



# CHANCES ARE

Cara creates a pathway out of poverty by empowering those in need with the skills and self-worth to find transformational employment.

By Alexandra Sabbag

In 2017, the *Chicago Tribune* calculated that 12.4 percent of metro Chicago's population—nearly 1.2 million people—live below the poverty line. On paper, “poverty” defines a household with an income of less than \$25,000 annually (for a family of four). In reality, it's like being caught in the eye of a storm, trapped in a pattern of precarious housing and never knowing where your next meal is coming from. And when hunger and homelessness become a way of life, begetting hopelessness and depleted feelings of self-worth, it's hard to see a way out.

For the rest of society, the key to understanding poverty is understanding that it's far from black-and-white—there's no one impetus that equates to all. Some individuals are raised in generational poverty, a social misfortune that's a challenging cycle to break. Others, when faced with financial hardships, turn to illegal activities as a means to put food on the table for their families (for example, selling drugs or gang-related activity). The good news is that Cara ([carachicago.org](http://carachicago.org)) does not discriminate when it comes to throwing out a lifeline.

“The Gaelic word for friend is *cara*,” says Maria Kim, president and CEO of the Chicago-based organization that's devoted to helping people affected by poverty—and often facing the challenges of recovery, domestic violence, episodic homelessness and incarceration—get and keep quality jobs while, more importantly, rebuilding hope, self-esteem and opportunities for themselves and their families. “When Cara accepts a participant, we make them a serious promise: If they keep showing up and working hard, they will find a job.”

Here's how it works: Step one is the application process. The majority of program applicants come from Cara's vast network of referral partners—174 in total last year, most are organized Chicagoland shelters and rehab facilities—who initially determine when someone is “Cara-ready.” Notable partners include Illinois Department of Human Services, The Salvation Army and Pacific Garden Mission. Other applicants find Cara through its admissions

hotline, mobile recruitment team and sometimes, quite simply, by walking into one of Cara's two Chicago locations—downtown and Bronzeville—and asking for help. (On average, participants are about 40 years old, roughly 50 percent are female and, perhaps surprising to some, nearly 70 percent have graduated high school.) Cara's only requirements? A clear desire to get back to work and the ambition to go through the program.

Step two consists of Cara's “boot camp” components—Recruitment (assuring participants are committed to the program), Training and Coaching (building workplace competencies and professionalism, alongside other skills like digital literacy and industry credentials), Transitional Jobs (putting the skills of the classroom to meaningful practice on the job), Placement (placing participants in quality jobs at companies that offer a competitive combo of wages and benefits), and Retention and Advancement (supporting participants along their career path to ensure they are best positioned for long-term success). “Our process is more rigorous than others so that our participants are more successful than others,” says Kim, adding that simulated workplace training is a big part of it. “The goal is to give them the traction they need to not only re-enter the workforce, but also the skills needed to achieve real, lasting success in life and work. Inevitably, stuff will happen while you are at work—coworker confrontations, human resources issues—and our program is designed to practice how to navigate through it all.”

The numbers are proof that the program is indeed working: Since the organization's inception in 1991, Cara has helped more than 5,800 Chicagoans find placements at more than 8,700 quality jobs with Chicago-area companies. This past year, more than 130 companies hired Cara participants, including ABM, Hilton Hotels, Whole Foods Market, JPMorgan Chase & Co., Eataly and Northwestern Medicine, to name just a few. On average, Cara serves 1,000 people per year and places more than 600 individuals annually into gainful employment (read: jobs that are conducive to forward



Every morning at Cara begins with Motivations, a set time for participants, staff and guests to share their stories of struggles and successes. *Photo by Alysa Schukar Photography*



Currently at work beautifying 33 Chicago neighborhoods and suburban communities, Cleanslate provides transitional employment and valuable job skills to Cara participants. *Photo by Matt Kosterman*

and upward momentum within a self-actualized career journey and through which an individual can derive a sense of purpose and growth). Of those placed into permanent employment, Cara boasts a more than 70 percent retention rate for one year on the job, outpacing the national employment rate by 20 percent. What's more? In a typical year, 50 percent of those placed in permanent or long-term positions receive benefits of some kind and collect, on average, \$12.07 per hour.

Cara's success rate has a lot to do with its emphasis on real-world experience. To that end, the organization owns and operates two social enterprises to offer temporary employment and build participants' resumes: The first is called Cleanslate, an exterior maintenance business. The second, Cara Connects, is an alternative staffing company. Combined with the support of Chicago's philanthropic-minded corporate community, Cara does everything it can to stack the resources in its participants' favor. "In most cases, our corporate sponsors are a trifecta partner," says Kim. "Meaning they not only give financially, but also serve as an employer and participate in the boot camp process, providing valuable job training skills."

West Loop real estate powerhouse Sterling Bay is one such corporation. Forming an integrated, almost decade-long relationship, Sterling Bay's Managing Principal Andy Gloor serves on Cara's board of directors. Sterling Bay is a regular supporter and sponsor at Cara events, even hosting an annual fundraiser for Cara (the 5Kto1K in the Fulton Market district), and they serve as a hiring partner as well. "Sterling Bay has had the opportunity to put more than 250 people to work since the inception of our partnership," says Gloor. "Cara is making a measurable difference in the lives of so many Chicagoans, and it's an honor to be a part of that."

But for far too many, stigmas are still a big hurdle. "There is a common misconception that homeless people don't want to work or that low-income individuals are lazy," says Kim. According to a *Huffington Post* article entitled "Homelessness Myth #1: Get a Job!" it's important to remember that many homeless people are in fact

employed with one or two jobs that, combined, don't pay enough to make ends meet. Oftentimes for those without jobs at all, the holdup isn't a lack of effort, but rather a lack of resources to tend to basic needs like hygiene, healthy sleep and work-appropriate attire. For Cara, treating the human spirit by making its participants feel human again is an important part of the program.

Take, for example, Cara graduate Andrea Marinho, who was 30 years old when she entered the program. Originally from Brazil, she had been a victim of domestic violence for five years before being recommended for Cara by a friend. "I was told repeatedly that I had no worth and that I was stupid because I could barely speak English," says Marinho. "My fears were overshadowing my confidence. But when I found Cara, their belief that I could accomplish something great inspired me to do just that. For me, the definition of 'Cara' is 'saving lives.'" After completing the program in 2013, Marinho earned a bachelor's degree in criminal justice, obtained her U.S. citizenship and now serves as The Salvation Army homeless division supervisor for the entire city of Chicago.

With palpable momentum, Cara continues to inspire much hope. The organization's annual signature event, the Cara Gala, will be held on Friday, April 27, at Morgan Manufacturing in the West Loop. Co-hosted for the second consecutive year by Alexi Giannoulas (former Illinois treasurer and now senior director of BNY Mellon Wealth Management), the event will welcome more than 400 Cara advocates from myriad Chicago industries to help support future programming and, according to Kim, expansion plans. "We're opening up new on-ramps to our work in Chicago and exploring ways to take what we do on the road," she says, "particularly in Rust Belt cities that are struggling to alleviate poverty and in need of a sustainable workforce solution. There is much work to be done, and the opportunity for hundreds of people placed in great jobs to become thousands." **sl**

*For tickets and to inquire about sponsorship for the Cara Gala, visit [carachicago.org/events](http://carachicago.org/events).*