police cooperation; the importance of organizational capacity during moments of political opportunity; and the role of compromise in coalition politics.

Institutional Access Does Not Automatically Produce Community Power

One of the clearest lessons from GAPA's ten-year campaign is that creating opportunities for community participation does not guarantee that residents will be able to exercise meaningful power through them. District Councilors can be elected and still lack sufficient time, staffing, or administrative support to perform their roles effectively. Public meetings can occur without generating sustained participation. Residents can be invited into decision-making processes while remaining uncertain about whether their involvement will influence what happens. A civilian body can possess formal authority while still operating within a larger system in which substantial power remains elsewhere.

These are not simply implementation problems. They demonstrate that institutional design must account for the material conditions under which participation occurs. District Councilors often balance elected responsibilities with employment, caregiving, and other obligations. When meaningful participation requires substantial undercompensated labor, the accessibility of community governance itself becomes uneven. Creating elected positions may expand representation in principle, but limited resources still limit who can exercise that authority in practice.

The lesson here is that formal access and substantive power are not the same thing. Creating a seat at the table is only the beginning. Community representatives need training, staffing, administrative support, adequate compensation, and meaningful authority if participation is to become governance.

Community Trust Cannot Be Legislated

GAPA's experience also demonstrates the limits of institutional design in overcoming longstanding distrust. An ordinance can create District Councils, establish a civilian Commission, require public meetings, and assign formal authority, but it cannot require residents to trust those institutions or erase histories in which communities experienced police accountability systems as unresponsive or ineffective. Greater outreach, education, and public awareness are important, but skepticism toward police accountability has deeper foundations. Residents who have repeatedly experienced the cycle of police violence leading to public outrage, subsequent reform, and eventual disappointment may require more than the creation of another institution before believing that the new structure will produce different results.

Trust develops through what residents experience. People need opportunities to see that participation leads somewhere: that a concern receives a response, that a policy changes, that resources reach a neighborhood, or that officials explain why a requested action could or could not occur. The precise outcome will vary, but the connection between participation and institutional response must be visible. ECPS therefore created the conditions under which trust might develop, not trust itself. Its long-term legitimacy will depend less on the existence of opportunities for participation than on whether residents come to experience those opportunities as consequential.

Movements Need an Implementation Strategy

Another lesson from GAPA's first ten years is that movements pursuing legislative change should begin thinking about implementation before legislation passes. Political campaigns naturally organize around moments of decision: hearings, votes, elections, negotiations, and passage. Those moments attract attention and resources. Implementation is less visible, but it is where much of the practical meaning of legislation is determined.

GAPA experienced this transition immediately after ECPS passed. The coalition moved quickly from advocating for an ordinance to confronting questions involving elections, staffing, administration, public education, District Council support, and the creation of an entirely new governmental structure. Authority had been established in law, but the capacity necessary to exercise that authority still had to be built.

Implementation planning should therefore be treated as part of movement strategy rather than as a separate administrative phase that begins after victory. Before legislation passes, movements pursuing institutional reform should ask who will staff and support new institutions, what resources officeholders will require, how community leaders will be recruited, how the public will learn about the new structure, and how implementation will be evaluated. They should also consider what will happen

to the movement itself. Some of the people most knowledgeable about a reform may become the people most qualified to implement it from inside government. While this could strengthen the institution, it could also reduce organizing capacity outside it. Successful implementation therefore requires planning not only for who will enter the institution, but for who will remain outside it to organize, advocate, and hold it accountable.

Community-Led Decision Making Must Continue After the Campaign

GAPA's organizing model depended heavily on repeated engagement with residents. Organizers held community conversations, brought proposals back to neighborhoods, explained how those proposals were changing, and asked whether the coalition remained aligned with what residents had demanded. Institutionalization makes that form of community-led decision-making more difficult to sustain. Government institutions develop professional staff, administrative routines, legal requirements, specialized knowledge, and internal decision-making processes. Those capacities are necessary for governing, but over time they can also create distance between an institution and the communities that produced it. Public meetings and comment periods can continue while the meaningful influence of residents over institutional priorities gradually weakens. Maintaining community voice therefore requires more than preserving opportunities for public comment. This may be one of the most important long-term tests of ECPS. The structure was created because organizers argued that communities should possess greater power over policing and public safety. If the institutions eventually become insulated from those communities, ECPS could become a civilian oversight system that has lost a significant piece of the political logic that made GAPA distinctive. Preventing that kind of institutional drift requires community-led decision-making to remain a practice, not merely an origin story.

