

# Neighborhood Story Envisioning a Stronger Austin, Together



For generations, residents of Austin, one of Chicago's largest neighborhoods, have faced great challenges. Community leaders have continued to work diligently to resolve them, and today they're banding together to take this work to new levels. This community on the city's southwest side covers more than seven square miles and has a population of about 97,000. **Continuous disinvestment and deep-rooted inequality has resulted in high poverty rates in the Austin neighborhood.**

To create more opportunity, Austin Coming Together—a coalition of businesses and nonprofits in the community—joined forces with United Way to form the Austin Neighborhood Network.

The Network partners collaborate on ways to improve the neighborhood and—with United Way's support—are able to respond to the needs of entire families. They're creating more pre-k and early learning programs for young people. They're building safe spaces for families to spend time together and access resources. In 2021, a new outdoor community space, Austin POPCourts!, was opened for residents and BUILD Chicago broke ground on a new youth hub.

"In spite of all of the challenges that exist, I love Austin. And there are a lot of organizations that are working together to create a better Austin," said Darnell Shields, ACT's executive director. "But for many years organizations have really been siloed to their specific areas. While they're pushing really hard to change things, the issues that we face, no one organization can approach them by themselves."

"But if we can all band together to approach that same issue. The issue doesn't stand a chance," Darnell said. "That's why the United Way Neighborhood Network has been such a game changer for us." ■

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**Darnell Shields,**  
Executive Director,  
Austin Coming Together

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