

# TOGETHER, INVINCIBLE:

## A Bold Agenda for Young Illinoisans

Young Adults in Illinois are at an inflection point. As the pandemic continues, young adults ages 18-34 are seeing wages eroded by inflation, ever-increasing college tuition, and a lack of affordable health care, just to name a few challenges. Black, brown, and low-income young adults often fare even worse because of systemic inequities. To take action and disrupt the status quo, Young Invincibles Midwest organized the following policy priorities for Illinois in 2023, with constant input from young adults directly impacted by higher education, health care, and workforce policies.

The work to create this policy agenda began in June 2022, when YI gathered young adults at our annual Illinois Policy Summit. YI solicited real-time feedback from participants on barriers preventing their economic empowerment, and what solutions they demand to see. Throughout the rest of the year, YI conducted surveys and held focus groups to expand and provide additional nuance to YI's policy agenda drafts. In late 2022, YI's Midwest Youth Advisory Board reviewed a final draft of this agenda to ensure it is aligned with young adults' priorities.

The following policy mandates from our constituency must be implemented immediately. We've been shortchanged and dismissed, but young adult power will undoubtedly make a forceful impact toward progress in 2023.

### Higher Education

#### 1. Meeting Students' Basic Needs for College Completion

Students needs such as housing, transportation, food, and others must be addressed to ensure students are able to complete college. The available support for students' college completion has long been inadequate, even before the pandemic. But not only are those problems worse, but new challenges unique to students of color, low-income, and first-generation students are





also emerging. Factors like finances, job stability, family responsibilities, access to technology, and health concerns are compounded with the perennial challenges of balancing work, studies, and life.

Students should have access to high-quality academic services on campus such as tutoring and office hours with instructors. These academic supports must be available for working students and students with children, as well as being accommodative for students with disabilities. Students should also have access to affordable classroom materials such as textbooks. However, before providing additional academic support, it is necessary to first ensure a student's most basic needs are met. It can be difficult for a student to excel academically when they are struggling to adequately feed or house themselves.

Aiding a student in meeting their basic needs through non-academic support ensures students can enroll, engage, and thrive in a post-secondary environment. Non-academic supports such as child care, food security, housing assistance, and transportation must be provided consistently, affordably, and promptly for students. This work will require cooperation among higher education institutions, government, and community providers.

In 2022, Illinois legislators passed a law requiring a public benefits navigator position at every public higher education institution in the state. This navigator will connect students with the appropriate public benefits programs and additional resources to ensure basic needs are met. YI will lead the work with students, institutions, legislators, advocates, and additional stakeholders to implement the law effectively, which may include legislative modifications to ensure navigators are able to meet the unique needs of various student populations.

## **2. Maintain Financial Aid Resources to Improve College Affordability**

Students must be able to afford post-secondary education, but many simply cannot. Historically, the Monetary Award Program (MAP) has been a critical state-based, need-based financial aid for thousands of students, but it is consistently underfunded. Every year, lawmakers fail to fully fund MAP to ensure that all the students who are eligible for MAP receive it. For first-generation students and students of color, MAP is even more critical; according to the Illinois Student Assistance Commission, about half of undergraduate students at Illinois' public universities who identify as Black or Hispanic receive a MAP grant, and over half of MAP recipients are first-generation college students.

In 2022, lawmakers appropriated a historic \$122 million additional dollars for MAP in the Fiscal Year 2023 (FY23) state budget. This is both a stunning and historic investment in students. This year, YI will continue to advocate on behalf of students by asking for an additional \$50 million over last year's historic budgetary victory. Every dollar in the MAP fund goes directly toward a student pursuing their

educational goals.

### **3. Elevate Student Perspectives for Equitable Systemic Funding**

The Commission on Equitable Public University Funding is tasked with furnishing recommendations to the Illinois General Assembly on a funding formula to equitably distribute public dollars amongst the state’s public universities. YI will advocate to include students in discussions about the formula recommendations and ensure they are based on equity, data, and students’ needs. All students in Illinois must have access to a high-quality education, and that begins with ensuring all higher education institutions have fair and equitable access to state funds.

To guarantee students in Illinois have a seat at the table, YI will lead in the creation and oversight of a student committee to further inform the work of the Commission. YI will train students to actively participate in the creation and passage of an equitable public university funding formula.

