



Right: ASE leaders and community members celebrate the US Army Corps of Engineers' withdrawal of its application to expand the toxic Confined Disposal Facility landfill on Lake Michigan.

Below: Warning sign for the Confined Disposal Facility, on Lake Michigan, at the north end of a local park.



CCHD-Funded Organization Unites Diverse Chicago Community in Fight for Environmental Justice

For almost a quarter-century, the Alliance of the Southeast (ASE, pronounced *ah-seh*) in Chicago has been growing a multicultural, interfaith coalition of churches, schools, and organizations to address and find solutions to some of the most pressing challenges the community faces.

BY RHINA GUIDOS

First and foremost is a focus on the well-being of those who live on Chicago's Southeast Side—an area known both for the rich diversity of its predominantly Black and Latino residents and for the lasting health impacts of pollution from the chemical and steel plants that once dominated during the Industrial Age.

"Everything we do is tied to social justice and has a lot of crossover with racial and environmental justice, economic justice," said Amalia NietoGomez, the alliance's executive director and lead organizer. "It means a lot to be able to help the community get what it needs and wants."

What the community most needs and wants is a safe and healthy environment for those who live there. Grants from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) have supported the alliance in organizing and sustaining a collective fight against environmental damage and the long-standing injustices faced by Southeast Side residents. In recent years, that

work has included opposing construction and other proposals that threaten nearby schools and public spaces, as well as engaging local governments to promote environmentally responsible and equitable development in Southeast Chicago.

One of the alliance's most recent victories came in March 2025, when the Army Corps of Engineers withdrew plans to expand a waste disposal facility in the Southeast side, following opposition from the community as well as city and state officials. Local headlines lauded the win that came as a result of Southeast neighbors banding together.

"Being able to get the Army Corps to withdraw an application to build a 25-foot-high toxic waste dump in the community that is already overburdened with toxic developments is a huge win," Amalia said. "And we got the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency [EPA] on board."



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 Through the CATHOLIC CAMPAIGN FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT (CCHD) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholics and friends of CCHD across the country help poor and low-income Americans to help themselves and their communities out of poverty.

Since 1970, CCHD has contributed more than \$464 million to more than 12,200 low-income-led, community-based projects that strengthen families, create jobs, build affordable housing, fight crime, and improve schools and neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects develop community leadership and participation so their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective, and so CCHD's investment in people will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between impoverished and affluent persons.

LETTER FROM

THE DIRECTOR



Dear Friends,

For generations, residents from Chicago's Southeast Side have carried the weight of environmental and economic harm left by the Industrial Age. Higher rates of asthma, cancer, and other health challenges have long affected this community. Today, as new companies look to expand in the area, the Alliance of the Southeast (ASE)—a coalition of churches, businesses and other community groups—is working to ensure that history does not repeat itself. ASE educates new generations about the neighborhood's polluted past and organizes residents to protect their future.

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) has proudly supported ASE in this vital work. Grants from CCHD have enabled the alliance to run campaigns that inform residents of their rights, unite the community, and create practical solutions that improve health, safety, and opportunity in the Southeast Side.

ASE's recent victories are powerful examples of what community organizing can achieve. The alliance successfully halted the expansion of a toxic waste dump, protecting families from further pollution. This summer, ASE also worked with its youth leadership council to confront gun violence by organizing a peace march and rally and planning future community healing events.

The alliance's advocacy extends beyond issues of pollution and environmental justice. In a social media campaign, 1,600 residents reached out to city officials to demand inspections at two apartment complexes that received US Department of Housing and Urban Development funds to house the poor. These efforts demonstrate ASE's commitment to justice, health, and equity in every corner of the community.

We are proud to partner with ASE, a CCHD-funded organization whose successes are made possible by your generosity. As you'll see in these pages, the real victory belongs to the residents themselves—neighbors who come together, raise their voices, and take action to build a safer, healthier, and more just community. These efforts are exactly what we at CCHD work to support—and why your continued support is so essential.

ALEXANDRA CARROLL

Director, Catholic Campaign for Human Development

You can be part of CCHD's critical work by donating at Mass or through your parish's online giving platform. #iGiveCatholic also accepts funds for CCHD. Visit igivecatholic.org/story/USCCB-CCHD to learn more.



Top Left: ASE coalition leaders held a town hall, where they spoke on community priorities for jobs, the environment, and housing for local development, at the South Works Quantum campus. Priorities were created by resident committees. **Lower Left:** Local resident and ASE staff member Sam Corona speaks at the community celebration event. **Lower Center:** Local resident and ASE leader Arnold Bradford speaks at the community celebration event. **Right:** ASE coalition leaders at a town hall, spoke on community priorities for jobs, the environment, and housing for local development at the South Works Quantum campus.

Here is how it happened. ASE initially joined forces with other local environmental justice organizations to file a 2023 lawsuit to stop the dump's proposed expansion. Beyond legal action, ASE then mobilized the community by educating residents, rallying them to petition government agencies, and encouraging diverse forms of advocacy. Some marched, others called local leaders, and many took to social media to raise awareness. After public uproar, that is when the state's EPA agreed that expanding the dump would violate Illinois law.

