



# Plant Chicago

ANNUAL REPORT

2021

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# EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

It's fitting that Plant Chicago ended up in a former firehouse. This building, originally built for emergencies, now serves a very different organization responding to very different emergencies: unchecked consumption and the climate crisis. Our global economy operates off of the false notion that there are infinite resources to consume, treating materials, and often people, as if they are "disposable." Plant Chicago is working to transition away from an extractive economy based on disposability.

In the months following the close of 2021, we secured a loan and purchased the iconic firehouse that we have come to call home. This purchase is transformational for our organization. We are planting literal roots in the Back of the Yards and tying our success with that of this truly special neighborhood. The purchase of our building makes economic sense. In the long term, it will enable us to channel funds towards people and programs that were previously needed for rent. Finally, we have full agency over renovations and operations. Since our founding in 2011, we have been helping others to renovate buildings. Now, as we renovate our own, we have the opportunity to center equity and economic opportunity for all residents.

While major renovations are forthcoming, the transformation of the firehouse into a hub for cultivating circular economies truly began in 2021; we launched a marketplace for local, sustainable foods and goods as well as free food scrap drop-off, hosted exciting hands-on programming, piloted our Indoor Victory Garden, and installed the first publicly available electric vehicle charging station on the Southwest Side. In the next year, we've set goals to decarbonize the building, ending our reliance on natural gas and increasing production of renewable energy.

On their own, buildings do not benefit communities. Our operations, amplified by these ambitious renovations, will ensure that our neighbors have access to locally and sustainably grown food, opportunities to divert materials from the landfill, and access to unique educational opportunities regardless of their ability to pay. Local businesses play a critical role in cultivating circular economies, so Plant Chicago will also ensure that small businesses have opportunities to generate additional revenue while implementing circular practices.

As I look back on the things our organization was able to accomplish amidst the tumult of 2021, I am filled with optimism. Plant Chicago serves to remind every visitor that even in times of crisis, there is plenty of reason to be hopeful. Your support ensures that we will be able to carry on this work for years to come - thank you for investing in a hopeful future.

Jonathan Pereira

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Jonathan Pereira". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end of the last name.



# THE FIREHOUSE

In 2021, we settled into our new home at the firehouse, steadily outfitting it as a center for cultivating local circular economies. As we transitioned back to in-person programming, the firehouse provided the perfect space for knowledge and resource sharing. We hosted workshops, school groups, and commercial growers, we created our own retail space, compost bins, refill station, hydroponic plant wall, and so much more!



## Waste Diversion

Plant Chicago tracks every pound of "waste" that leaves our space; it's the best way to build accountability. As a team, we strive for a 90% diversion rate and prioritize composting. Our newly opened Firehouse Market is the only place in the city where Chicago residents can drop off their food scraps free of charge. Additionally, we hosted The Community Compost Collection and our annual Pumpkin Smash with University of Illinois Extension and S.C.A.R.C.E, as well as materials diversion events with Zero Landfill Chicago.





FROM OUR TEAM:

**549**

**POUNDS COMPOSTED**

**531**

**POUNDS RECYCLED**

**237**

**POUNDS SENT TO THE LANDFILL**

**= 82.08%**

**DIVERSION RATE**

**A 6.18% INCREASE OVER 2020**

FROM OUR NEIGHBORS:

**3,395**

**POUNDS OF FOOD SCRAPS**

**DROPPED OFF AT THE FIREHOUSE MARKET  
TO BE COMPOSTED FREE OF CHARGE**





Plant Chicago also took in over 100 pounds of batteries to be recycled! While collection services like these are essential to waste reduction, so is resource sharing! Through partnerships with circular economy nonprofits like The Chicago Tool Library, we hosted seven swap events. Swaps encourage learning and exploration while keeping items in use, thereby reducing production demand as well as waste.

2021 also saw the installation of two electric vehicle (EV) charging stations on the back of the building thanks in part to AMB Renewable Energy, a local Black-owned business. These chargers were the

first publicly accessible EV chargers installed on the Southwest Side and represent a push toward more equitable access to green technology. We have so much more planned in regards to renewable energy, but altogether 2021 was an exciting year for the firehouse!



