

## **CITIED Foundation**

### **Early Birds Social Worker Development Program**

**Organization:** [CITIED Foundation](https://www.citied.org)

**Executive Director:** Ashton Lockhart, LCSW

**Service Area:** Rockford, Illinois (primarily zip codes 61101 & 61102)

**Funding Request:** \$50,000 (SY 26-27, SY 27-28)

**Program Focus:** Youth Mental Health, Workforce Development, Leadership Development, Violence Prevention, and Equity for Communities Disproportionately Impacted by Marijuana Laws

### **Program Overview**

The Early Birds Social Worker Development Program is a trauma-informed youth leadership and mental health initiative designed to support underserved youth disproportionately impacted by poverty, community violence, systemic inequities, and the long-term effects of marijuana criminalization policies.

Hosted at Auburn High School and implemented by CITIED Foundation in partnership with By Any Dreams Necessary, the program equips Black and Brown youth ages 14–18 with mental health education, leadership development, mentorship, postsecondary planning, and real-world apprenticeship experiences.

Now entering its fourth year, Early Birds continues to expand its impact within Rockford communities. During the 2025–2026 school year, the program graduated 22 students who successfully completed programming focused on emotional wellness, leadership development, social work education, and future planning.

In addition to direct programming, Early Birds participants also engage in community mental health initiatives that encourage youth voice, advocacy, and peer-to-peer engagement. In 2025, students hosted a teen mental health panel alongside State Representative West and other community leaders to discuss youth mental health challenges, stigma, and community solutions. This year, participants also facilitated a school-based peer-to-peer resource and coping skills workshop designed to help students identify healthy coping strategies and increase awareness of available support resources.

### **Community Need**

Rockford's west side communities, particularly zip codes 61101 and 61102, continue to experience concentrated poverty, violence exposure, educational inequities, and limited access to culturally responsive mental health services. These same communities were disproportionately harmed by historical marijuana enforcement policies that contributed to incarceration, family instability, economic hardship, and long-term disenfranchisement within Black and Brown neighborhoods.

Many participating youth come from low-income households and communities heavily impacted by these systemic disparities. Students frequently experience chronic stress, trauma exposure,

emotional dysregulation, school disciplinary involvement, and limited access to prevention-focused behavioral health support.

While CITIED Foundation is still evaluating final outcomes from the current school year, preliminary program feedback and early data reviews show several consistent themes: students want programming to occur more frequently, desire continued support around emotional regulation and coping skills and benefit significantly from trusted adult mentorship and postsecondary planning support.

These findings reinforce the need for expanded prevention-focused programming that combines both social work education and personal development support in a culturally responsive environment.

### **How Funds Will Be Used**

Requested cannabis revenue funds will allow CITIED Foundation to sustain and expand the Early Birds program through additional weekly workshops and enhanced student support services.

Funding will support:

- Expanded weekly workshops focused on coping skills, emotional regulation, communication, and personal development
- Continued social work education and leadership training
- Youth stipends for successful program completion
- Reinstatement of the program's postsecondary planning component to support college, trade, career, and workforce readiness
- Apprenticeship-based mentorship opportunities with younger students
- Community mental health events and peer-led wellness initiatives
- Mental health education and wellness activities
- Program supplies, meals, transportation, and engagement supports

Funding is especially critical following the loss of prior school-based funding support and will help ensure underserved youth continue to receive consistent prevention-focused services.

### **Program Impact**

Through Early Birds, youth:

- Build emotional regulation and healthy coping skills
- Explore careers in mental health and social work
- Develop leadership, communication, and advocacy skills
- Participate in peer mentorship and community engagement
- Gain exposure to college, trade, and workforce pathways
- Receive mentorship from professionals with shared lived experiences

Program outcomes from the 2024–2025 year showed:

- 100% of participants reported a positive program experience
- 93% reported growth in mental health and social work knowledge

- Expanded partnerships allowed high school students to mentor elementary-aged youth through apprenticeship experiences

The program's continued growth demonstrates both strong student engagement and an ongoing need for culturally responsive mental health and youth development services within Rockford communities.

### **Why This Investment Matters**

The City of Rockford's cannabis revenue funding presents an opportunity to reinvest directly into communities disproportionately harmed by historical marijuana laws and systemic inequities.

The Early Birds Social Worker Development Program represents prevention, healing, leadership development, and long-term community transformation. Rather than responding only after youth enter crisis systems, this program equips young people with the tools, support, mentorship, and opportunities needed to thrive before challenges escalate into crisis situations.

By investing in Early Birds, the City of Rockford will help develop emotionally aware, community-connected future leaders who are prepared to strengthen the health and well-being of Rockford neighborhoods for years to come.