"That same agency, when [the Army Corps] originally went to them about a different toxic development, they almost automatically approved the permits," said Amalia. "So getting to see a state agency move and start to protect communities and listen to communities and name environmental justice as one of the reasons why they are going to deny permits for a toxic development is really rewarding and powerful."

In addition to the favorable response ASE received from the Illinois EPA, it also garnered the support of Illinois Attorney General Kwame Raoul, who filed an amicus curiae brief in support of ASE's lawsuit in July 2024.

"Prohibiting the expansion of this facility is an important step to prioritize residents' quality of life and bring long overdue environmental justice to a Chicago community that has been overlooked for too many decades in our city's history," Attorney General Raoul noted in a statement he issued announcing his support for ASE's lawsuit.

When talking to one of the resident leaders about ASE's win, Amalia said they realized that their victory could have a domino effect on communities like theirs in other parts of the country.

"So many communities have had to fight the Army Corps of Engineers, [and] have had similar fights like we've had. But we won, and that's sending a big statement saying, 'Hey, this is doable,'" she said. "We can win these things and win healthier communities. So, yeah, it's a very big deal."

And this was not ASE's first victory. Previously, the alliance joined forces with others to successfully prevent a metal-shredding facility from relocating to the Southeast Side from a wealthier Chicago neighborhood, where residents had complained about its negative effects, including noise and pollution.

Amalia credits help from CCHD as a key factor in ASE's mission to put justice into action, noting that the funding enabled the alliance to share critical information with the community.

"I know a lot of the teachings talk about justice, but the CCHD funding actually helps people fight for justice and actually implement justice across all levels," Amalia said.

ASE seeks to achieve economic, environmental, and racial justice—often intertwined goals that are clearly reflected in the struggle against the toxic waste dump expansion.

"This funding lets us do the work," she said.

Looking ahead, ASE's focus is to fight for "good development, equitable development," Amalia said.

That means advocating to ensure that long-term residents are not displaced by higher property taxes or skyrocketing rent, as high-tech development seeks to gain a foothold in the Southeast side, while also encouraging healthier and more green development in the community.

Recently, ASE has raised community concerns about a development project in the Southeast Side, insisting that current residents need written guarantees from local leaders and the developer. The alliance is calling for the developer to commit to provide jobs with living wages, account for environmental impacts, and ensure the project improves public spaces.

"Right now, we are working to make sure that that 440-acre development actually benefits the local community, making sure that folks aren't displaced because of higher property taxes, higher rents, higher utility bills, as this high-tech development comes into a neighborhood that has also high rates of unemployment, returning citizens, and has been divested in for such a long time," Amalia said.

This summer, ASE hosted a community housing summit and resource fair to brainstorm ideas to help residents stay in the neighborhood amid concerns about rising property prices and other costs linked to the expected development in



Top: Local residents gather at an environmental justice town hall, hosted by ASE and partners, to discuss policies to stop toxic developments from being concentrated in low-income and racial/ethnic minority communities. **Lower Left:** Local Alderman Peter Chico speaks at a rally to stop the 25-foot expansion of the Confined Disposal Facility on Lake Michigan. **Lower Right:** Local residents and ASE staff speak at an environmental justice tour.

the area. ASE also organized environmental justice tours, guiding residents and visitors through toxic sites on the Southeast Side so they could learn about the area's industrial legacy, including the pollution left behind by steel mills. While not as widely known as tours of the city's architecture or its famous Magnificent Mile shopping district, the environmental justice tours filled up at a steady pace throughout the summer, Amalia said. They also focused on pending projects and the community concerns surrounding them.

The alliance also is working with a new generation of leaders from the Southeast Side.

"Our youth council is for ages 12 to 19 that we work with to develop their leadership skills. We organize the youth leaders like we organize the adult leaders. They have their own campaigns," Amalia said.

A recent campaign advocated for redirecting funds away from police officers in schools and toward mental health and restorative resources in schools.

"That started because a lot of the youth noticed that there were high detention rates and high suspension rates, especially in schools with youth of color in African American and Latino

neighborhoods . . . and they said, 'That's not exactly helpful for us. So what are some other things that we need?'" Amalia added. "So they identified restorative practices, where folks are not pushed into the juvenile detention system but actually are having access to resources and are being able to work things out and talk things out rather than being jailed."

ASE's strength has been in uniting a variety of people who make up the diverse landscape of the Southeast Side.

"We're a multicultural, intergenerational alliance. We're made up of both community and faith-based organizations. So we pull together a lot of folks from the community to work on issues that are important to the community and connect a lot of people," Amalia said.

That ability, she added, is also a testament to CCHD's support of the alliance, its work, and its commitment to a community that has often felt abandoned. She emphasized her passion for ensuring that residents' voices are not only heard but also translated into cleaner, healthier environments where people can thrive.

"Without the CCHD grants, we would not have been able to do these campaigns," Amalia said. "These campaigns help folks in poverty come up

with their own solutions, and we help them fight and win to make sure that our communities are healthier, safer, and thriving the way community members imagine it to be or want it to be." ♦



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