

## NEWS &gt; EDUCATION

# Obama Foundation's Girls Opportunity Alliance gives \$500K to 11 local nonprofits serving girls



M.E.A.N. Girls volunteer Stephanie Williams and London Jackson, 13, try to get Journee McKnight, 13, to smile during an Ice breaker game at the M.E.A.N. Girls Empowerment's opening day event at South Holland Community Center on Sept. 6, 2025. (Troy Stolt/for the Chicago Tribune)



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For M.E.A.N. Girls Empowerment, the mission is mentorship, bullying prevention and building confidence.

For SHE Chicago, an organization founded for students by teachers, the mission is social-emotional learning and academic achievement for disenfranchised teen girls and girl-identifying students.

The Medical Careers and Emergency Preparedness Initiative (MedCEEP)'s mission centers on addressing the healthcare inequities on Chicago's South and West Sides by empowering youth with health emergency response skills and exposure to medical careers.



From clockwise top right, Sanai Jackson, 13, Journey Brown, 13, Journee McKnight, 13, and London Jackson, 13, paint a sign during the M.E.A.N. Girls Empowerment's opening day event at South Holland Community Center on Sept. 6, 2025. (Troy Stolt/for the Chicago Tribune)

The connective tissue among these groups is twofold: They are all Chicago-based girl-serving organizations, and they are grant recipients of the Obama Foundation's Girls Opportunity Alliance. The foundation's program dedicated to adolescent girls' education and empowerment helps encourage fundraising for the groups by endorsing them and connecting to the groups' fundraising pages. According to the Obama Foundation, the Girls Opportunity Alliance Network is comprised of 4,000 grassroots organization leaders; its funding has impacted more than 120,000 girls.

In a [recently released Youtube video](#), former first lady and founder of the Obama Foundation's Girls Opportunity Alliance, Michelle Obama announced \$500,000 in support of 11 Chicago-based organizations, including MedCEEP, SHE Chicago and M.E.A.N. Girls Empowerment. The remaining grantees are: Black Girls Jump, Distinctively Me, The Fig Factor Foundation, Girls Inc. of Chicago, Girls in the Game, Ladies of Virtue, P.R.E.T.T.Y INC., and Sisters in Cinema. In the video, Obama spoke about the need to come together to invest in girls for our collective futures. "From leadership development to career training to violence prevention, these organizations are helping girls gain the tools they need to succeed in school and in life," she said.

For Asia Wiley, a freshman at Howard University, seeds of her SHE sisterhood started when she landed in Dominicca Washington's 3rd grade classroom at Fernwood Elementary. Washington, founder and executive director of SHE Chicago, would create the organization at Epic Academy, a public charter high school on the East Side.

"I was a teacher at Epic Academy from 2016-2018. I started SHE Chicago in my classroom there," Washington said. "By the time Asia came around, I wasn't able to catch her until her sophomore year because she was with that group of students that started high school online as a result of the pandemic."

Wiley stayed in the program until she graduated. Now the SHE sister is looking to attend the school of business at the HBCU so she can focus on a career of community and urban development, after getting her masters degree in organizational psychology and a law degree at Columbia University.

"One of the things that still sticks with me today is advocacy, having that confidence to always speak up for yourself," Wiley said.

Washington takes pride in SHE Chicago cultivating sisterhood for participants. She's watched the girls come together, hash out their differences through problem solving skills she's coached them on and seen the girls applaud and support each other through transitions, including transgender students. "I have watched my girls galvanize behind their transgender SHE sisters—advocate for them within the school, support them within group chats. As their mentor, I almost feel like a mom...I keep myself available to them, but I trust the bond that they've developed because I know the principles that it's developed upon," she said.

A two-time Girls Opportunity Alliance recipient, Washington hopes to expand the organization to enter as many schools as possible on the city's East Side to provide support for girls from middle school to high school age. Earlier funds from the Alliance helped SHE Chicago develop its college and career readiness curriculum, with a focus on leadership development. The new money will support expansion into Hyde Park Career Academy.

"This money is so important because it helps with facilitators. We stay with our students for the entire school year...for four years, we've developed a new model that this funding will help us in securing consistent facilitators that can host our program at multiple schools," Washington said. "We would like to work with school personnel and possibly provide stipends along with training."

