Chicago Innovation Awards Highlight Top Innovators Across Industries

22 organizations that embody the innovative spirit honored at 22nd annual awards ceremony

Governor J.B. Pritzker, Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson, Cook County President Toni Preckwinkle, and Secretary of State Alexi Giannoulias are Featured Speakers

CHICAGO – November 16, 2023 – The Chicago region’s most innovative organizations — those with new products and services that solve unmet needs — were honored at the 22nd annual Chicago Innovation Awards.

The Chicago Innovation Awards received nominations from 344 organizations in the public, private, and non-profit sectors. A panel of 12 judges selected the winners from 100 finalists announced in September.

The event featured remarks from Illinois Governor JB Pritzker, Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson, Cook County President Toni Preckwinkle, and Secretary of State Alexi Giannoulias.

“Before I was Governor of Illinois, I was closely involved with incubating and supporting innovative, future-forward companies like the ones honored by the Chicago Innovation Awards — and now, I see even more profoundly the essential role these entrepreneurs play in making our state stronger,” said Governor JB Pritzker. “These awardees are making a meaningful impact every day through cutting edge technology, social impact, and innovative problem solving. My most sincere congratulations to everyone honored, and I look forward to seeing your hard work blossom into an even brighter future.”

"I am honored to celebrate the 22nd Annual Chicago Innovation Awards and congratulate the leaders and innovators who are being recognized for their inspiring achievements," said Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson. “Chicago is a global innovation hub because of our community of talented innovators who lead our city's diverse and successful industries. We must continue to recognize these trailblazers and visionaries through Chicago Innovation as we continue shaping our world-class city.”

The Chicago Innovation Awards are a bellwether of success. Notably, 98 percent of Chicago Innovation Award winners since the program began in 2002 – 377 in total – remain in business today. Many past winners have become attractive acquisition targets for large corporations or private equity, with 70 exits totaling more than $157 billion since 2002.

This year’s 344 nominees have accounted for $3.8 billion in new product/service revenues and created over 10,000 new jobs.

“It’s a privilege to share this year’s winners with the world,” said Tom Kuczmarski, co-founder with journalist Dan Miller of the Chicago Innovation Awards. “We honor these organizations that embody a commitment to fresh thinking, results, inclusion, and economic growth. Chicago continues to recruit and develop talent that inspires and unleashes high-impact innovation.”

The theme of “From Inspiration to Impact” was central to the comments of the event’s co-hosts: Chicago Innovation’s President & CEO Luke Tanen, Founder of Hope Chicago & Chairman of the Kadens Family Foundation Pete Kadens, COO of Zeno Group Nancy Ruscheinski, and President and Co-founder of i.c. stars Sandee Kastrul.

The winning organizations receive a variety of honors including an invitation to ring the Nasdaq Bell in New York City.

Signaling the breadth of innovation unique to the Chicago region, the judges selected the following organizations as 2023 Chicago Innovation Awards winners:

- [Argonne National Laboratory](#) for Chain Reaction Innovations, an entrepreneurship program that lets startups leverage Argonne’s scientific breakthroughs and resources.
- [The Planting Hope Company](#) for Hope and Sesame Sesamemilk, the first commercially produced milk derived from sesame seeds, which has superior nutritional and sustainability traits over other plant-based milks.
- [University of Chicago SAND Lab](#) for Glaze, a digital tool that prevents generative AI from replicating artists’ work that has been uploaded online.
- [Solesence](#) for Kleair, a sunscreen technology that has the strength of Zinc oxide, but goes on clear in order to prevent whitening of the skin, particularly problematic for people of color.

Winners of this year’s Climate Champion Award, which celebrates innovators combating climate change, included:
Friends of the Chicago River for its Natural Solutions Tool, a user-friendly mapping portal with customizable local data sets that offer a new lens to the interplay between ecological and health equity factors in disinvested neighborhoods.

