

ONWARD HOUSE NEWSLETTER

Fall 2025

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Dear Onward House Supporters,

As we reflect on the moment we are living through, it is impossible to ignore the growing challenges facing families across Chicago. Recent cuts to the federal social safety net, alongside the rising cost of living, have placed immense pressure on working families. At Onward House, our commitment has always been to step in wherever the community needs us, and today that commitment is of critical importance.



Every day, our team works to ensure that families have the resources they need to build stability and opportunity. We provide nutritious food to households facing hunger, safe Early Childhood and School-Age programs so parents can work, enriching Adult Education classes for adults to continue learning, access to free Health Services, and support for immigrants as they integrate into our city and neighborhoods. In this challenging moment, we are striving to ensure that all families can build healthy, hopeful futures.

When we look back at Onward House's 132-year history, one truth stands out: our work has always been sustained by people uniting to support each other. Neighbors supporting neighbors; faith communities stepping up in moments of

need; organizations and volunteers offering their hands, hearts, and resources. Community has always been our strength.

Today, we are once again called to lean on these networks of care. Whether by volunteering, making a donation to sustain programs, or rallying your own network for a donation drive, your involvement truly makes a difference.

We also know that federal activity in Chicago has created deep fear and instability for many of the families we serve. Some parents are afraid to go to work, children are missing school, and families are experiencing heightened anxiety, isolation, and threats to their safety. These realities are heartbreaking—and they are urgent.

In response, we have taken steps to ensure that Onward House remains a safe and welcoming space. We have expanded virtual options across several programs and strengthened protections for those seeking services. When we saw that families were too afraid to come in-person for our Food Pantry, we partnered with long-term supporters in the north suburban communities to launch *A Bridge Home*, a food delivery program bringing groceries directly to confirmed homebound households. This initiative embodies the heart of our mission: meeting families where they are and ensuring that no one is left behind.

Through every challenge, what gives me hope is this community—your compassion, your solidarity, and your belief in our shared responsibility to care for one another. Together, we will continue to uplift our neighbors and build a stronger, kinder, and more connected Chicago.

With gratitude,

Mario F. Garcia

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Mario F. Garcia".

Executive Director

Onward Neighborhood House

A New Beginning at Onward House

Mariam first learned about Onward Neighborhood House when a community member mentioned that the organization offers English and Computer Classes. Curious and eager to learn, she visited and quickly found a place where she felt welcome. “I spend so much time here, almost the entire day. It feels like a second home,” she shares.

After arriving in Chicago a year ago from Camargo, Chihuahua, Mariam was ready to rebuild her life from the ground up. At 51 years old, she faced the emotional and financial challenges of starting over after a difficult divorce that left her with nothing but determination and hope for a fresh start. With limited income that only covered her rent and with her children now adults, Mariam set her sights on a new goal: creating a stable and independent life for herself.



She started by taking computer classes with Professor Juan, where she found not only practical skills but also comfort, safety, and a supportive community. Onward House helped her access essential resources during moments of uncertainty. During a particularly difficult period, Onward House assisted her with one month of emergency rent support, a gesture that was meaningful both financially and emotionally.

Mariam also shares how meaningful the personal support at Onward House has been, especially her the help she's gotten from Jonathan Barrera, Onward

House's IWC Coordinator. Mariam shared, "Jonathan is a very special person to me. He's always listened to me and been patient with me. He's been one of the people who has always supported me."

Mariam visited Onward House's co-located Healthcare Clinic, run by [CommunityHealth](#), where she underwent a procedure after doctors found a concerning issue. Facing medical uncertainty without family nearby has been hard, but she believes she has not been alone.

"Being here without my family has been difficult, but I feel that God has placed good people in my path."

Through her classes and connections at Onward House, Mariam has built friendships, confidence, and a sense of belonging. "When I arrived in Chicago, I only knew two people. Then, I met Jonathan and made other friends from the computer class." With the support of Onward House, she has discovered a new sense of independence. Mariam now feels more comfortable embracing her life in Chicago with renewed strength, and continues to support Onward House as a volunteer. Each day she continues to learn, grow, and invest in herself, something she had not been able to do for many years.

Mariam's story is a testament to the power of community, resilience, and the impact of Onward House acting as a catalyst for change. As she continues working toward her dream of owning a home, her experience highlights the importance of a welcoming space like Onward House, where every person can find support, dignity, and hope for a better future.