Police Buy-In Matters, but Is Not the Same as Police Permission

GAPA's experience of ECPS implementation also reveals a difficult balance in the relationship between civilian oversight and the institutions being overseen. District Councilors need working relationships with CPD district commanders. The Community Commission requires information from CPD and must interact with police leadership around policy and public safety priorities. Civilian governance becomes considerably more difficult when police officials view the oversight structure as illegitimate or burdensome.

Police cooperation therefore matters. But cooperation cannot become a prerequisite for civilian authority. GAPA emerged precisely because organizers believed existing systems had concentrated too much authority within institutions that

communities were attempting to hold accountable. If civilian oversight can function only when police leadership approves of its decisions or accepts the legitimacy of its authority, the underlying distribution of power remains largely unchanged. Effective oversight requires communication and, in many circumstances, collaboration. The challenge is to build working relationships without sacrificing institutional independence. Police buy-in can help civilian oversight function, but police permission cannot determine whether civilian oversight has the authority to act.

Critical Moments Create Openings, but Organizing Determines What Fills Them

GAPA's history also demonstrates the difference between political opportunity and political capacity. The murder of Laquan McDonald created an opening for police accountability reform. The Police Accountability Task Force created another. The 2020 uprisings following the murder of George Floyd changed the political environment again, as did transitions between mayoral administrations. Each moment altered what appeared politically possible. None automatically produced ECPS. A crisis can make an issue difficult for government to ignore, but it cannot by itself create a coalition, develop a policy proposal, build relationships with residents, conduct political education, reconcile competing organizations, or assemble votes in City Council. Those capacities have to be built through organizing.

The length of GAPA's campaign is important for precisely this reason. When the political environment changed in 2020, organizers were not beginning from zero. Years of community conversations, policy development, coalition building, and political education had created infrastructure that could be activated when the opportunity expanded. The coalition had developed both ideas about what should change and relationships capable of turning those ideas into political pressure. The lesson for movements is to not simply recognize moments of crisis or wait for favorable political conditions; it is to build enough organizational capacity before those moments arrive to make use of them when they do.

Coalition Building Requires Knowing What Can Be Compromised

Finally, GAPA's experience offers a lesson about the role of compromise in coalition politics. ECPS was neither GAPA's original proposal nor did it mimic the Civilian Police Accountability Council (CPAC) proposal. Building a unified campaign and securing passage required organizations to accept institutional arrangements they would not necessarily have chosen independently.

The campaign suggests an important distinction between compromising over the form of community power and compromising away the demand for community power itself. Elections, appointments, institutional relationships, and specific allocations of

authority changed during negotiations. The coalition nevertheless continued to insist that the final structure create a meaningful and durable role for communities within police governance. That distinction made coalition building possible. Organizations did not have to agree on every feature of the institution or abandon their longer-term political goals in order to work together. They just needed enough agreement about what the reform fundamentally had to accomplish to distinguish negotiable provisions from concessions that would undermine the reason for pursuing the reform in the first place.

This is perhaps one of GAPA's most transferable lessons for other coalitions pursuing structural change. Refusing every compromise can make collective action or legislative victory impossible. Accepting every compromise can produce an institutional victory emptied of the political purpose from which it arose. Successful coalition building requires knowing the difference and building enough trust among organizations to negotiate that boundary together.

Conclusion

Taken together, these lessons point toward a broader conclusion from GAPA's first decade. Community power cannot be secured through institutional design alone. It depends on the resources that make participation possible, the relationships that give institutions legitimacy, the organizing capacity that survives legislative victory, and the ability of communities to continue shaping institutions after they enter government. These lessons also suggest concrete priorities for the next phase of ECPS. The question moving forward is not simply how to preserve the institutions GAPA helped create, but how to strengthen the conditions under which those institutions can exercise meaningful and durable community power.

