

**GRA 2026 Annual Conference
Agenda**

Sunday, July 19

4 p.m. Check into hotel

5:00-7:30 p.m. Opening Evening: Dinner and Networking

Kick off the GRA 2026 Annual Conference with an evening of fun networking and connection. Designed to foster early connections and orient participants to the conference community, the evening will be a relaxed opportunity to meet peers, exchange ideas, and set the stage for the days ahead.

Location: TBD

Monday, July 20

8 a.m. Breakfast at CBOT Conference Center

8:30 a.m. Opening Setting: The Moment for State & Local Policy Research

The conference will formally open with remarks framing the current landscape for state and local policy research. As governments navigate fiscal uncertainty, shifting federal dynamics, and growing demands for impact, this session will set the stage for the day's discussions by highlighting the critical role research organizations play in informing decisions under pressure.

Speakers: Jeff Hornstein and Justin Coppedge

8:45 a.m. Anchor Presentation: Fiscal Sustainability Under Federal Pressure

State and local governments are facing increasing fiscal uncertainty as federal policy changes affect funding streams, program requirements, and intergovernmental relationships. This panel will explore how shifts in areas such as Medicaid, SNAP, and federal funding structures are impacting state and local budgets, as well as how governments are responding to manage volatility and long-term risk. Panelists will provide both national and practitioner perspectives on maintaining fiscal sustainability under federal pressure and highlight one actionable step governments can take to strengthen resilience.

Speakers:

- Jill Fraggos (Lurie Children's Hospital)
- Dean Constantinou (Cook County)
- Scott Leitz (NORC)

Moderator: Paula Worthington (Civic Federation, University of Chicago)

10:00 a.m. Break

10:15 a.m. Anchor Presentation: From Research to Results: Communicating for Influence

Strong research does not drive change on its own—impact depends on how it is translated, amplified, and used by decision-makers. This session explores what actually happens between publishing research and achieving real-world results. Through rapid-fire examples and a moderated conversation, speakers representing different roles in the “research to influence” chain will share what works, what doesn’t, and how to maximize impact even in resource-constrained environments.

Speakers:

- Merrill Davis (Texas 2036)
- Ianna Kachoris (Chicago Community Trust)
- Carlos Ballesteros (Injustice Watch)

Moderator - Megan McNeill (BGR)

11:30 a.m. Lunch

12:30 p.m. Concurrent Sessions 1

Jahn Event Space	Sullivan Room	Burnham Room
<p>Beyond Attendance: Building an Engaged Board Format: Interactive Workshop</p> <p>This session explores common breakdowns in board engagement and offers actionable approaches organizations can use to foster stronger participation, accountability, and board performance.</p> <p>Facilitator: Rena Henderson Mason, Bold Agenda</p>	<p>Grant Readiness Bootcamp Part 1 Format: Interactive Workshop</p> <p>Grant Readiness Boot Camp is designed to get your nonprofit grant-ready. Participants will gain insight into the funding sector, build a narrative foundation, and leave with a holistic understanding of the grant seeking process, including what you can prepare now to be ready</p>	<p>Making Education Data Comparable Across States Format: Interactive Workshop</p> <p>This session will strengthen participants’ ability to conduct cross-state education analysis by identifying and addressing key challenges in data definitions, measurement, and comparability.</p> <p>Facilitator: Elizabeth Durango-Cohen (Illinois Tech)</p>

	Facilitator: Artistic Fundraising Group <i>**must be taken with Part 2</i>	
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1:45 p.m. Break

2:00 p.m. Concurrent Sessions 2

Jahn Event Space	Sullivan Room	Burnham Room
<p>Coalition Strategy in Practice Format: Interactive workshop</p> <p>This interactive session will explore the skills required to build coalitions effectively, why coalition building is important, and to provide experience for attendees to practice using coalition building tools.</p> <p>Facilitator: Susannah Heitger (Crowe)</p>	<p>Grant Readiness Bootcamp Part 2</p> <p>Continuation of above</p>	<p>Property Tax Reform Across States: Challenges, Solutions & Paths to Reform Format: Panel & Q&A</p> <p>This panel will explore property tax systems across the country, highlighting national trends alongside challenges in places like Chicago and Louisiana. Panelists will examine how different systems function in practice and contrast them with successful reforms, such as those implemented in Massachusetts.</p> <p>Speakers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doug Howgate (MTF) • Stephen Stuart (BGR) • Chris Berry (Mansueto Institute) <p>Moderator – Deborah Carroll (University of Illinois)</p>

