



Cultivating local circular
economies - sharing
knowledge, resources, and space.



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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

There were a few big wins for local circularity in 2023: Plant Chicago served on the working group that helped to develop the Chicago Building Decarbonization Plan and our food scrap drop off model was an inspiration for a much larger program rolled out by the city. The cherry on top was that Plant Chicago was honored at the first Climate Infrastructure Fund award ceremony which will support decarbonization projects across the city.

Plant Chicago's work is a highly localized part of a broader transition to circularity. There are certainly other amazing organizations working to advance circular economies in the city, but Plant Chicago is the only one that is explicit about changing an entire economic system. To some, the idea of changing a system is overwhelming. Or absurd. For me, it is inspiring.

I have the benefit of getting to eavesdrop on a diverse set of workshops at Plant Chicago. Some of my favorites are about fungi, which the more I learn of them the more they amaze me. Fungi are the ecological equivalent of circular economy facilitators. They are traders, exchanging nutrients with plants in exchange for sugars. They take matter that is at its end of life, use that matter for their energy, and repurpose that matter into forms that other life can use. Their "waste" is just another life forms' opportunity. Fungi are also the hallmark of healthy and diverse ecosystems.

Much like fungi, Plant Chicago is made up of an incredible community of facilitators and connectors. By offering opportunities to divert materials from landfills, our building is serving as a hub for circular economy practices. A visitor recently told me "There should be a Plant Chicago in every city". And I thought what if there was an organization like Plant Chicago in every neighborhood?

A place where you can find locally and sustainably grown produce on a sliding scale and farmers markets with opportunities to swap and not just shop. A place where students have a chance to learn how to harvest greens or grow mushrooms in February or where you can sign up for a workshop with an experienced local farmer for free. A place where can you drop off batteries and food scraps, pick up compost, swap some clothes, and connect with local small businesses that are reducing waste. On any given day at Plant Chicago I might see a school group making salad from lettuce just harvested, a local farmer teaching neighbors how to process honey, and a neighbor picking up a box of local produce on a sliding scale at a price that they determine they can afford.

2024 will be the year that we take our role as facilitators even further as we finally move forward on our big plans to renovate and decarbonizing our firehouse. We anticipate making some big upgrades to the building to improve accessibility, aesthetics, functionality, and sustainability so that our programs and events can reach even more people.

I can hardly wait for what this coming year will bring.



Jonathan Pereira

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jonathan Pereira". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end.



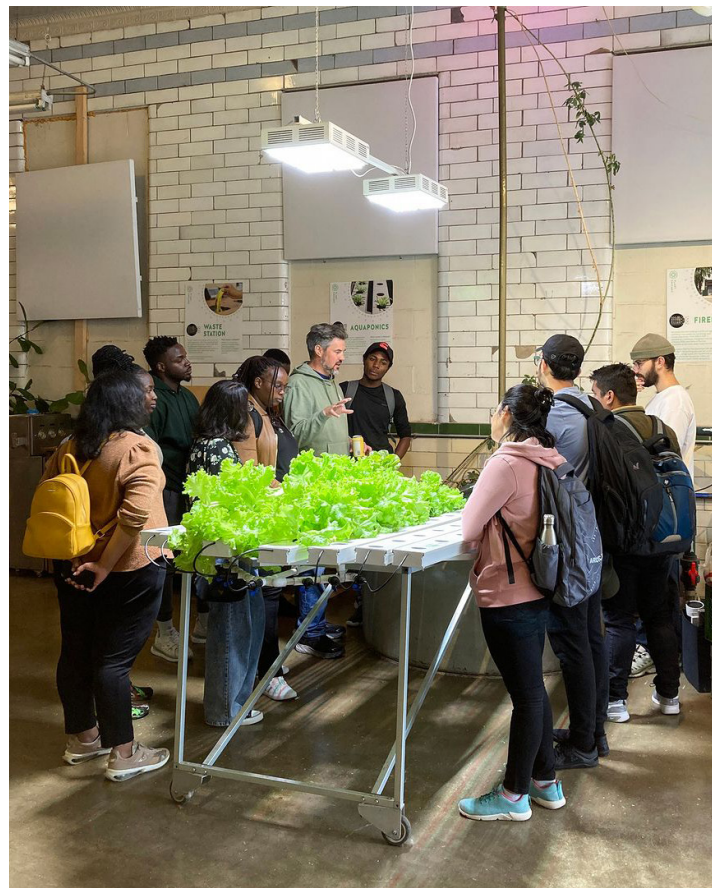
INTRODUCTION

The ever evolving circular economy...

