





HEART OF THE CITY IS PROUD TO BE RECOGNIZED AS A PROJECT PLAY CHAMPION IN 2024.

Project Play was launched in 2013 by the Sports & Society Program of the Aspen Institute to convene leaders in youth sports, identify gaps in access to quality sport activity, and mobilize organizations for action. Their work is guided by the Children’s Bill of Rights in Sports and the nation’s public health goal to have 63% of youth participating in sports by the year 2030.

The annual Project Play Summit is the nation’s premier gathering of leaders building healthy communities through sports. Each year, Project Play recognizes local and regional organizations that are taking new and meaningful actions to reimagine youth and school sports and share the cultural understanding that all youth should have the opportunity to develop as people through sport.

2024 MARKED HEART OF THE CITY'S OFFICIAL 10-YEAR ANNIVERSARY. AND WHAT AN AMAZING 10 YEARS IT'S BEEN.

What started out as a small recreational soccer team with a vision of providing the opportunity to play for low-income youth in Waukegan, has grown into an impactful youth development organization supporting young people at all stages of their lives. What began as a grassroots effort to address the socioeconomic challenges faced by youth and families has blossomed into a comprehensive county-wide initiative that successfully equips underserved youth with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to thrive on the soccer field and off, in the program, and after graduation.



We are especially proud of the young people we have witnessed grow up in the program. We are thrilled to share that in 2024, our graduating class doubled since the pandemic. And we are on track to quadruple that number in 2025, due to the hard work, determination, and perseverance of our youth, and the unwavering commitment of our coaches, partners, and staff. Our student athletes, most of which start out with no plans for their future, are leaving our program more prepared for the next chapter of their lives.

Our success is reflected in the stories of our athletes. In 2024, 100% of our seniors graduated high school, 100% applied and were accepted to college, 95% decided to pursue college as their next step, and 50% received scholarships to play college soccer. Each celebration and signing event is a powerful reminder of how far our student athletes have come and the bright futures that lie ahead of them.

However, we know that graduation is not the end of the journey - it's just the beginning. That's why we place a strong emphasis on safe spaces and mentors where youth can develop life skills. We understand that, to thrive in a rapidly changing world, they need the tools to navigate life's challenges. Many come back and coach our younger athletes, some connect with our partners on future internships or job opportunities.

None of this would be possible without your support, and the work of our dedicated coaches, staff, board, and partners. Together, we have created an environment where our youth feel seen, valued, and empowered. We are deeply grateful for your continued investment in their futures, and we look forward to continuing to shape the leaders of tomorrow together.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rena Lee".

Rena Lee
Executive Director

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Motley".

David Motley
Board President

WHY WE DO IT



Heart of the City helps underserved and at-risk youth develop critical life skills and lead safe, healthy, and productive lives.

Sports leverage and enhance the social, emotional, and physical development of youth. It helps them develop strong foundations to understand their emotions and behaviors, solve problems, gain confidence and self-esteem, build positive relationships, and increase resilience.

Sports serves as a solution to the barriers that youth in low income and underserved communities face. It helps them develop “grit”, a combination of perseverance and passion, to overcome everyday challenges and socioeconomic difficulties. Studies show that physically active children get up to 40% higher test scores and are 15% more likely to go to college.

77% of kids living in low-income households don't play sports on a regular basis and 70% of predominately Black and Hispanic communities lack recreational facilities.

57% of parents do not enroll their children in afterschool programs because they are too expensive.

The cost of youth sports has increased by 46% since 2019.

HEART OF THE CITY DISMANTLES THE PAY FOR PLAY STRUCTURE IN U.S. YOUTH SPORTS THAT MAKES IT LESS ACCESSIBLE OR INACCESSIBLE TO THE YOUNG PEOPLE WHO NEED IT MOST.

1,399 STUDENT ATHLETES

OUR PROGRAMS

**634
PLAYERS**

GRASSROOTS

Our free introductory soccer clinics and camps are implemented at partner locations, such as schools, park districts, and other nonprofit organizations. These one or two-day clinics focus on fun for elementary and middle-school youth, which gives them a positive introduction to the sport of soccer, helps build long-term healthy habits, and focuses on teambuilding.

