

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT
The Reopening

**“Chicago Community Trust CEO Helene Gayle on
Closing Gaps”**

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Andrew Schwartz: You're listening to The Reopening. The podcast that asks, "How will America work through the COVID-19 pandemic? How will we innovate, and how will it change our global economy?" Each week we invite top business leaders to share their insights on the road to economic revival here at home, and around the world.

Scott Miller: Today, our guest is Dr. Helene Gayle, Chief Executive of the Chicago Community Trust, a non-profit on the front lines of health and social equity in the city of Chicago. Previously, Dr. Gayle headed the venerable anti-poverty organization, Care USA. Helene talks with us about managing the Covid pandemic, racial disparities in wealth, education, and health outcomes in Chicago, and her vision for equity, opportunity, and shared prosperity.

Andrew Schwartz: I'm Andrew Schwartz.

Scott Miller: And I'm Scott Miller.

Andrew Schwartz: And this is The Reopening.

Dr. Helene Gayle, we are so happy to have you with us here today. Thank you for joining our program, The Reopening. I wanted to ask you, you're the CEO of the Chicago Community Trust, which touches many things in Chicago, but you're also a well-known physician. You're former head of Care, you worked for 20 years at CDC. We're living through a pandemic, as we all know. Given your expertise in public health, what's your assessment of the response to Covid-19, and where are we now? Where do you see us in the next several months? Is there any cause for optimism?

Helene Gayle: Thanks so much, and it's wonderful to be on this program. I so enjoy listening to these podcasts and all the interesting topics that you cover, so I'm really honored to be here today.

So, if we look at the response, I think there are a lot of ways to think about it. When we do response well, there are many things that are in place. First of all, we have preparedness before anything occurs. And having disease preparedness capability is critical. We also, when we do it well, have a coordinated national response. And depending on the level of that crisis, on the level of that pandemic or epidemic, we may have a coordination at the very highest levels of government. Or, if it's not as serious, it may just be coordination between agencies. I think we didn't have those things in place this time. We didn't have the kind of disease preparedness that would have been optimal, and we have not had the kind of coordinated national response. It has thus meant that in many ways, we've had many different responses. And those responses have been state by state to a large degree, because we haven't had the kind of federal coordination that would have been optimal.

So, you almost have to look state-by-state and see how different states have handled this. I happen to live in a state right now, Illinois, that has had excellent leadership, both political leadership as well as public health leadership. Our political leaders listen to our public health people

and, as a result of that, made very good public health centered recommendations around our response. But I think it's important to think about all of those different aspects of what we need when we have these kind of public health crises. And it doesn't start with the crisis. It starts with having that disease preparedness, even before.

Andrew Schwartz: The unevenness of the response in the United States has contributed to a lot of chaos right now, it seems like. Do you think we're able to get all on the same page, now? Some people are calling it a second wave, Tony Fauci has said we're not through the first wave. But do you think that we're all going to be able to get on the same page? And is it just a matter of more of a national awakening to what's really going on?

Helene Gayle: Well, I think we're starting to see signs of that and, unfortunately, we have this almost natural experiment taking place with states that have been more public health oriented in their approach have taken very different stances to reopening than states who I think have seen this more from a political standpoint.

And so, unfortunately, we are starting to see resurgence in states that probably reopened their economies/way of doing business too early and starting to see spikes. The fact that we're now having record number of new cases reported four months into this is really unfortunate. But I'm hoping that as a result of this, and no one would have wanted this to be the way in which people learn the lesson, but perhaps by seeing those comparisons, other states will start thinking differently.

So, for instance, we see Texas right now saying that they're not going to roll back, but they're not going to continue on their plans for reopening the economy as a result of the resurgence and infections that they're seeing. So, I'm just hoping that as we see the different responses and see how they are correlated. Or the different course of the epidemic and how that is correlated with how public health minded people were in their recommendations, that in fact, we can get all on the same page and recognize that there are stages of this. That if you do this in a way that looks at your data in an objective fashion, makes recommendations based on that, that the outcomes are better I'm still hopeful that we will get on the same page, even in the absence of having a more coordinated national response.

Andrew Schwartz: I want to bring in Scott.

