



**THE NEXT CHAPTER: BUILDING
TOWARD SUSTAINABLE,
GENERATIONAL IMPACT –
ONE GOAL AT A TIME**

WHO WE ARE?

Youth are the heartbeat of Heart of the City (HOTC). We believe that when youth thrive, our communities thrive.

Founded in 2014 by community members to address the lack of access to quality soccer programs for underserved youth, HOTC is one of the only sports-based youth development organizations to offer low-cost, accessible soccer programming in the Lake County area. Over time, we have expanded our youth development curriculum to use soccer as a vehicle to teach essential life skills, develop youth as leaders and mentors, and connect them with postsecondary opportunities.

HOTC's positive youth development pathway is centered around five pillars: **Health & Wellness, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), Post-Secondary Readiness & Workforce Development, College Soccer Recruitment, and Family Engagement**. We are evolving alongside the field of sports-based youth development to address the needs of the whole athlete, and we are committed to learning and growing with our community.

Today, HOTC serves over 1,400 youth ages 5–19 across Waukegan, Highland Park/Highwood, North Chicago, Zion, Round Lake, and Gurnee. With generous support from our partners and funders, we remove economic barriers that too often limit opportunity – subsidizing nearly 90% of the cost per child!

Every day, we are working to level the playing field for our young athletes so they can achieve great things on and off the field.

WHAT MAKES HOTC DIFFERENT

Focused on under-invested communities, HOTC is more than a traditional sports program. We deliver measurable, life-changing outcomes for youth and their families. Our participants don't just play – they grow.

OUR PROGRAM MODEL:

1. **Accessible travel soccer:** High-quality programs that remove financial barriers, ensuring equitable access to competitive play
2. **Whole-child development:** Integrating character building, leadership development, and social-emotional learning that translates into success in school and in life
3. **Family and community support:** Wraparound resources, wellness partnerships, and family engagement opportunities that build and strengthen community
4. **Future pathways:** Exposure to college, career, and leadership opportunities that expand horizons



**STRATEGIC DIRECTION:
FROM GROWTH
TO SUSTAINABILITY**



AS HOTC ENTERS ITS SECOND DECADE – currently operating at program capacity – the organization is shifting its focus from growth to sustainability, deepening impact and ensuring consistent, high-quality programming.

To move forward with clarity and a laser focus on the needs of our youth, families, and community, we embarked on a five-year, community-informed strategic plan. More than 80 people contributed their time and insight – including student athletes, families, board members, staff, coaches, community leaders, and partners – to ensure this plan reflects real needs and lived experiences.

Heart of the City's 2026–2030 Strategic Plan charts a focused, community-informed path forward, building organizational capacity and creating long-term sustainability – one goal at a time.

This plan prioritizes maintaining program quality and consistency over rapid expansion, ensuring each participant receives the full benefit of HOTC's model. A key component of this next chapter is securing reliable and consistent program space – including the long-term vision for a dedicated HOTC facility and fields. This investment will ensure consistent, high-quality programming, reduce operational barriers and costs, and create a centralized and safe community space for HOTC's youth and families

OUR UPDATED MISSION, VISION & VALUES

The updated mission, vision, and values reflect our commitment to positive youth development, youth empowerment, and brighter futures – clarifying our purpose, our vision for the future, and the way HOTC shows up as an advocate for equity.

MISSION

Heart of the City empowers under-resourced youth in Lake County through transformative soccer programs and exposure to academic, career, and leadership experiences, building skills for success on and off the field.

VISION

A thriving Lake County where youth are changemakers, creating lasting impact in their communities.



OUR VALUES: THE **HEART** BEHIND OUR IMPACT

HEALTH & WELLNESS

Building physically and mentally strong youth through structured play and supportive environments, leading to healthier lifestyles and improved well-being.

EMPOWERMENT

Equipping youth with the tools, mentorship, and confidence to pursue college, careers, and leadership roles – changing the trajectory of their futures.

ACCESS

Breaking down financial and logistical barriers so every child has the opportunity to participate, compete, and succeed.

RESILIENCE

Developing the social-emotional skills needed to overcome challenges, adapt, and persevere in all areas of life.

TEAMWORK

Fostering belonging, connection, and community – strengthening relationships among youth, families, and neighborhoods.

#PLAYWITHHEART



OUR STRATEGIC FOCUS: 2026–2030

Grounded in the needs of student athletes and their families, our plan articulates a clear path forward – prioritizing depth of impact and long-term sustainability over expansion.

HOTC WILL FOCUS ON TWO STRATEGIC PRIORITIES:

1. **Secure Facilities and Program Space:** We will secure reliable, safe, cost-effective and consistent spaces which will meet the needs of our current and future program offerings. We have an immediate goal of identifying partners in the Lake County area who can work with us long-term. We are exploring all potential options and opportunities including leasing, renovating and purchasing space for year-round soccer and youth development programming.
2. **Fundraising:** We will increase revenue to support growth and stability, including building board capacity, implementing a major donor program and corporate giving infrastructure.

BY FOCUSING ON TWO CLEAR GOALS, HOTC ENSURES THE WORK WILL BE MEANINGFUL AND MEASURABLE.

CALL TO ACTION!

HOTC is at a critical juncture. The families and youth we serve have experienced significant turmoil and upheaval in recent years. For our kids, HOTC is more than a soccer club – it is a family. A safe, supportive space outside of home and school where young people are empowered to become changemakers for themselves and their communities.

KEEP THEM PLAYING. KEEP THEM DREAMING.

TO LEARN MORE VISIT OUR WEBSITE: HEARTOFTHECITYSPORTS.ORG