Cover Letter

March 8, 2021

To:
Honorable Lori Lightfoot, Chicago Mayor
Dr. Allison Arwady, Commissioner, Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH)
Candace Moore, Chief Equity Officer, City of Chicago
Megan Cunningham, Managing Deputy Commissioner, CDPH
Genese Turner, Director, Health Equity and Strategic Partnerships, CDPH
Sandi Brown, Chief Racial Equity Officer, CDPH

Please find attached/enclosed the letter circulated by Health & Medicine Policy Research Group and the Collaborative for Health Equity Cook County and signed by over 500 public health and healthcare workers, students, community activists, and over 70 national and local organizations demanding that the City of Chicago take decisive action to deny the permit to relocate the General Iron/Reserve Management Group (RMG) scrap metal recycling facility to the Southeast Side of Chicago.

This open letter in support of demands to #DenyThePermit to the General Iron/RGM facility and in support of Chicago Hunger Strikers demands the City follow its own health plan, Healthy Chicago 2025. Those that have signed onto the letter include organizations and individuals from across the City, national leaders in public health, social service and advocacy and includes many who worked to produce the City’s Health Plan.

Below is a listing of some who have signed onto the letter:

- Eleven organizations that are members of the Partnership for Healthy Chicago have signed, as well as many recognized individual leaders and partners:
  - Chicagoland Equity Network, Health & Medicine Policy Research Group, Heartland Alliance, Illinois Community Health Worker Association, Sinai Urban Health Institute, Public Health Institute of Metropolitan Chicago, Natural Resources Defense Council, NAMI Chicago, Metropolitan Planning Council, UIC School of Public Health Collaboratory for Health Justice, and Metropolitan Tenants Organization

- Local and Nationally recognized public health, social service and advocacy organizations and leaders have signed onto the letter. They include Human Impact Partners; National Association of Social Workers, Illinois Chapter; Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America; Brian Smedley, PhD, Co-Editor of the IOM landmark Report Unequal Treatment; Linda Rae Murray, MD, MPH, Past President of APHA; Steven K. Rothschild, MD, member of the Chicago Board of Health; David Ansell, MD, MPH, Rush University Medical Center
• Organizations from across civil society have signed onto the letter, including public health advocates, research, philanthropic, healthcare, religious, labor, mental health, racial justice, immigrant rights, disability rights, student groups, legal aid, housing, environmental justice, and community-based organizations from all around Chicago.

Please read the letter below for the complete information and perspective from hundreds of public health and healthcare organizations and dozens of organizations who have signed on. We hope you will yield to the community demands that you deny the permit to the General Iron / RGM facility in order to advance health equity and racial justice in Chicago.

Sincerely,

Lead Letter Organizers:
Jim Bloyd, MPH, Collaborative for Health Equity Cook County
Contact: jimbloyd@gmail.com  708-955-4100

Joanna Tess, MPH
Contact: joannatess7@gmail.com  920-517-4611

Linda Rae Murray, MD, MPH, FACP, Past President, American Public Health Association, Board Member, Health & Medicine Policy Research Group; Collaborative for Health Equity Cook County
Contact: lindarae.murray@gmail.com  773-628-4911

Susan Ávila, RN, MPH, Collaborative for Health Equity Cook County
Contact: avila.susan@gmail.com  773-960-5961

Wesley Epplin, MPH, Director of Health Equity, Health & Medicine Policy Research Group, Collaborative for Health Equity Cook County
Contact: wepplin@hmprg.org  217-979-2632
March 8, 2021

To:
Honorable Mayor Lori Lightfoot
Dr. Allison Arwady, Commissioner, Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH)
Candace Moore, Chief Equity Officer, City of Chicago
Megan Cunningham, Managing Deputy Commissioner, CDPH
Genese Turner, CDPH Director, Health Equity and Strategic Partnerships
Sandi Brown, CDPH Racial Equity Officer

We, the undersigned public health and healthcare workers and organizations urge you as City of Chicago decision-makers and as public health-, racial equity-, and health-equity-focused public servants to take decisive action to deny the permit to relocate the General Iron/Reserve Management Group (RMG) scrap metal recycling facility to the Southeast Side of Chicago and to support a broader environmental justice response to this situation. We stand in solidarity with the Chicago hunger strikers and their supporters who have been demanding environmental justice for the Southeast Side of Chicago.

