

# Advocacy In Action:

## Unlocking Pathways Through Housing Programs

### The Chicago-Cook County Two-Generation Economic Mobility Project

**Betsy Lassar, Policy Analyst**  
**October 2024**


*The Chicago-Cook County Two-Generation Economic Mobility Project (“2Gen”) launched in May 2021, after more than six years of research and planning. 2Gen’s aim is to create family-centered research to enable effective service delivery and policy development that addresses the lived experiences of families utilizing Housing Choice Vouchers in the Chicago region. Involving hundreds of families, and with a focus on two generations (adults and youth), the robust learnings from 2Gen will be published over a three-year period beginning in 2024.*

### The Need for Research to Identify Successful Strategies for Family Support

In the last several decades, the use of Housing Choice Vouchers has become the most prevalent tool for federal housing support of families with lower incomes. For example, the Chicago Housing Authority’s housing voucher program is now more than three times the size of its public housing program; today CHA administers over 47,000 rent vouchers.

Housing Choice Vouchers have enabled some families with lower incomes to surmount the affordable housing barrier. However, many families who use housing vouchers continue to face serious constraints from the continuing effects of systemic racism, the challenges of the private housing market, and other high barriers to the prerequisites for economic mobility. The question of whether economic mobility for families using housing vouchers could be improved by supports designed to overcome some of these constraints has not been answered. Importantly, the experiences of families receiving housing support services, the factors that cause families to remain in or move from their neighborhoods of choice, and the experiences of their children all drive efforts to build economic mobility pathways for families with lower incomes, but they have not been gathered and understood.

The 2Gen Project grew from a need to answer these questions. Impact for Equity conceived of 2Gen after decades of experience with housing mobility work in Chicago. Impact for Equity, formerly BPI, represents a class of public housing



residents and applicants in the *Gautreaux* litigation, one of the nation’s oldest public housing desegregation cases. In 1976, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the *Gautreaux* plaintiffs agreed on a program to assist families who chose to move with rent vouchers to private housing in non-redlined neighborhoods of Chicago and the suburbs, becoming the first residential mobility program in the nation. In addition, research in the decades since the mobility program was established shows the potentially devastating lifelong impact of toxic stress for children and the significant impact that neighborhoods where children grow up have on their well-being and future life chances.<sup>1</sup> Based on this data, and Impact for Equity’s experience, the 2Gen Project was created to supplement policy and service delivery efforts with research that shows what works best for families.

## **Hundreds of Families Volunteered for 2Gen**

Beginning in 2021, all eligible Housing Choice Voucher renters in Chicago and Cook County were given an opportunity to participate in 2Gen. To be eligible to participate in the Project, families needed to have at least one child up to 17 years of age in their household and to be in good standing in the federal Housing Choice Voucher programs administered by the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) or the Housing Authority of Cook County (HACC).

All families within CHA and HACC renting within a Housing Choice Voucher were eligible for 2Gen. Participation was voluntary, and more than 300 families were offered services as part of the Project.

