



Soccer for All: Recommendations to Bolster Chicago Fire FC's Community Impact

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Executive Summary

Chicago Fire FC organizes and participates in many community soccer programming catered to youth and residents of Chicago. After comparing Chicago Fire FC community initiatives with similar programming at other Major League Soccer (MLS) clubs, six recommendations are outlined throughout this document to suggest additional community initiatives Chicago Fire FC can implement and evaluate their impact. Most recommendations are in alignment with Chicago's Recovery Plan and/or Major League Soccer's Social Justice Initiatives. This report focuses on three of Chicago Fire FC's community initiatives: mini pitches, the FC-77 Project, and the Little Sparks Program. This document suggests Chicago Fire FC, as well as the Chicago Fire Foundation **1)** Distribute soccer balls to kids that live within a one-mile radius of a mini pitch **2)** Host early learning curriculum for incoming kindergartners **3)** Establish a job training program for Chicago residents and Soldier Field workers **4)** Hire two BIPOC MBA students from a local college/university on a part-time basis each year for five years and have them work on activities within the club that align with the student's professional interests **5)** Create a scholarship fund with Chicago residents, workers, students, employees at Soldier Field in partnership with a local college and **6)** Incorporate STEM curriculum in youth programming. Below each recommendation is a suggested metric Chicago Fire can use to assess impact if the decision is made to implement that particular recommendation.

Context and Importance of the Problem

Most MLS teams have a "Community" section available on their website, outlining the different programming offered to engage their respective communities. Some of the programs include giving kids soccer supplies, holding a number of soccer clinics, or distributing tickets. The scale of impact of these programs, however, is not always known to the public due to an absence of published community reports. Of the 28 MLS teams, only six have community reports available on their website: Austin FC, Colorado Rapids, FC Cincinnati, New York City FC, Portland Timbers, and Seattle Sounders. In late 2020, the Chicago Fire pledged to develop programs to engage the Chicago community (i.e. ensure



black-owned businesses have the opportunity to bid for work sought by the Fire; develop plans to foster meaningful partnerships with and for the benefit of people of color, women and the LGBTQ+ communities)¹ but they have yet to issue an impact report of those initiatives. The pledge and its proposed programming, sans an impact report, runs the risk of being perceived as performative; in other words, well-intentioned initiatives seen as “checking a box” to fulfill a key performance indicator. Chicago Fire recently entered a lease agreement with the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) to build a performance center.² The club, subsequently, made a commitment to ensure CHA families benefit economically from the investment.³ For a club that has made a pledge to “continually make a lasting impact in Chicago,” it is imperative the Chicago Fire capitalize on this opportunity to track, evaluate, and publicly report the impact of their various programming.

Note: These recommendations are based on independent research and are made from the outside looking in. Consequently, some of the recommendations may have been implemented or may not align with the club’s community engagement strategy.

Community Engagement Recommendations

Mini Pitch

In 2017, Chicago Fire FC, together with the U.S. Soccer Foundation and the City of Chicago, announced plans to build 50 mini pitches in five years. The 50th mini pitch was installed in 2021, a year earlier than planned. The locations of the mini pitches span throughout the Chicagoland area (primarily on the south and west sides).⁴ In light of the successful completion of building 50 mini pitches in four years, below are a couple of recommendations inspired by the Seattle Sounders’ mini pitch activities. These recommendations could optimize mini pitch usage in Chicago.

Recommendation #1: Distribute soccer balls to kids that live within a one-mile radius of the mini pitch.

¹ See *A Pledge From Chicago Fire Football Club*. (n.d.). <https://www.chicagofirefc.com/pledge>

² See Chicago Housing Authority. 2022. *Lease Proposal for Chicago Fire Football Club Training Facility*. <https://aus.libguides.com/c.php?g=299652&p=2001146>

³ See Chicago Housing Authority, CFFC, City of Chicago. 2022. *Proposed Performance Center Chicago Fire Football Club*.

https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/dcd/supp_info/fire_community_engagement_presentation.pdf

⁴ See Chicago Fire Foundation. 2021. *Chicago Fire FC in the Community*.

<https://www.chicagofirefc.com/foundation/minipitches>

In an effort to reduce barriers to play, the Seattle Sounders' charitable arm, RAVE Foundation, gives out soccer balls to kids that live within a one-mile radius of the mini pitch.⁵

Recommendation #2: Host early learning curriculum for incoming kindergartners.

