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**Contact:** Angie Davis, External Relations

**Telephone:** (773) 320-7227

**Email:** [angie@options4youth.org](mailto:angie@options4youth.org)

## **Program Helps Teens Graduate Amidst Challenges by Reducing Violence in Their Lives**

***New approach emphasizes “there’s more to being a man”***

[CHICAGO, IL, June 29] — Despite the challenges caused by COVID-19 isolation and remote learning, a unique violence prevention program for teen boys saw 100% of its seniors graduate from high school this month. All 34 of the seniors in the “What’s Up with Manhood” program at World Language High School in Little Village graduated, and 80% have been accepted into college or trade school.

Options for Youth’s “What’s Up with Manhood?” program provides a new approach to reducing the impact of violence in the lives of adolescent boys in Chicago’s Little Village neighborhood. Chicago-based Options for Youth partnered with Promundo, a global leader in working with men and boys for gender justice and violence reduction, to develop the What’s Up with Manhood? curriculum, a gender transformative curriculum that helps young men growing up in one of Chicago’s most underserved neighborhoods think critically about “what it means to be a man” in their community.

Since 2017, 107 teenage boys participated in the What’s Up program. All are minority and growing up in a neighborhood where one-third of the families live in poverty. Fewer than half of the high school students in Little Village graduate each year and only 6% graduate from college. This year, with COVID isolation, participants faced increased obstacles as they neared graduation and many had to keep up with schoolwork on cell phones because they had no computer or internet in their home.

“Young people growing up in Little Village, and similar underserved south and west side neighborhoods, are living in a toxic environment, constantly bombarded by negative social images, through social media, on the street, at school, and often at home. What they think is ‘normal’ because it is all they know is not ‘healthy normal’,” said Pat Mosena, President of Options for Youth.

By putting a “gender lens” on their own life experiences, What’s Up helps adolescent boys understand socially defined gender roles and how rigid stereotypes of manhood can be harmful to their health and relationships.

Training and mentor relationships replaced “macho tough guy” images with positive role models and helped each young man redefine what it means to be a man within his own life experiences.

Being in the What's Up with Manhood? program also provided these adolescent boys with a new understanding of gender equality and how this impacts relationships with their girlfriends.

As Anthony, a program participant and recent high school graduate, states, "We learned to understand equality and to value girls as equals, not objects".

**About Options for Youth:** For more than 25 years, Options for Youth has worked with children and teenagers from under-served neighborhoods in Chicago to help them overcome significant challenges, maximize their potential, and become successful students and members of their communities. One of our newest and most innovative initiatives is What's Up with Manhood? which helps young boys think critically and redefine what it means "to be a man". What's Up provides our participants with the freedom to be themselves and replaces harmful gender norms with positive role models. Learn more about all of our programming at [www.options4youth.org](http://www.options4youth.org).

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WGN, Univision and HBO Vice have done specials on the What's Up with Manhood? program. If you would like more information about this program, call Angie Davis at (773) 320-7227 or email [angie@options4youth.org](mailto:angie@options4youth.org). Options for Youth can be found on Instagram and Facebook [@options4youth](https://www.instagram.com/options4youth) and twitter [@options\\_youth](https://twitter.com/options_youth).