

# Free root OPERATION

## IMPACT REPORT 2021



Fueling  
Stronger  
Communities

# EVERYONE HAS THE POWER TO CHANGE THE WORLD.

Change starts with everyday people standing up for human rights and making a difference where they can. Together, we can build our communities up. We all have unique skills that we can use to create a better world for ourselves and those around us. We don't have to mirror other communities or wait for the government to service us when they've shown us time and time again they won't.

In 2015, when I was just a junior in high school, I began talking to my neighbors in South Shore to understand what was needed and wanted. I decided to invest in my community and create the resources that were missing. I founded Free Root Operation to intercept poverty induced gun violence.

Free Root Operation is grounded in the belief that Black and Brown communities know what they need. We center the voices and perspectives of those most marginalized. It is not our job to question our community's needs; it is our job to meet them. This year, we proudly released *Our Community*, the culmination of three years of data collection, surveys from 500+ South Shore residents, and the help of many, many people and an incredible team. Our beautiful 44-page booklet walks folks through quantitative and qualitative information as well as community-sourced solutions to our neighborhood's unique issues. This is the first-ever project of this scale done in my community, and the first time it has been represented in such a way.

In this report, you'll see a sample of the results found in *Our Community*, along with some highlights of our Food Pairing Program and the work we are doing with a local elementary school to end the school-to-prison pipeline. 2021 was a year of showing up for our community, and I can't wait to share our collective impact with you.

This work that myself, FRO, and others in Chicago are doing is important and permanent. Our passion is permanent. Our dreams for ourselves are permanent. As we look forward to the year ahead, FRO will continue our outreach to meet our community's hopes and needs. Please join us as we spend each and every day loving on and growing with our neighbors.

With gratitude,



**Eva Maria Lewis**

FRO Founder & Executive Director

Eva Maria Lewis.

Photo by Jose M. Osorio / *Chicago Tribune*





# BLUEPRINT FOR A NEW WAY FORWARD

In October, we released *Our Community: A Data Project Re-imagining South Shore*. This data booklet contains the results of the first and only Community Needs and Assets Assessment (CNAA) conducted in South Shore. We surveyed over 500+ residents on what South Shore residents need and what they want the community to look like, elevating the demands for equity in Chicago. We hope that it can be a blueprint for a new way forward, as FRO advocates for the robust future of South Shore envisioned by its residents.



**“This data project has been a labor of love and a testament that people from marginalized communities do know what they need, they just are not asked.”**

—FRO Founder and Executive Director  
Eva Maria Lewis

The residents we spoke with mentioned economic opportunity the most: from the presence of banks and Black-owned businesses to divestment, unemployment, the legalization of marijuana, and mitigation of gentrification. When we discussed safety, topics such as gang relations, drugs, and city-implemented protocol to handle these concerns arose. They called for improved relations between the community and police, as well as alternatives to policing.

Residents expressed a general desire to be in more fellowship with each other. They described an ideal South Shore as being a walkable neighborhood with thriving community-owned commerce, with opportunities for joy and recreation for all age groups. They also want structures in place for youth to safely develop and positively impact the community.

They want what many communities want: a quality physical environment, access to food and health services, safety, and to have their representatives truly advocate for them.



## HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE COMMUNITY PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

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- Job workshops and training
- Jobs and programs for those recently/ formerly incarcerated
- Record expungement, especially for marijuana charges
- Gang outreach
- Gun control
- More meaningful CAPS meetings with police and alderman
- Nature focused activities
- Block parties and community events
- Community volunteer-led projects
- More technology in the classroom
- More youth activities in and around the community
- Better parks for kids
- Programs to help increase civic engagement
- Community-led political gatherings
- Efforts to mitigate gentrification
- Rent relief
- Rent control

**TO READ THE FULL REPORT,  
PLEASE VISIT [FREEROOTOPERATION.COM](https://freerootoperation.com)**

# EDUCATION EMANCIPATION: FINDING ROOM FOR PEACE AND REFLECTION

As part of our Education Emancipation Program, we are dedicated to providing funding and resources for underserved schools, especially on Chicago's South and West sides. South Shore neighborhood's Bouchet Elementary School has been one of our partners since 2017; they were the first institution to sit down with FRO and listen to the vision we had for the community. Through advocacy, programming, and donations we have been committed to helping Bouchet secure necessary resources to help their students thrive.



## In 2021, our Education Emancipation program:

- Served 600+ students through our Peace Rooms
- Sponsored 8 tablets for students to complete remote learning

In 2019, Bouchet became the first home to our Peace Room project. The project arose from a need to combat the school-to-prison pipeline. According to the ACLU, the pipeline is a “national trend wherein children are funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems.” The majority of these students are Black and Brown, low-income, have learning disabilities, and have histories of trauma. Due to zero-tolerance policies, students often face harsh penalties for just one instance of bad behavior. Our Peace Rooms address this issue by creating a space for healing in public schools with a primary population of students of color.