The people need more power. That's it.

– Brian Young

RECOMMENDATIONS. FOR STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY POWER THROUGH ECPS

Ten years of GAPA and the early implementation of ECPS suggest that the next phase of civilian oversight in Chicago should focus less on creating new opportunities for participation than on strengthening the conditions under which existing opportunities can produce meaningful community power. The institutional architecture now exists. Chicago has elected District Councils, a citywide Community Commission, and formal mechanisms through which residents can participate in police governance. The challenge moving forward is to ensure that these institutions have the resources, public legitimacy, community relationships, and organizational support necessary to exercise the authority they were created to hold.

The recommendations below follow directly from the experiences described throughout this report. They are intended not as a comprehensive redesign of ECPS, but as priorities for strengthening the system that organizers, residents, and elected officials have already built.

1. Provide District Councils with the Resources Necessary to Govern while Removing Bureaucratic Barriers

The early experience of District Councilors demonstrates that elected community governance requires more support than the original institutional design anticipated. Councilors are expected to hold public meetings, engage residents, communicate with community organizations and police leadership, respond to constituent concerns, and perform administrative work while often balancing full-time employment, caregiving, and other responsibilities. Limited compensation and administrative support can make those expectations difficult to sustain.

Chicago should therefore evaluate whether District Councils have sufficient staffing, compensation, administrative assistance, training, and communications support to perform their responsibilities effectively. Particular attention should be paid to tasks that consume Councilors' time without requiring their substantive expertise, such as maintaining contact lists, preparing meeting materials, distributing information, coordinating logistics, and navigating city administrative processes. This is not simply a question of making government more efficient. Resources shape representation. If serving effectively as a District Councilor requires substantial amounts of

uncompensated or undercompensated labor, residents with greater financial security and schedule flexibility will be better positioned to participate than residents without those advantages. Strengthening District Council resources is therefore necessary to make community governance more accessible to the range of people ECPS was designed to represent.

City and state leaders should also examine whether existing laws and regulations unintentionally constrain the District Councilors' ability to carry out the collaborative work their positions require. In particular, the structure of three-member District Councils can make the Illinois Open Meetings Act especially consequential: when two Councilors need to discuss public business, collaborate on a district project, plan an important community meeting, or coordinate a rapid response to an emerging neighborhood concern, ordinary working interactions may trigger Open Meetings Act requirements (i.e. making the meeting open and accessible to the public and providing advance notice and an agenda). These constraints can create tension between the Act's important commitment to transparency and the practical demands of community-based governance. Policymakers should therefore consider whether narrowly tailored amendments to municipal or state law could preserve meaningful public transparency while giving District Councilors greater flexibility to collaborate. The goal should not be to weaken open-government protections, but to ensure that laws designed to promote accountable government do not inadvertently prevent District Councilors from working together effectively enough to provide it.

2. Invest in Sustained Public Education & Community Outreach

Public awareness of ECPS remains uneven. Residents cannot exercise authority through institutions they do not know exist, do not understand, or do not know how to access. Public education should therefore be treated as a permanent function of the oversight system rather than as a temporary responsibility associated with its launch. Outreach should clearly communicate who District Councilors are, when and where councils meet, what authority District Councils and the Community Commission possess, what kinds of concerns residents can bring to them, and how community input moves through the system. Information should be accessible across languages, neighborhoods, and communication formats and should reach residents beyond those already engaged in police-accountability organizations or municipal politics.

District Councils should also continue developing relationships with institutions residents already know and use, including community organizations, schools, faith institutions, violence-prevention organizations, service providers, neighborhood associations, and other local networks. GAPA's own history demonstrates that community participation is more likely to develop through relationships than through announcements alone.

Strengthening awareness of ECPS should therefore rely on the same principle that helped build the movement: meet residents where they already are.

