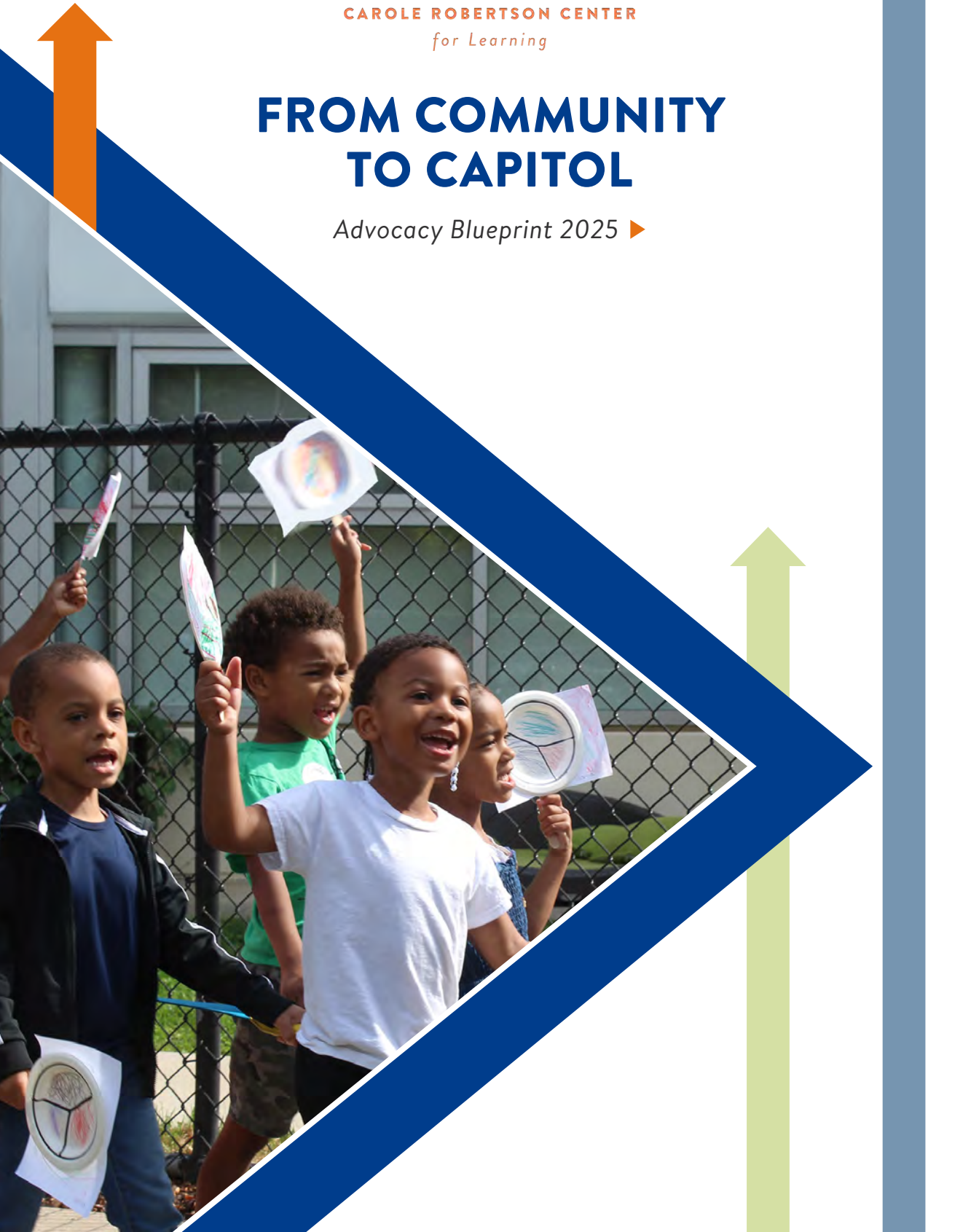




CAROLE ROBERTSON CENTER  
*for Learning*

# FROM COMMUNITY TO CAPITOL

*Advocacy Blueprint 2025* ▶



# OUR STORY ▶

## There is Power in Our Legacy—and Our Future

For decades, the Carole Robertson Center for Learning has honored the legacy of the four girls killed in the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama: Cynthia Wesley, Denise McNair, Addie Mae Collins, and our namesake, Carole Robertson.



