

Block Club Chicago



—— 2023 Annual Report ——

Table of Contents

Letter From Our Co-Founders	p 03
Our Mission and Impact	p 04
Neighborhood Coverage	p 08
Our Initiatives	p 12
Partnerships and Community Engagement	p 16
Awards	p 18
Our Growing Team	p 20
Newsroom Diversity Report	p 21
Our Supporters	p 22
Revenue	p 23
2024 Goals	p 24
Leadership	p 25

Hello, Block Club supporters!

It's been a busy year at Block Club Chicago as we celebrate five years of neighborhood news and continue our push to become the best hyperlocal news organization we can be.

Our first thought is always about the people we serve: you. How can we best cover the news that matters to you? How can we improve the scope and depth of the stories we publish on a daily basis? How can we reach all of Chicago, from Rogers Park to Beverly, Edgebrook to the Southeast Side?

We've hired more reporters and editors. We've added an investigative team, including two veteran editors who not only lead and coach their team, but also mentor the neighborhood reporters who are out on the beat every day.

We've added newsletters and topic areas, including a robust Arts and Culture desk. We upped our podcast game, adding extra episodes and reaching a record number of downloads. Our TV show, "On The Block: Powered By Block Club Chicago," continues to shine, including taking home an Emmy in November.

We are truly driven by the impact of our newsroom. We want to make Chicago a place that residents love, appreciate, celebrate and improve. We also want to spread the word that great things are happening in Chicago — in all neighborhoods. We want to tell the stories that only a local newsroom with reporters all over the city can do. Whether it's a hard-hitting investigation about unfulfilled government promises, tireless coverage of the unfolding migrant crisis or spotlighting the local businesses that make up the fabric of our city, we're committed to bringing unique stories that you won't find anywhere else to Chicago.

In 2023, we bolstered our coverage by hiring more editors and reporters, as we have every year since our launch; investing in the news team whose work you read every day will always be our highest priority. This year, we also added behind-the-scenes help to expand our sales and operations departments. We also overhauled our website to give our readers a far better experience. As a startup, we were small and scrappy. As we grow, we're holding tight to that scrappiness. It's what this city deserves.

It was a big year for us, and we hope 2024 will be even bigger. You trusted us with covering Chicago the way you want it to be covered, and we plan on doing just that for all Chicagoans.

Thank you,

Handwritten signatures of Shamus Toomey, Jen Sabella, and Stephanie Lulay. The signatures are written in black ink and are positioned above their printed names.

Shamus Toomey, Jen Sabella, Stephanie Lulay
Co-Founders

Serving Our City Through Neighborhood News

Our Mission

Block Club Chicago is a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization exclusively dedicated to delivering in-depth, original, daily coverage of Chicago's diverse neighborhoods.

Our mission is to build community through quality, accurate reporting grounded in readers' information needs. We aim to serve as a platform for community experiences, providing breaking news, investigative reporting and feature stories that highlight the people, places and events that make Chicago unique.

