

Volunteers with the Alliance for the Great Lakes cleaning up 57th Street Beach in Hyde Park in late September. See page 96.



BEST CHARITIES IN CHICAGO

20 standout nonprofits to support this season **BY LEE CLIFFORD**

It happens every year. As the holidays approach, you feel the urge to support a cause you care about—the environment, say, or education, or animals. But which nonprofits working toward those causes are not just good, but great? And, assuming you want to keep your giving close to home, which of those top nonprofits are based right here in the Chicago area?

We posed the first of these questions to Sandra Miniutti, vice president of Charity Navigator, a respected independent organization that analyzes and rates U.S. charities. While a good charity may certainly meet a need or fill a void in the community, she explained, “a great one is demonstrably efficient, ethical, and effective.” In other words, it measures its progress against clear goals, tells you exactly how it spends its money, and maximizes every dollar you give it. *Chicago* set out to find the best ones.

Our first criterion: The charity must be headquartered in the greater Chicago area and have 501(c)(3) status from the Internal Revenue Service, meaning that any donations to it are tax deductible. From that group, we eliminated any that were very small, lacked much of a track record, or didn’t actively solicit donations from the public. (Specifically, with the help of Charity Navigator, we cut those that could not provide tax filings for the past seven years, had revenue of less than \$1 million in the most recent fiscal year, or got most of their funding from government grants, fees, or a single person.)

Of the 277 charities that remained, we discarded those that did not earn Charity Navigator’s top ranking of four stars—an award that’s achieved only by those charities that “exhibit sound fiscal management practices and a strong commitment to accountability and transparency,” Miniutti says.

From there, we talked to nonprofit consultants and community leaders and did additional research on each charity. We applied four tests: Does the organization have a unique mission? Does it have significant data to show its impact? Does it have a strong Chicago connection? (That winnowed out several national organizations.) And, finally, how big a hole would be left if it disappeared? The answers resulted in the list that begins on the next page.

Chicagoans are generous . . .

Forty-four percent of Chicago-area households donated more than \$1,000 in 2013, according to *Giving in Chicago*, a study released this spring by the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy and funded by the Chicago Community Trust.

. . . and they give locally.

About two-thirds of all donations by those in the Chicago area remained in the region, according to the Lilly study. That’s no surprise to local nonprofit consultant Lisa Dietlin: “We’re a city built on neighbor helping neighbor. In Chicago, the first topic that tends to come up isn’t ‘What’s your business?’ or ‘Where did you go to school?’ It’s ‘What’s your philanthropy?’”

HOW WE IDENTIFIED THE TOP 20

18,239*

Number of 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations registered in the greater Chicago area



277

Number that are established enough to be analyzed by Charity Navigator



71

Number that earn Charity Navigator’s highest rating of four stars



20

Number that stand out most for their mission, impact, and value to the community

*According to Donors Forum, a nonprofit research and advocacy organization in Chicago

ENVIRONMENT

Alliance for the Great Lakes

greatlakes.org

2014 spending: \$2.7 million

Percentage spent on programming: 81

This 45-year-old organization is a powerful force helping to protect the Great Lakes through advocacy, education, and restoration. And it's achieving tangible results. For example, it helped push for the groundbreaking commitment made in June by the governors of Michigan and Ohio and the premier of Ontario to reduce pollution flowing into Lake Erie by 40 percent. And thanks in part to the organization's work, last year Illinois became the first state to pass a law phasing out the manufacture and sale of products, such as body scrubs containing microbeads, that cause pollution in the water supply and can be mistaken for food by marine organisms. The group's annual fall Adopt-a-Beach cleanup brings together nearly 15,000 volunteers in all eight Great Lakes states to pick up some 52,000 pounds of debris from beaches and shorelines (and provides researchers with valuable data about sources of pollution). Next up: fighting to restore the natural divide between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River basin.

HEALTH

Alzheimer's Association

alz.org

2014 spending: \$254.0 million

Percentage spent on programming: 73

Eager to help cure this common and profoundly disabling disease? So is this massive national nonprofit. Since 1980, the Alzheimer's Association has directed more than \$350 million in funding to 2,300 research studies. One of its innovations: TrialMatch, a free online service that connects patients with clinical trials for which they might be eligible.