**414
PLAYERS**

ACADEMY

Our recreational soccer Academy is a developmental program for ages 5-14 to learn the basics of playing soccer. Sessions are held for 6-8 weeks throughout the year, and practice is once or twice per week. The curriculum incorporates short social emotional learning exercises around teamwork, communication, and decision making, and introduces families to resources with our partner organizations. **Programs are held in Waukegan and at schools in North Shore School District 112 in Highland Park/Highwood, Gurnee School District 56, and North Chicago School District 187.**

**351
PLAYERS**

ELITE TRAVEL

Our Elite Travel program is high-level and competitive play for ages 8-19 focusing on more intensive player development to prepare students for college level soccer. Travel teams are formed by tryouts twice per year and teams practice 2-4 times per week. Games and tournaments are played in and out of the state. We incorporate more intensive social-emotional learning exercises and teambuilding trips into the program. Our youth development team meets one-on-one with high schoolers to ensure they are on track to graduate, have a plan after high school, and help break down any challenges and barriers they are facing.

OUR STUDENT ATHLETES



70% MALE

14% UNDER
8 YEARS OLD

79% LATINX

30% FEMALE

60% 8-12 YEARS OLD

9% AFRICAN
AMERICAN

26% 13 YEARS &
OLDER

7% WHITE

6% OTHER

WHERE OUR STUDENTS LIVE

30%

WAUKEGAN - 406 STUDENTS

18%

HIGHLAND PARK /HIGHWOOD - 236 STUDENTS

10%

ZION - 146 STUDENTS

9%

ROUND LAKE - 130 STUDENTS

8%

BEACH PARK - 110 STUDENTS

8%

GURNEE - 105 STUDENTS

3%

PARK CITY - 49 STUDENTS

3%

NORTH CHICAGO - 47 STUDENTS

3%

WADSWORTH - 38 STUDENTS

8%

OTHER - 118 STUDENTS

(GRAYSLAKE, GREAT LAKES,
INGLESIDE, LAKE BLUFF,
LINDENHURST, KENOSHA,
MUNDELEIN, WINTHROP HARBOR,
AND MORE)