Each year there are more and more definitions of the “circular economy” from companies, nonprofits, academics and other business professionals. While confusing at times, it isn’t necessarily problematic. Each definition recognizes that our current economic system operates as if there are infinite resources to extract, doesn’t account for negative environmental impacts, and is leading us into potential disaster.

Plant Chicago’s mission is to cultivate local circular economies. Perhaps our focus on local is what makes this obvious shortcoming in the circular economy movement more glaring. So what does circular economy mean to Plant Chicago?

Plant Chicago describes a local circular economy as a collaborative economic practice sustained by local circulations of materials, nutrients, knowledge and money. In practice, it is so much more.



To Plant Chicago, a local circular economy means:

Sharing knowledge, not just materials. We are surrounded by a wealth of local knowledge, including from small businesses and neighbors!

Supporting local food systems, especially the most vulnerable parts of it. Low income households can only benefit from a circular economy if we are intentional about ensuring that they have access to responsibly grown food.

Providing spaces for non-monetary economic opportunities like swapping and sharing, not just transactions of currency.

Supporting and elevating the work of small businesses, as they are often doing amazing work to cultivate circularity with few resources.

Diverting materials from landfills, reusing, repairing, decarbonizing buildings, installing renewable energy... but also making sure that all people have access to the benefits.

It is easy to get distracted by definitions. The most important thing to do is take action!



Plant Chicago board and staff





EDUCATION



A Closed Loop Lab participant

Cultivating a local circular economy means sharing knowledge.

Plant Chicago's education programs share knowledge and information that strengthen local circular economies. People come together in Plant Chicago's space to explore different ways to grow, create, and support local economies. Participants get hands-on opportunities to grow mushrooms, harvest honey, build composting systems, seed plants, prepare nutritious meals, build composting systems, reduce and repurpose waste, and experiment with different ways to grow food year-round.

We bucket this work into two major categories:

- STEM Education for Youth
- Community Programming

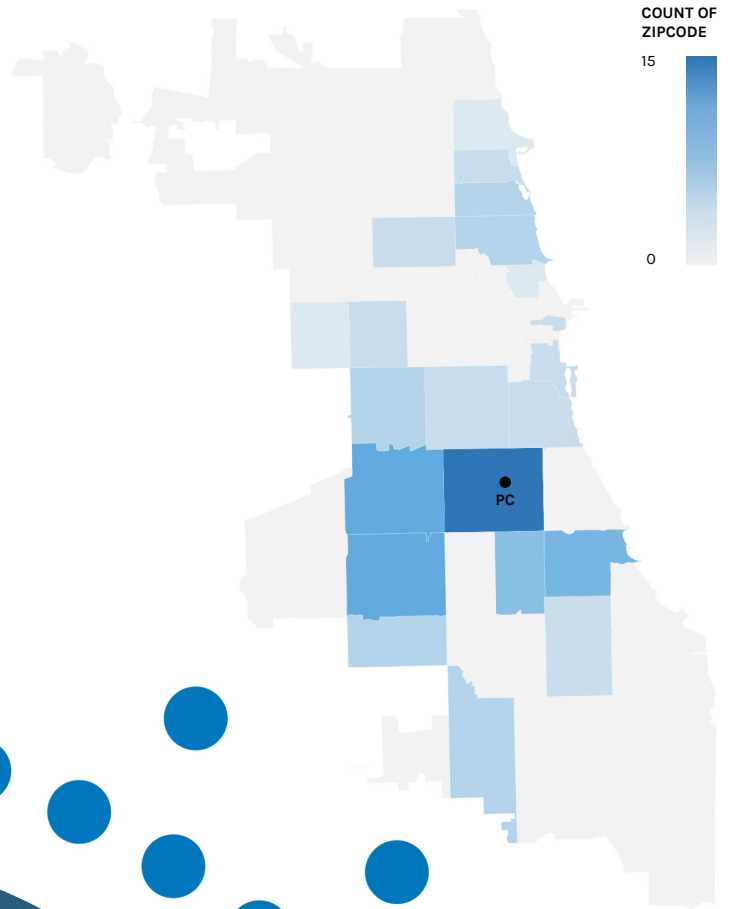
YOUTH EDUCATION

Closed Loop Labs, our hands-on STEM workshops, are one of the most unique learning experiences

available for school groups in Chicago. Student groups get to utilize our indoor farming systems at The Firehouse, including aquaponic farm beds, mycology lab equipment, and vermicomposting bins. Youth participants harvest fresh salad greens, learn to grow their own mushrooms, and even build their own worm bins to take back to the classroom. Even better, Closed Loop Labs are aligned with Next Generation Science Standards so they complement instruction from classroom teachers.