Gilda's Club Chicago

gildasclubchicago.org

2014 spending: \$1.8 million

Percentage spent on programming: 76

Saturday Night Live cast member Gilda Radner famously said that having cancer gave her membership in an elite club she'd rather not belong to. After the comedian died in 1989, her loved ones founded this nonprofit, which in the Chicagoland area provides more than 350 free activities each month: support and networking groups, social events, arts and crafts, and family programs. Membership is open to those with or affected by cancer, including friends and loved ones. Visits to the Chicago location (there are separate entities in several cities across the country) have more than doubled over the past three years, to some 25,000.

HUNGER & HOMELESSNESS

Bridge Communities

bridgecommunities.org

2014 spending: \$3.0 million

Percentage spent on programming: 82

More than just a housing program, Bridge envelops its clients—homeless families and individuals in DuPage County—in support: two years in a comfortably furnished apartment, financial coaching, career advice, interview preparation, therapy, and even nutritional counseling to help them get back on track.

Cara Program

thecaraprogram.org

2014 spending: \$6.7 million

Percentage spent on programming: 75

Consider Cara an on-ramp for the unemployed. The rigorous program—training lasts an average of four to five months and teaches skills such as team building and financial literacy—prepares its graduates (5,000 since 1991) to enter the work force and stay there. Cara also runs for-profit social enterprises Cleanslate, a neighborhood beautification business, and TCP Staffing, a temp firm where the program's

Inspiration Corporation

inspirationcorp.org

2014 spending: \$5.1 million

Percentage spent on programming: 89

In 1989, police officer Lisa Nigro decided to do something about the marginalized populations she saw on her beat (many chronically homeless or with criminal records). She founded Inspiration Corporation, where housing, training, and job placement are the recipe for success. Last year, it put 123 Chicagoans to work, including at its own Inspiration Kitchens in Uptown and East Garfield Park. Latepa Long (pictured in late September) works at the food court in University Center in the South Loop. Without Inspiration Corporation, "I would have been out on the street," she says.



PHOTOGRAPH: (GONZALEZ) JOEL PLOT

FOUR TO WATCH

They're still too young or too small for Charity Navigator to rate, but they've got passionate founders, inspiring missions, and 501(c)(3) status.



CHICAGO RUN

chicagorun.org

Founded In 2007 in Avondale by Alicia Gonzalez

Mission Get kids moving! This organization runs free physical activity programs in 46 Chicago public schools at last count.



GIRLFORWARD

girlforward.org

Founded In 2011 in Edgewater by Blair Brettschneider

Mission Empower girls ages 12 to 21 who have come to Chicago from war-torn countries. GirlForward provides these refugees everything from homework help to college applications.



JAMES B. MORAN CENTER FOR YOUTH ADVOCACY

moran-center.org

Founded In 1981 in Evanston by civic leaders and Judge James B. Moran (who died in 2009)

Mission Help young people emerge from the juvenile justice system and turn their lives around. The innovative program weaves together legal representation and social services.



PROJECT SYNCERE

projectsyncere.org

Founded In 2008 in Calumet Heights by Jason Coleman (pictured), Seun Phillips, and George Wilson

Mission Grow STEMs. These veterans of corporate America and academia want to increase the number of kids in grades 4 to 12 studying science, technology, engineering, and math. They have served more than 6,000 students at 35 elementary and four high schools in Chicago.

YOUR NAME IN LIGHTS

Fancy a bit of public recognition for your giving? Here's what it'll cost. —KATE FLAIM



Gift \$50

Your name goes On a bookplate in the Chicago Botanic Garden's library



Gift \$500

Your name goes In the program at Lyric Opera



Gift \$5,000

Your name goes On a welcome bench at Lincoln Park Zoo



Gift \$10,000

Your name goes On the back cover of a CD from Cedille Records, a local non-profit classical music label



Gift \$20,000

Your name goes On a "cat condo" at PAWS Chicago's Lincoln Park Adoption Center



Gift \$100,000

Your name goes On the gear house that opens the Michigan Avenue Bridge (part of the McCormick Bridgehouse & Chicago River Museum)



Gift \$1 million

Your name goes Into the official name of the Special Collections department at Loyola University's library



Gift \$1.5 million

Your name goes On the 606 bridge that crosses over Milwaukee Avenue (the most biked road in the city!)



