

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT OF THE MONTH: Youth Pose Their Questions to Public Officials at a Forum in North Chicago



Around 90 young people and YouthBuild program staff from North Chicago and Waukegan listened attentively as a panel of elected officials answered questions that the youth had collectively crafted on topics related to their everyday lives. The forum, planned by **YouthBuild Lake County** with **YCC Waukegan YouthBuild** supporting, successfully exposed the students to a town hall style panel of elected officials as the culmination of weeks of study and leadership development for the young people, and months of planning on the part of the staff of Lake County.

The seed was planted in April of this year, when staff were brainstorming ways to bring home some of the **civic responsibility** and **leadership development** in conjunction with the push for **voter registration** that they knew they wanted to do in time for this fall's elections. The idea gained momentum when they began outreaching to their Members of Congress in July, and **Congressman Brad Schneider (D-IL)** – who represents both North Chicago and Waukegan – agreed to attend. From there, YB Lake County ED Tameka Wilson and Program Director Christopher Afram invited a **bipartisan cross section of state and local elected officials**, successfully curating a panel of 5 representatives that included the Mayor of North Chicago Leon Rockingham, North Chicago Alderman Bobby Allen, Waukegan Township Assessor Mark Strickland and Waukegan Park District Board President Marc Jones, in addition to the Congressman. To avoid controversy and remain impartial in an election year, they restricted their invitations to currently elected officials.



“A core goal was to show the youth that **their lived experience is important** to their elected representatives, that they are real people who really do care about the challenges and triumphs that are part of the day to day for the youth,” shares Christopher. “The questions covered topics including community safety, activities and job opportunities for young people, education, youth homeless prevention, resources for young parents, and jobs for those who have previously been incarcerated – **all directly related to issues that our young people are facing**. It was important to make the event as genuinely **youth-led** as possible, from the questions to the moderation.”

“The majority of this group of youth, from both programs, just completed mental toughness in the last couple months so **this was a huge opportunity for them to show their initiative and potential**. We could not be more proud of their work and the result,” says Tameka. “To any other directors thinking of doing something similar, we would highly encourage it – though it was not an overnight process. We have worked long and hard over the years to establish solid relationships with our representatives at all levels of government, and that made getting panel turnout much smoother.”

We salute the efforts of YB Lake County and YCC Waukegan YB in pulling off a wonderful event!