

Dr. Helene Gayle

President and CEO, Chicago Community Trust

Helene D. Gayle is the president and CEO of The Chicago Community Trust, one of the nation's oldest and largest community foundations. Under her leadership, the Trust has adopted a new strategic focus on closing the racial and ethnic wealth gap in the Chicago region. For almost a decade, she was president and CEO of CARE, a leading international humanitarian organization. An expert on global development, humanitarian and health issues, Dr. Gayle spent 20 years with the Centers for Disease Control. She also worked at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and launched the McKinsey Social Initiative (now McKinsey.org), a nonprofit building partnerships for social impact. Named one of Forbes' "100 Most Powerful Women" and one of NonProfit Times' "Power and Influence Top 50," she has authored numerous articles on global and domestic public health issues, poverty alleviation, gender equality and social justice.

Holding Back Potential

The minority/majority dynamic is shifting. The youngest demographic in our country is the most diverse. To date, there has been a system in place that holds back the potential of minority communities, especially in places such as the Chicago community Dr. Gayle serves, which is two-thirds Black and Latinx. The simple math is, by holding back this much of the population, we are hurting everyone. There is no benefit to having an ever-increasing wealth gap in our country. Let everyone engage fully and we will see true economic opportunity for our entire nation, lifting us all.

Systemic Solutions for Systemic Racism

The awakening our country is having includes a growing understanding that racism is not just at an individual level, it is also systemic. Dr. Gayle points out that we are not here by chance, since our country's founding, when a small group deemed another larger group inferior, and barriers were built to assure that some were privileged over others. Today, this

plays out as the disastrous inequities in how long we live. Dr. Gayle describes two neighborhoods only five miles apart in Chicago but with a 30-year age difference in average length of life. Dr. Gayle is working every day to build out systemic solutions, partnering across businesses, other nonprofits, and government. Companies she works with are looking to hire more diverse employees, vendors, agencies, and suppliers. In tandem, her organization is pushing for public policy to help close the gap.

10 Years to Change

Dr. Gayle believes that closing the wealth gap is a 10-year plan that happens at the household, neighborhood, and community levels. Individuals and families need access to longer-term assets, such as home ownership and business creation free of predatory lending. Neighborhoods need to be seen as investment-worthy by the private sector, and communities can take the lead in shifting their narrative by raising their voices and having a seat at the table. Navigating COVID-19 and shifting to recovery needs to be done from an equity standpoint. There is an opportunity to make communities more resilient instead of being left further behind.