Scott Miller: Dr. Gayle, thanks so much for being on the program. You are head of a major philanthropic organization, and we really rely, in times of crisis, on the organizations like the one you run. Could you talk about what it's meant, because this public health crisis has come with an economic downturn. A lot of people need services and have a tough time getting them, and the philanthropic sector is so important at times like this. What's been your experience as this crisis has played out? And how do things look to you?

Helene Gayle: As this as this crisis unfolded in the Chicago region, we thought that our best use of our resources was around the economic crisis. And, as we all know, this is a public health crisis that, by the measures that we needed

to put into place, created an economic crisis as well. And so, we, along with our partners in the United Way of the United Way of Chicago, mounted in an emergency response. We were able to launch that response with about \$8 million. And within about three weeks, we were able to raise almost \$35 million and then also help the state raise an equivalent fund for about \$30 million. And we thought that the best use was to really focus on the emergency needs that presented as a result of this. Food. Shelter. Cash so that people could pay their bills. And really throughout the last couple of months, have worked to deploy those resources most rapidly with a real eye to which communities were most impacted by this pandemic. And that's both the health aspects of it, but also the economic aspects of it.

We know that there are many people in our city, in our region, who were already living paycheck to paycheck. And as a result of the economic shutdown, the fact that many people were laid off from jobs, life got a lot harder economically, that those same populations were even in more dire straits than before. So, we put a real focus on the most economically vulnerable populations in our state, in our region, that particularly affected communities of color. African American and Latinx, who also were the ones most disproportionately impacted by the disease of Covid-19.

So, we really tried to rapidly get resources together to be able to meet the greatest needs that people had around food, shelter, cash to pay bills. And, one of the aspects, I'll just add around the cash aspect, as you know, through the Cares Act, there were dollars that were given to people who were in need. But if you were undocumented, you didn't have access to those resources. And so, one of the populations we put a real focus on were undocumented populations who didn't have access to dollars through the Cares Act. We also helped to supplement some of the testing, some of the mental health services. But really, again, with a real focus on what were the most immediate needs of people facing, both the health as well as the economic, crisis of Covid-19.

Scott Miller:

It's so heartwarming that you had the response from donors that you did. Over \$30 million is astonishing. But here we are sitting in June and it's easy to forget that in March -- my church has a food bank operation, and that food bank operation was taxed massively because of the immediate needs and the paycheck to paycheck lifestyle of many people, those problems manifested themselves in a hurry.

So, congratulations on the response. But now that you're a few months into it, has it stabilized? What's it look like?

Helene Gayle:

We have real concerns about this kind of crossroads right now. Because on one hand, we're starting to look towards what does recovery look like because as economic activity begins to evolve and as we start opening up the economy, we know there's a big recovery effort that needs to happen. On the other hand, we're not out of the emergency crisis phase, either. And we don't know what's going to happen in the fall, for instance, which is the traditional flu season, whether we're going to have a double whammy of Covid and flu and some of the same sort of emergency kinds of needs as well. So we're kind of looking in both directions, making sure

that we don't stop too soon with the emergency response, but at the same time, start thinking about the hard business of rebuilding economies. And particularly, again, with an eye towards neighborhoods, communities, and households that were economically vulnerable before this crisis, who are in even more dire straits today.

Andrew Schwartz: Helene, we're having a conversation in this country, in parallel to the one we're having about public health, we're having a conversation about systemic racism. And you've made statements about the sickening death of George Floyd and other things that have been happening. With your position, as we look forward, systemic racism isn't just morally wrong, but it's also bad for business. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Helene Gayle: So, interestingly enough, when I came to take on my position almost three years ago now, we went through a process of stepping back and thinking about where we felt we could make the biggest impact in the Chicago region with our mission being working with our communities to help solve the most important challenges.

And what we thought as we stepped back, was that, we had a lot of challenges that we could pick one or two. The largest health disparity in the nation is in Chicago. If you live downtown in one of the wealthy neighborhoods, you live to 90. You go five/six miles away in poor communities, in Black or Latinx neighborhoods, and that plummets to about 60. So, a 30-year life expectancy gap in one city. Inexcusable.

We also have a huge challenge of violence in in many of the neighborhoods, particularly the neighborhoods where there's been such huge disinvestment and lack of opportunity. Lack of access to education, etc. I could go on listing single issues.

