

Valerie F. Leonard



Valerie F. Leonard convenes Illinois African Americans for Equitable Redistricting (IAAFER). IAAFER is an all-volunteer group formed in 2021 to serve the interests of Illinois' Black voters as the General Assembly drafted new legislative maps.

After reviewing the enabling legislation that created Chicago's first elected representative school board (ERSB), IAAFER developed a comprehensive districting proposal that protects the voting rights of all Chicagoans; facilitates collaboration between local aldermen and elected school board representatives; and encourages elected officials to align City and Board of Education resources to support academic outcomes for CPS students.

IAAFER is also recommending that the legislation creating the ESRB be amended to create a standing Black Student Achievement Committee of the Board of Education to increase accountability at all levels as CPS strives to eliminate the achievement gap and school to prison pipeline for Black CPS students.

In response to the potential of the Ogden-Pulaski TIF to displace local residents, Valerie co-founded the Lawndale Alliance in 2008. The group expanded its focus to include a number of education and community development issues, including equitable community development and implementation of TIF's; the potential for displacement as a result of the Olympics and the negative impacts of school closings and turn arounds. The group also advocated for an elected school board and provided advocacy for the creation of equitable school facilities that support learning opportunities for North Lawndale students. Under Valerie's leadership, the Lawndale Alliance spearheaded a ward wide petition drive and GOTV effort to get an advisory referendum on the ballot for Chicago's Elected Representative School Board. The measure received 87% of the vote in the 24th Ward. The Lawndale Alliance also worked with a broad range of stakeholders, including the Lawndale CAC, elected officials and nonprofit organizations to develop an alternative plan to school closures, geared to turn schools that were targeted for closure into centers of activity for students, their families and local community stakeholders.

Valerie co-founded the North Lawndale Coordinating Council (NLCCC) in 2015 and served as a member of the executive committee and chairperson of the transportation committee. She recruited and oriented a multidisciplinary leadership team to facilitate North Lawndale's first comprehensive plan since 1959. She was the lead writer for successful applications to get a technical assistance grant from Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) to develop a comprehensive community plan and funding from LISC to coordinate a Quality of Life Plan. Valerie took the lead in developing much of the group's infrastructure, including facilitating the drafting of its vision and core values statement; developing the rules of engagement and handbook; developing the organization's committee structure and recruiting leaders and members for those committees; developing the website and marketing collateral materials; fundraising and resource development; managing social media accounts and newsletters and developing content for the first North Lawndale Community Planning Conference. She also advocated for restoration of CTA service along the Pink Line, Blue Line and Ogden bus line serving North Lawndale.

Valerie is the Founder of Nonprofit Utopia, LLC, the ideal community for leaders who want to start, manage and scale nonprofits. With a mission of training the next generation of ethical nonprofit leaders, Nonprofit Utopia offers an online community, courses and coaching to help leaders strengthen their leadership skills as they build their organizations. Valerie is also a Maxwell Leadership Team Certified Member, providing leadership assessments, mastermind groups and coaching using methods developed by John Maxwell, an international authority on leadership. To date, Nonprofit Utopia has reached over 40,000 people through its podcast, YouTube videos, online community and courses.

Valerie has a bachelor's degree in economics from Spelman College and a Master of Management degree in finance and marketing from the Kellogg Graduate School of Management at Northwestern University. She is an adjunct instructor for the University of Illinois at Chicago's Certificate in Nonprofit Management, teaching courses in nonprofit operations, strategic management and program design and evaluation. Valerie co-facilitates full-day grant writing workshops for the University. She is also an adjunct instructor for Roosevelt University, teaching courses in social enterprise.