Carole Robertson



Addie Mae Collins



Cynthia Wesley



Denise McNair

In 1976, a group of parents and neighbors united to create a community-based organization to uplift children and families in Chicago. One of the students involved in this effort suggested the organization be named after Carole Robertson, to honor her memory in the spirit of social justice.

## We Listen to Our Community—and Help Leaders Do the Same

Today, the Carole Robertson Center’s commitment to working for, by, and with families drives how we serve—including our approach to community-based advocacy. The Center has offered high-quality early childhood and youth development programs for children from before birth to age 17 for close to 50 years. We remain anchored in supporting communities that have historically experienced disinvestment and envision a world where every child can thrive, regardless of their circumstances.

Our journey into community-based advocacy began with the vision of establishing the Center as a beacon of justice and equity for children, families, and providers who have previously been sidelined in systemic decision making. We embrace the hopes, aspirations,

and challenges that our families and staff face, and those experiences guide the Center’s advocacy priorities.

We are on the path to transformation in Chicago, Illinois, and beyond, thanks to historic investments in early childhood education and continued momentum within the youth development sector. With change comes a growing responsibility to champion the systemic improvements that will positively impact the long-term trajectories of our children, youth, and families. We continue to work toward a brighter future so every child has the opportunity to reach their fullest potential.

**Community-driven advocacy is a powerful catalyst for meaningful change, and activating our staff and families is key to addressing local challenges. We do this by:**



**Co-Creating Equitable Solutions**



**Strengthening the Workforce Behind the Workforce**



**Investing in Young People—and Those Who Nurture Their Potential**



**Using Practice to Inform Policy**

## HIGHLIGHTS

September 2022 - Present

Support from elected officials results in federal and state investments to the Center that fund capital improvements to our Little Village and Albany Park facilities.

January 2023

The Center’s recognition as a high-quality early learning organization prompts Governor Pritzker to announce Smart Start Illinois, a state initiative to invest \$300M in early childhood, during a press conference at our Little Village flagship location.

August 2023

The Illinois Department of Human Services awards funding to pilot TransformED, the Carole Robertson Center’s innovative early childhood apprenticeship model.

2023 - Present

Staff, parents, and youth travel to Springfield and Washington, D.C. to advocate for continued early childhood and youth development investments.

October 2023

Governor Pritzker unveils his plan to create a new state agency for early childhood. Bela Moté, Carole Robertson Center President and CEO, is appointed as Chair of the Early Childhood Education and Care Transition Advisory Committee.

June 2024

Illinois Department of Early Childhood is established, thanks to bipartisan support in the Illinois General Assembly.

# CO-CREATING EQUITABLE SOLUTIONS ▶

The families that access the Center’s programs have often experienced multi-generational disinvestment within their communities and we know that their lived experience is valuable. The most effective community and systems solutions come from those who access and experience them—including our staff, many of whom have children enrolled in our programs. The diversity of our programs—which include site-based, school-based, and home visiting options—reflects our families’ unique needs across settings while honoring their cultures, values, languages, and hopes for the future. Likewise, the core principle of our community-based advocacy efforts is to engage families, staff, youth, and community members on high-priority issues that matter to them. Together, we design, develop, and champion for those solutions to take effect and ensure that policies address real issues rather than theoretical ones.

## Engage Families and Staff Perspectives on Current Issues and Opportunities

We strive to make advocacy accessible for everyone by educating our communities on timely policy developments and providing engagement opportunities that allow families, staff, and other partners to inform the Center’s advocacy priorities.

As the benefits of high-quality programming and support for children and families continue to gain attention at the local, state, and federal levels, the Center’s families and staff will continue to inform sustainable solutions that promote a more just society.



### STAFF ENGAGEMENT

From updates at regular all-staff meetings to convening a staff-driven Advocacy Committee, we encourage staff to learn about—and get involved in—community-based advocacy.



### FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

We incorporate civic engagement and education into our annual Family Orientations to educate families on policies affecting them and their children. Our Parent & Family Policy Council offers further opportunities for families’ voices to be heard and to shape our programmatic priorities.



### PARTNER ENGAGEMENT

Systems change doesn’t happen in a vacuum. We collaborate with fellow providers and advocacy organizations across the sector to ensure all children have access to high-quality learning experiences.