In order to ensure that there is equitable access, we offer these labs to schools on a sliding scale basis, which often means free!

PLANT CHICAGO SCHOOL PROGRAMS 2023 BY ZIP CODE



BY THE NUMBERS

In 2023...

Our Closed Loop Labs engaged

Over 2,900 participants

Over 30% of Closed Loop Labs offered for free or low cost

132 workshops in total!

6 youth interns

“[Plant Chicago] always does an incredible job with our students. We had honors students in attendance... in addition to students that receive educational services via IEPs. Tom, without knowing this, quickly adapted needs for each student group. Students were very excited to grow the mushrooms... [and] the highlight of the field trip for them was seeing the worms and chickens. A review from a student – ‘This is the best field trip I have ever been on!’”

COMMUNITY PROGRAMMING

Plant Chicago provides incredibly unique educational experiences for the general public, too!

The Indoor Victory Garden (IVG) is our most notable example of a shared resource as it is one of the few indoor farms that is shared by small growers and community members. The IVG provides space, equipment, and a knowledgeable community so individuals have a low-risk environment to grow food, year-round. In 2023, 6 users were able to take advantage of these resources.

The IVG is also a space for sharing knowledge. Plant Chicago hosts educational programming led by practitioners like urban farmers, beekeepers, mycologists and even chefs. Like our K-12 programming, workshops are offered on a sliding scale which often means free!

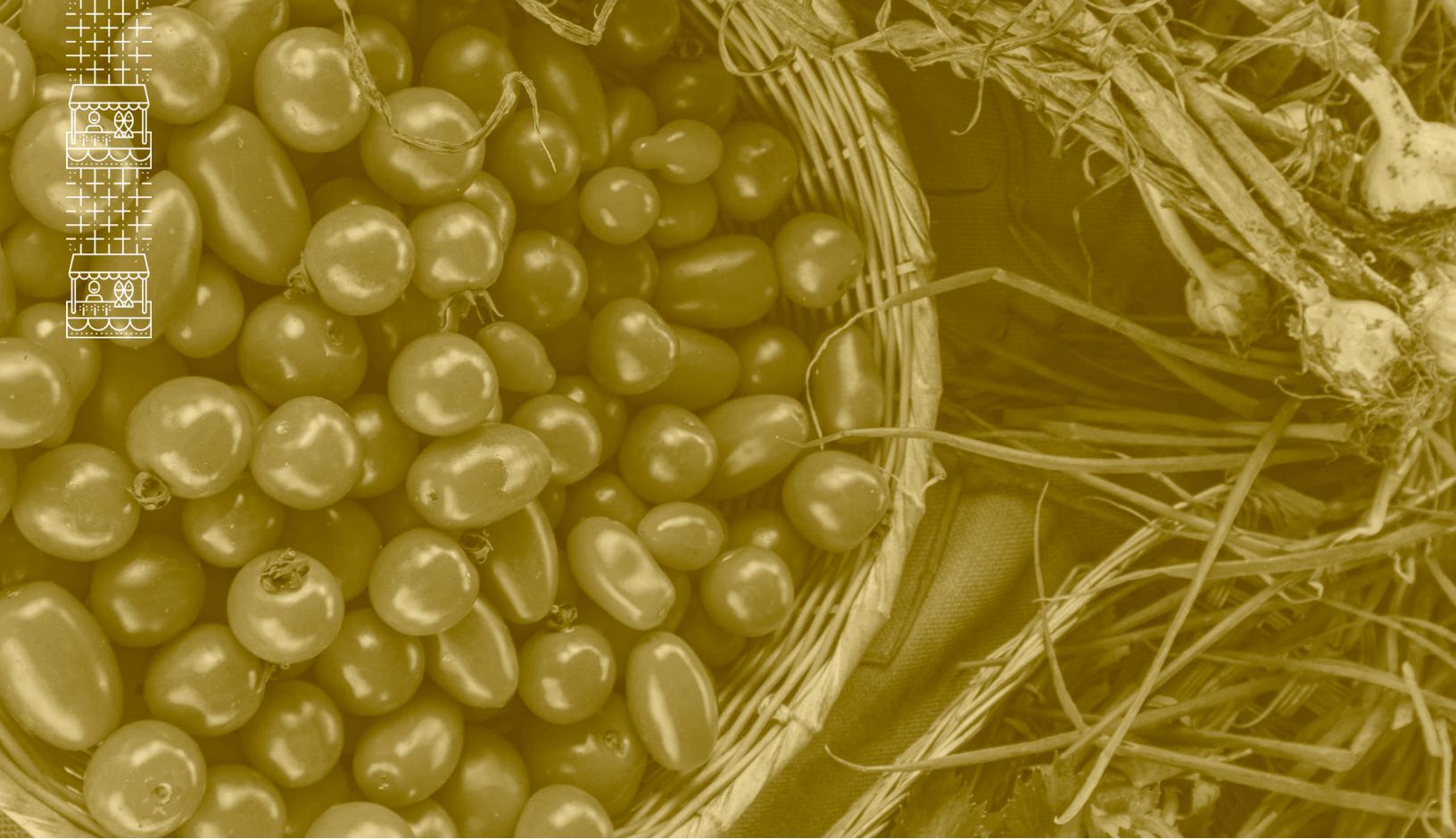
In 2023, we hosted over 20 public workshops and events on honey harvesting, growing mushrooms, aquaponics, fermentation, seeding for seasons, degrowth, circular economy, composting, as well as community dinners with Candid Fare and Next Door Dinners.



