**Headline:** This Clinic in Chicago Offers Free Legal Aid to Solidarity Economy Groups

**Teaser:** The Community Enterprise and Solidarity Clinic is part of a growing mutual aid movement in Chicago, Illinois.

By Damon Orion

**Author Bio:** Damon Orion is a writer, journalist, musician, artist, and teacher in Santa Cruz, California. His work has appeared in Revolver, Guitar World, Spirituality + Health, Classic Rock, and other publications. Read more of his work at [DamonOrion.com](https://damonorion.com/).

**Credit Line:** *This article was produced by* [*Local Peace Economy*](https://observatory.wiki/Local_Peace_Economy)*.*

**Tags:** Social Justice, Community, History, Food, Law, Activism, Human Rights, North America/United States of America, Immigration, Opinion, Time-Sensitive

**[Article Body:]**

Chicago, Illinois, has a rich history of grassroots organizing. Notable examples are the [Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council’s](https://tinyurl.com/fn8uz2a8) efforts to improve local economic and social conditions and the Black Panther Party’s establishment of [housing cooperatives and free food, clothing, and medical services](https://the1313.law.columbia.edu/2024/02/12/bernard-e-harcourt-conditions-of-necessity-the-black-panther-party-and-cooperation).

The solidarity economy movement has continued to gain momentum in Chicago. In 2024, a map from the worker-owned [ChiCommons Cooperative](https://www.chicommons.coop/) [showed](https://www.fairobserver.com/world-news/chicagos-solidarity-economy-map-makes-poor-families-lives-better/) more than 800 solidarity enterprises, co-ops, and mutual aid groups in the city.

“I think there is a critical mass of folks who are trying to build a solidarity economy in Chicago,” notes Renee Hatcher, the founder and director of the [Community Enterprise and Solidarity Economy Clinic](https://law.uic.edu/experiential-education/clinics/community-enterprise/) (CESEC) at the [University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) Law School](https://law.uic.edu/). “Several folks have been organizing on a local level in Chicago neighborhoods to incubate cooperatives and develop institutions that address the real needs of their communities. They realize that the dominant economic system doesn’t work for the majority of people we care about, so they’re creating institutions that can function differently.”

Hatcher observes that some of this activity focuses on rapid gentrification in Chicago neighborhoods. [According to the Urban Displacement Project](https://www.urbandisplacement.org/maps/chicago-gentrification-and-displacement/), “22 percent of lower-income neighborhoods in Chicago were at risk of gentrification in 2017,” and the stakeholders they interacted with were concerned about “the uneven distribution of risks, resources, (dis)investment, and opportunity along racial lines in communities across the region.”

Citing [Grow Greater Englewood](https://www.growgreater.org/) and its [community land trust](https://www.englewoodclt.org/), she also mentions efforts to help neighbors gain more agency in stewarding vacant lots in their communities.

Hatcher says this work is important to Chicago, which “feels like ground zero for neoliberalism in some ways. We’ve [closed 50 schools](https://graphics.suntimes.com/education/2023/chicagos-50-closed-schools/buildings/) [in 2013] and privatized everything, including our [parking meters](https://www.courthousenews.com/chicagos-decades-long-parking-privatization-contract-goes-before-seventh-circuit/), and a lot of public goods aren’t as accessible as they once were.”

This lack of accessibility has especially had dire consequences for people of color. For instance, the [University of Chicago Medical Center](https://www.uchicagomedicine.org/forefront/cancer-articles/aacr-cancer-disparities-progress-report) has linked heightened rates of cancer deaths among African American populations, “especially in large cities like Chicago,” to “racism, segregation and discrimination against marginalized population groups.” Meanwhile, a 2024 [JAMA Pediatricsstudy](https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2815850) found that members of largely Black and Hispanic neighborhoods in Chicago were “disproportionately less likely to be tested for lead yet disproportionately exposed to contaminated drinking water.”