**“I used to be nervous speaking with lawmakers about issues affecting our families and communities. But every time we go to Springfield or D.C., our Community-Based Advocacy team brings a great group and provides well thought-out trainings on how to tell our stories. Now I feel empowered to share not only my lived experience but also how legislation and funding impact the communities we’re serving.”**

**-Angel Morales**  
Senior Manager of Eligibility, Recruitment, Selection, Enrollment, and Attendance (ERSEA)

# STRENGTHENING THE WORKFORCE BEHIND THE WORKFORCE ▶

Research shows that high-quality early childhood education and youth development have long-term, multigenerational social and economic ripple effects. Child- and youth-focused organizations serve a dual purpose across communities: to offer safe, stable, and enriching spaces for children; and to give caregivers the ability to work or further their own education, knowing their children are well cared for. Investments in early childhood and youth development programs can yield a return of up to 14 times the amount invested, with positive impacts to both children and families.

## Represent Those We Serve

The Center’s hiring practices ensure that our staff reflect the families we serve. Through innovations such as our TransformED apprenticeship model, we attract, retain, and strengthen our sector while bolstering local economies. We invest in children by investing in the diverse workforce that supports and educates them.

**80** Number of TransformED participants, our early childhood apprenticeship model

**26+** Number of languages spoken across our program sites—English, Spanish, and Arabic being the top three.

Our staff is composed of:

**89%** women

**79%** women of color

## Invest in Staff and the Value They Bring

Early education and youth development professionals are the backbone of a healthy economy. They allow families to work, prepare young learners for school and life, and serve as trusted partners. And yet, wage growth and professional development opportunities in these sectors remain largely stagnant. Here’s how we’re changing that narrative by investing in the professional trajectories of those we hire:

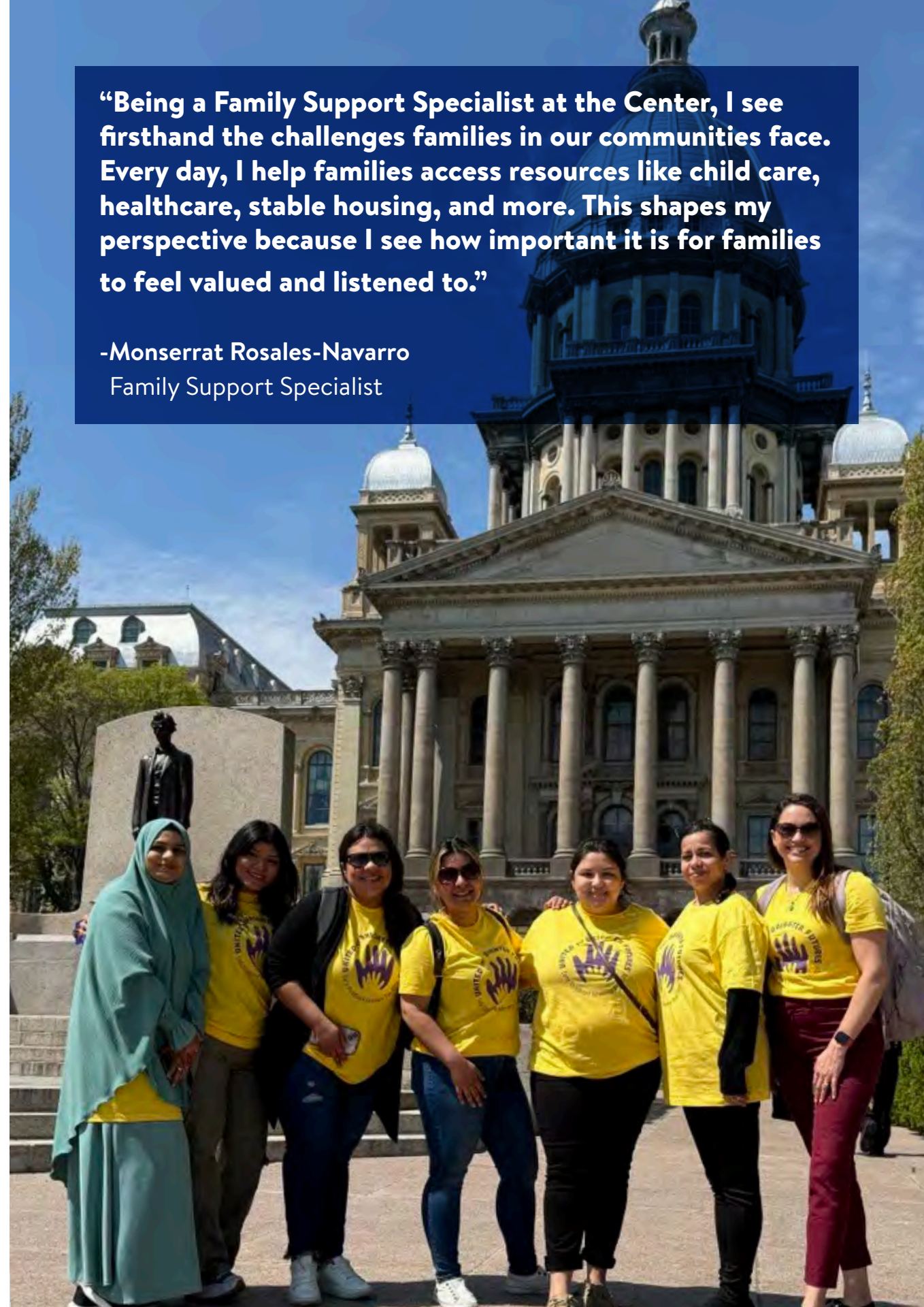
## STAFF BENEFITS

- Credential and Degree Attainment
- Retention Bonuses
- Medical Insurance
- Retirement Plans
- Paid Time Off
- Tuition Reimbursement

We remain committed to advocating for systemic improvements and public funding that help attract and retain a highly skilled workforce through pay equity, essential benefits, and professional development opportunities across the sector. Often, the early learning and youth development workforce experience the same stressors as our families, and their needs must also be prioritized to protect the sector’s long-term sustainability.

**“Being a Family Support Specialist at the Center, I see firsthand the challenges families in our communities face. Every day, I help families access resources like child care, healthcare, stable housing, and more. This shapes my perspective because I see how important it is for families to feel valued and listened to.”**

**-Monserrat Rosales-Navarro**  
Family Support Specialist



# INVESTING IN YOUNG PEOPLE—AND THOSE WHO NURTURE THEIR POTENTIAL ►

The Center offers engaging, stimulating, and hands-on enrichment programming to youth ages 5-17 in communities across Chicago. By shaping career pathways for instructors and program leaders, providing high-quality experiences for youth, and being an active thought partner in the sector, we demonstrate our commitment to uplifting the youth in our programs and the staff who care about them.

## Shape Career Pathways for Dedicated Staff

Youth development professionals enter the field with a wide range of educational backgrounds and career goals—an asset that makes for a diverse, well-rounded workforce. However, insufficient funding and limited career pathways continue to impact the youth development workforce pipeline. The Center is committed to advocating for increased state and federal funding and promoting progressive career pathways for our youth development staff to further professionalize the sector.

## Define and Deliver the Quality Programs Youth Deserve

In youth development, so much goes into leading impactful programs. We continue to advocate for well-defined measures of program quality and stronger investments for the sector and workforce. These systemic improvements will even the playing field and empower young people to reach their full potential.

