The Dovetail Project
Founded: June 2010
Founder: Sheldon Smith
Community Focus Areas: Woodlawn and Bronzeville

Sheldon Smith had his first community organizing experience at the age of 13. At 19, when he learned he was going to be a father, he decided to launch a fatherhood initiative that today is known as the Dovetail Project. It serves African American fathers between the ages of 17 and 24, teaching them parenting, life and job readiness skills that will help them be better fathers, and earning them a G.E.D., job, or trade. The program also teaches Felony Street Law to help the young men avoid incarceration, explained Smith, who served a few months in jail as a teen.

Since 2010, 150 young men -- more than half of them from Woodlawn -- have gone through the 12-week program. According to Smith, they are “in risk” of making poor choices, but have not yet crossed the line to becoming at risk. As such, they benefit significantly from the confidence they develop to become better fathers and pursue better futures for themselves and their children. In August 2014, Smith was honored by Ariel Investments as one of Chicago’s “40 Game Changers Under 40.”

The Dovetail Project, which has a staff of five led by Smith, started in Woodlawn. Smith is looking to expand throughout Chicago and Illinois. In October 2014, the organization launched a new partnership with the City Of Chicago, University of Illinois at Chicago Centers for Literacy, and Head Start. In addition to its regular programming, which will serve 40 fathers, Dovetail will be running a second program simultaneously at the University of Illinois at Chicago in 2015. Smith also recently established a partnership with the City of Gary Mayor’s Office to expand to Indiana within the next year. He plans to be operational in Michigan and Wisconsin, too, by 2020.

Smith applied to the Community Programs Accelerator at the University of Chicago for guidance on developing a replicable business model, legal expertise, and access to the University’s Crime Lab research and data. Dovetail is exploring a second program model for young Latino fathers. Despite ambitious expansion plans, the organization is deeply committed to its Woodlawn roots.

“We have an opportunity to strengthen our infrastructure with resources that are available in the Booth School of Business, Harris School of Public Policy and the Crime Lab, which would have been difficult to obtain without the Community Programs Accelerator,” said Smith. “The monetary support that will be provided is amazing, but knowing we will be able to have the expertise of the University of Chicago within arm’s reach will give us the much needed support to expand and strengthen our rapidly growing agency through the year 2020.”