The RAVE Foundation engages indigenous youth in responsive programs at mini pitches. The early learning curriculum, First Kicks, focuses on the cognitive and physical development of incoming kindergartners, ensuring they are ready to learn.⁶

RAVE PLAY FIELD PROGRAMMING ✓ WA State K-12 Learning Standards Aligned

- Fostering Physical and Mental Health
- Inspiring Learning
- Creating Career Pathways

PRE-K

- First Kicks** ✓
A physical literacy program for 3-5 year olds that teaches our youngest learners and their parents how to move their bodies while developing cognitive skills—using a soccer ball.

K-4 GRADE

- Goals for Art** ✓
Art program inspired by soccer. Fosters social-emotional wellness and belonging. Affirms children as stakeholders in their communities.
- Camps & Clinics** ✓
High quality soccer skills training that fosters team building, inclusivity, fitness and fun.
- One Ball** ✓
A program that aims to give 100,000 high quality soccer balls to kids who need them, targeting communities where RAVE invests fields and programs.
- PE Curriculum** ✓
Lessons meeting WA State learning standards for PE, using soccer and other sports to teach agility, basic skills like throwing and kicking, and nutrition.

5-8 GRADE

- Science of Soccer** ✓
A WA State Learning Standards aligned program that teaches STEM concepts using soccer as the subject.
- Camps & Clinics** ✓
High quality soccer skills training that fosters team building, inclusivity, fitness and fun.
- Sports Media Institute** ✓
A summer internship style program that teaches sportswriting and media skills alongside SFC communications staff and local media experts.

HIGH SCHOOL

- Pro Sports Career Events** ✓
A program that gives 9th and 10th graders the opportunity to envision their futures while learning about the multitude of sports-related careers.
- Sounders FC Internships** ✓
Paid internships through partner organizations provided to local high school students seeking first-hand job experience in sports.
- Sounders FC Stat Rookie** ✓
An app based financial literacy teaching tool aimed at high school students, intended to gamify learning, all set in the professional soccer landscape.

Example curriculum offered by RAVE Foundation (Source: Seattle Sounders Social Impact Report 2021)


Metrics to measure: academic performance of kids that received cognitive and physical development early learning curriculum compared to kids that did not receive the early learning curriculum).

Alignment with Chicago Recovery Plan: the plan is devoting \$65 million to youth programs in order to “increase opportunities for out-of-school programming and education.”⁷

⁵ See *Seattle Sounders FC Social Impact Report*. Section 4 (Fight Racism). 2021. <https://yearly.report/from/#/soundersfc/seattle-sounders-fc>

⁶ See *Seattle Sounders FC Social Impact Report*. Section 3 (Examples of Our Work in Action). 2021. <https://yearly.report/from/#/soundersfc/seattle-sounders-fc>

⁷ See Chicago Recovery Plan. September 21, 2021. City of Chicago. *Youth Opportunities*. Page 39. https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/obm/supp_info/2022Budget/ChicagoRecoveryPlan.pdf



Alignment with MLS: as part of MLS's Youth and Grassroots Community Initiative, MLS will use league resources to close the representation gap across the broad spectrum of the sport in North America with the goal of increasing participation and opportunity for members of underserved communities.⁸

FC-77 Project

FC-77, a project soon to be launched by Chicago Fire FC, looks to implement long-lasting change by bringing the game to black and brown communities that have been historically disenfranchised. Below are a few recommendations of initiatives to implement with the FC-77 project (inspired by FC Cincinnati's Community Benefits Agreement and the Seattle Sounders).

Recommendation #3: Establish a job training program for Chicago residents and Soldier Field workers

FC Cincinnati launched the Cornerstone Construction Training Program (in partnership with the local non-profit CityLink Center) a program that provides job training opportunities for residents. As part of their commitment to invest in the West End community, FC Cincinnati awarded a grant to support the Phlebotomy Training Program Pilot, a program to train individuals for an in-demand industry. In 2021, a culinary program was introduced in partnership with Levy, the TQL Stadium concessionaire.⁹

Metrics to measure: number of job training program participants that obtained employment in construction, phlebotomy, or the culinary industry, or any other industry Chicago Fire identifies.

Alignment with Chicago Recovery Plan: the City of Chicago is devoting \$10 million to provide workforce development programming, including career services and other wrap-around support for those entering the workforce or new industries.¹⁰

Recommendation #4: Hire two BIPOC MBA students from a local college/university on a part-time basis each year for five years and have them work on activities within the club that align with the student's professional interests.