3. Make the Connection Between Community Participation & Institutional Action Visible

Increasing meeting attendance should not be the only measure of successful community participation. Residents are more likely to remain engaged when they can see what happens after they raise an issue, attend a meeting, provide testimony, or communicate with a Councilor. ECPS should therefore develop clearer feedback mechanisms connecting community participation to institutional response. District Councils and the Community Commission should regularly communicate what residents have raised, what actions were taken in response, which issues were elevated to other institutions, and where authority to act rests elsewhere. Not every community request will produce a policy change, and civilian institutions will not possess authority over every issue residents bring forward. In those cases, transparency about what happened and why remains important.

The goal should be to make the pathway from voice to response visible. Residents should be able to understand not only how to participate, but what their participation can realistically accomplish. Without that feedback, even well-attended public processes can begin to feel symbolic. ECPS was created in part because organizers challenged systems that offered communities opportunities to speak without corresponding authority. Its implementation should avoid reproducing that distinction.

4. Preserve Independent Community Organizing Outside Government

One of the most important lessons from GAPA is that institutionalization does not eliminate the need for organizing outside government. Some organizers and community leaders have appropriately moved into roles as District Councilors, Commissioners, and city employees. Their experience and knowledge can strengthen the institutions they now serve. But ECPS also needs an independent constituency capable of supporting, monitoring, defending, and challenging those institutions from outside. GAPA and other community organizations therefore continue to have an important role after passage. Independent organizations can conduct political education, recruit new leaders, mobilize residents around emerging issues, advocate for resources, identify implementation problems, and apply pressure when government institutions fall short. They can also preserve institutional memory about why ECPS was created and the community demands that shaped its design.

Funders and philanthropic organizations should recognize this work as part of implementation rather than assume that organizing is no longer necessary because legislation has passed. The period after legislative victory may receive less attention than the campaign itself, but it is precisely when sustained organizing capacity can help prevent new institutions from becoming disconnected from the constituencies that created them. Maintaining this outside infrastructure also protects an important form of accountability. Community power is strongest when residents have both representatives exercising authority inside government and organizations capable of mobilizing independently outside it.

5. Strengthen the Connection Between District Councils & the Community Commission

The two-tiered structure of ECPS was designed to connect neighborhood-level participation with citywide authority. That relationship should remain central to implementation. District Councils can identify concerns, priorities, and emerging public-safety issues within individual police districts, while the Community Commission is positioned to address questions requiring citywide policy or institutional action. The effectiveness of that structure depends on whether information and priorities can move meaningfully between the two levels. Clear processes should exist for District Councils to elevate issues to the Commission, for the Commission to communicate how those issues are being addressed, and for Councilors to bring that information back to residents. District Councilors should be able to understand when a concern has moved beyond the authority of their individual council and what pathway exists for advancing it elsewhere.

Strengthening these relationships can help ensure that neighborhood participation is connected to institutional authority rather than operating alongside it. The objective should be a visible chain connecting resident knowledge, District Council deliberation, Commission action, and communication back to communities.

6. Protect Independence While Building Functional Relationships With CPD

Civilian oversight cannot function entirely without cooperation from the police department it oversees. District Councilors need relationships with district leadership, and the Community Commission requires information and engagement from CPD to exercise its responsibilities effectively. Continued efforts should therefore be made to develop functional relationships among civilian institutions, district commanders, CPD leadership, and other components of Chicago's public-safety system. At the

same time, cooperation should not become dependence. The legitimacy or authority of civilian oversight cannot rest on whether CPD agrees with the decisions civilian institutions make. ECPS emerged from a movement that sought to redistribute authority precisely because organizers believed communities required power independent of the institutions they were attempting to influence.

The goal should therefore be cooperation without sacrificing independence. Constructive relationships can improve implementation, information-sharing, and responsiveness, but disagreement should be understood as an expected feature of oversight rather than evidence that the structure is failing. Civilian institutions must retain the capacity to exercise their authority even when doing so produces conflict with existing public-safety institutions.