FAMILY HOUSEHOLD INCOME



20K> **13%**

20K-40K **36%**

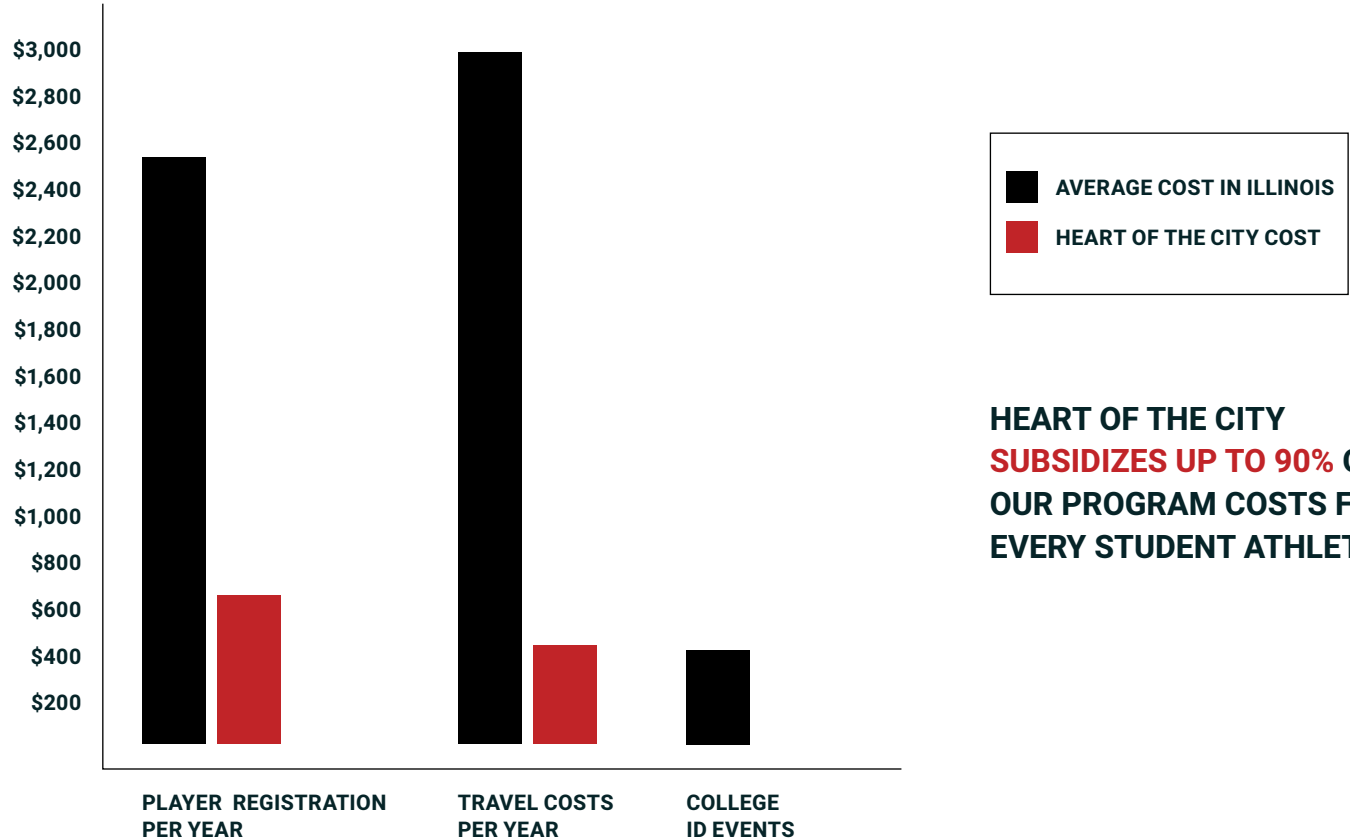
40K-60K **19%**

60K> **18%**

UNREPORTED **12%**

\$56,050 IS CONSIDERED VERY LOW
INCOME FOR A **FOUR PERSON HOUSEHOLD**
IN LAKE COUNTY.

AVERAGE SOCCER COSTS IN ILLINOIS VS HEART OF THE CITY



**HEART OF THE CITY
SUBSIDIZES UP TO 90% OF
OUR PROGRAM COSTS FOR
EVERY STUDENT ATHLETE.**

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT & SUPPORT PROGRAM

Our positive youth development pathway is focused around our pillars of health & wellness, social-emotional learning, post-secondary readiness & workforce development, college soccer recruitment, and family engagement.



HEALTH & WELLNESS



**SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL
LEARNING**



**POST-SECONDARY
READINESS & WORKFORCE
DEVELOPMENT**



**COLLEGE SOCCER
RECRUITMENT**



FAMILY ENGAGEMENT



POST-SECONDARY READINESS & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Our staff and mentors help to prepare our student athletes to transition to college and their chosen post-secondary pathway.

College, university, and career exploration trips once or twice a month introduce student athletes to life on campus or at an office. Staff work with students to identify their goals and create a plan to achieve them.

Launched in 2024, our Senior Cohort prepares student athletes with step-by-step guidance of college applications and essays. We include FAFSA workshops, scholarship help, financial aid, and planning, leadership development, emerging technology, communication and interviewing skills, and more.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

The background of the entire page is a photograph of two young boys in soccer uniforms. They are smiling and holding hands, suggesting a moment of teamwork or celebration. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent red filter. The boy on the right is more prominent, wearing a dark blue jersey with a crest that includes the letters 'HOTC' and 'SAV'. The boy on the left is partially visible, also in a similar uniform.

We empower elementary, middle school, and high school student athletes with essential skills needed to thrive on and off the soccer field. We nurture the development of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making through short engaging activities at practice.

One example of an SEL activity is relay race that takes student athletes through a series of teamwork challenges. They have to listen, strategize together, make decisions, and trust each other to do their part. It may look like “all fun and games”; however, the lessons they are learning and the skills they are developing will empower them far beyond the soccer field.

We use surveys to monitor the growth and development of our student athletes and the impact our programs have on their lives. The results provide invaluable information that help us develop meaningful programs to meet the needs of our athletes and families.