Seattle Sounders FC has a commitment to building authentic partnerships with local and national partners to have a greater, collective impact in fighting racism. As a result, in partnership with Seattle University, Seattle Sounders will hire two Seattle U Sports and

⁸ See McConnell, E. ProstAmerika. October 19, 2020. *MLS rolls out major social justice initiatives.* <https://www.prostamerika.com/2020/10/19/mls-rolls-out-major-social-justice-initiatives/244157/#prettyPhoto>

⁹ See 2021 FC Cincinnati & FC Cincinnati Foundation Community Report. Page 14-15. <https://images.mlssoccer.com/image/upload/v1643984861/assets/cin/Foundation/FCCFoundation2021EndOfYearFINAL.pdf>

¹⁰ See Chicago Recovery Plan. September 21, 2021. City of Chicago. *Assistance to Families.* Page 29.



Entertainment MBA BIPOC students on a part-time basis each year for five years. The students will support initiatives that align with their professional interests.¹¹

Metrics to measure: collect anecdotes from MBA participants and what they learned while at the Fire; number of MBA students that transitioned to a full-time position with Chicago Fire.

Alignment with Chicago Recovery Plan: “create opportunities for Chicago’s youth to access employment and out-of-school programming, with an emphasis on workforce development in early-stage careers and other educational opportunities.”¹²

Alignment with Major League Soccer: With the league’s Soccer Upward Mobility Initiative, MLS will provide access, exposure and clearly defined career paths that develop talent from underrepresented groups. “This initiative will include developing pathways of entrance and advancement for emerging and current talent, in addition to creating policies and an educational ecosystem to increase Black representation in executive and sporting positions at the league office, the member clubs and other North American soccer organizations.”¹³

Recommendation #5: Create a scholarship fund with Chicago residents, workers, students, employees at Soldier Field in partnership with a college

The FC Cincinnati Foundation established a scholarship for Cincinnati residents, workers, students and employees at TQL stadium, in partnership with Chatfield College. The FC Cincinnati Foundation Scholarship Fund provides \$1,000 annually for full-time students and \$500 annually for part-time students for a total commitment of \$10,000 annually. This is a pledge FC Cincinnati made (invest a minimum of \$100,000 into the West End community annually for 30 years) as part of their Community Benefits Agreement.¹⁴

¹¹ See *Seattle Sounders FC Social Impact Report*. Section 4 (Fight Racism). 2021. <https://yearly.report/from/#/soundersfc/seattle-sounders-fc>

¹² See Chicago Recovery Plan. September 21, 2021. City of Chicago. *Youth Opportunities*. Page 39.

¹³ See McConnell, E. ProstAmerika. October 19, 2020. *MLS rolls out major social justice initiatives*. <https://www.prostamerika.com/2020/10/19/mls-rolls-out-major-social-justice-initiatives/244157/#prettyPhoto>

¹⁴ See 2021 FC Cincinnati & FC Cincinnati Foundation Community Report. Page 14-15. <https://images.mlssoccer.com/image/upload/v1643984861/assets/cin/Foundation/FCCFoundation2021EndOfYearFINAL.pdf>

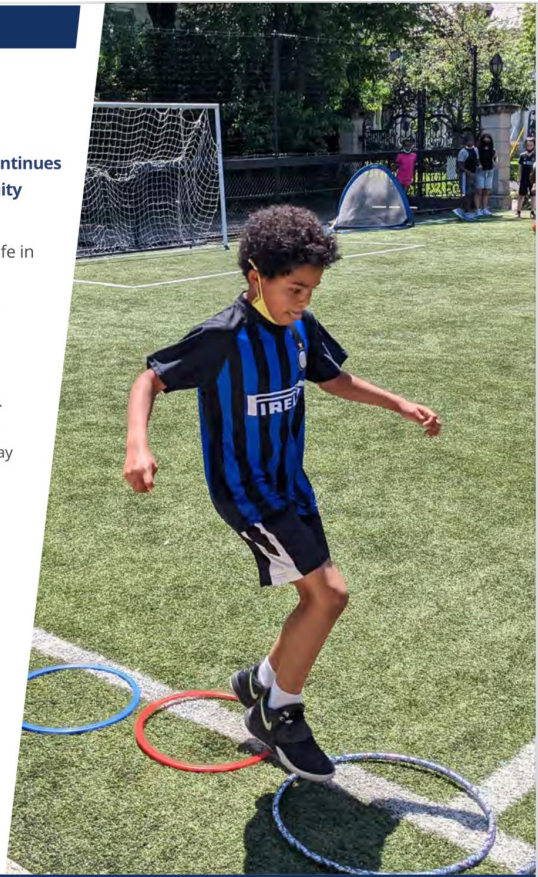
OTHER FC CINCINNATI COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

WEST END COMMITMENT

FC Cincinnati is committed to being good neighbors in the West End. The club continues to fulfill and exceed the commitments outlined in the club's landmark Community Benefits Agreement with The Port and the West End Community Council.

