

Rufus Williams, President and CEO, BBF

Tell People About BBF and Your Role

BBF Family Services, formerly known as the Better Boys Foundation, is a social service agency based in North Lawndale. Our origins date back to 1961 when businessman Joe Kellman formed the Better Boys Foundation and Archie Moore Gym as a boxing club to help curb the delinquent behavior of youth in Lawndale. **BBF now provides services in the areas of employment, education, youth services, family services, mentoring and community engagement.**

What are the skills you utilize most frequently on the job?

In my role as President and CEO, I find that every skill in my toolbox is required. Elevating and providing visibility to our organization internally and externally, fundraising, managing staff, working with our Board and recruiting new Board members, developing and managing programs, motivating teens, youth and their parents and engaging in opportunities to uplift people are all part of my work. The skills I use most frequently are leadership (in all of its facets), communication, empathy and organization.

What do you think people don't understand or forget when it comes to youth violence/youth violence prevention?

There are so many things that are misunderstood as it relates to youth violence and youth violence prevention. There have been a number of government policies passed and enforced over the years that have a direct and sustained negative impact on our youth. Neighborhoods that struggle with generational poverty, joblessness, inferior educational outcomes, disinvestment and overly aggressive policing create environments that contribute to youth violence. **When children can see a positive outlook for their future, when they see positive and productive outcomes for their parents and their neighbors, or they see positive, productive and believable stories on popular media, they have true hope and imagine real possibilities for their futures.** This is what children experience who grow up in our more stable and affluent areas. It is what some, but not enough of our children experience.

We shouldn't be surprised when children growing up without these stabilizers, particularly in areas that are segregated from affluence and positivity, engage in violence. Children who may have a parent who is incarcerated, who directly experienced violence or know people who have, who personally have experienced homelessness or whose families are perpetually on the brink of homelessness, children who constantly see illegal activity as a means of survival are more prone to participate in that same illegal activity.

Too many of our youth have had negative experiences with law enforcement and the judicial system. When police are seen as threatening, rather than as providing safety and protection, the expected reaction is that people deal with issues in the manner they believe to be appropriate—and violence can prevail.

These circumstances cause trauma for families and communities. This trauma may also lead to mental health issues, which too often go un-diagnosed and untreated. And violence can result.

Addressing this also requires sustained investment in education, housing, workforce development and jobs, improved policing and investment in youth and their families (and those organizations who support them) to assist them in reordering their lives.

When images are consistently shown of drugs, gangs and guns without addressing why these are so prevalent, at its root, the picture to broader society is that people/communities/races are violent, thus all of the people in these neighborhoods are violent and all interactions should be handled accordingly. Media too often perpetuates negative images and stereotypes which lead to more violence being performed against and by our youth. This can be somewhat addressed with more thoughtful, honest, unbiased images shown on our news and in our popular series.

What's one piece of valuable advice you've been given that you'd like to pass on?

One of the most valuable pieces of advice that I've been given came from my high school history instructor, Mr. Phillips. While I was a good student and doing what I thought was better than everyone else, Mr. Phillips threatened to fail me because he didn't think I was doing as well as I *could*. **That lesson I've taken to every other aspect of my life. Always do my absolute best, irrespective of how well or poorly anyone else is doing. Set the bar high and achieve great things.**

What has Get IN Chicago funding helped BBF do specifically?

The funding that we have received from Get IN Chicago has directly impacted the framework of programming that we provide at BBF. Prior to this funding, our work was focused on apprenticeships and childcare. **This funding has allowed us to directly impact those people who need our services the most.** Our mentors in the SYNC program are enhancing the lives of hard-to-reach and difficult to engage teens and their families. We are keeping them in school, advocating for youth in court and assisting youth and their families in moving their lives forward. The ability to help direct young people to improve their educational outcomes, make healthy decisions and create positive futures is occurring because of the connection that we have with Get IN Chicago. Our police youth baseball program has helped forge a healthier relationship between our community and the Chicago Police Department. The skills our staff is attaining through these GIC-funded programs will help to sustain this community and the people we are impacting for years to come.

What do you love most about Chicago?

I am Chicago, born and bred. I am proud of being raised in Lawndale and Garfield Park. I love living in Lincoln Park. I love the culture, the food, the institutions and the people of this city. I love the strength of Chicago and I love its possibilities. We are two cities and I have lived both of them. I love that the history of this city shows what is possible and those possibilities can create a brighter future for all of the citizens in our city.