North Shore Neighbors Say Bienvenidos & Onward Neighborhood House Present:



Where We Are Now: Meeting the Moment



Part 2 of last year's program "When the Bus Stops Here"

A COMMUNITYWIDE CONVERSATION ON THE NORTH SHORE'S RESPONSE TO THE "MIGRANT CRISIS"



On November 6th, close to 200 neighbors gathered at St. Francis Xavier School to listen, learn, and connect at Where We Are Now: Meeting the Moment, hosted in partnership with [North Shore Neighbors Say Bienvenidos](#). We are deeply grateful to everyone who attended, supported, and helped create an evening rooted in compassion, solidarity, and collective purpose. Together, we affirmed a shared commitment: supporting migrant families and strengthening a community where all feel safe, seen, and welcomed.

A Continued Commitment to Showing Up

This gathering marked the second installment following last year's community conversation, proof of the North Shore's sustained dedication to welcoming new neighbors. This year, tensions across the region have grown, and many migrant families continue to face uncertainty and fear. In that context, the tone of the evening stood out as both thoughtful and hopeful.



Insights From the Panel

The evening's panel featured *North Shore Neighbors Say Bienvenidos* Founder Jessica Leving Siegel, Onward House Executive Director Mario F. García, Onward House Director of Community Services Gerbis Badell, and moderator Julie Stark of The Stark Solution. Each speaker offered valuable perspective on the evolving landscape of migrant support. They spoke to the realities facing migrant families, the progress made through collaboration, and the essential role of community partnerships.

Jessica Leving Siegel captured the heart of the evening when she said,

“Tonight is about shifting from improvisation to coordination—from individual acts of care to a shared, sustainable effort. It is about moving from asking ‘What do we do next?’ to saying, ‘Here’s how we move forward together.’”

Mario García emphasized the importance of consistent presence and trust-building, saying,

“We are in constant communication with families and participants, and we want to show them that ‘We got your back. You are a human being; you should be treated with respect and dignity. We don’t care who you are. If you have a need, we are here to serve you.’”



What Our Partnership Makes Possible

The event highlighted the power of partnership. For both North Shore Neighbors and Onward House, working together means more than coordinating logistics. It means pooling strengths, building trust, and creating opportunities for neighbors to care for one another.

Attendees arrived with a spirit of generosity, contributing non-perishable food, hygiene items, and other essentials to support families currently accessing services. Jessica also unveiled that the partnership with Onward House has driven a new name for the organization: **North Shore Friends of Onward House**.



She reflected on this growing momentum:

“People have been asking how they can help. And I keep thinking that we can ask others what they can do. It doesn’t hurt to ask and there are connections to be made. Ask who you know, or who you’re related to, and say yes if you have power.”

Thank You for Helping Us Meet This Moment

We extend our heartfelt appreciation to [North Shore Friends of Onward House](#), St. Francis Xavier School, our volunteers, staff, donors, and every community member who made this event possible. Special thanks to Julie Stark, Jessica Leving Siegel, Miggie McCurry, and Mary Bianchi Harrington for their leadership and dedication in bringing our communities together for this important conversation.

[Click here to learn more about how to get involved and support this work.](#)

Responding to Crisis with Corazón: *A Bridge Home* Food Delivery Program

In September, some families across our programs began sharing that they were afraid to leave their homes. In light of shifts in federal policy, many expressed concerns about profiling and persecution, which made even a simple trip to our Food Pantry feel dangerous. At the same time, the government shutdown and temporary suspension of SNAP benefits compounded the challenges many families are facing. Together, these factors created an urgent crisis of food insecurity for vulnerable families in Belmont Cragin.

Onward House moved swiftly into action, launching *A Bridge Home*, a new initiative rooted in our origins in the settlement movement: meeting families where they are, listening to their needs, and responding quickly.

With the support of faith institutions and Northshore Friends of Onward House and a dedicated corps of local community member volunteers, we mobilized right away. Volunteers collected food donations, transported supplies to a partner organization in Glencoe, assembled weekly boxes of groceries, and delivered them to community members with care and dignity.

On October 31st, the very first deliveries went out. That day, 50 families in Belmont Cragin opened their doors to find essential food delivered safely to their homes, along with a message of support, compassion, and community.