CESEC provides free legal support to community-based businesses, worker co-ops, and other city residents and collectives in Chicago’s solidarity economy movement. These cooperatives and businesses are, in Hatcher’s words, “meaningfully trying to change their neighborhoods, have more control and agency, and think about collective care and collective wealth in a way that doesn’t highlight the sole entrepreneur making lots of money off a new business, but building institutions that support the material needs of folks in Chicago neighborhoods.” This includes endeavors related to collective land stewardship, removing land from the speculative market, and establishing community land trusts or affordable housing.

“Lawyers often approach clients thinking they have the answer, and I think the law itself sometimes creates very problematic power dynamics,” Hatcher says. “So, we’re trying to use a community- and-client-centered approach and provide anything and everything that new institutions or existing solidarity economy initiatives might need as they grow their organization, co-op, or community land trust.”

CESEC does not typically represent clients in court disputes. “We work with a lot of startups, so we’ll help folks think through what business entity structure might be best for their vision and what the governance might look like and help them draw governance documents based on their decisions,” Hatcher explains. “We draft contracts, help folks get business licenses, navigate or apply for tax-exempt status, or consider social enterprises that might be related to some of the work they’re already doing.”

This clinic, which Hatcher launched in 2019, is staffed by law students, who work with clients throughout a semester to complete whatever legal work they might need. The number of students at the clinic during a semester can range from eight to 20. The clinic typically works with at least 30 clients per semester. At the end of each semester, the students wrap up their work and hand the files off to Hatcher and law professor Alicia Alvarez. CESEC continues to work with these clients until their legal needs are met.

[According](https://nextcity.org/urbanist-news/clearing-the-legal-and-financial-pathway-for-worker-coops-in-illinois) to the nonprofit news organization Next City, CESEC played a key role in passing the [Limited Worker Cooperative Association Act](https://www.ilga.gov/legislation/BillStatus.asp?DocNum=3663&GAID=15&DocTypeID=HB&LegID=120382&SessionID=108&SpecSess=&Session=&GA=101) in 2019, which helps worker co-op members “protect the essential features of worker ownership and control. The act also eliminates or reduces some major barriers for worker cooperatives to raise capital from their members and their communities.”

CESEC has helped numerous co-op incubators start and flourish. Examples of these are the incubating cooperatives [Co-op Ed Center](http://www.coopedcenter.org/#/) and *Centro de Trabajadores Unidos* (United Workers’ Center), whose website [states](https://centrodetrabajadoresunidos.org/programs/worker-co-op/) that its partnership with CESEC and the Chicago Food Policy Action Council has enabled the incubator “to provide comprehensive business development services to low-income, immigrant and Latino community members on the southeast side of Chicago and in the south suburbs.”

CESEC also [aided](https://advance.uic.edu/news-stories/flourishing-at-chifresh-kitchen/) the 2020 launch of [ChiFresh Kitchen](https://www.chifreshkitchen.com/), a worker-owned cooperative led by formerly incarcerated individuals.

Solidarity economy entities like CESEC and the groups it supports may prove crucial to Chicago residents during the second Trump presidency. In January 2025, the Real News Network [reported](https://therealnews.com/chicago-trump-ice-raids-know-your-rights), “In plans that were publicly leaked ahead of Trump’s inauguration, the city of Chicago was identified as a key target for immigration raids, putting immigrant residents and their neighbors on high alert.”

“The national climate has been difficult before, and the way we get through these moments of increased oppression, state violence, and surveillance is by turning toward each other,” Hatcher says. “I think the way we protect each other in the Trump presidency is by building stronger relationships of mutuality, support, cooperation, and solidarity and building institutions that can serve people in moments of crisis.”

“Some of those are community and mutual aid organizations, and in the long term, we can build an ecosystem of different types of institutions that are owned and controlled by the community to serve our direct needs, give folks agency, and [help them] not just survive but also protect and provide for our families,” she added.