Intellihot for The Electron, the world’s first tankless heat pump water heater, which enables buildings to become more sustainable, compared to more costly and larger traditional heat pump water heaters.

Other special sponsored awards included:

- The Accenture Corporate Innovator Award went to Abbott for the Eterna SCS system, the smallest and most energy efficient spinal cord stimulator on the market to treat people suffering from chronic pain.
- The Molex Creating Connections for Life Award went to Sibel Health for ANNE One, a medical monitoring system that leverages soft, flexible sensors that replace cumbersome wires on premature babies, as well as adults.
- The Lessen (formerly SMS Assist) Entrepreneurial Spirit Award went to project44, whose Movement platform provides transparent collaboration between all partners in complex global supply chains.
- The Wintrust Chicago Neighborhood Awards went to four organizations providing innovations targeted at locally impacting Chicago’s diverse neighborhoods:
  - Dion’s Chicago Dream for Dream Vault, a network-enabled locker system that provides fresh groceries to low-income families in Chicago’s food deserts.
  - VOCEL, a non-profit that trains everyday moms and dads to lead weekly classes for fellow parents aimed at building the educational capacity for kids and families in disadvantaged neighborhoods.
  - Industrial Council of Nearwest Chicago, the developer of two business incubators for the Chicago’s Westside, The Hatchery for food & beverage entrepreneurs, and Make City for product/service innovators.
  - Law Center for Better Housing for Rentervention, an online portal that provides much-needed assistance to low-income renters who don’t know their rights when faced with eviction.

The Chicago Innovation Awards recognizes companies to watch in the future with its Up-and-Comer Awards. The winners (below $1M in current revenue) selected for this category were:

- Volexion, a nanotechnology that brings more power, charging speed and cost reduction to electric vehicle batteries.
- Casechek, an implant supply chain management solution that makes it easier for hospitals to manage implant costs.
- Ludex, a sports and trading card app that utilizes AI to quickly identify a card’s value before uploading it for sale.

The awards recognize innovators that are scaling social impact. This year’s Social Innovator Award winners are:

- EAB Global for Greenlight Match, which reverses the traditional admissions process by letting students upload anonymized profiles that are sent to colleges for admission and scholarship offers.
- Chicago-Blend, a fellowship program for underrepresented individuals who aspire to become venture capitalists.
- STIGMA, a community-based mobile app that helps people struggling with mental health issues access a community of people who know exactly what they’re going through and can offer in-the-moment support.

New this year was the Innovations for Older Adults Award to recognize a company addressing an unmet need for older adults. This year’s inaugural winner was Jellyvision for ALEX Medicare, a one-on-one, interactive and personalized cloud-based software that helps older adults navigate the complex world of Medicare plans.

To celebrate the importance of multiple organizations working together to create new value, this year’s Collaboration Award went to the Consulate General of Canada in Chicago, which collaborates with several incubators in Chicago to foster sharing of innovation resources between Canadian and Chicago startups.

The People’s Choice Award, which received over 11,000 votes from the general public, went to Mavely, a social commerce platform that brings together more than 900 global brands with more than 40,000 content creating influencers.

Chicago Innovation is supported by over fifty sponsors, including Diamond Sponsors Accenture, Wintrust, Molex, Lesson (formerly SMS Assist); Gold Sponsor Comcast Business, and others.
**About Chicago Innovation**

Chicago Innovation, established in 2002 as the Chicago Innovation Awards, has grown from a single awards ceremony to a year-long series of events and activities with a mission to educate, connect and celebrate all innovators in the Chicago region. The organization’s expansion has included the Chicago Innovation Women’s Mentoring Co-op to support female innovators, the Illinois Student Invention Convention to teach innovation to K-8th grade students, Ageless Innovators to combat ageism through intergenerational co-mentorship, The Ladder to support Black and Latine innovators in Chicago, and the Climate Change Initiative to support innovators who are combating climate change. For more information, visit [www.chicagoinnovation.com](http://www.chicagoinnovation.com).

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