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Lurie Children's Hospital and Communities United have a shot to win \$20M to transform mental health for Black and brown youths

By **DARCEL ROCKETT** | CHICAGO TRIBUNE | SEP 21, 2021 AT 11:10 AM

The deaths of Marques Watts' 16-year-old brother, Derrion Umba Ortiz, and [friend Caleb Reed](#) in 2020 due to gun violence led Watts to the doors of Communities United, the survivor-led, grassroots, intergenerational, racial justice organization in Chicago.

The 18-year-old senior at Stephen Tyng Mather High School says seeing the work that Reed was doing with the organization, which centers on leadership development to achieve social change and racial justice, changed him. Watts said Reed transitioned from being “one of the goofy kids that he hung out with” to a young man using his voice to make his community better.

Reed's “death caused me to be like ‘That's something I want to do,’” Watts said. “The work he was doing, he was really out here trying to better his community, better the streets and stop the killing, stop all the violence. I wanted to continue that work, especially when it came to losing my little brother as well a couple of weeks before Caleb — having all that death around me really changed me mentally and I had two options: Stay in the grieving stage or use my voice like Caleb did and change what is going on.”



Caleb Reed was a leader with Voices of Youth in Chicago Education, a coalition of community organizations advocating racial justice in the education system. (Jose M. Osorio / Chicago Tribune)

Watts has been a youth leader with Communities United for a year, and in that time, he's seen his school council vote in favor of removing the police officers who work as school resource officers. [Parents and students said the decision](#) was made to honor the organizing work led by Reed. Now, Watts is setting his sights on changing the mental health landscape for youth by participating in helping Communities United, in partnership with Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago, develop a holistic plan for youth that moves the mental health conversation from one focused on individual treatment to one that supports community healing.

"The vast majority of kids who have been traumatized survive and recover, but they don't always use their traumatic experience or their lived experience to do something transcendent — that is to grow post-trauma," said Dr. John Walkup, chair of the Pritzker Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Health at Lurie Children's Hospital and professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine.

"If you look at human beings in general that's how we're all built," he said. "We have bad times, we come through those bad times, we never forget those bad times, and hopefully we learn enough from those that we can do something better in this world because of our bad times. (Communities United and Lurie) began to put together this idea: If you've been traumatized in your community, but you get mentorship and support, and you come together to do something to heal your communities, that you will heal yourself in the process. ... Healing your community breaks the cycle."

The plan, “Healing Through Justice: A Community-Led Breakthrough Strategy for Healing-Centered Communities” is a 10-year road map to foster youth-led strategies on community healing that centers youth leadership in creating institutional change on mental health. The medical institution and grassroots organization will bring the plan to scale over the next nine months with a \$1 million planning grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation’s Racial Equity 2030 Challenge. The challenge is awarding a total of \$90 million to help build and scale actionable ideas for transformative change in the systems and institutions that uphold racial inequities.

The Chicago-based organizations are one of 10 finalist teams in the global competition. If Chicago is among the winners, their project could receive up to \$20 million to bring it to fruition. Five awards totaling \$80 million will be announced in the summer of 2022. Three awardees will each receive a \$20 million grant and two awardees will each receive a \$10 million grant. Grants will be paid out over eight years to coincide with W.K. Kellogg Foundation’s 100th anniversary in 2030.



Community organizer Laqueanda Reneau, center, talks with attendees during a youth meeting at the Communities United office on Sept. 20, 2021. (Armando L. Sanchez / Chicago Tribune)

“It’s still in the design phases, but when we talk about healing through justice ... it’s through the love,” said Laqueanda Reneau, a community organizer at Communities United for the past four years. “I’m seeing our people coming into these spaces and into their schools with the pressures of the whole community, not just as that one young person that just needs to sit down and learn and understand how to do this mathematic problem. We have already been approaching our young people through that lens. Through this project,

the goal is for us to be able to reach even more young people. Our young people know about the reasons why our Black and brown communities are at a disadvantage. And because of that, they want to bring forward the solution.”

Communities United worked with Walkup and Lurie Children’s in developing the Healing Through Justice leadership development framework. During the past 10 years CU and Lurie Children’s have worked together to end the zero tolerance expulsion policy in Illinois public schools; expand public health approaches like restorative justice; participate in community-based research to address underage drinking; engage youth as advisory members to guide the strategic direction of substance-use prevention; work with youth leaders to reform school discipline to be more restorative; and engage boys and young men of color to advocate for mental and behavioral health transformation.

“Lurie Children’s Hospital is an institution that does mental health care and through our relationship with them, they’re going to listen to our young people,” Reneau said. “They’ve been doing this in the past. ... We’re hoping we’re able to change how our institutions are looking at mental health when it comes down to Black and brown youth.”



Community organizer Laqueanda Reneau hands pizza to Derrick Magee, 18, during a youth meeting at the Communities United office on Sept. 20, 2021, in Chicago. (Armando L. Sanchez / Chicago Tribune)

Walkup is excited about the change that this project could yield.

“I like the idea of working on large numbers of kids across a big population and getting those kids to make substantial changes, not impossible changes, but substantial changes in their life as a way to break the cycle,” Walkup said. “The other thing we’re hoping for is that many of the kids who participate in this will want to become psychologists, and psychiatrists, community organizers and lawyers — they’re going to want to, through their occupations, do something to transform their communities, because they’re motivated by their experiences as youth in changing the world. Trauma begets trauma. And if you can break it for kids by breaking it within the community, then the community can break it. And the next generation of kids aren’t going to have the experience. That’s the dream.”

Watts is already mulling the idea of majoring in psychology in college to become a psychologist, given his life experiences.

“For me, I’m not fully out of the grieving stage, but what helped me is just fighting,” Watts said. “I don’t want to see the next generation go through the same stuff I went through. I don’t want my baby brother growing up and have to lose me, or lose a close friend to him, so that’s what my main thing is with this organization, to work on how can we better the next generation? And that’s what helps me keep pushing forward. From a personal point of view, I feel like we don’t have much mental health resources so we turn that into violence and take it out on each other. I feel like with this grant and with us working with Lurie Children’s, it will also stop the violence at the same time.”



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