Until the last day of 2020, General Iron operated a metal shredding operation in Lincoln Park that was closed down after repeated fines for violating environmental laws. The proposed move of the metal shredder polluter from Lincoln Park, a predominantly White, wealthy Chicago community, to Chicago’s Southeast Side—made up predominantly of people of color, including Latinx and Black people, and working class people—exemplifies environmental racism and class inequity. The Southeast Side is already overburdened with polluting industries, so moving this metal scrapper there would add to an already overburdened community. Structural racism is a root cause of health inequities. Chicago’s elected and appointed officials should not allow this relocation and operation of this polluter.

In 2020, Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) launched Healthy Chicago 2025, the current community health improvement plan for the city. The plan’s vision is, “All people and all communities have power, are free from oppression and are strengthened by equitable access to resources, environments and opportunities that promote optimal health and well-being.” A major theme from the

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assessment is the need to, “Transform policies and processes to foster antiracist, multicultural systems.” The plan described the intention to “promote and advocate for policies and leaders that are antiracist,” as part of a broader effort to foster antiracism in public health and advance health equity. Antiracism and health equity require more than words and intentions; they require aligned actions, including in promoting antiracist policies and leadership, as Healthy Chicago 2025 states.

The American Public Health Association notes that “structural racism and discrimination in planning have further contributed to environmental injustices and, thus, threats to public health in Environmental Justice communities.” In this case, the local community health improvement plan—Healthy Chicago 2025—properly takes aim at environmental injustice and structural racism. However, with the proposed relocation of the General Iron/RGM scrap metal facility, the environmental health risks would be worsened for the residents of this area and children attending nearby schools. This means that in addition to damaging Southeast Side residents’ ability to breathe clean air, this polluter would likely worsen the current educational opportunity inequities, a critical social determinant of health.

Air pollution and disease burdens are inequitable in Chicago and air pollution is a problem throughout the city. At the same time, the proposed new location of the metal scrapper would not simply be a move from one community to another with equal pollution burdens; rather it would be from a less burdened community to an already highly burdened community area. The move would worsen toxic air in an already burdened community of color, worsening structural racism.

A failure of the City to take decisive action and deny the permit for General Iron/RGM scrapper to move to the Southeast Side would be in conflict with CDPH’s own plan, which commits on page 20: “Here’s how we – the local public health system, including government, community organizations, academic institutions, businesses and others who support a Healthy Chicago – will make change, together, over the next five years and for generations to come.” On the same page, the plan states that populations experiencing inequities include “Communities disproportionately burdened by pollution” that could expect that a future “ideal state” will include the ability to “Breathe clean air free of harmful pollutants.”

If permitted by the City of Chicago, the operation of the General Iron/RGM facility would abrogate these and other commitments to health equity and racial justice and demonstrate that the City values the scrap metal company’s profits over the health of the Latinx, Black, and working class people on the Southeast Side who would be most impacted by the decision. One article noted that according to court records, two owners of General Iron had each received $64 million—totaling $128 million in profits for


the owners—over the last decade. Chicago must stop sacrificing its people’s health for business owners’ profits.¹

**There is much at stake with this permitting decision.** The health and wellbeing of people living in Chicago’s Southeast Side is at stake. The proposed relocation and operation of General Iron/RGM would worsen Southeast Side residents’ ability to breathe clean air. The City of Chicago’s stated commitment to equity and racial justice is likewise at stake.

CDPH’s stakes include: its ability to consistently be in service of the public’s health and for health equity; to work on behalf of and in partnership with communities, especially those facing structural racism, class inequity, and other oppressions; and the faith and partnership placed in the department’s ability to respond to and follow through on its community health assessment and community health improvement planning processes. The very vision for Healthy Chicago 2025 and whether or not CDPH, its leadership, and the Lightfoot Administration are all willing to use their authority to stand up for that vision, for public health, and racial and environmental justice—against industry profiting off of pollution—is all at stake.