“MY SON LOVES THE SEL SESSIONS. IT HELPS HIM CONNECT WITH HIS TEAMMATES AND SHARE HIS FEELINGS, SOMETHING HE HAD NEVER DONE BEFORE.”

- HOTC PARENT

STUDENT ATHLETES FEEL THAT HEART OF THE CITY:

Engaged with them Authentically	78%
Challenged their Growth	83%
Built a Sense of Team	78%
Helped them Manage their Goals	76%
Expanded their Interests	73%

PARENTS REPORTED THAT HEART OF THE CITY COACHES:

Encouraged Teamwork	95%
Created a Fun Atmosphere	95%
Treated Players with Respect	97%

PARENTS REPORTED THEIR CHILD'S SKILLS IMPROVED IN THESE AREAS:

Self-Confidence	95%
Team Player	98%
Sportsmanship	96%
Soccer Skills	96%
Physical Health	97%
Leadership	95%





EMPOWERING GIRLS

Girls in sports are 92% more confident, yet by age 14, they drop out at twice the rate of boys. 43% of girls never play sports and only 36% of girls play sports currently yet, sports boost graduation rates, the pursuit of higher education, and future leadership roles.

REASONS GIRLS LEAVE SPORTS

- Lack of Access & Resources
- Social Pressures & Stereotypes
- Body Image Concerns
- Lack of Quality Coaching
- Safety & Inclusion Issues

WAYS WE KEEP GIRLS IN SPORTS AT HEART OF THE CITY

- Leadership Development
- Confidence & Identity Workshops
- All Girls Clinics & Events
- USSF Referee & Coaching Licenses
- All Girls Teams
- Female Coaches & Mentors
- Career Exploration Trips
- College Soccer ID Events & Recruitment

PARTNERSHIP



Sports participation and retention rates for girls has increased over the past few years, and we can attribute some of the increase to the rise in media around women's sports and the growing number of professional female athlete role models. Locally, we cheer on The Chicago Stars FC as they contribute to the positive outlook around women's sports.

Heart of the City is grateful to have The Stars as a partner in youth development on and off the field. Last year, our student athletes took a field trip to the Stars' new corporate offices to learn about career paths in the sports industry from a women's professional team in their own backyard, they enjoyed a family game night in Chicago, and participated in a Stars' community soccer clinic.

Heart of the City was also delighted to have Chicago Stars' assistant coach and former professional player Ella Masar as our keynote speaker at our 2024 Soccer to Success Gala. Ella talked about the challenges she faced growing up and the positive impact soccer had on the trajectory of her life. Later in the Fall, Ella joined our high school girls on the field and ran them through a professional coaching session.

COLLEGE RECRUITMENT

Unlike most soccer programs that just send their players to tournaments, we enhance the possibility of our students being recruited by utilizing a professional college soccer recruitment specialist with established college coach connections; full-time staff members dedicated to providing one-on-one college and post-secondary readiness support; and a variety of college soccer recruitment programming throughout the year.

This year we hosted four College ID Events with 145 student athletes in attendance.

Q&A WITH OUR RECRUITING SPECIALIST ROB KETTLE

WHY IS COLLEGE SOCCER RECRUITMENT ASSISTANCE ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT FOR UNDERSERVED AND LOW-INCOME STUDENT ATHLETES?

Low-income families may have no previous college experience, and as a result, have little idea of how the college soccer recruitment process works and when/how to get started. Also, college coaches often completely overlook athletes from clubs in low-income communities and often focus only on players from major soccer clubs and organizations. Coaches also select students from their own ID camps, which often cost hundreds of dollars to attend.

FOR ANY PARENTS & ATHLETES, WHAT'S THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE YOU GIVE A RECRUIT?

Start the process early, keep your options open, and be proactive. Don't wait for coaches to find you—reach out, send highlight videos, visit campuses, and communicate consistently. Recruiting is competitive, so the more effort you put in, the better your chances of finding the right fit.