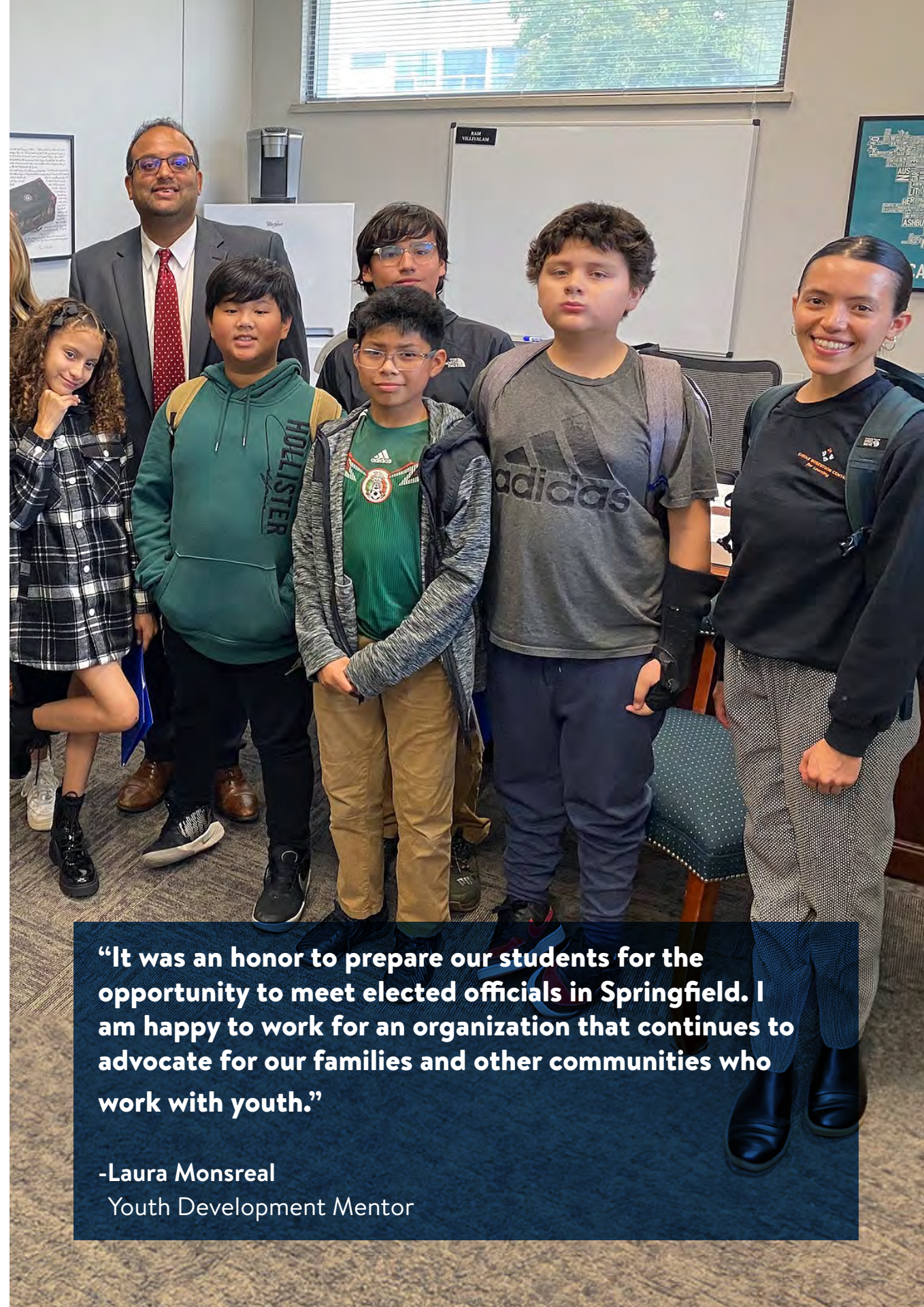


### HONORING OUR LEGACY

By engaging youth in advocacy, we empower them to take ownership of the issues they care about, inspiring a lifelong commitment to civic engagement and social justice.

## Encourage Youth Leadership

Our origin story is anchored in youth voices. We honor our namesake, Carole Robertson, and her legacy by creating spaces where youth can explore democracy, civic engagement, and their identities with agency, emboldening them to envision their own futures and shape the world they are inheriting. From completing projects focused on environmental justice to sharing their stories with lawmakers, the youth in our programs are already making an impact on their communities—and strengthening the skills they'll need to be positive change agents for the rest of their lives.



**“It was an honor to prepare our students for the opportunity to meet elected officials in Springfield. I am happy to work for an organization that continues to advocate for our families and other communities who work with youth.”**

**-Laura Monsreal**  
Youth Development Mentor

## USING PRACTICE TO INFORM POLICY ▶

By utilizing our insights from on-the-ground challenges and leaning into the expertise of our families and staff, the Center continues to shape effective, real-world solutions to pressing challenges to the sector. Our staff and families can speak to the unique challenges that certain communities face in accessing high-quality programs—challenges that policymakers must hear from their constituents. We are anchored in ensuring sustainable, impactful change that reflects the needs of communities—and to sharing these learnings with policymakers.

### Meet Families Where They Are

The Center’s founding was anchored in community-driven efforts to inspire change. Our community-based advocacy efforts enable us to deepen our footprint in influencing systems decisions that support early learning and youth development as public investments. Our reliance on public funding means we interact with systems that have increasingly complex requirements and regulations.

These systems and policies also define a family’s experience in accessing the right programs to meet their needs. The current early childhood and youth development systems often require families to navigate multiple agencies to obtain services. We see opportunities to reimagine those systems and promote more streamlined experiences for families, with the added benefit of freeing up direct service organizations’ time, energy, and capacity to deliver high-quality programs.