As public health, healthcare, and other health and social service workers, we expect that our local health department will follow through on the health equity and racial justice commitments it has been making for years and that it has made central to Healthy Chicago 2025. We expect our Mayor, Lori Lightfoot, and her entire administration to be accountable for advancing racial justice and public health.

CDPH should fulfill its ethical obligations, which the APHA⁵ states in part is to promote equitable distribution of burdens, benefits, and opportunities for health; ensure that health inequities are not exacerbated; and remediate structural and institutional forms of domination that arise from inequalities in voice, power, and wealth. Ignoring these obligations would be an instance of public health malpractice. Public health malpractice is the preventable gap between established science and actions by policymakers.⁶ We demand that CDPH follow its own community health improvement plan—Healthy Chicago 2025—and prioritize environmental justice, racial equity, and health equity in its actions. As a minimum first step, CDPH leadership should publicly state its support for the Chicago hunger strikers and community members who have raised their voices in support of their community’s right to breathe clean air and for racial justice.

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CDPH should follow health equity-focused public health practice by forming partnerships with social justice actors and environmental justice organizations, which will push it out of its comfort zone, and will be a major step in beginning to address environmental racism.

For the many reasons listed herein, we demand that Mayor Lori Lightfoot and the Chicago Department of Public Health support the health and wellbeing of the Southeast Side people by denying the permit and not allowing the relocation to and operation of the metal shredder in Chicago’s East Side community area—or anywhere else in Chicago.

Sincerely,

**Lead Letter Organizers:**
Jim Bloyd, MPH, Collaborative for Health Equity Cook County
Contact: jimbloyd@gmail.com  708-955-4100

Joanna Tess, MPH
Contact: joannotess7@gmail.com  920-517-4611

Linda Rae Murray, MD, MPH, FACP, Past President, American Public Health Association, Board Member, Health & Medicine Policy Research Group; Collaborative for Health Equity Cook County
Contact: lindarae.murray@gmail.com  773-628-4911

Susan Ávila, RN, MPH, Collaborative for Health Equity Cook County
Contact: avila.susan@gmail.com  773-960-5961

Wesley Epplin, MPH, Director of Health Equity, Health & Medicine Policy Research Group, Collaborative for Health Equity Cook County
Contact: wepplin@hmprg.org  217-979-2632

