



POLICY CASE STUDY

Tearing the Paper Ceiling in Chicago



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Breaking Barriers with a Billboard

In early 2025, Opportunity@Work (O@W) received a voicemail from Alderman Gilbert Villegas' office:

"I work in Alderman Gilbert Villegas' office. The Alderman is interested in the Tear the Paper Ceiling movement. There are a lot of ads in Chicago and the Alderman is considering sponsoring legislation to address the paper ceiling."

The seed had been planted months earlier, when Villegas— a retired Marine who served in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm—first saw a [‘Tear the Paper Ceiling’](#) billboard in Chicago. Sponsored by Opportunity@Work, in partnership with the Ad Council, ‘Tear the Paper Ceiling’ is a national public awareness campaign aimed at changing attitudes toward workers [Skilled Through Alternative Routes \(STARs\)](#) and motivating employers to shift toward skills-first hiring practices. The campaign’s message resonated deeply: **millions of skilled Americans are locked out of opportunity simply because they lack a four-year college degree.**

For Villegas, who knew firsthand the value of military training and real-world experience, the paper ceiling was not just a metaphor—it was a barrier keeping veterans, working parents, and people of color from good jobs in Chicago.

From Inspiration to Legislation

Determined to take action, Villegas introduced an [ordinance](#) to amend Chapter 2-74 of the municipal code, allowing work experience, vocational training, or military service to be considered as substitutions for college degree requirements for most city jobs. Professional positions requiring licensure—such as attorneys, doctors, or engineers—remain exceptions.

Villegas argued that the change was about fairness, workforce needs, and economic opportunity:



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“As we continue advancing a more inclusive workforce nationwide, it is crucial that we recognize the value of experience, training, and certifications—not just degrees—when evaluating candidates for employment.”

– Alderman Gilbert Villegas, City of Chicago, 36th Ward

The Workforce Committee Hearing: Voices for Change

At the Committee on Workforce Development hearing¹, the case for reform came into sharp focus.

- **The cost barrier:** Alderman Marty Quinn pointed out that college tuition is “closing in on \$100,000—a-year at some institutions,” and Human Resources Commissioner, Sandra Blakemore, emphasized that only a third of city employees currently hold a college degree.
- **The opportunity barrier:** Opportunity@Work’s Senior Vice President of Public Sector & Policy, Blair Corcoran de Castillo, testified that nearly 2 million STARs (Skilled Through Alternative Routes) in Chicago² already have the skills to qualify for city jobs. She highlighted how degree requirements disproportionately screen out 61% of Black workers, 54% of Hispanic workers, 39% of White workers, 33% of AAPI workers, and 64% of veterans.³ She concluded:



“It takes more than 30 years for a STAR to earn the same wage that a bachelor’s degree candidate earns on their first day after college.”⁴

– Blair Corcoran de Castillo, SVP, Public Sector & Policy at Opportunity@Work

- **The workforce barrier:** Annika Cole of the Chicago Jobs Council (CJC) noted that STARs were being “held back by outdated hiring practices,” even though they were ready for higher-wage work.
- **The personal barrier:** Alderman Andre Vasquez, chair of the Council’s Latino Caucus, recalled leaving University of Illinois Chicago without a degree and only later completing an online credential to get a promotion. “The amount of debt that people take on just to get a degree ... isn’t a solution for people looking to get ahead,” he said.

The hearing underscored a powerful reality: degree requirements were locking out qualified Chicagoans from good jobs while shrinking the city’s own talent pool.

Coalition Power Behind the Policy

The ordinance didn’t advance on inspiration alone. O@W and CJC partnered to organize advocacy, prepare testimony, and rally support. Together, they drafted a [letter of support signed by 17 organizations](#), from workforce nonprofits to veteran advocates, and coordinated testimony that included both experts and STARs themselves.

This coalition effort proved decisive in demonstrating that the ordinance was about more than hiring—it was about restoring pathways to prosperity for nearly 2 million Chicago STARs.