The agreement identifies community priorities that aim to improve the quality of life in the West End. Highlights from 2021 include:

- FC Cincinnati is proud to have exceeded our economic inclusion construction goals for TQL Stadium with 70% inclusion and over \$180 million spent with MBE, WBE and SBE businesses.
- The opening of TQL Stadium included several community events, one being an Open House event for our West End neighbors who were among the first to see the stadium.
- Continue to build and invest in our youth soccer programs reaching residents through West End Pride and Soccer Unites. The West End Pride players were the first to ever play a game on TQL Stadium's pitch.
- Distributed the third annual installment of \$100,000 in grant funding to support non-profit businesses in the West End. Recipients are noted on the next page.
- Continue to build upon job training opportunities for residents following the successful launch of the Cornerstone Construction Training Program with CityLink Center. In 2021, a culinary program was introduced in partnership with Levy, the TQL Stadium concessionaire.
- FC Cincinnati continues to support the West End neighborhood with programs including a park clean-up at Laurel Playground with Keep Cincinnati Beautiful, support of the West End Christmas celebration, and an annual staff service project to support St. Vincent de Paul's Christmas Together Program.
- In partnership with Chatfield College, FC Cincinnati Foundation established a scholarship fund for West End residents, workers, and students, including employees at TQL Stadium. The FC Cincinnati Foundation Scholarship Fund provides \$1,000 annually for full-time students and \$500 annually for part-time students, for a total commitment of \$10,000 annually.
- Ongoing engagement with West End Community Coalition.



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2021 FC CINCINNATI & FC CINCINNATI FOUNDATION COMMUNITY REPORT

A snippet from FC Cincinnati's community report, outlining achievements in 2021 (Source: 2021 FC Cincinnati & FC Cincinnati Foundation Community Report)

Metrics to measure: anecdotes on how the scholarship funds helped the recipients; number of students/employees that obtained a certification/degree with the scholarship funds.

Alignment with Chicago Recovery Plan: "Expand economic opportunity and catalyze growth in the hardest-hit neighborhoods and industries, by supporting small businesses and entrepreneurs, connecting residents with jobs, and increasing the vibrancy of commercial corridors."¹⁵

Little Sparks Program

Little Sparks uses three key principles (experiential play, creative learning, holistic activity) to build an environment for children to learn and explore different outcomes associated with soccer and self-development.

¹⁵ See Chicago Recovery Plan. September 21, 2021. City of Chicago. *Small Business & Workforce Support*. Page 48.



Recommendation #6: Incorporate STEM curriculum in youth programming

The Portland Timbers have two programs that are related to STEM: Girl Strong and Science of Soccer. Girl Strong offers an inspiring day of empowerment, STEM and play for 75 underserved girls at the Timbers Training Facility. Science of Soccer is an innovative week-long program in collaboration with the Oregon Museum of Science Industry (OMSI) to engage youth with STEM involved in soccer.¹⁶

Metrics to measure: number of girls/program participants that maintained an interest in STEM two years after their participation in the programs.

Alignment with Chicago Recovery Plan: “Expand My CHI. My Future. program to increase opportunities for out-of-school programming and education.” Many components of the My CHI. My Future. curriculum is STEM focused (in partnership with Allschool).¹⁷

Conclusion

In closing, the six proposed recommendations are practical and feasible ways to supplement the existing community engagement initiatives at Chicago Fire. They also encourage the need to evaluate programs for impact. Investing in the long-term future and well-being of Chicago residents is necessary, and Chicago Fire can make bigger strides toward fulfilling that reality.

¹⁶ See Portland Timbers 2019 Impact Report. Page 4-5.
https://images.mlssoccer.com/image/upload/v1622841224/assets/por/PDFs/STAnnualReport_2019_v1.5_jl0qlg.pdf

¹⁷ See Chicago Recovery Plan. September 21, 2021. City of Chicago. *Youth Opportunities*. Page 39.