CONGRATS TO OUR 2024 RECRUITED SENIORS

Adamariss “Adi” Chavez
Ariadne “Ari” Gonzalez
Mariana Gollaz
Jose Alcala
Mariana Gollaz
Will Verber



Triton
College



University of
St. Francis



College of
Lake County

CONGRATS TO OUR GRADUATING SENIORS

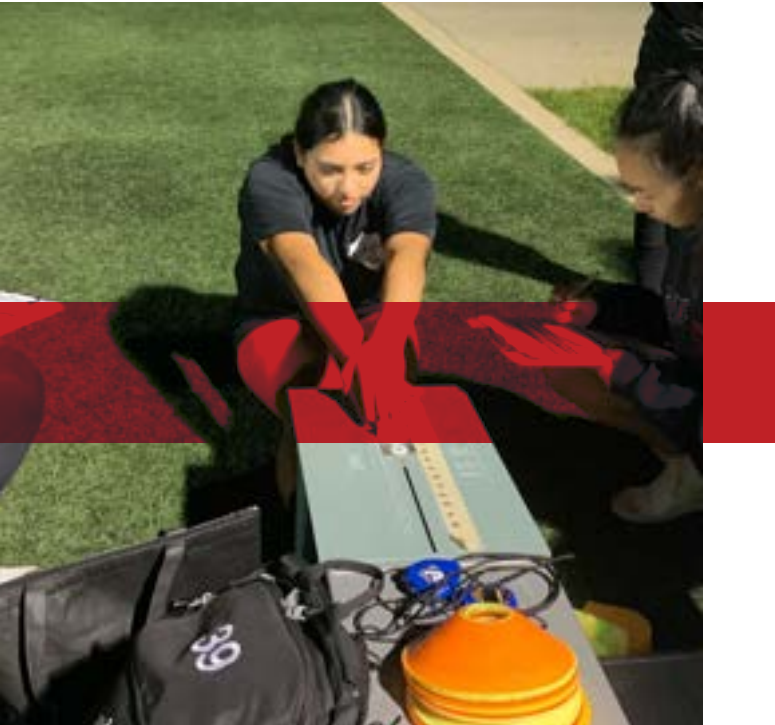
Bethzaira “Betzy” Herndandez
Cristian Estrada
Gabriel Anguiano
Jonathan Andrade
Robert Lach
Tatyana Harrington
Yarelle “Ruby” Fajardo

COLLEGE BOUND

Each year we celebrate our high school seniors who were recruited to play college level soccer on scholarship, this year 50% of our 2024 High School graduates were recruited to play soccer in college.



HEALTH & WELLNESS



Health & Wellness are crucial for student athletes, ensuring they perform at their best both on and off the field. At Heart of the City, we prioritize their well-being by hosting events that promote physical, mental, and emotional health. Programs like **Wellness Wednesdays** (yoga, workouts, strength training, CrossFit) help build endurance, prevent injuries, and improve overall fitness. **Mindfulness** sessions and **Injury Prevention** workshops teach athletes how to manage stress and stay resilient. We also focus on **Nutrition Education**, emphasizing healthy eating for peak performance.

Thank you to Rosalind Franklin University for working with our athletes on a Performance & Prevention Program to help them build strength and avoid injuries. And thank you to the Community Care Connection mobile clinic and the Interprofessional Community Clinic for providing free wellness checks, vaccines, and sports physicals.

Family engagement is a cornerstone of our program. Just like in soccer, where teamwork and support from teammates are essential to success, the active involvement of families helps strengthen our athletes' growth both on and off the field. By participating in events like our community resource fairs, workshops, and holiday potlucks, families play a vital role in creating a supportive environment where our young players can thrive. Engaged families foster a sense of belonging, encourage personal development, and ensure each athlete has the resources and motivation they need to score big in both their athletic and academic pursuits. Together, we're building a championship team, both on and off the field.

We encourage all families to get in the game—attend events, stay connected, and cheer on your child's journey. Let's score success together!

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT



PLAYER HIGHLIGHT



Fabian exemplifies the impact of our holistic approach to youth development. Starting his freshman year at a new school, Fabian faced many challenges. He was misunderstood by peers due to cultural differences and language barriers, which led to bullying and even threats of physical harm leaving him feeling isolated and alone. In search of a positive outlet, his mother signed him up for Heart of the City, hoping soccer would help him connect with others his age.