# The Firehouse Market

After years of experimentation with alternative retail, our new building provided the perfect opportunity to officially launch The Firehouse Market. We designed a rubric to evaluate the circularity of potential vendors and proudly welcomed many of our small business cohort members to the space. By the end of 2021, we were able to offer this unique platform to over 20 local small businesses. Close collaboration with an amazing group of vendors inspired us to really stretch the limits of sustainable consumerism. From local sourcing to the elimination of single-use plastics, the products found on-site represent the types of efforts needed to truly shift away from take-make-waste economic systems!



## Local Food Boxes

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated food access inequalities in areas like Back of the Yards. We expanded our operations to ensure that locally and sustainably grown food could be accessible to all residents by partnering with The Urban Canopy on our Local Food Box program. Not only do we accept Link payment (Illinois' Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Benefits Program) but ensure that each dollar spent goes twice as far with Link matching. Because not all low-income families qualify for Link, we also offer sliding scale options. In 2021, we distributed 777 food boxes (totaling 6,605 pounds), a 55% increase over 2020. At least 44% of these boxes went to low-income families, either through subsidies or donations to partner organizations such as The Port Ministries.

# 777

Local Food Boxes  
distributed in 2021



**\$7,336**

Given in direct  
healthy food  
incentives

## FARMERS MARKET

In 2021, Plant Chicago hosted 25 markets, including one indoor market as we transitioned to our winter season. Over 1,800 people joined us and vendors recorded nearly \$24,000 in revenue.

We were thrilled to welcome back many vendors from previous years to sell local and sustainable produce, honey, baked goods, and self-care products. Plant Chicago was also able to host nine new vendors for a total of over 20 businesses. We partnered with community organizations to expand and diversify the market experience, offering over 140 COVID-19 vaccinations with InstaVaxx, Young Invincibles, Increase the Peace / La Casa Norte, cooking demos with Chicago Commons, performances with Free Street Theater, dancing lessons with the Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, live music from Chicago Sinfonietta, Holy Cross Marimba Ensemble, and more!

*"Me encanta ver a nuestra gente alegre y bailando / I love seeing our neighbors happy and dancing again!" - Farmers Market Customer*



**90%**  
BIPOC-Owned

**86%**  
Woman-Owned

**57%**  
Operate within  
five miles of PC

With support from our small business program, the Circular Economy Leaders Network, a few of our vendors introduced bring-your-own-container products this year! We are particularly excited to highlight inspiring work from businesses like Dinobi Detergent, Soap Junkii, and Piel Bella who are not just eliminating single-use plastic packaging but are going one step further and implementing packaging reuse models. While farmers market customers were getting the hang of things, we were happy to provide glass jars for reuse! Plant Chicago's farmers market presents the perfect opportunity for small businesses to push boundaries and make new connections!



*"In the five years I've been a vendor at their farmers market, I've seen Plant Chicago give many entrepreneurs the opportunity to sell their product, connect with one another, and reduce their waste."*

*- Dulce Morales,  
Cedillo's Fresh Produce  
Co-Founder & Lead  
Educator*

# SMALL BUSINESS SUPPORT

Small businesses are often left out of the circular economy conversation despite the fact that many are doing incredible work. Our Circular Economy Leaders Network (CELN) brings together Chicago-area small businesses to swap resources and work toward individual circular economy goals. Through a combination of workshops, knowledge sharing opportunities, and technical assistance, Plant Chicago supports network members as they set and pursue these goals.

The 2021 cohort included businesses spanning a variety of fields, including farms, restaurants, health / beauty, and more. One of the most productive ways to curate a circular economy is to help local businesses thrive and we are so proud of this cohort! One example of a win that came out of the program was the partnership of CultureBox and Cedillo's Fresh Produce. The CultureBox team acts as a "safety valve," taking in surplus produce (leftovers from farmers markets, experimental crops, etc.) and using it as ingredients for their preserved food products. The produce stays in use and the income generated stays local!



