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## Over 50 years, Otis Monroe works to empower Black-led transformation

Founder of Monroe Foundation fosters Black-led movements

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*Staff Reporter*

Several dozen people listened to community organizer Otis Monroe explain the relief options available for individuals with a conviction or arrest record at an information session Saturday held at the Village of Broadview Chambers. It is one of many initiatives by The Monroe Foundation, a not-for-profit organization he founded 32 years ago to support Black movements.

“We believe Black movements should be transformative and when a movement is transformative you can see it, you can hear it, you can feel it,” Monroe said in an interview. “And people begin to believe that there’s hope for change...”

At Saturday’s event, residents from Maywood, Hillside, Broadview, Melrose Park and Bellwood with a conviction or arrest record received legal counseling to identify whether their records qualify to be sealed, expunged or to seek another relief option. It is an important step for justice-involved individuals seeking employment opportunities that may be negatively impacted by a criminal record, one of many reentry obstacles faced by returning citizens.

Partnering with the local organization PLCCA and local police departments, qualifying attendees received free on-site legal counseling and began the legal process by getting their fingerprints taken. Monroe emphasized these events are regularly held for thousands of justice-involved people released from Cook County Jail who are at high risk of recidivism. In 2022 alone, almost 17,000 people were released from the Illinois Department of Corrections, with the state agency estimating that 48% of those leaving state prisons will return to prison within three years, either for parole violations or new crimes. Moreover, it is part of their work to



SARA JANZ

*Otis Monroe speaking at Village of Broadview Town hall during “RapSheet Day” on March 4.*

advocate for criminal justice reform through the “Get Clear Illinois” movement.

Besides advocating for criminal justice reform, The Monroe Foundation supports community projects by providing technical assistance and connecting to funding opportunities, focusing on individuals or organizations seeking to improve Black communities in Proviso township and West Side of Chicago. Monroe is very intentional about supporting Black leaders to achieve the goals that the civil rights movement worked for and is yet to achieve.

“We purposefully and intentionally focus on how do we build Black leadership to be effective,” he said, adding the scope of the work includes building the capacity of Black-led movements and organizations to “make their activism effective and sustainable.”

Since his childhood, Monroe has seen the impact of community organizing. He recalls his grandparents supporting the civil rights movement and working to bring peace to the Woodlawn neighborhood of Chicago area by holding truce

meetings between gang members at their own kitchen table.

Over 50 years as a community organizer, Monroe focuses on working with committed leaders with impactful initiatives for their communities in need of financial or technical support. Having secured ongoing financial support from entities like Citibank, PNC Bank and the Chicago Community Trust, the Monroe Foundation shares its expertise with community organizations to seek funding opportunities. This work includes coaching, defining a project’s mission and objectives and creating development proposals. Member organizations can also share resources and find collaboration in monthly meetings held by the coalition-building project known as the Partnership Assisting Community Transformation (PACT), which includes organizations like The Black Star Project, People Empowering People and Action Coalition for Englewood.

“At the end of the conversation, it is the Black community that’s most impacted socially, educationally, economically and it’s still lagging behind.”