ILLUSTRATIONS: (MUSIC NOTE, BENCH, CD, GEAR) THE NOUN PROJECT



PAWS Chicago

pawschicago.org
 2014 spending: \$10.6 million
 Percentage spent on programming: 91

In 1997, when this grassroots organization was founded, more than 42,000 dogs, cats, and other pets were euthanized in the City of Chicago. Last year, fewer than 10,000 were. The credit for that huge drop goes largely to PAWS, which runs the largest pet adoption and foster programs in the city. (Here, volunteers bathe canine friends on the rooftop of the Lincoln Park Adoption Center in late September.) With its Lurie Clinic and mobile surgical van, PAWS also spayed or neutered 18,290 pets in 2014, offering nearly three-quarters of the procedures free of charge.

graduates can get valuable job experience. Beyond that, the organization has partnerships with a whopping 120-plus Chicago-area employers, including Marriott, JPMorgan Chase & Co., and Eataly.

Greater Chicago Food Depository

chicagosfoodbank.org
 2014 spending: \$107.7 million
 Percentage spent on programming: 94

An astonishing one in six Cook County residents benefits from this food bank's services every year. Founded in 1979, it distributes donated and purchased food through a countywide network of 650 pantries, soup kitchens, and shelters. Impressively, this mainstay goes right where the need is: Its Producemobile delivers fresh fruits and vegetables to food deserts, and its popular Lunch Bus serves free healthy lunches to kids throughout the city in the summer.

Northern Illinois Food Bank

solvehungertoday.org
 2014 spending: \$123.5 million
 Percentage spent on programming: 98

There's plenty of need outside Cook County—and that's the focus of this far-flung network of pantries and soup kitchens, which provided more than 50 million meals last year. It serves Boone, DeKalb, DuPage, Grundy, Kane, Kankakee, Kendall, Lake, McHenry, Ogle, Stephenson, Will, and Winnebago counties, where Feeding America reports one in seven residents are at risk of hunger.

PETS

Save-A-Pet

saveapetil.org
 2014 spending: \$1.5 million
 Percentage spent on programming: 81

Though much smaller than PAWS (see description at left), this Grayslake organization goes above and beyond for each animal it serves and plays an important role in rescuing animals from "kill" shelters (it saved 308 last year). Programs include medical and behavioral assistance, adoption services, and referrals to low-cost spay and neuter services. Says Dominique Allion, president of the board: "Since we treat any medical condition and provide animals in need of special surgery all the

vet care they need, our vet bills are rather high." Attention, feline fans: A complete remodel of the center's free-roam cat room is underway.

JUSTICE & EQUALITY

Chicago Legal Clinic

dclaw.org
 2014 spending: \$3.9 million
 Percentage spent on programming: 94

This 34-year-old clinic has evolved into a major provider of low-cost or pro bono legal assistance, serving an impressive 25,000 clients last year. Its sliding-scale fee structure is a particular boon to the working poor, who make a little too much to qualify for free legal services from the state.

Roger Baldwin Foundation of ACLU

aclu-il.org
 2014 spending: \$3.3 million
 Percentage spent on programming: 89

Illinois is the only state in the Midwest where women can get reproductive health care free from many burdensome restrictions. Fighting to keep it that way is the Illinois chapter of the ACLU—which since 1969 has been committed to defending all civil liberties guaranteed by the federal and state constitutions. In August of last year, the organization secured an agreement with the City of Chicago that will give transgender city workers insurance coverage for transition-related health care. Additionally, the nonprofit has been a huge force in the fight to end juvenile solitary confinement as we know it. "Working together, volunteer and staff attorneys protect the rights of tens of thousands of people and often set national precedents," notes Edwin C. Yohnka, director of communications and public policy.

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Center for Enriched Living

centerforenrichedliving.org
 2014 spending: \$2.2 million
 Percentage spent on programming: 72

This center was created in the late '60s when two mothers couldn't find after-school programs for their disabled children. It served 468 members this year, who



HOOKED ON GIVING

In his recent book, *The Opposite of Spoiled*, Chicago native Ron Lieber—the money columnist at *The New York Times* and a father of two—gives advice on raising children who are “grounded, generous, and smart about money.” Here are four key tips.

→ Create a “give” jar.

Lieber recommends that kids divvy up any money they earn into three jars: “save,” “spend” and “give.” He explains that the jars “are stand-ins for all the values we want our kids to take in.”

→ Lead by example.

Be open to giving spare change to homeless people when you're with small children. “We want to be modeling compassion,” says Lieber. When kids get older you can have deeper conversations about more lasting ways to help those in need.

→ Involve them in decision making.

Ask your child to help choose which causes your family should support. When Lieber's daughter was eight, he and his wife even gave her control over a percentage of the family's charity budget.