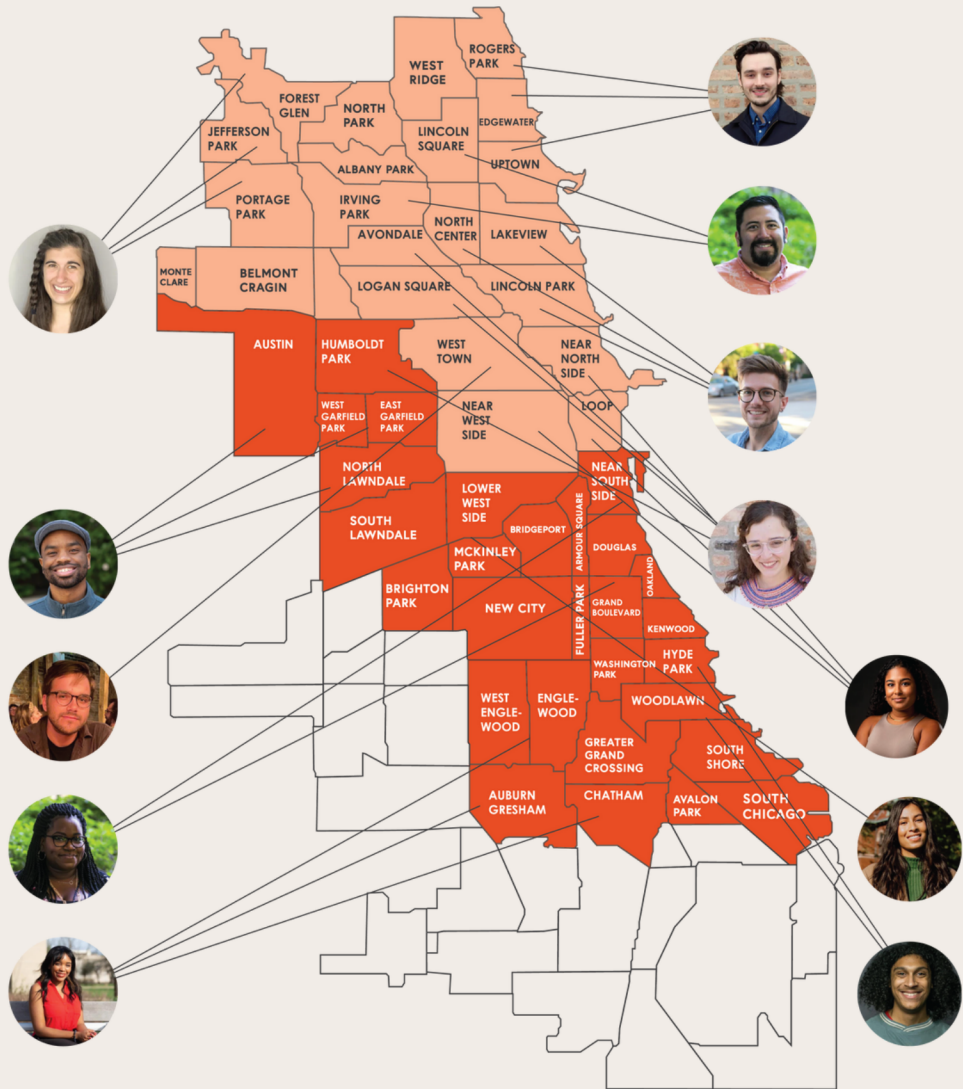
Block Club Chicago started in 2018 with eight journalists and has since grown to a newsroom of 31 employees who have a deep understanding of our city and its neighborhoods. Our award-winning coverage enabled us to transform from a scrappy startup to one of the most-read news organizations in Chicago, publishing more than a dozen stories daily from every corner of our city. Our website is read by 1.5 million unique readers each month, and our free daily newsletter and hyperlocal newsletters reach 130,000 Chicagoans.



Hyperlocal Coverage of Chicago's Diverse Neighborhoods

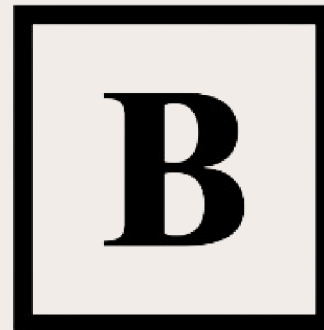
Block Club's reporters don't parachute in when something bad happens. Our journalists are on the ground every day in the communities they cover, allowing them to report with context, respect and deep knowledge of the issues neighbors care about most, and quickly and efficiently gather information or breaking news as it happens.

Our reporters mirror the diversity of the communities they cover, and many of them also live in the neighborhoods in which they report. We believe this ground-level approach not only builds trust and community but leads to a more accurate portrayal of a neighborhood. About half of the key areas Block Club serves are majority-Black or majority-Latino neighborhoods on Chicago's South and West sides.



A Multi-Channel Approach

As the leading news organization in Chicago, Block Club Chicago offers neighbors the opportunity to connect with us on their preferred platforms. We publish news and informational resources on our digital news site, we inform Chicagoans through our neighborhood-specific and free daily newsletters, we share stories about the people who make Chicago great on our “It’s All Good” podcast and we report the biggest stories of the week on our “On The Block” TV show.



Community Supported

Block Club Chicago has about 20,000 paid subscribers and thousands of individual donors, demonstrating that community members find value in our dedicated, ground-level approach, unmatched accessibility and the deep relationships we’ve built with the communities we serve.

We’re also supported by leading Chicago and national foundations, and our diverse revenue mix includes advertisements, sponsorships, events and merchandise.



