

CivicLab trains new wave of candidates, activists

By Igor Studenkov

<https://gazettechicago.com/2022/08/civicl原因-trains-new-wave-of-candidates-activists>

Tom Tresser, co-founder and chief operating officer at the CivicLab, described his nonprofit organization as a “do tank, as opposed to a think tank,” in the sense that the organization does not just want to study issues but rather translate research into action. That means teaching Chicagoans civics and other skills they need to improve their communities and make a lasting difference.

In 2017, CivicLab organized the People Organizing to Win, Engage, and Resist (POWER) Institute to lead workshops on grassroots organizing, community activism, the ins and outs of City budgets, campaigning, and organizing nonprofits.



Jonathan Peck (left), CEO of CivicLab, developed its POWER Institute.

While the organizers noted the difficulty of quantifying how much of a difference the workshops made, increasing demand without much advertising shows they benefit from strong word of mouth.

POWER Institute plans to ramp up workshops dealing with operating nonprofits and political campaigning starting this summer. Leaders hope the latter will affect the 2023 Chicago municipal elections and the 2024 presidential election.

When CivicLab launched in 2013, it started researching tax increment financing (TIF) districts, where property tax revenue the City and other taxing bodies normally would collect is frozen, with the revenue going into TIF funds. While proponents tout TIFs as a way to generate money for development, opponents criticize them for taking funding from schools and other public service providers. Opponents also object that the City has used TIFs, originally intended to improve “blighted” areas, in affluent communities. CivicLab founders and other activists argue TIFs are more likely to benefit White developers.

The organization also looked at other issues affecting Chicago’s finances, such as privatizing parking meters. To educate Chicagoans, CivicLab held “around 185 public meetings,” Tresser said, noting people are interested in doing something about city problems.

POWER Institute launch

Community organizer Jonathan Peck became CivicLab’s CEO near the end of 2019. Tresser credited Peck with developing the POWER Institute, and Peck said he felt inspired by both the feedback CivicLab received and the nationwide push to get more women to run for office.

“Those two...streams of work came together and lay the foundation for launching the POWER Institute,” Peck said.

The institute started out offering courses in four areas that “were building blocks for successful social justice work,” Peck noted. For example, Chicago 101 looks at Chicago’s history from the era when Native American tribes that inhabited the land before Europeans arrived up to the present day. “People organizing in Chicago should know its history, political history, and we spare no punches [regarding] Chicago’s bad civic past,” Tresser said.

Community Organizing 101 teaches “baseline fundamentals,” Peck said. Grassroots Campaigning 101 teaches the fundamentals of getting a campaign off the ground and gives people an opportunity to realize whether they want to run for office themselves or support other people’s campaigns, he added. TIF 101 goes back to the organization’s roots, teaching the ins and outs of TIFs and how to bring more transparency to them.

POWER Institute subsequently added White Privilege 101, which not only delves into the concept but “how to talk about and contextualize personal and civic identity,” Peck said. In 2021, the institute added Public 101, which delves into public assets such as parks and libraries, and how access to public assets and services is fundamental to activism.

“We explain what the heck the word ‘public’ means and why it’s so important for us to cherish and to defend,” Tresser said. “We think it’s an important course to take when you work with social justice or civic engagement.”

In addition to the baseline workshops, the institute offers workshops on privatization and the ins and outs of Chicago’s budget process. Tresser said CivicLab worked with DePaul University and Adler University, a private not-for-profit mental health studies graduate university based in the Loop, to develop the courses.

Four instructors teach workshops—Tresser and Peck as well as Phillip Thomas, who has held leadership positions in several Chicago nonprofits and philanthropic organizations, and Ama Johnson, founder and president of the UBUNTU Institute for Global Learning. Tresser mused that, together, they have about a century of community organizing, nonprofit management, campaigning, and fundraising experience.

New seminars

Most recently, Peck said, the institute added nonprofit management seminars for both new and existing nonprofits to address how to manage nonprofit finances, submit required paperwork, do grassroots engagement, and handle leadership development. Seminar content varies depending on the needs of the organizations signing up for the sessions.

Peck said many nonprofits do not have the funds for that kind of coaching, so the POWER Institute meets them where they are.

“Not-for-profit groups that are fighting for social justice, that are fighting for change, providing services—we want our organizations to be successful, we want them to be organized and efficient,” Peck said. “We want to be offering opportunities to enhance their knowledge and skills.”

Tresser said the pandemic helped the POWER Institute increase its reach because geographic distance no longer presented an obstacle due to online training. In 2021, it partnered with the Illinois Access to Justice coalition, which provides legal services and educates Illinois residents about their rights, to provide training for its member organizations.

Tresser and Peck envision longer, more extensive workshops. “We know that the campaign season is upon us, and we’re gearing up to help candidates get involved in a more effective way,” Peck said. “Before you jump into your first congressional race, we can coach, we can offer [training] to you.”

Eight people the institute trained ran for office, and one, activist Jahmal Cole, ran in the 1st Congressional district Democratic primary. While none of the candidates the institute worked with won their races so far, Peck said it is not unusual for candidates to

lose their first race and win further down the line. Peck said the organization is putting together workshops aimed at youth, noting he started out as an activist organizing youth.

Ruth Maciulis, who was a co-director of the Pilsen Alliance when the organization participated in Civics 101 workshops, praised the training as a bulwark against the push to “privatize and monetize all levels of government. It’s becoming more and more important for our communities to organize and become engaged. The CivicLab’s POWER Institute lays the groundwork for exactly that. They have designed a curriculum for individual empowerment by arming participants with the power of knowledge of local history, policy, community organizing, and political campaigning.”

Another participant, Priscilla Orta, said, “I have heard of these political operatives and cannot believe that I got to speak to them in such an intimate environment. I also loved the workshop because it was cathartic and was grounded in the reality that we still have a democracy. We still matter. We can beat the machine – but we have to be ready for a fight. I can fight. I’ve fought my whole life.”

Charise Walker, the director of programs and community services at the Westside Justice Center told *Gazette Chicago* that the organization provided funding to several organizations through the Illinois Access to Justice (ILA2J) grant.

For more information, log on to www.civiclab.us/the-power-institute.



www.civiclab.us - info@civiclab.us