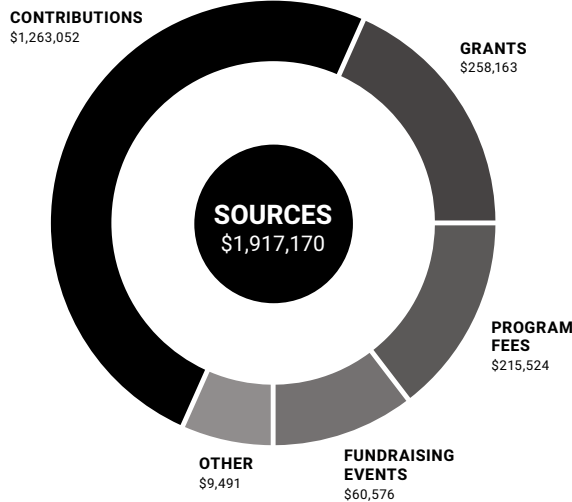
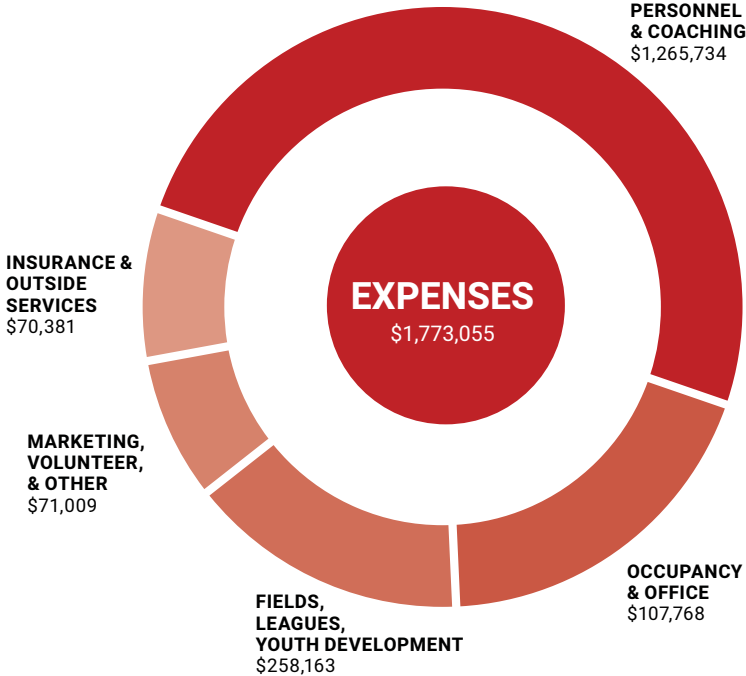
Initially, Fabian was quiet and kept to himself. As the season progressed, his love for soccer helped him begin to connect with his teammates. He started to feel more comfortable, and his confidence grew. Fabian participated in our college and career visits, where he began to see what opportunities lay ahead after high school.

With guidance from our Youth Development staff, Fabian expressed interest in continuing to play soccer in college. He applied to our College Soccer Recruitment Pathway and will be ready for recruitment by the time he is a senior. Recognizing the importance of preparation, Fabian was one of the first to join our Injury Prevention and Performance pilot program, knowing that to succeed at the next level, you need to go the extra mile. Fabian gained valuable knowledge about what it takes to succeed, both academically and athletically.

He and his family eagerly take part in any program we offer and connect with other families. Now, a Sophomore, Fabian is a transformed young man. He is confident, vocal, and feels a strong sense of belonging within our community. At our End of Season Celebration, Fabian was chosen by his coaches to receive the "Most Improved Player" award on his team, representing his passion and dedication on and off the field.

Fabian and his family are grateful for the support of Heart of the City, but it is we who are grateful for his hard work, perseverance, and commitment to making the most of the opportunities we offer. We are excited to continue supporting him as he grows as an athlete and prepares for college, where he hopes to continue playing soccer while pursuing his education.

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THANK YOU TO OUR DONORS

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