We came to an agreement with leadership at the school that they will use the Peace Rooms to address conflict as opposed to detention being the first avenue of discipline. The FRO Peace Rooms are stocked with yoga mats, fidget toys, yoga balls, tranquility-inspired decor, and other tools for healing and sustenance. Students and faculty use these rooms to promote positive discipline solutions, community building, and character development.

Moving forward, we hope to build more Peace Rooms in additional schools and to fund counselors for them. We believe Black and Brown students deserve grace and equity in their educational experience; this initiative seeks to contribute to this while putting a stop to the school-to-prison pipeline. The children of South Shore will shape our community in the future and we must support them in doing so.

## PEACE ROOMS HAVE GIVEN STUDENTS:

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- Space to talk about their issues
- The ability to get to the root of why they acted out
- Time with themselves to reflect on their actions
- An environment that allows them to prioritize peace and joy

**According to Julian Johnson Law, “Black students comprise 36% of Chicago Public Schools but account for up to 61% of the 19,799 school suspensions.”**

# IF YOU WANT CRAB LEGS, WE WILL GET YOU CRAB LEGS!

Our Chicago Food Pairing Program (CFPP) began in 2020 due to sudden mass grocery store closures that took place during the Black Lives Matter protests. In the summer of 2020, we were able to serve over 500 families by equipping 500+ volunteers with access to open grocery stores on the North Side and in the suburbs with the funds to deliver food and supplies to families affected by the store closures on the South and West sides.

This year, we restarted the program by personally servicing one family a week. Each participant is given a budget and the ability to create their grocery and/or supply list. Along with our deliveries, we maintain a vlog series that allows our community members to get to know each other. After delivering to and getting to know each recipient, we offer a service to make a customized resource list to further meet their needs.

On a grocery run over the summer, we served Ms. Coleman who lives on the Southside. She had recently lost her mother who was more than 90 years old. In her grief, Ms. Coleman was having a difficult time getting to the grocery store and cooking. By providing her with foods that she loved and needed, we were able to be a part of her healing journey. It was really meaningful to connect with her and see the difference our delivery made in her spirit.

At the root of this program is the belief that we cannot tell people what they need; access and autonomy are empowering. The CFPP catchphrase is, "If you want crab legs, we will get you crab legs!" We say that because we believe every individual is entitled to receive what they need to live happy and healthy lives. This work isn't just about sustenance, it's about building what has been lost. If crab legs are what you need to feel comfort and joy, then that's what you'll get. No questions asked.

## During the COVID crisis, our CFPP program:

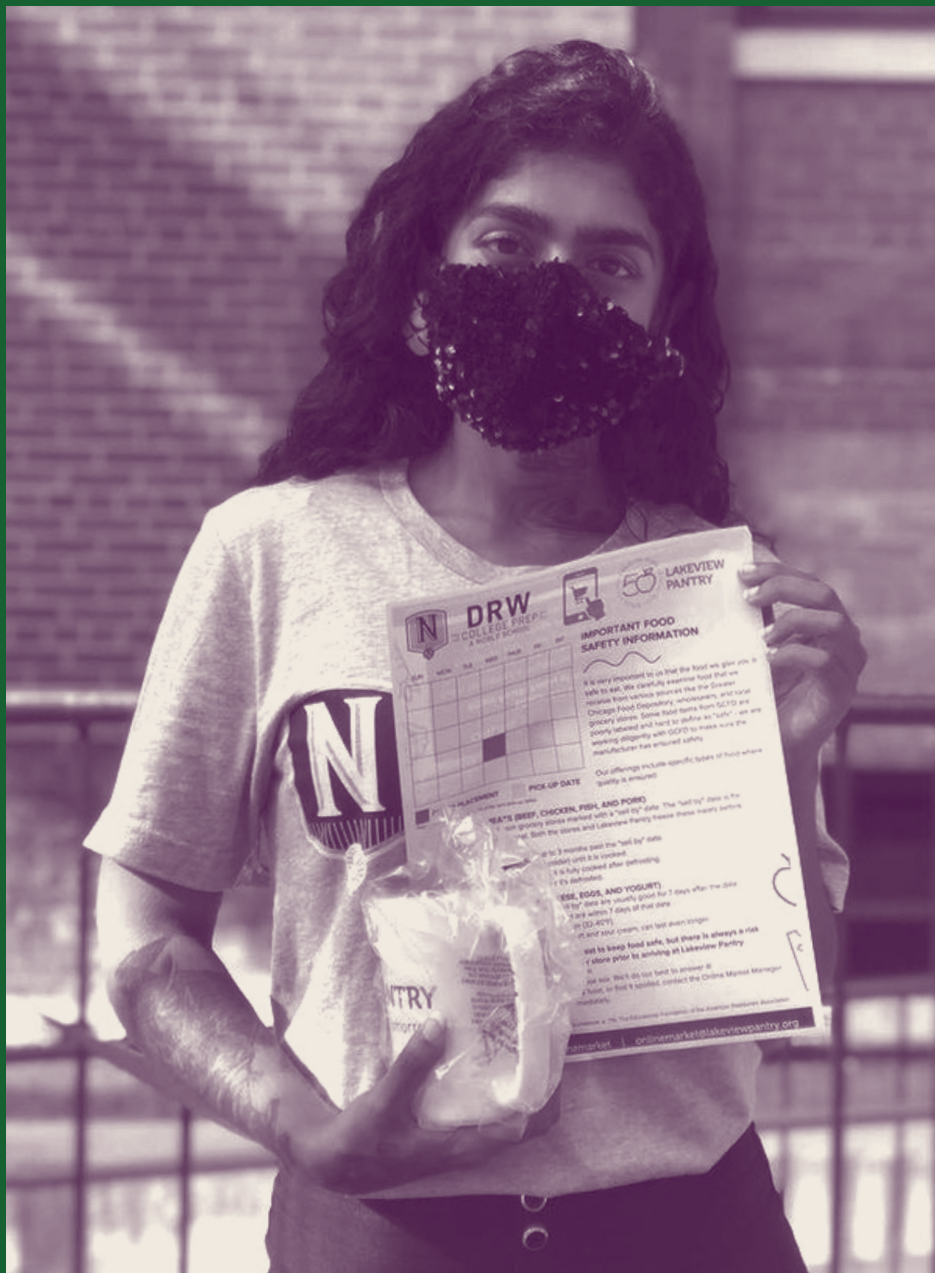
- Provided **\$71,800.53** worth of groceries
- Served **543 total** low-income families (with an average household of **4 people**)
- Paid an average grocery bill of **\$127.75** per family







# VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT



I wanted to dedicate this to my four students who passed away in the four years I have been teaching in North Lawndale. I am grateful for their spirits and legacy that have lasted in our hearts. I deeply appreciate FRO because all of you give hope and action to some of the losses we have faced in our school. We recently lost two of our students to gun violence within the past three months and knowing how FRO systematically challenges and grounds the work with our families on the West and South Side Chicago MEANS a LOT.

Thank you Sushmitha for your support and amplifying our mission!



**“I am passionate to give back to Free Root Operation as they create, imagine, and educate our society on the brilliance and inner power of Chicago Black youth and organizers. Eva Maria Lewis created the Chicago Food Pairing Program... a free delivery grocery service for west and south side neighborhoods temporarily operated by On the Ground Chi.**

**They have served over 15+ families [from our schools] and I was able to get so much support from the organizers to connect families to these services. When CPS’s meal line ended for one week and protests impacted local grocery stores (along with the historical food deserts families face), On the Ground Chi and Free Root Operation provided direct support without question.**

**I know that the money goes to the people and the money is based on people’s empowerment rooted in Black liberatory practices, leaders, and organizers.”**

**–Sushmitha Ram, FRO Volunteer and Learning Specialist at DRW College Prep, a Noble Campus.**

# LOOKING FORWARD

The year 2020 was an opportunity for Free Root Operation to adapt. You don't grow when things are easy, so we couldn't press pause on servicing our community in their greatest time of need. It was a year that highlighted the inequities of our food and educational systems more so than ever before. We've used 2021 as a time to continue to adapt. Our programming is always being evaluated to ensure that we are meeting the needs of those relying on us. Moving forward, we want to expand our work so that we can have a larger impact on the community.



## OUR PLANS INCLUDE:

- **Scaling our programming**
- **Expanding existing Peace Rooms to include free stores**
- **On-site counselors**
- **Consistent programming and events**
- **Building more peace rooms in underserved schools to replace detention/suspension**
- **Automating Chicago Food Pairing Program to allow for volunteers to participate in grocery runs**

# SHARING OUR MESSAGE

We love opportunities to spread the word about FRO while sharing our message of compassion and opportunity. Here is a spotlight on some of the recognition we received in 2021.

South Shore Data Project Reimagines Neighborhood from Residents' Perspective. Eva Maria Lewis Hopes it Serves as a Tool for Action: 'It's Everyone's Cape to Wear.' –October 29, 2021, *Chicago Tribune*

Reebok Human Rights Award –August 12, 2021

A year after the George Floyd murder, Eva Maria Lewis is still working –May 21, 2021, *Chicago Tribune*

8 Women Who Are Making Chicago a Better Place in 2021 –March 15, 2021, *TimeOut*

# WE NEED YOU IN 2022

We want to get people involved in the conversation about what it looks like for Black and Brown sustainable communities to exist that meet all of our needs.

If you'd like to join us for the exciting year ahead, take the Rooted in Freedom pledge to learn how you can help drive FRO's programming: [freerootoperation.com/getinvolved](https://freerootoperation.com/getinvolved)



To support our programming and efforts in 2022, please consider a donation. Your contribution will help us to grow FRO beyond our imagination. The work we do is near and dear to our hearts, and it is even more satisfying to know that it is catalyzed through the support of people like you. We thank you and hope you join our community

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