### Use Data to Continuously Improve—and to Inform the Broader Field

Our continued engagement with policymakers, community-based peers, and advocacy organizations is critical to shaping high-quality experiences for children and youth. To demonstrate our impact, the Center uses robust data collection and evaluation metrics to improve our services and inform our advocacy priorities. By sharing families’ lived experiences in policy conversations, we demonstrate how systems impact the well-being of our families and the workforce and how improvements can help children thrive in our classrooms and beyond.

### Support the Whole Child and Whole Family

Like our families, many of our staff experience stressors in their day-to-day lives outside of work. As an employer to more than 300 individuals, the Center values caring for our workforce. This means we consider how external policies and systems intersect with our work and how we can mobilize around the resources our workforce needs to show up for children and families without sacrificing their own well-being.



## AMPLIFYING VOICES, ADVANCING ADVOCACY ▶

Since embarking on our community-based advocacy journey, we’ve prioritized three central goals: strengthening the workforce, cultivating advocacy champions, and contributing to policy development.

Here’s a snapshot of our accomplishments in each of these areas:

### STRENGTHENING OUR WORKFORCE

TransformED, the Center’s innovative early childhood apprenticeship model, demonstrates our asset-based approach to developing the workforce. A \$500K investment from the Illinois Department of Human Services allows us to strengthen the model and serve as a pilot for scaling this work across Illinois.

### CULTIVATING ADVOCACY CHAMPIONS

We actively engage our staff, families, and youth in sharing their stories with policymakers. From youth-led voter outreach to staff advocacy in Washington, D.C., the Center’s community-based advocacy efforts empower our community to let their voices be heard.

### CONTRIBUTING TO POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Our partnerships with key organizations helped the new Illinois Department of Early Childhood (IDEC) come to fruition in 2024. The appointment of our President and CEO Bela Moté as Chair of the Transition Advisory Committee ensures that community-based providers—and those they serve—inform important policy decisions.



## LOOKING AHEAD ►

The local, state, and national policy landscapes continue to shift—but our emphasis on community-based advocacy persists. Though local and federal administrations may change, we maintain our unwavering belief in early learning and youth development as public goods. This drives us to champion systems change and strong investments in our early learning and youth development ecosystems. We remain committed to uplifting the experiences of our children, families, and workforce to influence and improve the systems around us. Now more than ever, we must promote trust, empathy, compassion, and social justice so that every child can reach their fullest potential.

In advocating for policies that uplift children, families, and our workforce, we strengthen the foundation of the communities we serve and create a ripple effect that benefits society at large. In growing and fortifying the workforce, strengthening the youth development sector, and contributing to tangible policy solutions, we uphold Carole Robertson's legacy by building a brighter tomorrow. We invite you to join us in shaping a more just future for children and families.



**“The Center’s approach to advocacy is anchored in the voices and lived experiences of our dedicated workforce and the families we serve. Our staff and families are the heartbeat of the Carole Robertson Center, and their needs must be heard, understood, and amplified to make meaningful change.”**

**-Julissa Cruz**

Senior Director of Community-Based Advocacy

## CONTACT US ►

The Carole Robertson Center for Learning reaches approximately 15,000 children, youth, and adults across 27+ Chicago communities that have been historically under-resourced. We strive to be the connective tissue that brings together families, partners, and other providers in critical conversations. Their guidance is key to shaping our advocacy efforts.

Our goal is to ensure that, together, we participate in influencing solutions that ensure equitable access to high-quality programming based on what works best for individual children and families.

Through community-based advocacy, we can promote robust learning, development, and opportunity for our children, families, and workforce.



### Get Involved

Use this form to contact our Community-Based Advocacy team and learn how you can support our mission today!



**“It doesn’t matter the culture you’re from, nor the language you speak. [The Carole Robertson Center] always has the methods to fulfill the expectations of any family that arrives.”**

**-Vanessa Olivera-Romero**  
Teacher Aide



# MISSION

To educate, enrich, and empower children and families.

# VISION

To help build a just and equitable society, the Carole Robertson Center for Learning, in partnership with families, will be a beacon of best practices, innovation and impact in early childhood, and youth development.

# PURPOSE

We exist to ensure that every child and family we impact can reach their full potential in school and life. Our unwavering commitment to eliminating the opportunity gap in Chicago and across Illinois begins by creating early childhood education and youth development environments that are abundant in compassion, support, and quality, helping create a more just, inclusive, and equitable world for all children.



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