During an internship with Plant Chicago, individuals assist with the day to day operations of cultivating local circular economies while working on a project that fits their interests and career ambitions.

INTERN SPOTLIGHT: LITZY

Litzy Estrada grew up in Back of the Yards and joined Plant Chicago as an intern in 2023 as she was pursuing her degree in Chemistry. Working with our Education Manager, she received an intensive training in how to care for indoor farming systems and was hired as Plant Chicago's Aquaponics and Hydroponics Associate in 2024!



FOOD ACCESS



A local circular economy means supporting local food systems.

The most vulnerable links in the food supply chain are small food producers and low-income households. Small farmers often can't afford to be cost-competitive with industrial agriculture, especially when they are incorporating organic and regenerative practices into their operations. Similarly, low-income households may struggle to afford basic food items.

Plant Chicago is committed to ensuring that low-income families are able to access local, sustainably produced food while also helping small farmers meet their revenue goals. In order to make good food accessible, Plant Chicago offers a variety of “healthy food incentives,” which include matching the cost of produce 1:1 for Link card holders (SNAP benefits), distributing coupons for all food items purchased with Link, and making our sliding scale pricing available to everyone. In order to support local food businesses at our farmers markets, we also offer Link matching on their produce and distribute coupons for local households to use for local

produce. The Firehouse is open to the public every Friday and Saturday throughout the year (close to 100 days in 2023) providing residents ample opportunities to drop in for local food boxes or a la carte produce. When we host our monthly farmers markets, additional vendors spill out our front doors into neighboring Davis Square Park!

We partnered with nonprofit Common Threads to host free cooking demonstrations at our markets. Professional chefs prepared healthy meals using locally sourced produce and each participant went home with their own set of produce! An average of 18 people participated in 8 cooking demos in 2023, with the majority being neighbors from Back of the Yards.

BY THE NUMBERS

Over \$7,000 in healthy food incentives distributed

Close to 5,000 pounds of food distributed

At least 40% of food to low-income households

“My family and I have found a great enjoyment in Plant Chicago. [We are] able to explore farmers’ markets and learn about composting, as well as being mindful of incorporating new life changes. It’s always exciting to discover new activities to do on the weekends! Plant Chicago has been a perfect fit of learning and enjoyment for our family.”

- DAISY VEGA, SOUTHWEST SIDE RESIDENT





LOCAL ECONOMIES

Cultivating local circular economies means providing opportunities for non-monetary economic activities.

Plant Chicago’s monthly farmers market provides locally-grown produce to Back of the Yards residents, supports local food businesses with a direct-to-consumer marketplace, and serves as a gathering space for the community. Our public market serves as a revenue generating engine and collaborative learning environment for local small businesses. By incorporating activities such as swapping, subsidizing, and selling items on a sliding scale into Plant Chicago’s marketplaces, we are creating one of the most unique market experiences in the region.