But underneath all of those issues, is this economic gap that exists, the wealth gap. And in Chicago, like so many urban areas, there are large racial underpinnings to that inequity. And so, we said that we felt that closing the racial and ethnic wealth gap was where we wanted to put our highest focus because it is so critical. It's kind of the root cause, if you will, to so many those issues. And I say that as a backdrop. Because when Covid crisis hit, and we started seeing the disproportionate impact on Black and Latinx communities, it really was almost a moment of clarity for people who had seen us unveil our strategy to saying, "Wow, now we really get it. We get why this is such an underlying issue."

And then George Floyd. And the racial reckoning, if you will, that came with that was again, one of those moments where people said, "We get it. We get that this is a real issue and that it doesn't just hurt the communities most impacted, but it hurts us all in so many ways."

And, again, back to our strategy. One of the things that we said was, if you look at the data that came out of several reports in Chicago, it showed that the economy overall suffered when you think about the fact that African-Americans, Latinx make up two-thirds of the population. If you're holding back the economic potential of two-thirds of your population, how do you expect that the whole community is going to move forward?

We also helped to fund a report that showed that as a result of Chicago segregation, and it's a report called *The Cost of Segregation*, between \$4 to \$8 billion of GDP was lost. And if Chicago was able to become a less segregated and segregated not residentially only, but because of the consequences of segregation, it would contribute \$8 billion dollars in GDP to the economy. So, when you make those economic arguments and you recognize that: yes, it's the moral thing to do, it's the fair thing to do, it's the right thing to do. But at the end of the day, it's also the smart thing to do. And it is the only way that we in our region, but I would argue the rest of the nation, is going to move forward.

And just finally, if you look at the charts where people project what will happen as we become a majority minority country. And if we don't look at this wealth gap where we will be as a nation as a result of that. So, I just think, for me, I believe it from a justice and fairness point of view as an African American, I believe it in my heart and soul. But, as a pragmatist, I also recognize it's the only way that we're going to actually achieve what we could achieve as a region, as a nation. If we can make sure that everybody has the opportunity to be economically productive and contribute at the level of their own ability.

Andrew Schwartz: Is this something that you're talking to other CEOs about, and when you're talking to other CEOs about this, of major companies and heads of institutions, are they aware of this and are they embracing it?

Helene Gayle: Covid-19 and George Floyd, not to say just those two events, partly because of the proximity, partly because of the gruesome and visceral nature of the seeing George Floyd's murder. All of these things, I think, really have led to an awakening. And also, not just an awakening, but a questioning. People are starting to ask themselves hard questions. And I think that's true for companies.

I believe that philanthropy has a huge role in this. We can be catalytic. We can really help to support activities that help to demonstrate what works and what doesn't work. Government can put in big dollars through public resources, but it is business that has a unique role in contributing to some of these factors. So, as another example, one of the things that we all know is part of the reason why we have this wealth gap is because of some of the federal policies, particularly around home lending, home mortgages, and what happened through the experience of redlining. We know that one of the best and most consistent ways in which Americans have been able to gain access to building assets has been through homeownership. Well when a group of people were denied that opportunity, by definition, generations later, you start seeing a very different economic potential.

So here in Chicago, as an example, a recent study showed that in one neighborhood alone on the north side of Chicago, a predominantly white neighborhood. There was more lending in mortgage lending in one single neighborhood than all black neighborhoods in Chicago put together.

Andrew Schwartz: Extraordinary.

Helene Gayle: This is extraordinary. And this is today. And it showed, not only was it this one particular neighborhood, but there were three other neighborhoods, that if you took the single mortgage lending to any one of those four single white neighborhoods, each one of them was more than the whole aggregate mortgage lending to black neighborhoods on the south side. This is today. This is in this time.

And so when people ask the question, "We passed anti-discrimination laws in the 1960s, haven't we moved on?" Well, we haven't moved on. And I think this is the issue of recognizing systemic racism. We focus so much on individual racism. Are you treating individuals right? I'm all for treating individuals right, but I think we will see real change when we start analyzing those systemic issues and really make changes in those. And to your point, I think it is the private sector that really has an important and unique role in examining the ways in which they can start dismantling barriers to economic opportunity for all Americans.

Scott Miller: You know, a few weeks back, Andrew and I had the privilege of talking to Oscar Munoz, Executive Chairman of United Airlines. Another Chicagoan. Oscar talked to us about his experience as a Mexican-American who became chief executive of a major company. But he also talked about the role of allies. So as you look forward in sort of how we translate the energy into action. How do you think about allies, what advice could you give us about that?