7. Build Leadership Development into the Long-Term ECPS Infrastructure

GAPA's experience demonstrates that leadership development was not incidental to policy change; it was one of the conditions that made policy change possible. ECPS now has the potential to extend that work by creating pathways through which residents can gain experience in public leadership, governance, community engagement, and public-safety policy. That opportunity should be cultivated intentionally. District Councilors should receive continuing opportunities for training and leadership development, while community organizations and existing Councilors can help residents understand how to become involved, serve on committees, participate in meetings, or eventually seek elected positions themselves. Particular attention should be paid to ensuring that these pathways remain accessible to residents who have historically had fewer opportunities to enter formal political institutions.

Leadership development also provides one way to protect ECPS against overdependence on its founding generation. The long-term durability of community power cannot rely on the continued participation of the organizers who created the system. New residents must continually develop the knowledge, relationships, and governing experience necessary to sustain and reshape it.

8. Establish Ongoing Evaluation as Part of Institutional Development

ECPS should be treated as an institution that can learn and adapt. The early years have already revealed challenges that were difficult to anticipate when the ordinance was being designed, including Councilor workload, administrative demands, public awareness, relationships with CPD, and the practical effects of legal and procedural requirements. Future challenges will similarly emerge as the system matures. Ongoing evaluation should therefore examine not only whether required meetings occur or

formal responsibilities are fulfilled, but whether the institutions are advancing the broader democratic purposes for which they were created. Relevant questions include who participates and who does not; whether Councilors have adequate resources; whether residents understand the system; whether community priorities reach the Commission; how institutions respond to those priorities; how relationships with CPD develop; and whether residents perceive their participation as meaningful.

Evaluation should also preserve the community-centered approach that shaped GAPA's development. Residents, District Councilors, Commissioners, community organizations, and other stakeholders should have opportunities to help define what successful implementation looks like and identify where the structure requires improvement. Evaluation should function not simply as an external judgment of whether ECPS "works," but as a mechanism for institutional learning and democratic accountability.

MOVING FORWARD. STRENGTHENING THE CONDITIONS FOR COMMUNITY POWER

Taken together, the recommendations in the previous section reflect a central finding of this report: the next phase of the Empowering Communities for Public Safety (ECPS) ordinance depends on both expanding its formal powers and strengthening the conditions that allow existing authority to become meaningful in practice. Adequately resourced Councilors; informed residents; visible pathways between participation and action; independent community organizations; strong connections between District Councils and the Commission; functional but independent relationships with the Chicago Police Department; leadership development; and ongoing evaluation all contribute to whether institutional access becomes substantive community power.

Responsibility for that work is necessarily shared. City government and the Community Commission have responsibilities for resources, administration, public education, and institutional development. District Councils have responsibilities for community engagement and neighborhood-level governance. CPD has a responsibility to recognize and work within the civilian governance structure established by law. Community organizations have a continued role in organizing residents and holding institutions accountable. Funders can support the less visible work of implementation and long-term community capacity. Residents themselves remain central to determining whether the opportunities created through ECPS become meaningful forms of democratic participation.

The goal moving forward should not be to treat ECPS as a finished institutional design that simply needs time to operate. Its first years have already demonstrated that community governance must be continually built. The structure should be strengthened in response to what Councilors, residents, organizers, Commissioners, and other participants learn through practice while preserving the central principle that animated GAPA's work from the beginning: communities most affected by policing should have meaningful power in determining how public safety is governed.

ECPS remains an unfinished democratic experiment and the institution remains capable of development. The question for this next decade is whether Chicago can build on the formal authority that has been won and create the resources, relationships, practices, and public constituency necessary to make that authority durable. GAPA's ten-year experience demonstrates that grassroots organizing can change institutions,

but it also demonstrates why institutional change cannot be the final measure of community power. Power has to be organized before it can be institutionalized. And once it is institutionalized, it has to be continually maintained.