29

Network members  
in 2021





## CELN 2021 Workshops + Events

- Annual Kickoff Event + Circular Economy 101
- Financial Management for Small Businesses with First Midwest Bank
- Disrupting White Dominant Culture
- Planning for a Healthy Business (in Spanish)
- Marketing and Communications Tools / Strategies for Small Businesses
- Waste Audit Demonstration
- Speed Consulting with West Monroe Partners
- CELN Connect: Part 1
- Textile Takeback Programs with EILEEN FISHER Renew
- Circular Creativity: Collaboratively Workshopping Business Challenges
- Independence from Amazon
- Negotiations 101 with The Institute for Justice
- CELN Connect: Part 2 / Wrap Up Event



*"Plant Chicago has helped me to achieve my sustainability goals. Elise & Eric helped me with my first waste audit back in August 2021, this was a huge milestone for me... Plant Chicago also hosted many trainings, talks, and calls during the year for the whole network to learn from each other and from professionals in the industry. [They] encouraged me to offer my products package-free during the farmers market season and at their zero-waste station in the retail space. This has provided exposure for me as well as educational opportunities for my clients."*

*One of [Plant Chicago's] biggest contributions has been the networking opportunities and the life-long friendships I have created with some of the people in the network! I'm really looking forward to continuing to collaborate with Plant Chicago in the upcoming years."*

*- Jazmin Curiel, Founder of Piel Bella by Jazz*

# INDOOR VICTORY GARDEN

Learning to grow your own food can be an empowering experience, but lots of folks lack the space, knowledge, equipment or money to take the leap. The Indoor Victory Garden (IVG) works to remove these barriers and give city residents the opportunity to learn how to grow food indoors, year-round. This year saw the completion of our first 12 months of operating the IVG at a pilot scale. A total of 14 users grew in the space, including a mix of small businesses, individuals, and Plant Chicago interns. Our overall goals for this first year were to not only host those wishing to learn, but also to discern how best to serve them and what adaptations are needed to scale up the project.

Our findings are detailed in the [2021 IVG Report](#) available on our website. In this document, we cite the challenges that arose during our pilot year alongside potential solutions.

*"Plant Chicago and the Indoor Victory Garden provided me the space, support and community to completely change the way I think about my ability to grow food. As a longtime apartment dweller, I kept daydreaming about having my own backyard garden "someday," but really had no idea how much I could accomplish with indoor growing. From helping to set up the grow beds, to harvesting my first crop of leafy greens, being part of the IVG was an invaluable experience and I look forward to paying it forward by supporting new growers as they come into the IVG!" - Dan Tafelski*



# 14

Growers utilized  
the IVG in 2021



# EDUCATION



# 69

Closed Loop Labs  
hosted in 2021

## Closed Loop Labs

When a classroom visits Plant Chicago they get a chance to do a truly hands-on workshop utilizing our indoor growing systems. From aquaponics to vermicomposting, these are one of a kind experiences! Historically, our workshops with school groups have been some of our most popular offerings. It's a joy to hear the literal shrieks of excitement coming from the classroom as kids handle worms and learn about the importance of composting. When we say "hands-on" we mean it!

In 2021, we faced significant challenges hosting in-person workshops due to COVID-19. We adapted by doing as much as possible outside and virtually. Despite these challenges, we were still able to host 69 labs!



# Public Workshops

We partner with local entrepreneurs to offer public workshops on a variety of topics related to circularity, from growing your own food to repairing your clothes, there is something for everyone. We hosted 29 workshops in 2021. A couple crowd favorites included Visible Mending and Urban Foraging. Money should never be a barrier to participate, so we offer sliding scale options and free tickets available for those who cannot afford it.

*"One of CultureBox's main goals is to spread the joy and benefits of fermentation and support those who want to start / grow their at-home fermentation practices. Plant Chicago provided the space and network for us to do fermentation workshops, allowing us to dispel any myths and encourage folks to come closer to their food sources and preservation methods."*

- Michaela Hrbacek, CultureBox Development Director







## Community Learning Circle

The Community Learning Circle is a workshop series led by locals for locals. While they may not call it circular economy work, we see our neighbors as leaders in the field. Plenty of folks grow their own food, prepare healthy meals, and rely on repair and reuse to extend the life of materials and save money. They have valuable knowledge to share!

We hosted a wide variety of workshops including, Dia de Muertos with Laura Gonzalez, Loss & Thyme - Grief and Gardening with Bridge & Bloom Farms, Vermicomposting with Contemporary Farmer, and Enchiladas 101 with Free Street Theater.