We Reach People

2.7M

Pageviews a month

130,000

Newsletter subscribers

500,000

Social media followers

1,300

Text alert subscribers

20,000

Paid subscribers

Serving Our City Through Neighborhood News

Through our boots-on-the-ground coverage, Block Club Chicago holds those in power to account, empowers residents to get more involved and elevates local businesses.

In a time of great division, this hyperlocal focus makes Chicagoans feel more connected with their city and one another.

Stories That Make a Difference

Block Club's coverage has led to new laws, criminal charges, federal investigations and more — but perhaps most importantly, it has encouraged Chicagoans to become more involved in their communities.

As City Battles Housing Shortage, CHA Lets Hundreds Of Empty Homes Decay

Amid a shortage of affordable housing and a spike in homelessness, the Chicago agency that's supposed to provide homes for those in need is sitting on hundreds of empty units, with some left to deteriorate for as long as 15 years.

Our investigation prompted the Chicago Housing Authority to pledge \$50 million to fix up empty units, while members of the Chicago City Council called for agency leaders to testify in public hearings and community groups demanded leadership changes.

Our investigative team's coverage of the Chicago Housing Authority leasing public land to a billionaire's soccer team was also used in a lawsuit to block the move.





Why Chicago Is Losing The War On Rats

Block Club’s joint investigation with the Illinois Answers Project found the city bureau tapped to combat rodents in Chicago is short-staffed, underfunded and failing to collect millions of dollars in rat violation ticket fines from wealthy property owners. Meanwhile, renters in many of these buildings deal with infestations that cause them severe stress and illness.

Following our investigation, the city increased its rodent abatement funding and targeted one woman whose company racked up nearly \$10 million in rat-related fines and fees.

While The CTA Flounders, Its Leader Keeps Getting Pay Hikes

As CTA riders coped with unreliable and sometimes unsafe service, agency President Dorval Carter’s salary climbed more than 60% in just eight years. But he operates with little accountability.

Reporter Manny Ramos’ story questioned accountability at the CTA and resulted in the City Council requiring the president to attend quarterly council meetings on service levels, operations and planning.

Reporter Mack Liederman also dug into the CTA president’s tenure, finding that leaders of the agency rarely use the system they manage.





COVID Testing Lab Gave Chicagoans False Results, Got \$83 Million From Gov't — While Owner Bought Cars And Crypto: Feds

Following her award-winning reporting from 2021 and 2022, Senior Editor Kelly Bauer continued to dig into abuse of federal COVID relief funding and fraudulent testing centers. She found that LabElite, which operated on the Northwest Side and beyond, gave people false test results while collecting \$83 million from the federal government. Its owner used the money to buy luxury cars and cryptocurrency — and is now facing federal charges.

Stories with Heart

Aside from our deep-dive investigations, Block Club reporters regularly elevate people and businesses that need support. As small businesses struggle nationally, our holiday gift guide highlighted more than 160 stores in dozens of neighborhoods, urging people to shop local and support their community economy. We also regularly highlight mutual aid efforts, fundraisers for families in need and volunteer opportunities for neighbors.

Explore the guide



After being robbed twice in just one year, 7323 Cafe in Woodlawn was on the verge of closure. Block Club's story on its struggles helped the business meet its GoFundMe goal — and it's still serving the neighborhood today.

[Read the full story.](#)



Since last year, more than 26,000 people have been bused to Chicago from the Texas/Mexico border. People arrive with nothing — some in shorts despite frigid winter temperatures. Block Club has covered the crisis closely from day one, forming lasting relationships with migrants and the volunteers helping them.



We've highlighted dozens of coat and food drives, helped volunteers connect with city employees and let officials know we were watching as conditions at city shelters and police districts deteriorated. The story is far from over, but those seeking asylum, neighbors now living among them and people dedicated to helping have thanked us for our tireless efforts.

[Explore our ongoing coverage](#)

When a beloved elotero was robbed in September, neighbors immediately stepped up to help him. With Block Club's help sharing the story, the man's family raised more than \$7,800 to get him and his family back on their feet after a traumatic ordeal.

"[I'm] thankful for the community and all the help they have provided," Olivares said. "The people that donated and put a dollar, or whatever it was — [I wish] that it [returns] way more money for them."