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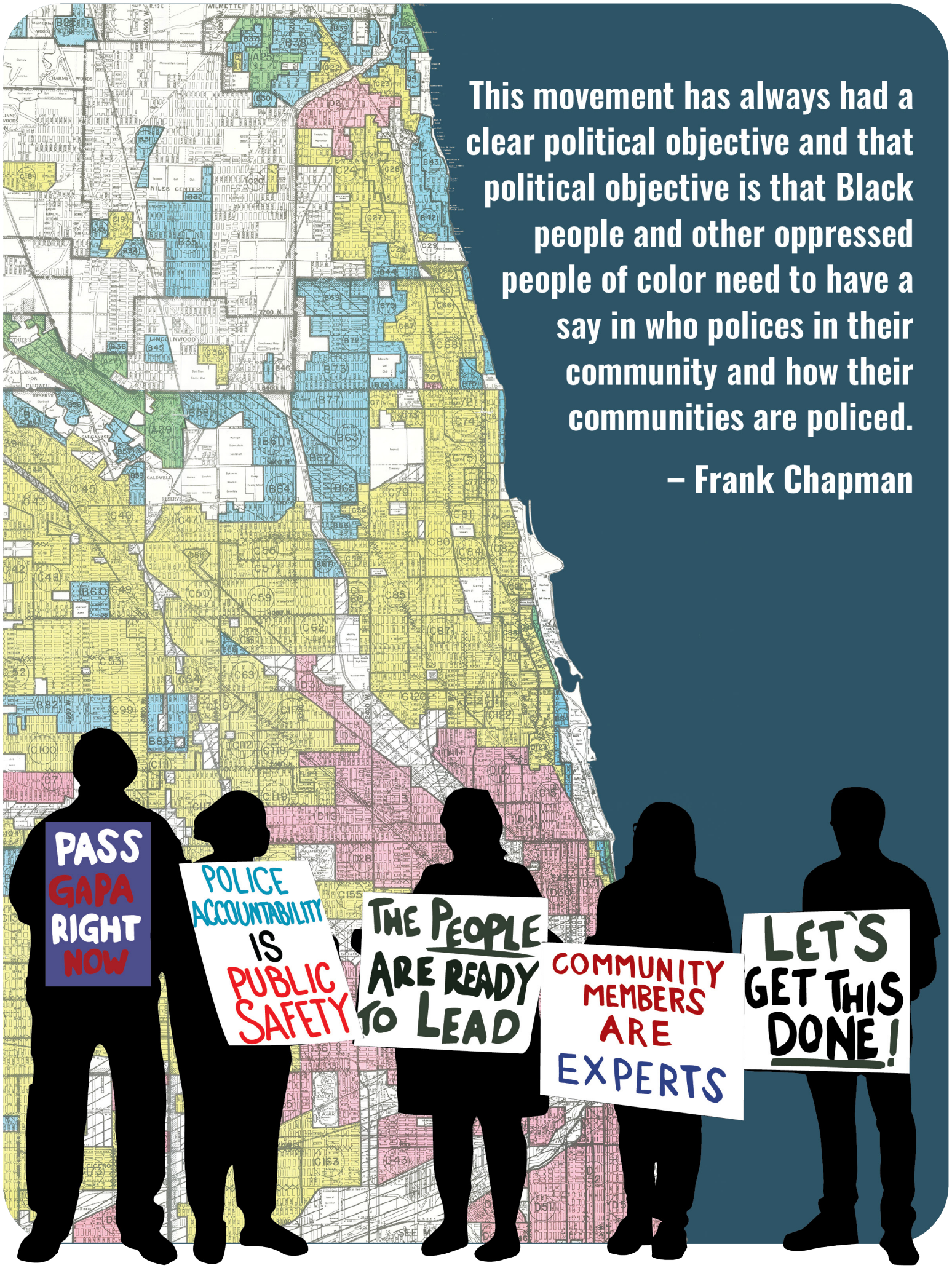
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This movement has always had a clear political objective and that political objective is that Black people and other oppressed people of color need to have a say in who polices in their community and how their communities are policed.
– Frank Chapman
PASS GAPA RIGHT NOW
POLICE ACCOUNTABILITY IS PUBLIC SAFETY
THE PEOPLE ARE READY TO LEAD
COMMUNITY MEMBERS ARE EXPERTS
LET'S GET THIS DONE!