### **4. Support Black Students at the University of Illinois for Equitable Access to Higher Education**

Black residents are almost 15 percent of the state’s population, but in 2021, they were only about eight percent of the University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign’s undergraduate and graduate students. As the state’s flagship system, the University of Illinois should be easily accessible to every state resident. YI will work with stakeholders to learn from Black students about possible solutions to increase Black student enrollment at multiple campuses in the University of Illinois system. Ultimately, the University of Illinois should ensure all campuses market financial aid opportunities to Black students, reach out to two-year colleges to strengthen the pipeline of Black transfer students, and help foster a sense of community for Black students.



## Health Care

### **1. Fully Fund Campus Mental Health Supports to Invest in Care**

The 2019 Mental Health Early Action on Campus Act must be fully funded. This law provides a framework for Illinois public colleges and universities to improve and expand their services through: partnerships with community providers, screening tools and online resources, staff training, peer support programs, improved student-to-clinician ratios, and assistance through a state-based technical assistance center. In January 2023, state lawmakers appropriated \$9 million for the implementation of the Act in the Fiscal Year 2023 supplemental budget. YI will advocate for full funding for Fiscal Year 2024 to implement this law. Students are struggling across the state, even more so in the aftermath of a lingering global pandemic. Given that students with mental health problems are twice as likely to drop out of college, funding campus mental health services is a critical investment in meeting students' basic needs and boosting college completion rates.

### **2. Promote the Adoption of Best Practices for Campus Mental Health Services to Improve Access**

In 2022, YI and the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Chicago convened the Mental Health on Campus Learning Collaborative. This platform brought together public higher education administrators, staff, clinical directors, researchers, advocates, and students to create connections and share best practices on how to overcome current challenges to meet students' demand for mental health services. Because of the success of the first year of the Collaborative, YI and NAMI Chicago will convene for a second year with the aim of setting the foundation for the Technical Assistance Center within the Illinois Board of Higher Education.

### **3. Disseminate Accurate and Useful Health Care Information to Sharpen Young Adult Knowledge**

From a lack of transparency concerning mental health service costs to misinformation about the COVID-19 vaccine, young adults have a difficult time accessing the accurate information they need to make the best choices for themselves. YI will continue to provide accurate information to young adults through outreach, community events, social media campaigns, and trainings.

## Workforce Development & Finances

### 1. Establish Baseline Protections for Young Workers

Young workers are struggling to reach financial security, stability at work, and earn a living wage. Low-income workers and workers of color are disproportionately impacted by a lack of protections. Illinois must adopt legislation recommended by the YI-led Young Workers' Bill of Rights resolution to support young workers, who constitute our entry-level workers and those starting to step into larger roles. Every industry must generate high-quality jobs that provide a living wage, access to generous benefits, support for child care, financial assistance for higher education, pathways to freely consider unionization, and opportunities to grow in their chosen career.



### 2. Strengthen Students' Financial Life Skills

Students must have access to quality financial life skills education, in particular through their post-secondary studies. As a member of the Bank On Commission housed within the Illinois Office of the Comptroller, YI elevates student voices in the development of recommendations to the Illinois General Assembly to improve the financial life skills of students enrolled in Illinois' public colleges and universities. YI will advocate for the adoption of policies that improve financial life skills, which include skills such as budgeting, student loan debt management, retirement planning, and credit score monitoring.

### 3. Review Career Pathways in the Foster Care System

Young adults exiting the foster care system must have access to information and resources on various career pathways to provide them with an opportunity for economic prosperity. Yet, many young adults do not receive any information or resources, often because of a lack of staff knowledge about such resources. Informing frontline workers in foster care agencies on opportunities for apprenticeship and other career pathway options can improve awareness and connection to meaningful work for those exiting the foster care system. YI will research current practices, policy barriers, and innovative programming to inform a report with recommendations for improvement.

### 4. Expand Tax Credits to Increase Young Adult Economic Power

The Earned Income Credit (EIC) and Child Tax Credit (CTC) must be expanded for young adults. Tax policies undoubtedly impact young adults' financial power. In 2022, Illinois expanded eligibility of the state Earned Income Credit (EIC) to 18-24 year-olds without dependents, among other groups. The credit amount must be raised, and legislators must understand how young adults are attempting to navigate a tumultuous economy. The CTC has assisted low-income families with further financial support to pay for child care services and needs, reducing a large barrier to employment with young adults.

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