Each farmers market is combined with an “intercambio” to provide free opportunities to swap instead of shop. Plant swaps, clothing swaps, pumpkin smashes, the Hallow Borrow... even our first swap of durable medical devices, each intercambio is an opportunity for Chicago residents

to divert materials from the landfill while supporting local economic systems. When somebody exchanges a piece of clothing instead of buying a new one, they are engaging in a non-monetary economic transaction that also keeps materials out of landfills.





“Bee-utiful Honey values so many things about our partnership with Plant Chicago – farmers markets and the Firehouse Market, circular and sustainable communities, rooftop beekeeping, the opportunity to teach workshops about bees. This year, the experiences that stand out the most are the conversations we have with community members at the market... seeing young people excited about bees is the highlight of our week.”

- JESS, BEE-UTIFUL HONEY & CANDLES

“Our partnership with Plant Chicago allowed us to have a direct impact with our surrounding community. From a back to school drive, writing & dance workshops, to a storytelling market when we needed a space to gather, Plant Chicago opened their doors so we can have an artistic space in Back of the Yards that is accessible for everyone.”

- ELIZABETH NUNGARAY, FREE STREET THEATER

The impact of our markets could not be possible without amazing partners like Free Street Theater, Serving People with a Mission, Common Threads and Increase the Peace.

“We have always collaborated with Plant Chicago because they are aligned with our mission and values. They have shown these efforts in many ways. Facilitating Link transactions and offering the Link Match program at the farmers markets has been very instrumental for the growth of our business. It allows our neighbors and customers to maximize the use of their Link dollars and it allows us to continue sharing our produce with the community.”

- DULCE, CEDILLO’S FRESH PRODUCE



Garcia and Jenny of Zafra Farms

SMALL BUSINESS SUPPORT

Cultivating local circular economies means supporting and elevating the work of small businesses.

Plant Chicago supports ambitious small businesses to implement circular practices in their own operations. What that looks like is often a combination of sourcing locally, reducing waste, diverting materials from landfills, eliminating single use plastic, and implementing refill or package free options for their products.

In 2023, we worked closely with two incredible local food businesses, El Hongo Magico and Cadinhos Bakery. Both businesses were at transition points in their operations with plans to expand into brick and mortar facilities.

Over the course of the year, both are implementing composting as a part of their operations, sourced more local ingredients, and have figured out other ways to reduce waste and collaborate with other local businesses!



David of Contemporary Farmer



“I really enjoyed and learned so much from [working with Plant Chicago]. We now understand the need to view everything we do from a different lens. We didn’t have this lens a year ago, when we first launched El Hongo Magico, but now it is a big part of our identity and our connection to the community.”

- BERNICE AND CARLOS, CO-OWNERS OF EL HONGO MAGICO

“Throughout our time together we found ways to reduce waste, change practices, and connect with other like-minded businesses. But, most importantly, we learned to change our mindset into ALWAYS finding ways to do better and seek ways to improve and become a more sustainable business. We appreciate everything we learned and all the connections that are and will continue to be valuable for our journey as a sustainable business.”

- MARIA, OWNER OF CADINHO BAKERY



Some other successes from businesses in our network:

- Bronzeville based Soap Junkii has gone package free, working with Plant Chicago to provide products for our refill station at The Firehouse
- Closest Closet opening up brick and mortar store for their circular clothing business model
- Local farmers Cedillos, Zafra, Contemporary Farmer, and Bee-utiful Honey sharing resources and knowledge in our Indoor Victory Garden

BY THE NUMBERS

Worked with **30 businesses**

We hosted **19 markets** in 2023, each with free opportunities to swap (and not just “shop”)

Over **\$30,000** of local economic support to small food businesses

Over **2/3rds** of businesses in our small business network are led by women, and about

60% BIPOC owned or led



WASTE DIVERSION

Cultivating local circular economies means diverting materials from landfills.

A circular economy is one that actively reframes how we see “waste.” Rather than simply an unwanted by-product, waste becomes an opportunity. Materials that end up in landfills not only take up space and can cause greenhouse gas emissions, but they also do not reenter our economic system. Plant Chicago prioritizes reuse and repurposing in all of our operations and programs, but ultimately many materials need to be recycled.