[Read the full story](#)



Our Initiatives



The Investigative Team

In September, Block Club announced its new investigative reporting team, The Watch, made possible by a three-year, \$1.6 million grant from the McCormick Foundation, additional funding from the Driehaus Foundation and the unwavering support of our subscribers. The team works closely with our neighborhood reporters and is positioned to act on tips and pursue high-impact stories to improve government transparency and accountability throughout the city, especially on the underserved South and West sides.



Arts and Culture

Thanks to support from the Walder Foundation and the Joyce Foundation, Block Club's arts and culture coverage has exploded in recent months. We've published more than 100 arts and culture stories since hiring our editor, Gwen Ihnat. From community theater to independent galleries, our coverage is shining a light on the city's thriving cultural scene.

In addition, our new Arts & Culture Newsletter launched on Nov. 29 with a "Hamilton" ticket giveaway.

The Ballot

Ahead of Chicago's 2023 municipal election, Block Club debuted The Ballot, a months-long effort to deliver comprehensive resources to voters. The Ballot included free live interviews with all mayoral candidates as part of The Ballot Live so readers could ask the questions that matter most to them. It also included comprehensive coverage of all 50 ward races, hyperlocal newsletter voter guides, a new podcast and a text-based voter information service. On Election Day, Block Club delivered live election results, bringing readers the latest from the ground. The Ballot won LION's 2023 Public Service Award.



“[The Ballot] is an excellent example of what community and local news should aspire to be. It employs multiple formats to reach people where they are, and the project’s experimentation with text messaging opens up opportunities for future stories and projects. The enthusiasm and expertise in the content are palpable, and the quality of writing is top-notch.” -LION’s award judges

Hyperlocal Gift Guide

In November, Block Club rolled out its fourth annual Shop Local Gift Guide. Our guide skips the big-box stores and instead focuses on the small, locally owned and operated shops that make our neighborhoods special. From Rogers Park to Roseland, our reporters highlighted more than 160 businesses.

Marquette Bank sponsored this year's guide, and we were able to include affordable sponsored options for businesses that wanted to be added after publishing. Shop owners and readers routinely thank Block Club for this guide, which makes it easy and fun to support community businesses.

Block Club

Shop Local 2023 Guide



Block Club Book Club

In August, Block Club organized a book launch event for local author Pidgeon Pagonis. Their book, "Nobody Needs To Know," chronicles their experience as an intersex person navigating young adulthood and learning the truth about their past. The sold-out event in Humboldt Park included food, a book discussion and a dance party. The success of the event was just the beginning, and Block Club will ramp up the book club in 2024 with events and readings highlighting local authors.





Proud City

On June 1, Block Club launched Proud City, an online hub for LGBTQ+ news from Block Club Chicago. In the past seven months, more than 20 reporters have contributed to Proud City and published more than 50 stories, five full-length newsletters, two bonus newsletters, two weekend newsletters, a five-part newsletter course about allyship, five podcast episodes and six TikTok posts.

It's All Good Podcast

In August, we decided to invest more in audio storytelling, expanding the podcast program to two episodes each week. Listeners now enjoy a newsy midweek episode and the Friday Block Club Chicago Podcast focused on good news. Since the change, downloads, which were around 15,000 each month, have skyrocketed to an average of 30,000 per month. To date, the podcast has been downloaded 500,042 times! We also hired a freelance editor to help craft these podcasts.



In addition, during election season, Block Club launched The Ballot podcast. Episodes were downloaded over 22,000 times!



On the Block

“On the Block,” Block Club’s weekly TV news show in partnership with WCIU, released 43 episodes featuring nearly 250 reporter selfies, interviews and studio appearances. A story discussing changing voter trends in the Chicago area won an Emmy Award, and an episode featuring Mayor-elect Brandon Johnson was nominated for a Chicago Journalists Association award.

Partnerships and Community Engagement

We're proud to partner with organizations and news outlets in our community and across the country. We are stronger together.

Press Forward

Block Club's reporting photos were featured in the national Press Forward announcement, and our success story was part of one-on-one pitches to funders nationwide.

Press Forward Chicago

Investigative Editor Mick Dumke and our investigative team were featured in the Press Forward Chicago promotional video. In addition, Shamus Toomey was one of three panelists at the Press Forward Chicago Informative Luncheon, which included leaders from across the country.

