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## **Program Helps At-Risk Teens from Little Village Graduate Amidst COVID-19 Challenges**

***Faced with increased violence in Little Village, a new approach emphasizes “there’s more to being a man”***

[CHICAGO, IL, July 6, 2021] — Despite the challenges caused by COVID-19 and remote learning over the last seventeen months, a unique violence prevention program for teen boys saw 98% of its seniors graduate from high school in 2020 and 2021. Options for Youth’s “What’s Up with Manhood?” program works with teen boys in Chicago’s Little Village neighborhood to prevent high school dropout and to reduce the impact of violence in their young lives.

A total of 45 senior participants in the What’s Up program at World Language High School in Little Village graduated in 2020 and 2021 during the ongoing pandemic, with 100% accepted into college or trade school. A majority of the graduates had been with the program since their freshman year of high school.

Chicago-based Options for Youth partnered with Promundo, a global leader in violence prevention and gender equality research, to develop the What’s Up with Manhood? program in 2017. Since then, over 120 teens have participated in the mentoring program which is designed to improve academic performance and decrease violence by promoting positive images of masculinity among adolescent boys in Little Village.

“In Little Village, the high school graduation rate is only 49% and we’re seeing too many kids who should be thriving in school, getting caught up in criminal activity,” says Pat Mosena, President of Options for Youth. “We believe these kids have the ability to succeed, which is why our program helps them maximize their own potential. Through intensive training focusing on healthy masculinity, gender equality, and non-violent conflict resolution, we teach teen boys what it really means to be a man in their community. Academic performance begins to take center stage in their lives, and success follows.”

Options for Youth’s training and mentor relationships help teenage boys think critically about how “being a man” is defined in their community and replace “macho tough guy” images with positive role models. Program participants gain a new understanding of their roles in society, and how this impacts relationships with their partners, peers, parents and teachers.

Program participant, Antonio, joined the Whats Up program as a freshman four years ago, and graduated three weeks ago from World Language High School in Little Village with his fellow cohort members. Antonio states, “I had just come to the United States from Mexico the year before I joined the program. I was extremely shy and didn’t know how to connect with my

teachers or classmates. This program helped me stay strong and taught me perseverance, respectfulness, and how to communicate with others.”

Now in its fourth year, the What’s Up with Manhood program works directly with World Language High School with the intention to expand to other high schools within the Little Village Lawndale High School Campus. Fundraising is underway to support an increased service plan.

### **About Options for Youth**

For over 20 years, Options for Youth has worked with at-risk teens from distressed neighborhoods in Chicago to help them overcome significant challenges, maximize their potential and become successful students and members of their communities. Through intense education, ongoing individual support, plus a long-term commitment to each young person, Options for Youth is changing the life trajectories of its adolescent participants.

The ultimate goal of the organization is to break the cycle of poverty that plagues our younger generations in under-resourced neighborhoods throughout the city. Learn more at [www.options4youth.org](http://www.options4youth.org) or [www.facebook.com/options4youth](http://www.facebook.com/options4youth).

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PHOTOS:

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