**Organizations signed on to public health and healthcare sign-on deny the permit letter:**
Access Living
AIDS Foundation Chicago
Alliance for Community Services
American Federation of Government Employees Local 704
Arise Chicago
Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America
Black AIDS Institute
Black Treatment Advocates Network Chicago
Brighton Park Neighborhood Council
Center for Neighborhood Technology
Centro de Trabajadores Unidos (United Workers’ Center)
Chicago Area Fair Housing Alliance
Chicago Center for Health and Environment - CACHET
Chicago Coalition for the Homeless
Chicago Democratic Socialists of America
Chicago Women's AIDS Project
Chicagoland Equity Network
Citizen Action/Illinois
Coalición de Migrantes Mexicanos
Collaborative for Health Equity Cook County (letter organizer)
Edgewater Environmental Coalition
Enlace Chicago
Environmental Committee, Indivisible Lincoln Square
Equal Hope
Equity And Transformation
Esperanza Health Center
EverThrive Illinois
Family Matters
Garfield Park Community Council
Health & Medicine Policy Research Group (letter organizer)
Healthy Illinois
Heartland Alliance
Human Impact Partners
Illinois Area Health Education Centers Network Program
Illinois Community Health Worker Association
Illinois PIRG Students
Illinois Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival
Illinois Unidos
Indivisible Chicago-South Side
Indivisible Illinois
Indivisible Illinois 9th District Andersonville-Edgewater
Learning Disabilities Association of Illinois
Legal Council for Health Justice
Metropolitan Family Services
Metropolitan Planning Council
Metropolitan Tenants Organization
MiMedico (Salud Latinx LLC)
Minority Students for the Advancement of Public Health
NA4J
NAMI Chicago
National Association for the Advancement of Colored
National Association of Social Workers, Illinois Chapter
Natural Resources Defense Council
Nehemiah Family Fellowship Church
ONE Northside
People (NAACP) Chicago Southside
Planned Parenthood of Illinois
Protect Our Care Illinois
Public Health Institute of Metropolitan Chicago
Public Health Student Association (PHSA)
Radical Public Health
Respiratory Health Association
SEIU Healthcare Illinois & Indiana
Shriver Center on Poverty Law
Sinai Urban Health Institute
SOUL Southsiders Organized for Unity and Liberation
Southeast Environmental Task Force
Southeast Side Coalition to Ban Petcoke
Student Alliance for Public Health and the Environment
Students for Animal Liberation
Students for Justice in Palestine UIC
The Southwest Collective
Thresholds
UIC Public Health Alliance
UIC School of Public Health Collaboratory for Health Justice
United Neighbors of the 35th Ward
Workers Center For Racial Justice
Working Family Solidarity
Individuals signed on to public health and healthcare sign-on deny the permit letter:
Aaron Beswick, MSW, MPH
Abigail Medrano, Anakbayan Chicago, Malaya Chicago
Adam B. Becker, PhD, MPH
Adnan Vhora
Aida L Giachello, PhD
Aisha N. Davis, Esq.
Alan Palacios
Alejandra Valencia, DDS, MPH, MS
Alexia Ng, MPH Candidate, UIC School of Public Health
Alicia Riley, PhD MPH
Alina Hillery
Ally Zimmerman
Alma Schrage
Almudena Veiga-Lopez, DVM, PhD
Amanda Benitez, MPH
Amanda Dougherty, MPH
Amanda Elizabeth Rivera, UIC School of Public Health
Amanda Goldstein
Amanda Montgomery, RD, LDN
Amanda Morales Quintana
AmarDev Khalsa
Aminah McBryde-Redzovic, MPH
Amparo Castillo, PhD - University of Illinois at Chicago - School of Public Health
Amy Eisenstein, Heartland Alliance
Amy L Reimer
Amy McManus, UIC School of Public Health
Ana Torres
Anastazia Prost
Andrea DaViera, M.A.
Andreina Pesantes
Angela Eastlund, MS, Health & Medicine Policy Research Group
Angela Ray, fourth year medical student, UIC
Angelica Scanzera, OD, MPH
Anh B Nguyen
Anna Ahn, University of Illinois At Chicago