## **Services Included Family-Centered Coaching**

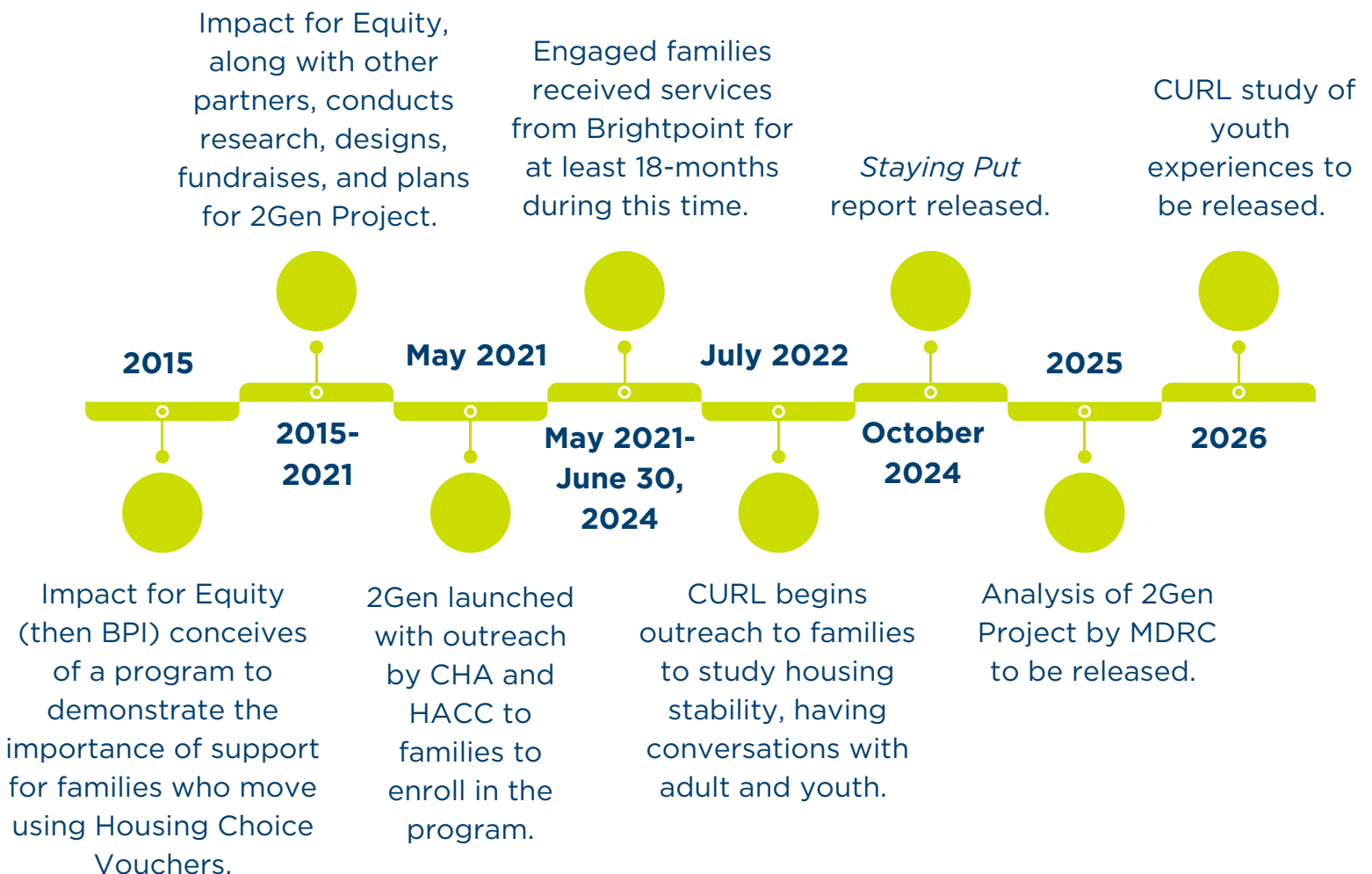
Brightpoint (formerly Children’s Home & Aid), an Illinois social service agency, offered the services – comprehensive family coaching, employment services, and referrals for other needed services – for up to eighteen months. A coach, supported by a team of two generalists and specialists, engaged personally with each family to:

- assess the family’s unique educational, employment, emotional, and social needs and strengths, including health and well-being, education challenges and skills deficits, and financial and employment-related issues;
- engage in collaborative problem-solving with participants;
- work with participants to determine short-term and long-term goals and manageable actions steps to achieve to the goals; and

- where appropriate, help families build networks and communal ties to access educational, employment, and social service systems available in their communities;

In addition to coaching, the services offered to families included employment services for adults and older teens, workshops that addressed common needs among families, and opportunities to network with other families in the 2Gen.

## 2Gen Spans More Than Ten Years



## Key Partnerships in the 2Gen Project

The 2Gen Project has required interdisciplinary partnerships and significant and longstanding collaboration to ensure its success.

**Chicago Housing Authority and the Housing Authority of Cook County: identified and reached out to families.**

**Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL) at Loyola University Chicago: conducting qualitative research of factors impacting housing stability and community impacts on youth.**

**Brightpoint (formerly Children's Home & Aid): provided coaching and related services for families participating in 2Gen.**

**MDRC: conducting research related to the implementation of the 2Gen project and co-coordinator of 2Gen Project.**


**Impact for Equity: Overall project management and coordination for the 2Gen Project.**

Funding for 2Gen has been provided by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Chicago Community Trust, the Ford Foundation, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. 2Gen is also part of a national project called Building Evidence on Employment Strategies (BEES) sponsored by the Department of Health and Human Services and led by MDRC.

## Research Outcomes

### ***Staying Put: A Qualitative Analysis of Residential Stability Among Housing Choice Voucher Holders in Chicago and Cook County***

Since the *Gautreaux* mobility program catalyzed efforts across the country to help families with lower incomes move to opportunity neighborhoods, numerous analyses have illustrated the importance of providing services to support families in identifying and leasing those housing units.<sup>2</sup> However, once families lease a housing unit in an opportunity neighborhood, it is less clear what factors, challenges, and opportunities impact whether or not they stay in these neighborhoods.