Houston Landing

Arnold Ventures and the Houston Endowment invited Shamus Toomey to Houston in October to speak with the newsroom and funders of the Houston Landing, plus other nonprofit newsrooms. He discussed what is working in Chicago, including our revenue model, our investigative work and the support we've received to help expand our team.





Poynter Leadership Academy for Diversity in Media

Senior Editor Dawn Rhodes attended the Poynter Leadership Academy for Diversity in Media, “a prestigious weeklong seminar that connects and empowers diverse leaders to be self-aware managers, visionary leaders and change agents.”

National Partnerships and Events

Our staff were moderators and speakers at several media engagements across the country. Some of our hosts:

- American Journalism Project
- The Lenfest Institute
- Texas Tribune
- City Civics Day

Awards

In 2023, our newsroom received numerous awards for our reporting, videos, photography and social media. Congratulations to all of our winning journalists and team members!

Best Reporting on Race and Diversity, Chicago Headline Club's Peter Lisagor Awards: Pascal Sabino's [Chicago Police Are Arresting Thousands More Black Drivers After Traffic Stops Than They Report](#)

Best Deadline Reporting, Chicago Headline Club's Peter Lisagor Awards: Mina Bloom and Noah Asimow's [All 4 Boys Injured In A West Humboldt Park Fire Have Died, Officials Say: 'These Are Our Babies From The Neighborhood'](#)

Best Use of Social Media, Chicago Headline Club's Peter Lisagor Awards: Kelly Bauer's [COVID-19 Testing Chain Opened Pop-Ups Across The US. Now, It's Temporarily Closing Amid Federal Investigation And Mounting Complaints](#)



Local Independent Online News Publishers Community Engagement Award: [Proud City](#)

Local Independent Online News Publishers Public Service Award: [The Ballot election coverage](#)

National Association of Black Journalists' 2023 Journalist of Distinction: [Jamie Nesbitt Golden](#)

2023 Emmy Award: [On the Block](#)

Chicago Headline Club's Peter Lisagor Awards Best Use of Feature Video: Colin Boyle's [work to investigate dangerous bike lanes](#)

Chicago Headline Club's Peter Lisagor Awards Best Feature Photo: Kathleen Hinkel's [photo series on Chicago's Queer spaces](#)

Chicago Journalists Association Awards Keynote Speaker: [Shamus Toomey](#)

Chicago Journalists Association Award in Politics: [Mick Dumke](#)

Chicago Journalists Association Award in Transportation and Photo: [Mina Bloom and Colin Boyle \(Illinois Answers Project\)](#)

Finalist for the Chicago Headline Club's Watchdog Award: Kelly Bauer's [reporting on problems with COVID-19 testing pop-up companies](#)

Finalist for the Driehaus Foundation Awards' Investigating Reporting Award: Kelly Bauer's [reporting on problems with COVID-19 testing pop-up companies](#)



Our Growing Team

In 2023, we grew from 22 to 31 employees! Meet our 2023 hires:



Mick Dumke
Investigative Editor



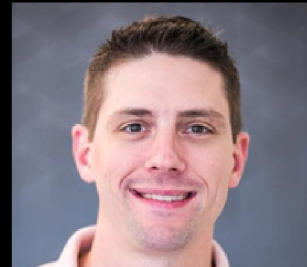
Curtis Lawrence
Sr. Investigations Editor



Janet Rausa Fuller
Managing Editor



Trey Arline
West Side Reporter



Zack Heydorn
Director of Sales



Gwen Ihnat
Arts & Culture Editor



Luriel Ocampo
Operations Coordinator



Manny Ramos
Investigative Reporter

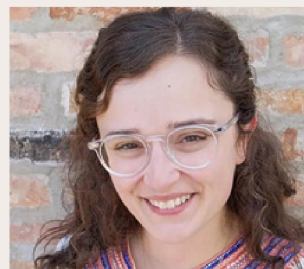


Rachel Hinton
Investigative Reporter

2023 Promotions:



Maple Walker Lloyd
From Director of Development and Community Engagement to Senior Director of Development



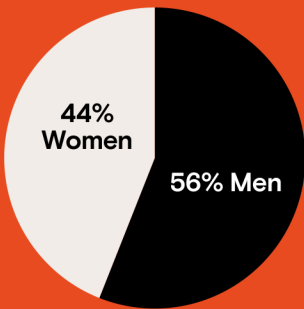
Mina Bloom
From Logan Square Reporter to Investigative Reporter

The Block Club newsroom also welcomed six interns serving the neighborhood news, arts and culture, and investigative teams. We are proud to invest in young journalists in our community!