Anna Baccellieri, ABD, MPA, University of Illinois Chicago, School of Public Health
Anna Sampley, MPH
Anna-Lisa Bowans
Anne K. Ruva, PhD, Rush University Medical Center
Anne Krantz, M.D, MPH
Anne Marie Murphy, Ph.D., Equal Hope
Anne Scheetz, MD, Physicians for a National Health Program
April Singer
Arden Handler, DrPH, UIC Center of Excellence in Maternal and Child Health
Aresha Martinez-Cardoso, MS PhD, University of Chicago
Arissé Stephens
Ashley Bieniek-Tobasco, DrPH, MPH, University of Illinois at Chicago, School of Public Health
Ashley DeGarmo, AM, LSW
Ashley Dyer DACM MPH, Northwestern Center for Food Allergy and Asthma Research
Asia Price
Audrey Brewer, MD, MPH
Avery Geiger
Barbara Gottesman, UIC School of Public Health, Division of Healthy Policy & Administration
Barbara Nowak, UIC
Barbara Shaw, DNP, FNP-BC
Benjamin D Terpstra
Beth Blacksin RN Phd
Beth Isaacs, MPH
Bishop Connie Crawford
Booker Marshall, MPH
BreAna Pipkins
Brenda Bedolla, Rizoma Collective
Brenda L. Rodriguez, MPH
Brenda Soto
Brian Edmiston, School of Public Health, Community Health Sciences, University of Illinois at Chicago
Brian Smedley, Ph.D.
Douglas Bruce, PhD, MSW, DePaul University
Dr. Antoinette Lullo DO
Dr. Jeffery Waddy, DrPH, South Suburban College
Elena Grossman, MPH
Eleni Sakas
Elizabeth Berkeley, MPH
Elizabeth Fisher, CHES, MA(C), University of Illinois Chicago, School of Public Health
Elizabeth Stranges, MD
Elizabeth Van Opstal, MD, Associate Professor of Internal Medicine and Pediatrics
Ellen Byrne, MPP
Ellen Mason MD
Emalee Pearson, MPH, MSW
Emily Benedict
Emily Foisy
Emily Harper
Emily Jimenez
Emily Laflamme, MPH
Emily Parenti
Emma E. Boylan, MS, Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, University of Illinois - Chicago School of Public Health
Emma Meersman, UIC School of Public Health
Emma Villarreal, Access Living
Erica Blanton
Erica Martinez, MBA, MPH
Erica Molina
Erika Enk, APRN, CNM, MPH
Erika Peterson, MSW, LCSW
Erin Fisher
Erin Virgo, MPH/MSW Candidate ’21
Erin Weir Lakhmani, MSW, LSW
Esteban Lopez, MS
Estefania Martinez, Students for Animal Liberation
Esther Bier
Ethan Cox
Eunice Carson
Fabiola Ochoa
Farqan Khan, FNP, Heartland Alliance Health
Felipe Tendick-Matesanz, Collaborative for Health Equity Cook County
Fern Bogot
Fernando De Maio, PhD
Fran Feeley
Fran Tobin
Fredrick A. Kendricks, MA
Gabriel Schwartz, PhD Epidemiologist
Gabriela Pena, UIC-PACT
Gail S. Prins, PhD
Gail S. Prins, PhD
Garth H Rauscher, PhD, University of Illinois At Chicago
Giann Munar
Gina Ramirez
Gizelle Alvarez
Glenna Sullivan, MPH, MSW
Gloria Guzman
Grace Gradowski, Loyola University Chicago
Graciela Guzmán
Grayson Willenbacher
Griselle Torres
Gwen Holtzman, Northwestern University
Hannah Bonecutter, Radical Public Health
Hannah Gelder, ONE Northside
Heather McNabola
Heather ODonnell
Helen Margellos-Anast, MPH
Helen Ramirez-Odell, Retired school nurse from Chicago Public Schools
Henry Siegel, Radical Public Health
Hilary Mac Austin, Northeastern Illinois University
Indira Choudrey Randhava
Isa Ahearn
Isabel Galic, Center Food Food Allergy and Asthma Research, Northwestern University
Feinberg School of Medicine
Isaiah Sarju
Ishan Bhatia
Jaclyn Martin, MPH
Jada Wordlaw
Jakalynne Gosnell, MPH (IH/OS)
Jake Kryshak
Jaquie Algee
Jared Walker
Jasmine Arrington
Jasmine K Chandy, Rush University Medical Center