A Bridge Home is a reflection of the resilience that defines Belmont Cragin and the spirit that has guided Onward House since its beginnings: communities thrive when neighbors look after one another, and when institutions step up to fill gaps during moments of uncertainty.

We are deeply grateful for our network of volunteers, faith partners, Northshore Friends of Onward House, our dedicated volunteer corps, and our Onward House families for joining us in responding to urgent needs with dedication, adaptability, resilience, and corazón.

Monthly Free Farmers Market: Tackling Food Insecurity in Belmont Cragin

This fall, Onward House launched the Free Farmers Market, a new initiative designed to expand access to fresh, healthy produce for families in Belmont Cragin, while also strengthening Chicago's regional food ecosystem. Made possible through our partnership with the Reva & David Logan Foundation, this program reflects our commitment to both immediate food needs and long-term community health.



Over the past three months, the Free Farmers Market has provided 743 families with high-quality fruits and vegetables purchased from Common Market, a nonprofit wholesale food distributor based in Chicago. Common Market connects communities and institutions with food grown by local farmers and producers who prioritize their workers, their land, and their communities. By sourcing produce through this mission-driven network, Onward

House is able to support small local growers while ensuring that families on Chicago's Northwest Side have access to fresh produce.



This past weekend's Free Farmers Market brought our community together once again as we head into Thanksgiving. Thanks to the generosity of the Reva and David Logan Foundation, The Common Market, the Puerto Rican Bar Association, Wilbur Wright College, and 30th Ward Alderwoman Ruth Cruz's office, over 250 families received fresh produce and hams to help prepare for the holiday week.


As part of our broader food access strategy, the Free Farmers Market complements our Food Pantry and A Bridge Home programs. Ultimately, the Free Fresh Market is a testament to what is possible when foundations, nonprofits, volunteers, and community members work together toward a shared vision: a healthier and food secure Belmont Cragin.

Get Involved: Volunteering and More!

Volunteers play an essential role in helping Onward House support children, families, and immigrants in our community. Whether you want to assist with food distribution, support classroom learning, or help with a special event, there's a meaningful opportunity waiting for you.

Below are our current volunteer opportunities:

ONWARD NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSE



VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

OPPORTUNITY	WHAT YOU'LL DO	DESIRED SKILLS	REQUIREMENTS	TIME COMMITMENT	GOOD FOR GROUPS?
FOOD PANTRY	Move and pack boxes, organize food and clothing, distribute food to community members, help with cleaning	Customer service, patience, conflict management	Ability to lift up to 25 lbs.	Flexible – Tuesdays 2-6PM or Thursdays 1-6PM	Yes
FREE FRESH MARKET	Help distribute produce, assist families, support event setup and cleanup	Communication, organization, works well with others	None	One Saturday per month, 9AM-12PM (through January)	Yes
CLASSROOMS: ECE & SCHOOL AGE	Support teachers and students. ECE: Assist in classrooms, help with activities. School Age: Mentor kids, assist on field trips and events	Hands-on, comfortable with children, enthusiastic, adaptable to fast-paced environments	Background check, medical exam	Flexible – ECE: 9-11AM, School Age: 4:30-6PM	No
ADULT EDUCATION: ESL CLASSES	Teach English to adult learners, help improve speaking and vocabulary skills	Native English speaker, prior teaching experience, reliability, consistency, Spanish proficiency is a plus but not required	Résumé/CV	Mondays 5-6pm (in-person) or Saturdays 9AM-12PM (online)	No
IWC PARTICIPANT HOLIDAY CELEBRATION (DEC. 23RD)	Help set up, organize gifts and classrooms, decorate, assist with activities or dress-up roles (e.g. Santa, elves), support cleanup	Creativity, hands-on, enthusiastic, craftiness, teamwork	None	Dec. 23rd, flexible – 12-5PM	Yes

Ready to Volunteer?

[Sign up to volunteer for an Onward House program by clicking here.](#)

Looking for Other Ways to Get Involved?

[Explore additional opportunities to get involved by clicking here.](#)

[Support Onward House - Donate Today!](#)

Want to Learn More?

Whether you're interested in making a difference, touring our space, or simply learning more about how your support can impact families, we'd love to connect.

Please contact [Emilio Araujo](mailto:earaujo@onwardhouse.org), Director of Development & Communications at earaujo@onwardhouse.org.

We'd love to hear from you!

ONWARD HOUSE AT A GLANCE