→ Write a blank check.

For holidays and special occasions, consider giving your child two checks of equal amounts: one written out to the child (for a present he or she will choose) and one with a blank recipient line. Ask the child to fill in the line with the charity of his or her choice.

on average spent 200 hours in its programs. In June 2016, it will unveil a \$3.8 million renovation of its Riverwoods facility, which will use the principles of universal design: Everything will be accessible to people at any stage of life and any level of ability.

Center on Halsted

centeronhalsted.org
2014 spending: \$5.1 million
Percentage spent on programming: 78

The largest LGBT community center in the Midwest, Center on Halsted sees more than 1,000 people come through its (LEED Silver-certified) doors each day. From cooking classes and yoga to HIV testing and therapy, it's a hub of activity and advocacy in Lake View. Last year, it opened Town Hall Apartments on Halsted Street, the area's first LGBT-friendly affordable housing project. It also opened a senior center on Addison Street, in the former Town Hall police station—the very spot where some older members of the community spent nights after raids on Halsted Street's gay bars.

KIDS & EDUCATION

Big Shoulders Fund

bigshouldersfund.org
2014 spending: \$20.7 million
Percentage spent on programming: 92

Supporting inner-city Catholic schools through scholarships, teacher development, capital improvements, and more has been the mission of Big Shoulders since its founding in 1986. The nonprofit reports that 88 percent of grads from the 82 schools it funds enroll in college (far exceeding the 51 percent national average for low-income, high-minority urban high schools according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center).

SOS Children's Villages Illinois

sosillinois.org
2014 spending: \$10.6 million
Percentage spent on programming: 84

SOS has completely rethought the foster care model. Children who come to live in one of its three “villages”—in Roosevelt Square, Auburn Gresham, and Lockport—stay with their biological siblings in a private home. A full-time, professionally trained foster parent lives with them, and the village offers support and strength. SOS served 698 children in 2014.

CULTURE

Chicago Botanic Garden

chicagobotanic.org
2014 spending: \$40.0 million
Percentage spent on programming: 81

More than a million visitors each year enjoy this breathtaking 385-acre site—but the Chicago Botanic Garden is about much more than pretty plants. Its Windy City Harvest program, which operates at 14 locations around Chicagoland, provides transitional jobs, training, and access to freshly grown food. And its \$26 million Regenstein Foundation Learning Campus, opening in July 2016, will educate students from preschool through doctorate level in everything from horticulture to sustainability.

Chicago Public Library Foundation

cplfoundation.org
2014 spending: \$6.3 million
Percentage spent on programming: 75

Founded in 1986 by Cindy Pritzker and other civic leaders, this public-private partnership works to enrich the collections and programs of the Chicago Public Library. Thanks to its funding, says CEO Rhona Frazin, the Teacher in the Library program provided 85,296 hours of free homework help to Chicago kids during the 2014–15 school year—a 15 percent increase over the previous year. Next up: plans to open pre-K active learning centers at the Harold Washington Library Center and 14 other branches.

Joffrey Ballet

joffrey.org
2014 spending: \$16.3 million
Percentage spent on programming: 91

Happy 20th! This internationally acclaimed ballet company moved to Chicago in 1995 following residencies in New York and Los Angeles. To celebrate its anniversary, the Joffrey debuted 20 for 20!, a series of performances in the community, with partners such as the Field Museum and the Garfield Park Conservatory. The company is doing its part to make ballet relevant and accessible to young culture seekers: This year's Millennials program, a series of three ballets by contemporary choreographers, featured discounted tickets (\$20). The company is also raising the barre for young dancers, offering 110 programs in 44 Chicago public schools.

A photograph of a theater stage with several young people performing. The theater has multiple levels of seating and is dimly lit, with spotlights on the stage. The performers are in various poses, some with arms outstretched. The background shows the ornate architecture of the theater.

Chicago Shakespeare Theater

chicagoshakes.com

2014 spending: \$14.7 million

Percentage spent on programming: 84

Which organization is the single largest employer of Chicago actors? Chicago Shakes. Though the Bard's 38 plays constitute the company's core offerings, devotees are also treated to other classical and original works. And don't forget the award-winning education program. Each year students and teachers (pictured in 2013) from Chicago public schools create a production inspired by Shakespeare that is performed on the main stage. The mission, says founder Barbara Gaines, is to "change lives through this work—one person at a time." ●