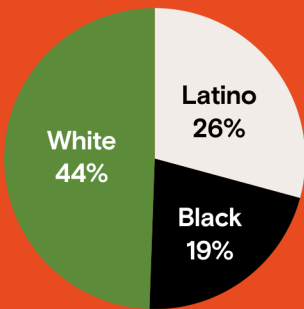
Newsroom Diversity Report

16 REPORTERS

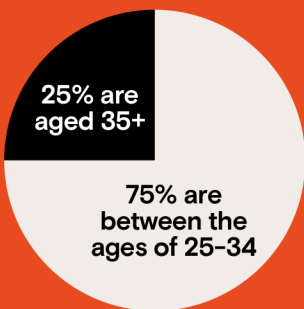
Gender



Race



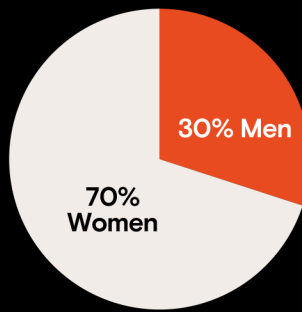
Age



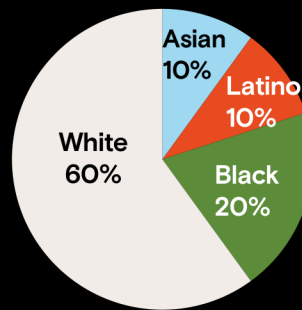
- Two reporters identify as Black and White and Black and Latino
- 12% of reporters identify as LGBTQ+

10 EDITORS

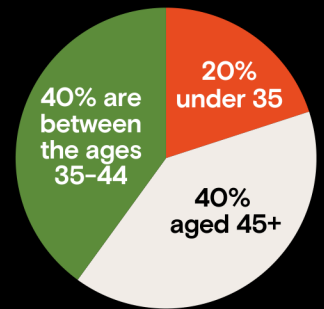
Gender



Race

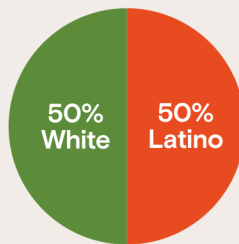


Age

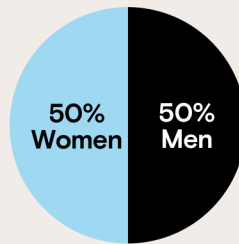


2 SUPPORT STAFF

Race

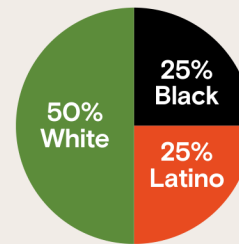


Gender

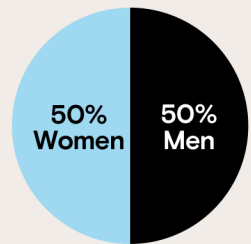


4 REVENUE DEPARTMENT

Race



Gender

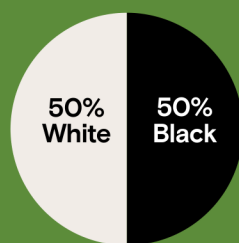


Revenue (3), Editorial (10)

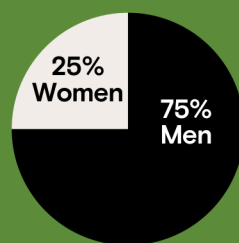
BOARD

Block Club's board is led by a Black woman.

Race



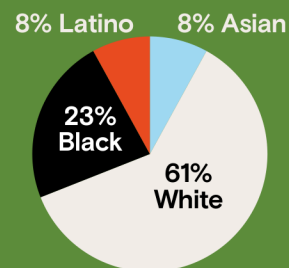
Gender



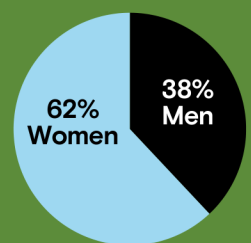
LEADERSHIP

Revenue (3), Editorial (10)

Race



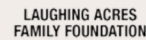
Gender



- 23% of leaders identify as LGBTQ+

Our Supporters

In 2023, our funders contributed more than \$4 million to support our newsroom.