Jason Martino
Jaureese Gaines
Jax Witzig, MA, Northwestern University
Jen Brown, MPH, Alliance for Research in Chicagoland Communities (ARCC), Northwestern University
Jeni Hebert-Beirne, PhD, MPH, University of Illinois at Chicago, School of Public Health
Jenin Alharithi, Illinois PIRG
Jennifer Kautz, Ed.S., NCSP (School Psychologist)
Jennifer Norsworthy, MPH, RDN, LDN
Jennifer Shao
Jenny Drzewiecki, MPH
Jesse Blumenstock
Jessica E Ebacher
Jessica Shergill
Jessica-Rose Wallace, Metropolitan Family Services
Jessyca Dudley, MPH
Jill Sellers
Jim Bloyd, MPH, Collaborative for Health Equity Cook County
Jim Doyle and Ana Garcia Doyle
Joanna Brown
Joanna Tess, MPH
Jocelyn Rangel RN and Southeast Side Resident, Nehemiah Family Fellowship
Joe Feinglass PhD, Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine
Joe Hinton
Joel Lopez
John Bartlett, Metropolitan Tenants Organization
Jon Schmidt
Jonathan Contreras MPH, MBA
Jonathan Nagy, United Neighbors of the 35th Ward
Jorge Mujica
Jose Gonzalez, MPH
José Ramón Fernández-Peña, MD, MPA, Northwestern University
Joseph Zanoni, PhD, MILR
Joy Bloyd RN, BSN
Joy Macatangay
Joyce A Bartz, LCSW
Joyce Brody, United Neighbors of the 35th Ward
Juan Castellanos, Enlace Chicago
Julia Lippert, PhD, DePaul University
Julie Sampson, Citizen Action/Illinois
Justin Zaslawsky, Northwestern Center for Food Allergy and Asthma Research
Jyotsna Jagai, MS, MPH, PhD, University of Illinois, Chicago
Kaelyn Cobos
Karen Aguirre, MPH, Rush University Medical Center
Karen Conrad PhD RN MPH
Karen Goldner
Karen Peters, DrPH, Illinois Area Health Education Centers Network Program
Karen Pierce, MD, Illinois child and adolescent psychiatry
Kate Craemer
Kate Peteet
Katherine Koo, MS-HSM, Rush University Medical Center
Kathleen Kilbane
Kathleen Powers, AAS, Chicagoland Leadership Council
Kathy Levitan
Kayelyn Smith, student, Student at Loyola University of Chicago
Kayla Moore, MPH
Keegan Krause, MPH, MA
Kelley Sunde
Kelli Wozniakowski
Kelly Leffler, MSN, RN, CNL
Kelly Opalko
Kelsey Barnick
Kendall Lucero
Kenneth Simmons
Kerri Goldstein
Kevin Irvine
Kevin Rak, MA
Khamillah Zimmer, Chicago Health Coalition for Black Lives
Killian C Walsh, Edgewater Environmental Coalition
Kim DeLong MDiv
Kim Jeffries, NA4J
Kirsten Peachey, MDiv, MSW
Kirstin Williams Smith
Kori VanDerGeest, MPH
Kristen Richter, MSN
Kristin Lems
Kristine Zimmermann, PhD, MPH
Kumar Jensen
Kunal Lohana
Kyra Carter
Ladasia Cooke, MPH
Laila Zayed
LaShonda D. Tate, MPH(c), UIC Center of Excellence in Maternal and Child Health, UIC School of Public Health
Laura K. Botwinick, MS, University of Chicago
Laura Kinsey, MS, CCC-SLP
Lauren Day
Lauren Dillon
Lauren Klebek
Lauren Sandherr, UIC School of Public Health
Lee Hasselbacher, JD
Leni Manaa-Hoppenworth, PT, Indivisible Illinois AND Indivisible Illinois 9th District
Leone Jose Bicchieri, Executive Director, Working Family Solidarity
Leslie Carnahan, PhD, MPH, University of Illinois At Chicago
Leticia Boughton Price, Illinois CHW Association
Leticia Boughton Price, Illinois CHW Association
Leya Ismail, Illinois PIRG Students
Lilian Jiménez, Esq.
Linda Forst, MD, MPH, Professor UIC, Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences
Linda G. Coronado
Linda Martinez