SHE Chicago is also in the market for corporate partnerships where girls can come into a business and learn more about a company and get one-to-one mentorship based on the interests of the girls. Volunteers to chaperone or host a SHE session to teach girls on opportunities at their place of work are also needed.

Wiley took part in SHE Chicago two days a week after school with Washington. SHE Chicago participants engage in career or community activities once a month. The SHE connection continues with advice and mentoring in college. Wiley has garnered a number of scholarships with Washington's assistance.

"I am these girls, and these girls are me," Washington said. "When I became a teacher, I saw the gap in relationship to the social, emotional development of minority girls, that is what made me say something has to be done to bring all of these resources and support into one space and make sure that girls have access to it. We have 318 girls that we've served between 2017 and 2025."

For Dr. Abdullah Pratt, assistant professor and emergency medicine physician at the University of Chicago Medical Center and founder of MedCEEP's in-school program (that provides a six-session curriculum including hands-on emergency preparedness and career exploration), funds from the Girls Opportunity Alliance will support sustainable programming at Kenwood Academy, focusing on girl leaders who serve as peer mentors, providing them with exposure to medical career panels and medical simulations.



M.E.A.N. Girls founder Shatina Edwards, right, introduces attendees to local artist Aaliyah Steele during the group's opening day event at South Holland Community Center on Sept. 6, 2025. (Troy Stolt/for the Chicago Tribune)

MedCEEP's model gives medical students, nurses, and EMTs who grew up in the same neighborhoods as the young participants the chance to give back and impact health inequities. With their expertise and personal stories, young people can see career opportunities in real time. Students learn how to take blood pressure and how to suture a wound. Once they learn those skills, Pratt envisions said student leaders teaching their peers. Much of the Alliance money will go to equipment they need: Stethoscopes, white coats, etc.

"These students are our patient population. For our youth, their number one cause of death is violence, Pratt said. "By teaching them how to save their own lives, how to save the lives of their peers, if they're shot, if they're injured, if they're having a drug overdose, if there's a stroke that's happening...we encourage the youth to be empowered." The kids are given trauma kits, she added, so they have tools in their cars or backpacks to handle a bleeding wound or an overdose with Narcan. "Our hope is that this is the beginning of support...of starting that model that can go nationwide to how we can fight healthcare disparities," Pratt said.

Journee McKnight, 13, and Antwonette Golatte, 17, have been a part of the M.E.A.N. Girls Empowerment group going on four years. Both consider the organization's health summit a highlight. The Girls' Health Matters Summit takes everything the empowerment group does in a 16-week program and packs it into one day, said Shatina Edwards, founder and executive director of M.E.A.N. Girls Empowerment. Health providers and community partners educate girls about healthy living, fitness, stress, understanding their skin, and how their hair grows. The programming in its 5th year, was recognized by Gov. JB Pritzker with its own day, April 5th, Girls Health Matters Day. Last year, the Girls Opportunity Alliance, awarded M.E.A.N. Girls Empowerment a grant that allowed them to purchase a van to travel through communities to provide resources to girls.

"We call it pop-up assemblies, where we are popping up at the schools and community centers educating the girls about health," Edwards said. "Last year we did mental health kits. This year, we did self-care kits, and we distributed over 500 kits to girls throughout the city. We empower the girls to avoid negativity, but it's all about empowering their mental health as well-teaching them about themselves and learning about the emotions and feelings that goes with this."

The current funds are scheduled to help bring M.E.A.N. Girls Empowerment programming to Walter H. Dyett High School in October. For two days a week, freshmen and sophomore female students will have the chance to attend 32 sessions where art therapy and the Girls' Health Matters curriculum will be available throughout the school year. From inception with 25 girls, growing to working with 75 girls on first and third Saturdays, and now contracting with a CPS high school with over 200 girls, Edwards said the 11-year-old organization has empowered over 2,000 girls. And with the money this year, which will be 25% of M.E.A.N. Girls Empowerment's budget, installing confidence in Black girls will continue.

The Girls Opportunity Alliance launched at the Obama Foundation in 2018 and supported 158 organizations—25 in Chicago. In addition to funding, the Alliance is providing organizational support to girl-serving organizations who will benefit from capacity-building workshops and Obama Foundation programming.

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