Block Club was awarded investments for the following initiatives:

- Investigations
- South and West Side coverage
- Environmental
- Arts and Culture
- LGBTQ coverage
- South and West Side investigations
- Housing
- General Operations
- Far North and Southeast Side coverage
- Elections coverage



Cheers to Five Years

Block Club celebrated our five-year anniversary in June. We surpassed our ambitious \$50K goal and raised more than \$52,000.

200+

Guests

20

In-Kind Donations

52K

Raised

6

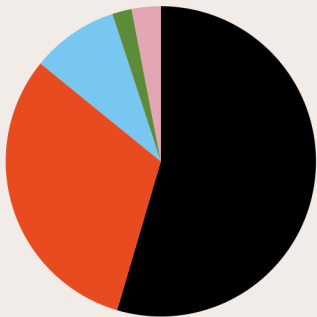
Major Sponsors

Revenue

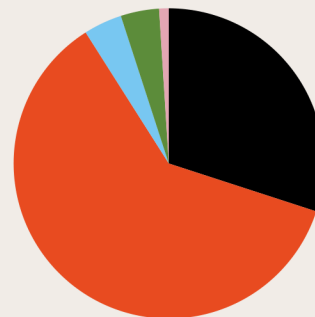
This year marked the midpoint of our three-year, \$1.6 million grant from the American Journalism Project, an investment explicitly directed toward the expansion and refinement of our revenue department and business operations, bolstered by additional funding from the Chicago Community Trust.

In late 2022, Revenue VP Lizzie Schiffman Tufano joined Block Club, then only our second-ever hire outside of the newsroom. During 2023, we added operational support staff, built out a dedicated advertising department, expanded our development team and outlined an ambitious, multi-year growth plan focused on diversifying our revenue streams.

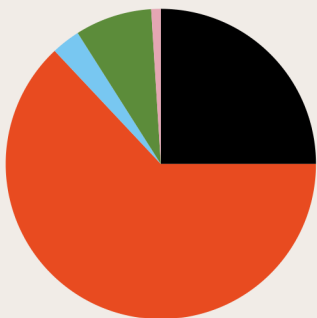
2021
Subscriptions 54%
Grants 31%
Donations 9%
Advertising 3%
Other 3%



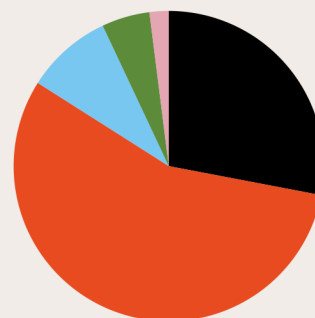
2022
Subscriptions 30%
Grants 61%
Donations 4%
Advertising 4%
Other 1%



2023
Subscriptions 25%
Grants 63%
Donations 3%
Advertising 8%
Other 1%



2024 Forecast
Subscriptions 28%
Grants 56%
Donations 5%
Advertising 9%
Other 2%



“Other” includes merchandise sales, revenue from events and other miscellaneous revenue sources that each constitute less than 1% of total revenue.

Advertising

Block Club rolled out its go-to-market advertising strategy in June. Internally, we developed new inventory and offerings. Externally, we invested in deeper partnerships with past businesses and worked to cultivate new advertising relationships. This work led to substantive growth in filled ad space.

2024 Goals

Expand Coverage

We plan to expand into new coverage zones, including Beverly, Morgan Park and Mount Greenwood. Block Club will hire a reporter to provide hyperlocal reporting on these neighborhoods.

Expand Revenue Team

We will further expand our Revenue Team to increase gifts and memberships and continue advertising growth, working towards equalizing our revenue streams to reduce our reliance on any one funding source.

Expand Community Engagement and Events

After the success of the 2023 events, Block Club is planning a quarterly event series in 2024.



Our Leadership

BOARD OF DIRECTORS



Brant Houston



Dan Israelite



Laura S. Washington



Charles Whitaker

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP



Stephanie Lulay
Co-Executive Editor
and Co-Founder



Jen Sabella
Co-Executive Editor
and Co-Founder



Shamus Toomey
Publisher and
Co-Founder

5 YEARS OF IMPACT



Block Club Chicago