Helene Gayle: I think allyship is critical. On a very personal level, as a person of color, we are always asked to solve the problems of people of color. We can't solve them by ourselves. It is a burden too large to bear, and we didn't create the systems. So, it is important that we have allies who understand the issues, and then can actually help on finding solutions.

I always say, I think a lot of this starts with understanding. There are a lot of really good people in this world, in this country, who have not had information that allows them to understand the problems, let alone the solutions. Most of us did not have education that gave us the kind of background on why we are where we are today. And so, I think a lot of it starts with education, understanding what are the kinds of policies and practices that have been in place that are real barriers to individuals and to communities. And then thinking about what ways that you can work on shifting those policies both in your own environment, but also thinking about what does it mean to advocate for policies that really would help to redress some of these issues. And so, I'm a full embracer of allyship. I think it's critical. I think it's vital, and I think we won't do it unless we have allies.

Andrew Schwartz: How do you think the public policy change really starts? Because, as you point out, business needs allies, but government needs to change the policies. And, there's this history of, continuing through this day, of systemic racism, redlining you pointed out, disparities in education, disparities in health care. We could list these individual things on and on and on. There's so many public policy challenges, where do we even start?

Helene Gayle:

Well, I think we start by making sure that we put in office people who we think have a commitment to actually taking a look at those issues and who are serious about public policy change. So, I think we all have a part in making sure that we have people who we feel are responsive, who are accountable, and who want to make sure that this is a country that works well for all of its citizens. I think that's fundamental.

But, there's also a lot of organizations, like CSIS, who are thinking smart about policies and thinking about what ways can we create policies and give that so that people who are in the business of advocating for policies have the kind of background and the data that they need to be able to really push for policies that can make a difference. So, I really hope that there will be more funding of organizations that are thinking about public policies that relate to this.

I think it's important, again, thinking from the private sector perspective, I hope that investors who are the ones who oftentimes invest in companies just like they are calling the question on ESG and how are companies thinking about the environment and other things, I hope that the same kind of investor activism can go into thinking about issues of systemic racism. So, I think there's lots of ways in which you think about, who are the stakeholder groups, and are we making sure that we're talking to the stakeholder groups who can have an influence on these issues.

Andrew Schwartz:

Do you think we're in a time where this is a movement? Or is this a moment? Or is this a fad? In the 60s, we had the Civil Rights Movement, and then it turned into the anti-war movement, and as Todd Gitlin of Yale pointed out, it turned into the counterculture. Now we've got this moment or movement, we don't really know what it is. What do you think it is?

Helene Gayle:

Maybe I'm kind of old, so I'm used to old movements. This is a different animal. This is a different way of organizing, it's much more spontaneous. I love it. I really appreciated seeing this kind of energy come forward. But I do think that at some point, there needs to be some way of codifying it or some way of moving it more into a movement that has specific goals. And it doesn't have to be one movement. But I think it is a question of whether this will be a moment or whether this will be sustained action that will really lead to some tangible outcomes.

But that said, it's hard to ignore that there is a large part of our population that is fed up, that feels that this is unjust, unfair, and unsustainable to continue to do business the way we're doing it. And I hope that whether it continues to be just people voicing that sentiment or whether we see something that is more structured in the way that we think of movements. Or maybe it's going to be something in between. But I think, like everything else today, how it happens is partly a creation of this new generation and a new way of doing things and moving things forward.

Scott Miller:

Just for the record. And for our audience. You're not old.

Helene Gayle: Older, older!

Scott Miller: Fair enough. We'll go with that.

But Helene, thank you so much for your time today. We appreciate the inspiration, more than anything else. It's been great hearing from you, and I'm really glad you have an agenda for all of us, even people at CSIS. So, we'll take your words to heart.

Andrew Schwartz: Helene, thank you from the bottom of our hearts. This is a great discussion and hopefully the first of many.

Helene Gayle: Thank you. My pleasure, my honor. Thank you.

Andrew Schwartz: Thanks for listening to The Reopening. If you liked this episode, please write us a review and subscribe wherever you find your podcasts. You can also find other podcasts from the Center for Strategic and International Studies at [CSIS.org/podcasts](https://www.csis.org/podcasts).