## Internships

Each year, Plant Chicago makes sure to bring on paid youth interns to work on a variety of projects related to waste diversion and local food access. Our 2021 interns worked on projects such as plant swaps, tool swaps, mushroom cultivation, and outreach efforts related to our local food box program. Alejandra Bergquist (left center) conducted research to determine if it was possible for specific mushroom species to be bred to release stronger enzymes, potentially strong enough to break down plastics!

*"I loved the internship! Giving me the option to pursue many micro-goals as opposed to a singular large goal was extraordinary - I was able to assist with the creation of a bulk refill station, find an outlet for Blue Tin Production's fabric scraps, and begin the process of scheduling a group order of soil between different farms!"*

- Camila Jaramillo



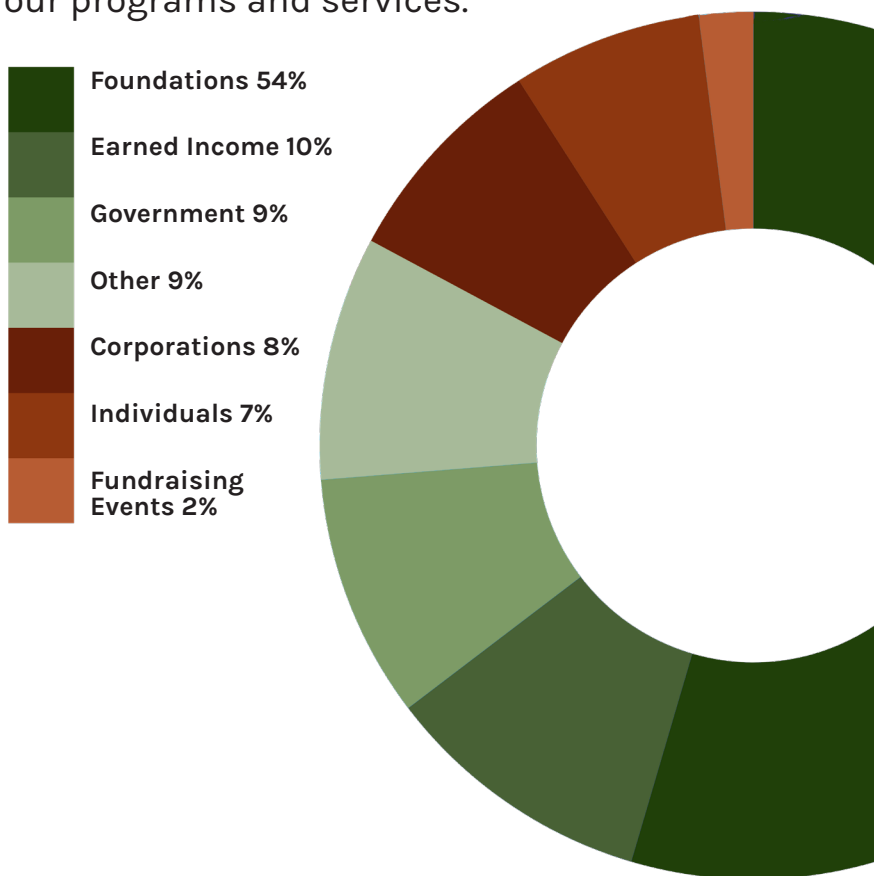
# FINANCIALS



In 2021, over 72% of our expenses went towards staff, small businesses, youth, and residents of the Southwest Side. Like many nonprofits and small businesses, COVID-19 presented challenges for revenue. Thankfully, through a PPP loan and the generosity of foundations, corporations, and individuals we were able to continue providing all of our programs and services.

## Revenue: \$539,670

Like most years, Plant Chicago's top source of revenue was from private foundations. Earned income comes from program fees and sales. The majority of "other" revenue came from the forgiveness of our PPP loan which helped to close the gap from earned income losses. 2021 saw several multi-year restricted grants sunset; note that these are recorded as revenue in previous years in tax documents.

