

Chapter Spotlight: Chicagoland SSN Engages City Hall

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"I'm immensely grateful to the Scholars Strategy Network for regularly convening thought-provoking programs on the most pressing issues facing Chicago." - Matt Martin, Chicago 47th Ward Alderman

As America's third largest city, what happens in Chicago politics not only influences the lives of millions of people, but can have national significance. That became especially apparent in 2019 when Mayor Rahm Emanuel decided [not to run for reelection](#), opening the race to a broad field of new candidates and fueling a barrage of national headlines over who would be next to run the Windy City.

Ready to mobilize around this development, the Chicagoland SSN chapter saw an opportunity. The chapter decided to send policy briefs to mayoral candidates during the campaign to help inform their policy platforms, and hopefully one day, their policy decisions as well. This outreach led to meetings with several candidates and their policy chiefs, including the candidate who would become Chicago's new mayor, Lori Lightfoot. Noting this success, the chapter decided to turn their attention to the Chicago City Council next.

As mayor, Lightfoot promised robust policy debates in city hall, vowing to end the era of the [rubber-stamp city council](#). Additionally, the 2019 election brought in a larger than usual number of new city alderpeople. Without the resources to have a paid staff of researchers to answer their every policy question, it became clear that the Chicagoland SSN chapter could have an important role to play for city council.

"There was a big influx of new alderpeople, twelve actually. Many of them had never been involved in government before, some had, but not all of them. That's when we thought it might be useful to start a dialogue," said Chicagoland SSN chapter co-leader, [Barbara Risman](#).

So began the chapter's most long running program - their biannual Building Bridges event. The idea was simple: bring together members of the Chicagoland chapter to provide research briefings, in plain English, to local alderpeople and their staff on topics that they would be debating in city hall. Following each event with Q&A's and networking sessions would further build connections between these decisionmakers and researchers, and help inform the policies coming out of Chicago's new political era.

Chicagoland SSN has now organized three such sessions. In the fall of 2019, the chapter's first Building Bridges event saw researchers gather in person with alderpeople from over 10 different wards to present on a range of issues facing the city. And during the pandemic, the chapter quickly adapted, organizing events online on two of the most salient issues of 2020: affordable housing and segregation, and racial justice and policing.

"For some of the alderpeople, these events really served as an introduction to research for policymaking, because it's not really what a city council does a great deal of the time. It isn't like a state house that has researchers on hand to provide policymakers with answers," said Risman of the events. "And for our members, these events really allowed everyone to pull together on one project, send a couple emails and make a phone call to your local alderperson's office to invite them."

Alderpeople and their staff from districts all across the city have attended the events, often sparking conversations between offices about the research at hand and its implications for their work. Following each event, alderpeople have reached out to stay in touch with the presenters or ask follow up questions to inform their decisions.

"I'm immensely grateful to the Scholars Strategy Network for regularly convening thought-provoking programs on the most pressing issues facing Chicago. Whether it's public safety, environmental protection, or municipal finances, I can always count on SSN to expose me to research and policy proposals that can improve the lives of middle- and working-class Chicagoans," said Alderman Matt Martin.

Always with an eye towards the future, the Chicagoland SSN chapter is already planning their next Building Bridges event for the fall. To learn more about the Chicagoland chapter and their members, visit their [chapter page](#).