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Altgeld Gardens

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The south side of Chicago faces a continuous battle for survival, and it holds a monument to crushing, unfulfilled promises: Altgeld Gardens. With a long and illustrious history of accommodating black World War II veterans, the community now faces new battles of survival in the form of environmental dangers. The Chicago Housing Authority initially created Altgeld Gardens as a resource, as a progressive promise towards integration and compensation. However, eighty years later, poor air quality continues to impair youth health and education. Remoteness from the city limits the job opportunities available to residents, and Cook County offices have failed to invest in solutions needed to connect Altgeld Gardens to the city. Many different processes continue to harm and maintain Altgeld Gardens as an oppressed community unable to reconcile.

The deterioration from a compensatory haven to an unstable, neglected area exposes systemic failures in urban planning and resource allocation. This paper argues that the overall decline in Altgeld Gardens is not an uncontrollable byproduct but rather a consequence of discriminatory zoning and corruption.

The story of Altgeld Gardens unfolds through two structural processes: its poorly planned creation and subsequent desertion. Built at the end of World War II, Altgeld Gardens represented architectural and civic progress: it compensated the veterans for their service and did so with a revolutionary city planning initiative. However, instead of serving as a continuation of progress, it has regressed into one of many instances of environmental degradation and racial discrimination. University of Illinois Professor Lou Turner stated, “The city initially adopted a Garden City model...and now it is one of the most toxic places in America.” The Garden City model calls for a sustainable approach to building communities through promoting air quality and natural solutions, but it is ineffective without proper development. Planners must sustain natural growth within the community, but abandonment has completely disrupted any continuity of agriculture.

The remote location of Altgeld Gardens was an intentional decision by city planners to enforce segregation, but the planners have pushed the narrative that its location is purely coincidental. As a result of geographic isolation, the Black population—previously and currently—is kept out of sight and out of mind from the rest of the Chicago population. Sociological findings from the Hal Baron Project reaffirmed that initial isolation paved the way for decades of institutional neglect, which enabled mayoral administrations to disregard the

contaminants and distress that residents faced. Altgeld Gardens being in a remote location made it easier to ignore.

The subsequent poverty in Altgeld Gardens extends far beyond simple financial benchmarks. Poverty within the community is emphasized through concerns of physical security and public health. The remoteness of the neighborhood allows gangs and street organizations to thrive with alarming freedom, resulting in territorial gang fights and boundaries in which wearing the wrong colors can result in death. The atmosphere of localized violence, evident through recent tragedies such as the July 2025 shooting in Altgeld Gardens, inflicts psychological danger on the youth that compromises proper development. A former student and resident remarked that “one wrong word is all it takes to get a bullet in the head.” Simultaneously, the physical landscape coupled with social dangers acts as a hazard. The Riverdale community, the broader community Altgeld Gardens is located in, suffers from alarmingly high rates of cancer, respiratory illnesses, and asthma. The Chicago Reporter notes that 276 children in Altgeld Gardens were treated for asthma in 2004, more than one in eight children at the time, and this number will only continue to increase. All of these diseases are outcomes of exposure to industrial toxic waste. Environmental challenges reduce the quality of life through not only disease and illness, but also through professional and educational challenges. Rising rates of chronic illnesses within children also come with an increase in school absences, hindering academic performance and educational opportunities. The Toxic Donut of Altgeld Gardens, which comprises wastelands, toxic industrial areas, and pollution, serves as a barrier that prevents future generations from developing beyond past struggles. Thus, a cycle of disease, educational disadvantage, and poverty seals the fate of residents in a former land of promise.

Documented institutional corruption and systemic diversion of funds, specifically within Cook County, have compounded the downfall of Altgeld Gardens. A critical ruling in early 2026 stated that the county had wrongfully spent \$243 million in transportation tax dollars to subsidize the state's attorney and sheriff's offices. These actions directly contradicted the 2016 Safe Roads Amendment to the Illinois Constitution, which intended to preserve transportation fees for infrastructure development. This delay in funding impedes profound improvements to transportation for Altgeld Gardens, an area notorious for poor transportation and isolation from the rest of Chicago. For decades, the Red Line Extension toward Altgeld Gardens was delayed

under the guise of insufficient funds. Such false guises were so blatant that Professor Lou Turner stated that hopes for a better future in Altgeld Gardens were “an urban legend.” However, the 2026 judicial ruling exposes the fallacy of such a narrative, showing that the resources needed to connect Altgeld Gardens once and for all were readily available and taken elsewhere. This misallocation confirms that the disempowerment of Altgeld Gardens is fueled by political motives that prioritize municipal self-preservation over constitutional rights.

Changing the current trajectory of Altgeld Gardens calls for active civic reconciliation. Regardless of municipal abandonment, community resistance remains an enduring force. Founded by an Altgeld Gardens resident, the late Hazel Johnson and People for Community Recovery (PCR) led the charge toward improvement by exposing the corruption and speaking out against it. Recent events show the efficacy of such movements: after a period of advocacy and community mobilization, the \$5.7 billion Red Line Extension was approved and promises the integration of Altgeld Gardens into Chicago transportation by 2030. However, infrastructure alone cannot resolve social issues or pollution. Finding true justice requires social and financial concordance with driving organizations like PCR, advocacy for progressive policy reforms, and putting an end to the overt bureaucratic system of those in power.

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