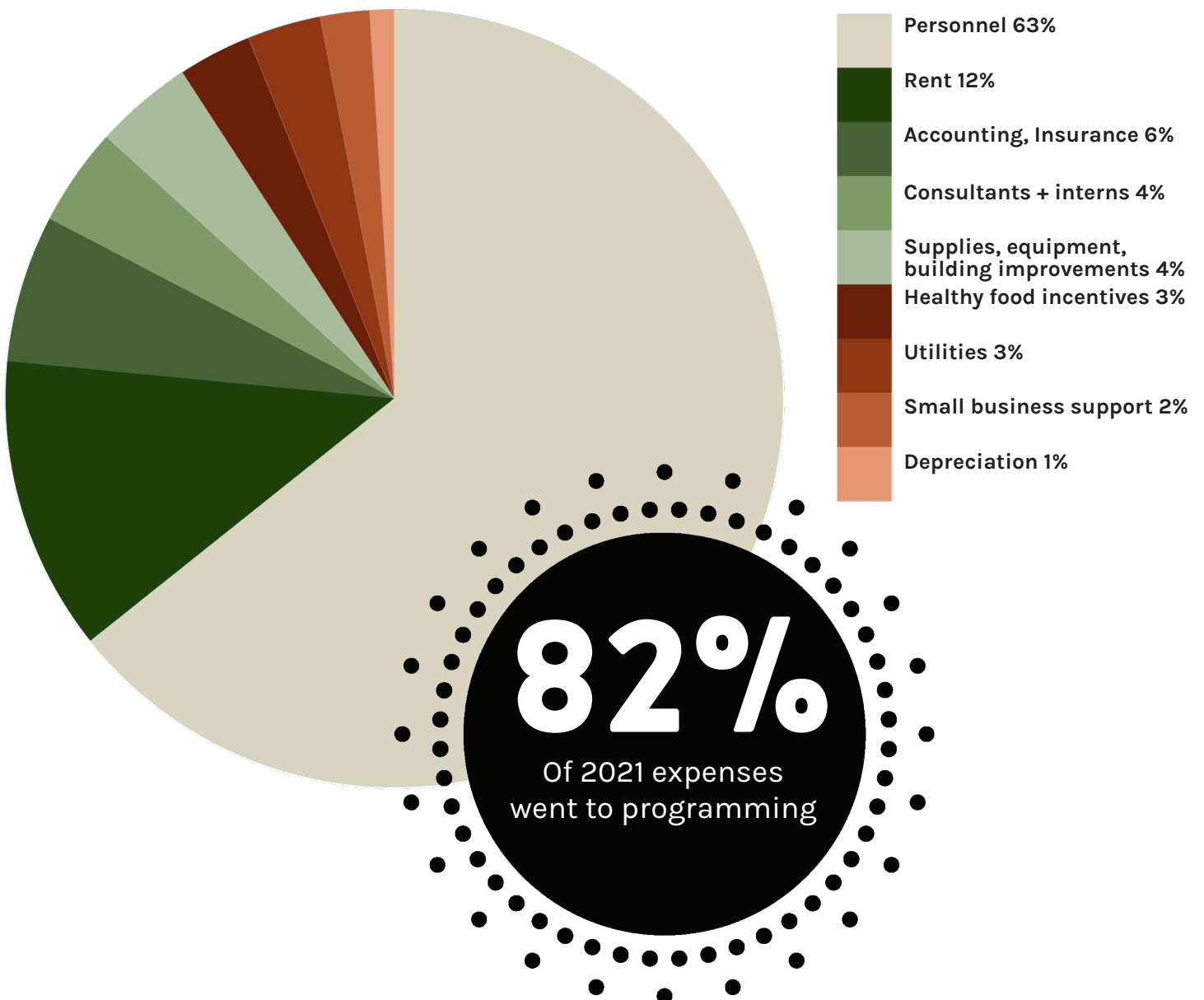




## Expenses: \$460,349

Historically, Plant Chicago's second highest expense has always been rent. With the purchase of the firehouse in 2022, we are looking forward to eliminating this expense! While we have funded this purchase primarily with a loan, the work that we put into renovations will benefit our nonprofit and not a landlord. Over the years, our loan payments will be lower than renting, meaning that a greater portion of our expenses can go toward people and programs.

Thank you to all of the individuals, foundations, and businesses that have helped Plant Chicago be able to continue to do such unique work throughout the pandemic. We cannot do this work without your help! We hope you will continue to support our programs and operations through 2022 as we enter into a new chapter as building owners. We have big things on the horizon!



## Many thanks to our current sponsors, in-kind donors, and foundation partners:

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We would also like to thank the 150+ individual donors who chose to support our mission in 2021!