3:15 p.m. Break

4:30 Neighborhood Explorations

Attendees are invited to join Civic Federation staff-led excursions exploring Chicago's diverse neighborhoods and cultural offerings. Participants may choose from a selection of four curated, free neighborhood experiences, including walking tours in Logan Square, Pilsen, and Lakeview/Boystown. Each experience highlights local food, arts, music, and culture, and the opportunity to join a group dinner at attendees' own expense. Advance registration will be required for all evening activity options due to capacity and transit coordination. All groups will travel together via public transit, with staff providing guidance and meeting points for each excursion.

- Logan Square Neighborhood Exploration - Explore one of Chicago's most vibrant creative corridors via walking tour of historic Chicago housing and local stops.
- Pilsen Arts & Culture Walk - Exploration of Chicago's historic Latinx cultural district through a historic walking tour and local stops.
- Lakeview Cultural Corridor - A walking tour through one of Chicago's most iconic and historically significant LGBTQ+ neighborhoods.
- Loop Cultural Experience – Visit the Chicago Cultural Center and enjoy a relaxed evening in the heart of downtown Chicago.

Tuesday, July 21

8 a.m. Breakfast at CBOT Conference Center

8:30 a.m. Anchor Presentation: Chicago & Illinois Perspectives: Everything is interconnected

Chicago, Cook County, and the State of Illinois are deeply interconnected, shaped by overlapping tax bases, shared service responsibilities, and intergovernmental funding flows. This panel will examine how decisions at one level of government affect others, including impacts on budgeting, service delivery, and long-term fiscal sustainability. Drawing on perspective from city, county, and state leadership, the discussion will highlight key areas of alignment and tension, as well as opportunities for coordination. The session will conclude by identifying lessons and strategies that may be transferable to other states navigating similarly complex intergovernmental systems.

Speakers:

- Suzanna Mendoza, Illinois Comptroller
- David Merriman, University of Illinois
- Justin Marlowe, University of Chicago

Moderator: Joe Ferguson

9:45 a.m. Break

10:00 a.m. Concurrent Sessions 1

Jahn Event Space	Sullivan Room
<p>Designing Community Engagement That Actually Influences Policy Format: Interactive Session</p> <p>Equitable policy planning is most effective when informed by inclusive, holistic community engagement. This session will highlight a specific example of an effective community engagement strategy that led to policy adoption and implementation with measurable impact. We will then use these insights to design a hypothetical outreach strategy.</p> <p>Facilitator: Elevated Chicago and Duo Development</p>	<p>Designing & Scoping Research Project Format: Interactive Session</p> <p>What makes research actually get used? This hands-on session will guide participants through a structured process to clarify research questions, right-size scope, and map how findings translate into decisions. Through peer feedback and applied exercises, attendees will leave with practical tools to design more impactful, decision-oriented research.</p> <p>Facilitator: Mandy Spears and Robin Yeh (Sycamore Institute)</p>

11:15 a.m. Lunch and Affinity Meetings

Jahn Event Space	Sullivan Room	Civic Federation Conference Room
Research	Operations	Executives

12:15 p.m. Break

12:30 p.m. Interactive Sessions 2

Jahn Event Space	Sullivan Room
<p>Operations Innovation Exchange Format: Interactive Session</p> <p>This session will give participants an opportunity to explore and discuss how the</p>	<p>AI & Research Operations Format: Interactive Session (computer required)</p> <p>This hands-on workshop explores how AI can be applied to core research workflows. Participants will engage in live</p>

<p>following topics can be utilized as tools to meet organizational needs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data Tracking • Project Management Systems and Event Logistics • Finance • and more! <p>Facilitator: David Schwab (William Everett)</p>	<p>demonstrations and guided exercises to test how AI tools can support tasks such as summarizing complex materials, analyzing data, and drafting policy-ready content.</p> <p>Facilitator: Saloni Tandon (Economy League of Greater Philadelphia)</p>
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1:30-2:00 Break

2:30-4:30 p.m. [Architecture Tour](#)

Explore Chicago’s iconic architecture aboard the #1 rated boat tour of the city. The only Chicago River cruise partnered with the Chicago Architecture Center (CAC), First Lady offers visitors the city’s most engaging 90-minute architectural tour experience. Highly trained and enthusiastic volunteer CAC docents (guides) provide visitors with a compelling and detailed narrative of Chicago’s numerous architectural styles and the stories of the legendary figures who designed and built our city.