Plant Chicago increases access for the average Chicago resident to be able to divert materials from landfills for free. We do this by actively accepting materials from our neighbors to be recycled or reused for free and by working with our external partners and small businesses to minimize single-use packaging.

We implement the following practices:

- Compost all organic materials from our shared use farm on-site.



Volunteers helping give away free compost



Daisy recruiting a new composter!

- Measure all materials leaving our facility as a part of our operations.
- Collect packaging materials for reuse by other small businesses.
- Provide free food scrap drop off for composting and free lightbulb and battery recycling.
- Avoid single use plastic.
- Host monthly events, such as pumpkin smashes and clothing swaps, to divert even more materials from landfills!

In 2023, Plant Chicago hired long-time volunteer Daisy Zamora to encourage our neighbors and market goers to drop off food scraps for composting. Late in the year, the City of Chicago officially implemented the first citywide food scrap drop off program. Prior to that, Plant Chicago was the only location in the city that residents could drop off food scraps for free.

BY THE NUMBERS

In 2023...

We diverted **82% of materials**

from landfills from internal operations

We facilitated diversion of an additional

6.37 tons of material from the landfill



Photo credit: City of Chicago

DECARBONIZATION



Cultivating local circular economies means ensuring that all people have access to the benefits of renewable energy and decarbonization.

Decarbonization refers to the process of removing direct use of fossil fuels in building infrastructure. As more of the electrical grid becomes powered by renewable sources like wind and solar, using electricity instead of fossil fuels to heat and cool buildings means that overall less carbon enters the atmosphere.

2023 was arguably the year that “decarbonization” really took off in Chicago, as the city officially released the Building Decarbonization Plan (Plant Chicago’s Executive Director served on the working group) to set decarbonization targets and policy recommendations for Chicago.

In May of 2023, Plant Chicago’s Executive Director was invited as a keynote speaker for the Climate Infrastructure Fund (CIF) award ceremony with outgoing Mayor Lightfoot at the Chicago Cultural

Center. The CIF award will allow Plant Chicago to replace old gas powered space heaters and install a new air source heat pump heating and ventilation system at The Firehouse. These improvements will make a huge difference in our journey to decarbonize our own building.

Cultivating local circular economies means ensuring that all people have access to the benefits of renewable energy and waste diversion.

Decarbonizing buildings also means increasing the production of renewable energy. Starting with our own building, our 16 kilowatt solar array was finally brought online in February. The system produced over 19,000 kWh of energy in the first year of operation! That's about 2.5 times the electricity that the average Illinois household uses each year (EPA).

At the end of 2023, Plant Chicago joined the Grassroots Education team with Illinois Solar For All (ILSFA), a statewide initiative to help income-eligible and environmental justice communities access solar and the renewable energy economy. Plant Chicago is focusing on ensuring that residents of Back of the Yards and the greater Southwest side of Chicago have access to the benefits of residential solar.

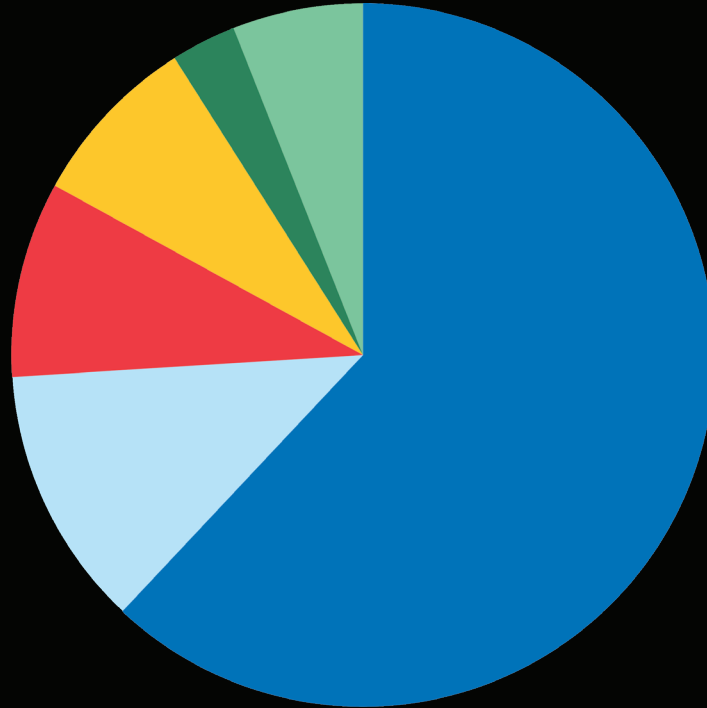
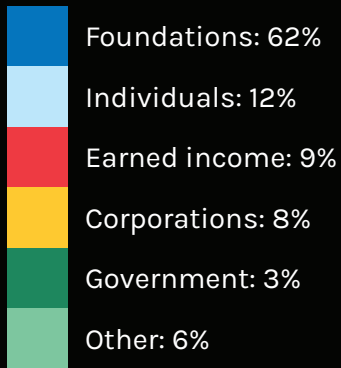
Director of Operations, Eric Weber, celebrating the successful installation of the solar array