Why Skills-Based Hiring Matters for Chicago's Future

Chicago's ordinance, passed on May 21, 2025, represents a fundamental shift in how the city thinks about talent:

- **Broadening access:** "College degree required" will no longer appear automatically on city job listings, opening pathways for candidates with apprenticeships, certifications, military service, or work experience.
- **Promoting fairness:** With 2 million skilled STARs in the City, the ordinance recognizes the contributions of STARs and dismantles a barrier that disproportionately affected minority and veteran applicants.
- **Addressing workforce needs:** The state of Illinois faces persistent hiring challenges.⁵ Fewer than half of Chicago students graduate from a four-year institution. Only 30% of Chicago Public Schools 9th graders are expected to earn a degree by age 25.⁶
- **Aligning with reality:** Half of recent college graduates report feeling unqualified for the workforce, and 40% of employers agree. Meanwhile, Illinois has the sixth-highest in-state tuition in the nation, and student debt burdens continue to climb.⁷

By endorsing skills-based hiring, city leaders acknowledge that a college degree is not the only—or even the best—indicator of competency.

A Win for STARs—and for Chicago

The Chicago City Council passed the ordinance, and Mayor Brandon Johnson reinforced it through an [executive order](#), further demonstrating the City's commitment to skills-based talent practices. With this, Chicago joined local governments, like New York, Philadelphia, Hennepin County, and St. Paul, in making a commitment to tear the paper ceiling. This includes reviewing job specifications for City jobs and ensuring that requirements are inclusive of skills, competencies, and work experiences from various pathways which may qualify candidates for the position, removing the statement "or an equivalent combination of education, training, and experience," from City job postings and replacing it with language that clearly details what constitutes the necessary experience, training, or education, or a combination thereof to qualify for a position, making it easier for STARs to identify jobs they are qualified for and hiring managers to evaluate qualified candidates based on skills.

Blakemore summed up the city's excitement:



*"With skill-based hiring, it really diversifies and expands our labor pool. We're excited about that because ... only a third of city employees have a college degree. So this helps not only prospective employees, but also helps our current city workforce."*⁸

– **Sandra Blakemore**, City of Chicago, Commissioner of Human Resources

The City of Chicago [employs](#) upwards of 25,000 employees in more than 1,000 different job categories. Not only will this policy change enable increased access to upward mobility for over 8,000 STARs currently employed by the city, but also provide new opportunities for thousands of STARs across the city who have skills for the job.

Conclusion

What began with a billboard—and a voicemail from Alderman Villegas’s office—sparked a movement that reshaped city workforce policy.

Thanks to the leadership of Alderman Villegas, the advocacy of the Chicago Jobs Council, the organizing of 17 community partners, and the expertise of Opportunity@Work, Chicago has opened the doors of opportunity to nearly 2 million STARs.

By tearing the paper ceiling, the city is not only giving more residents a fair shot at prosperity—it is strengthening its own workforce, proving that **when skills are valued over pedigree, everyone rises.**

¹ City of Chicago Committee on Workforce Development, May 13, 2025 <https://vimeo.com/showcase/8928568?video=1082931074>

² Source: Opportunity@Work analysis of the 2023 1-year American Community Survey, Integrated Public Use Microdata Sample. This excludes 685k workers under the age of 25 from our analysis of the labor force to ensure that the majority of the population studied has completed their education.

³ Source: Opportunity@Work analysis of the 2023 1-year American Community Survey, Integrated Public Use Microdata Sample

⁴ Blair, Peter Q, Debroy, Papia and Heck, Justin. “Skills, Degrees and Labor Market Inequality.” National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper. July 2021. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w28991>.

⁵ *Examining Illinois’ public workforce: Three decades of state personnel trends.* Examining Illinois’ Public Workforce: Three Decades of State Personnel Trends | Civic Federation. (2025, July 16). <https://www.civiced.org/blog/illinois-state-personnel-trends>

⁶ Usher, A., Mahaffie, S., & Nagaoka, J. (2023). The educational attainment of Chicago Public Schools students: 2022. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.

⁷ Zuar, L. (2025, May 28). *No degree? no problem. Chicago expanding access to work.* Illinois Policy. <https://www.illinoispolicy.org/no-degree-no-problem-chicago-expanding-access-to-work/>

⁸ City of Chicago Committee on Workforce Development Testimony, May 13, 2025 <https://vimeo.com/showcase/8928568?video=1082931074>