The research team at Loyola University Chicago’s Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL) interviewed a subset of families participating in the 2Gen Project: 53 adults and 29 teenagers with Housing Choice Vouchers who either live in opportunity neighborhoods or lived in opportunity neighborhoods at one time but left. The qualitative study focused on families’ experiences in those neighborhoods and analyzed factors influencing whether they stayed or left.


The resulting *Staying Put* report provides an initial roadmap to identifying and understanding those challenges, including policy and program suggestions. It finds that key factors shaping whether families moved away or stayed in an opportunity neighborhood include whether they felt a sense of belonging, whether they experienced race or class-based antagonisms, and whether their family experienced school-quality improvement. “Forced moves” were also a leading cause of a family leaving their unit, including landlords selling a building and terminating the lease, but households also moved for other reasons outside of their control, such as medical issues or job loss.

**The study suggests policy and program recommendations including:**

- **Providing advocacy for families with a hostile landlord or when one is selling the building;**
- **Investment by public housing authorities in post-move supports, including housing counseling and post-move support, including housing counseling for families who choose to opportunity areas;**
- **Encouraging more affordable and economically diverse housing in opportunity areas;**
- **Providing child-centered and family resources and referrals to foster connections in opportunity neighborhoods.**

**2Gen Implementation Study: 2025**

A second 2Gen study offers a platform for centering the voices and experiences of participating families. As part of the HHS-sponsored BEES project, national research partner MDRC is conducting an Implementation Study focused on the ways in which the families engaged with the 2Gen project and their coaches.



The Implementation Study will provide detail about 2Gen implementation and operations, successes and challenges, family perspectives, and how coaching models like 2Gen contribute to the larger policy conversations around employment strategies for families with lower incomes. It will help 2Gen and other employment service providers improve their services to benefit future families with lower incomes. The Implementation Study offers a rare opportunity to understand a potential approach for child welfare agencies to operationalize a coaching model and build capacity to provide employment services.

The 2Gen Implementation Study is expected to be published in 2025.

### **Youth Study: 2026**

The 2Gen Project also offers a rare opportunity for understanding how and why neighborhoods matter for the life trajectories of youth. While research shows that neighborhoods can impact young people's future earnings and educational achievement, the pathways by which this happens need to be better understood.

Building on the youth interviews done for *Staying Put*, CURL has interviewed 65 2Gen teenagers and their families. At the time of their interviews, these youth and their families were living in a range of communities across Chicago and Cook County. CURL will conduct follow-up interviews two years after their original interview, and researchers will publish a longitudinal study on youth experiences and identify formation.

The objective of the Youth Study is to understand the relationship between policy-based opportunities, including participation in the Housing Choice Voucher program and the path that youth in families with lower incomes take to adulthood.

The Youth Study is expected to be published in the first quarter of 2026.



## Conclusion

2Gen’s goal is to identify the experiences of families receiving housing support services, the factors that cause families to remain in or move from their neighborhoods of choice, and the experiences of their children and how those experiences can create economic mobility pathways for families with lower incomes. The insights gained from these studies will continue to inform initiatives at the local, state, and national levels and identify opportunities for action through improvements in existing programs, program development, and policy support.

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the Annie E. Casey Foundation for its generous support of the 2Gen Project. In particular, we thank Bob Giloth, Cindy Guy, Beadsie Woo, and Allison Holmes for their insights and steadfast support of the Project. We are also grateful to the Chicago Community Trust, the Ford Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and our 2Gen partners for their commitment to advancing understanding and fostering positive change through the 2Gen Project. Together, the work of many has laid the groundwork for impactful outcomes that will resonate for years to come.

## Notes

1. The first body of studies, on the effects of adverse childhood experiences and the import of research on early life brain development, is reviewed in Shern, David L., Andrea K. Blanch, and Sarah M. Steverman, *Impact of Toxic Stress on Individuals and Communities: A Review of the Literature*, Mental Health America, September 16, 2014. The second body of studies, on so-called “neighborhood effects,” is reviewed in Ann Owens, PhD., *Expert Report*, 8/8/2017, for Plaintiff in *ICP v. Department of Treasury and Office of the Comptroller of the Currency*, 3:14-3013-D (N.D. Tex.).
2. For the Project, “opportunity areas” are lower-poverty census tracts that have historically high rates of, or are otherwise deemed likely to foster, economic mobility.