- 2:00 departure from CBOT
- 2:10 departure from the Hotel

6:30-7:30 - Cocktail Hour and GRA Awards Presentation (6:30-7:00)

7:30-8:30 – Gala Dinner and Keynote Speaker (TBD)

Join us for an evening celebrating excellence in state and local policy research at the annual GRA Awards Ceremony and Gala Dinner. The evening begins with the presentation of the GRA Awards recognizing outstanding contributions to the field, followed by a networking reception. Following the awards, attendees will gather for a seated gala dinner featuring remarks from a keynote speaker.

Location: Italian Village

Wednesday, July 22

8 a.m. Concurrent Sessions

Burnham Event Space	Jahn Space
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<p>8:00 a.m. Breakfast and GRA Membership Meeting This is a required meeting for all staff of GRA member organizations</p> <p>8:30 a.m. Lightning sessions with GRA Award Winners Presenters will share brief, high-impact insights into their research, strategies, and lessons learned.</p>	<p>8:00 a.m. Breakfast</p> <p>8:30 a.m. AI Considerations for Government Current state of state AI policy, focusing on data privacy and security considerations. Speakers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Renzo Soto, Texas 2036 • Future of Privacy Forum
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9:30 p.m. Break

9:45 a.m. Evaluating Economic Gains from Policy Changes

Unlocking Potential is a first-of-its-kind economic analysis that quantifies the measurable gains for Arizona families, businesses, and state economies when leaders act on the priorities voters across party lines consistently support.

Facilitator: Amanda Burke, Center for the Future of Arizona

10:45 a.m. Thank you and travel safely!

11:00 a.m. GRA Board Meeting (Trustees only)

Communications/Logistics General notes

- attire
- weather
- walking shoes
- directions
- have someone at the hotel to walk people over
- lanyards and name tags
- overall name things like sessions are for everyone – promote
- maybe have an info sheet that has stats
 - o people have multiple roles, want to give varied experiences
- for all interactive sessions – is there a cap on participants also minimum participants for a session to be good
- do signup for sessions a week before

Possible speakers/facilitators from...

- NORC at the University of Chicago - major federal surveys and policy research on health, education, economics, and public opinion.
- Institute of Politics at the University of Chicago
- YMCA – in a lot of cities and policy areas
- People's Action – possible for community engagement workshop - national network of grassroots organizations in dozens of states working on economic justice, health care, housing, and democracy reforms.
- Forefront Chicago - <https://myforefront.org/> - nonprofit, governance resources and expertise

GRA Orgs Possible Subjects

- Civic Federation
 - o Government Consolidation
 - o Public Pension Funding
 - o Governance Reform for City of Chicago (City Charter)
 - o Property Tax Reform
 - o Overcoming Structural Deficits and Junk Status

- Early Childhood Dept
 - Launching Community Engagement
 - Membership and governance structure complete overhaul
- Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation
 - Unemployment Insurance reform
- Citizens Research Council of Michigan
 - Local Sales Taxes
 - Transportation Taxes
 - Property Tax Reform proposals
- Sycamore Institute
 - 10 year anniversary fundraiser
 - Hosting regional events on housing around Tennessee
- Bureau of Government Research
 - Financial sustainability of local government
 - Implementing stormwater fees
 - unique school funding and school cost structure
 - park and recreation best practices
 - local government workforce planning and incentives
 - property tax exemptions
 - infrastructure planning and funding
- RIPEC
 - Economic benchmarking and economic development
 - analysis of the state budget in a period in which revenue growth is slowing but expenditures are not
 - Chronic absenteeism in K-12 schools; K-12 education funding reform
 - Property tax reform
 - tax competitiveness
 - Spending of affordable housing dollars
 - Impact of H.R. 1 on Medicaid program
- Wisconsin Policy Forum
 - Chronic absenteeism
 - child care
 - temporary state government surpluses