Linda Rae Murray, MD, MPH, FACP, Past President, American Public Health Association; Board Member, Health & Medicine Policy Research Group; Collaborative for Health Equity Cook County
Lindsey Hayden
Lindsey Wixom
Lisa Sharp, PhD
Lisa Tanzer
Logan Charlesworth, Coalition Manager
Lon Berkeley, Hearts In Motion
Loreen Targos, MSPH
Lorena Ornelas, MA, LCSW, Rush University Medical Center
Lori Ashikawa
Lucy Peterson
Lynn Canfield
Maarten Bosland, University of Illinois at Chicago
Madiha Qureshi, MPH
Madison Levecke
Madison Offstein
Magale Avitia, CHES, MPH (c), University of Illinois At Chicago
Maggie Acosta, MA
Maggie Haite
Mahil Nawaz, UIC
Mandy Chen
Marc Rosen, MPH
Mardi Klevs
Margaret Dorokhina
Margaret O’Hara
Margaret Q. Chan
Margie Schaps, MPH, Health & Medicine Policy Research Group
Maria Infante, BA of Public Health student
Maria Elena Juarez
Marianne Grabowski
Marilyn Leonardino
Marina Del Rios, University of Illinois At Chicago
Marina Tecuanhuey
Marjorie Fritz-Birch
Marjorie Kersten (MPHc)
Mark Heyrman, Mental Health America of Illinois
Martha Armenta-Robles, Enlace Chicago
Mary Ann Castle, PhD, Planning Alternatives for Change
Mary Ann Stott
Mary Driscoll RN MPH, Chicago Women Take Action
Mary Elsner, JD
Mary Frances Charlton, Attorney
Mary Futrell, Westside Coalition For Seniors
Mary Grace Fries
Mary Mackesy-Amiti
Mary Turyk, MPH PhD, UIC School of Public Health
Maryann Philbrook
Maryanne McDonald, MPH
Matthew Almendradas, Illinois PIRG
Matthew Raske
Maura Julian
Maximillian Boykin
Maxwell Dziabis
Maya Bauer
Maya Khurana
Maya McCoy
Maya Watson JD
Mayra Diaz, UIC Collaboratory for Health Justice
Meg Helder, MSW, JD
Megan Piotrowski, MS in EOHS Student
Megan Sanico, Public Health Undergraduate, UIC SPH
Meghana Menon, MPH
Melanie Carver, Asthma & Allergy Foundation of America
Melishe Bansa, MPH
Melissa Manus, MSc, Northwestern University
Melissa Martin, MPH
Melissa Palma, MD, MPH
Meredith Hollender, MPP, Health & Medicine Policy Research Group
Meredith Payne
Merlyn Chua, RN, BSN, MSN, DNP, NP-BC
Merrill Goozner, former editor, Modern Healthcare
Michael Heffernan
Michael Rabbitt
Michael Skilton
Michael Stumpf
Michelle Calva
Miguel Landeros
Mildred Williamson, PhD, MSW, Health & Medicine Policy Research Group
Mirelle Rivera, M.Ed.
Molly Wendland
Mona Zubi, Students for Justice in Palestine at UIC
Monica Castañeda
Moufi Rasehid
Nadine Peacock, PhD, UIC School of Public Health Office of Diversity and Inclusion
Naiya Upadhyay
Nancy Krieger, PhD, Professor of Social Epidemiology and American Cancer Society Clinical Research Professor, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health
Natalie Burda, IL PIRG Students
Natalie Sheneman, University of Illinois at Chicago School of Public Health
Nhu Do, MSN, RN
Nia Cunningham, Be the good initiative
Nia Staggers EMT
Nicole Gamboa
Nikita Kondratyev
Nikki Carter
Nora Handler
Norman Groetzinger, Second Unitarian Church
Olivia Meisenbach
Pamela Levin, PhD, RN
Pamela Roe'sch, MPH
Pamela Vergara-Rodriguez
Parker D. Everett
Pastor Rich Martinez
Patricia J. Buckley,
Patricia Fron, Chicago Area Fair Housing Alliance
Patricia Handlin, Attorney
Patricia Huettetman, MPH
Patricia Labellarte, MPH
Paul Pater, Illinois Nurses Association
Paulene Pascua
Penny Burke
Peter Orris, MD, MPH, Professor of Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences, University of Illinois School of Public Health