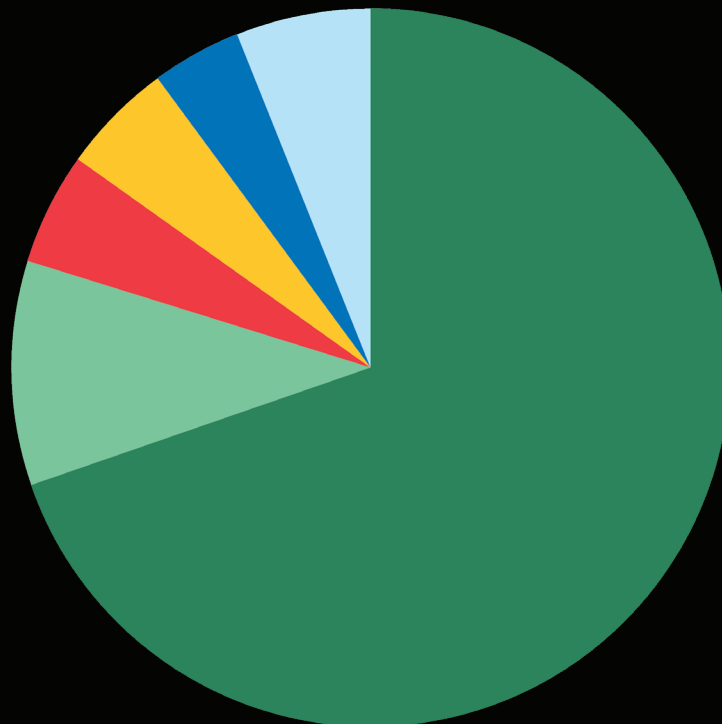
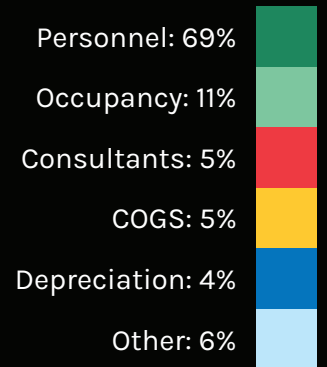
FINANCES

Plant Chicago is committed to ensuring that everyone has access to our programs, regardless of their income level. Public workshops, events, youth programs, shared-use spaces, and even the foods in the Firehouse Market are offered on a sliding scale, which often means entirely free of cost to participants. Subsequently, our organization remains highly dependent on the generosity of others! In 2023, over 85% of our funding came from philanthropic sources.

REVENUE: \$624,748.74



EXPENSES: \$550,694.50



81% of our expenses went to programs.

Our expenses track with our values: as usual, our largest expense is our most valuable asset: our people!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

COMMUNITY AND ORGANIZATIONAL PARTNERS

The work of cultivating local circular economies cannot be done alone. Plant Chicago recognizes the outstanding partnership of the following nonprofits and small companies that collaborated with Plant Chicago in 2023:

Chicago Commons
City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events
City of Chicago Department of Environment
Closest Closet
Common Threads
Communities in Schools of Chicago
Embarc Chicago
Free Street Theater
La Casa Norte / Increase the Peace
Lara Academy
Serving People with a Mission
State Representative Teresa Mah
The Urban Canopy
University of Illinois Extension: Cook County

CORE PHILANTHROPIC PARTNERS

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Food:Land:Opportunity funded by the Searle Foundation at the Chicago Community Trust
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Jonathan Pereira
Kathleen Valdez
Eric Weber
Daisy Zamora

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Our Auxiliary Board is a diverse group of young professionals who support Plant Chicago's activities + programs.

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Thank you to all of the individuals who donated to Plant Chicago in 2023!

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