Pnina Tranen, MPH, MSW
Rachael Wilson
Rachel Reichlin, MPH, RN
Rachel Rubin, MD, MPH
Raj C. Shah, MD
Ran Flanders
Rashid Kysia MD MPH, Dept. of Emergency Medicine, Cook County Hospital
Raul Figueroa
Ray Mendez, MD
Rebecca Campbell, PhD, UIC School of Public Health
Rebecca Lauris
Rebecca Valek
Rebekah N. Williams, MPH
Renee Patten, Edgewater Environmental Coalition
Rev. Jason Lydon, Second Unitarian Church of Chicago
Rex Tai, Medical Student
Rhona Jacobs RN
Rhonda Kineman, PhD, UIC, Div. Endocrinology Diabetes and Metabolism
Richard David, MD, University of Illinois, College of Medicine
Richard Wallace, Equity And Transformation
Robert Freeman
Robert Vogelzang MD
Robert Lopez-Tamayo, PhD, University of Illinois At Chicago
Roberto Requejo Carballo, MUPP, Elevated Chicago
Rohan Patel, Taylor Biagi Brazilian Jiu Jitsu
Roni Facen
Rosie Hanneke
Ruben Espinoza
Rudy Calderon
Rukiya Curvey Johnson, MBA
Ruth Bouman
Ruth M Meberg
Ruth Rosas
Sadie Wych, MPH, HealthConnect One
Sahida Martinez, Promotora de Salud
Samantha Lasky, MSW, IPHI
Sana Syal, MPH
Sandra L. Laase
Sandra Webb-Booker, RN, RET COL, PHD,
Sara Jean Lindholm, retired
Sara Navin, MPH
Sarah Agamah, MPH, MBA
Sarah Lomahan
Sarah Love, MPH, MSW
Sarah Rhone
Sarah Savage
Sasha Adkins, PhD, MPH, Loyola University Chicago, School of Environmental Sustainability
Sean Zolfo
Shannon Kim
Shannon Sweetnam, Health & Medicine Policy Research Group
Shantel Suarez Avila, PMP
Sharmili Majmudar, MSW
Sharon and Alec Bloyd-Peshkin
Sharon Reyes
Shehara Waas, ARCC, Northwestern University
Sheree Blakemore
Shermish Mitchell, Black Workers Matter
Sherri Smith, MPH
Sherrilyn Drew
Shirley Adams
Shirley Stephenson, APRN, University of Illinois Chicago
Shreyas Shastri, School of Public Health
Sidney Thomas
Signe Gleeson
Sonia Oyola
Sophie Circenis
Sruthi Cherkur, MPH
Stanley and Julieta Pasko
Stephani Becker
Stephanie Rivera, MPH, University of Illinois at Chicago, School of Public Health
Stephanie Salgado, UIC School of Public Health
Stephanie Shapiro Berkson, PhD, MPH,
University of Illinois at Chicago, School of Public Health
Steven K Rothschild, MD, Rush University Medical Center
Sunny Seto, MPH
Susan Altfeld, PhD
Susan Ávila, RN, MPH, Collaborative for Health Equity Cook County
Susan M Richter, Second Unitarian Church of Chicago
Susan M. Yacht, Esperanza Health Center
Susan Rogers, MD, Physicians for a National Health Program
Susan Schaffrath
Suzanne Carlberg-Racich, PhD, MSPH
Suzanne McLone, MPH
Tabor Whitney, Northwestern University
Tami Bartell, MPH
Tanya Friese DNP, RN, CNL USN (ret)
Tanya Watkins
Teresa Horton, PhD

Theresa Gibbons
Thomas Wilson Board Chair, Illinois Single Payer Coalition
Tiffany McDowell, PhD, Chicagoland Equity Network
Tiffany McKinnon
Trevor Walker
Trina M. Fresco, UIC School of Public Health
Viable Shum, UIC - School of Public Health
Victoria Persky M.D., University of Illinois Chicago
Vidya Venkataramanan, MPH PhD
Virginia Boller, LCSW, Indivisible IL 9th
Wesley Epplin, MPH, Health & Medicine Policy Research Group, Collaborative for Health Equity Cook County
Will DiNola
William McGrath, Loyola University Chicago
William Zhou
Winnie Shaba
Woodger Faugas
Xóchitl Bada, Associate Professor, University of Illinois At Chicago
Yamile Molina, PhD, MS, MPH
Yeyzy Vargas
Ysabel Beatrice Floresca, Northwestern University
Zeke Eastman