

WHITE PAPER

A New Community Centered Approach to Gunshot Awareness in Chicago

How Chicago can move from infrastructure only detection to a collaborative, privacy conscious, city supported awareness model.

Prepared for civic leaders, ward offices, public safety stakeholders, community organizations, and local media.

Core proposition

Chicago should not simply replace one fixed gunshot detection system with another. It should test a new public safety model that helps residents, trained community partners, city staff, and police become aware of possible gunfire sooner and coordinate more effectively.

SplitSec enables that model through a smartphone based, opt in, distributed awareness network that is often easier to pilot and communicate, and designed to support trust-building when paired with transparent governance.

April 2026

Executive Summary

Chicago has an opportunity to rethink how gunshot awareness works in the city. The debate over ShotSpotter made clear that residents care about more than whether a system can detect possible gunfire. They also care about trust, transparency, who gets alerted, how police are engaged, and whether public safety tools strengthen or strain the relationship between communities and government.

The city ended its ShotSpotter deployment in 2024 and then began evaluating replacement technologies through a new public process. That creates a policy opening. Chicago can either install another infrastructure heavy system, or it can test a more community centered model that is city supported, privacy conscious, and designed around shared situational awareness. [1]

This paper argues for the second path. It outlines how a smartphone based approach such as SplitSec can support local awareness, designated community or city leads, and responsible escalation to law enforcement without requiring the city to blanket neighborhoods with fixed microphones or camera based systems.

At a Glance

Technology Summary in Plain Language

SplitSec AI is a smartphone-based approach to gunshot awareness designed to minimize surveillance risk while improving early coordination.

- Detection runs on the phone. The system can be designed so raw audio is not stored or uploaded.

- Only minimal incident metadata is shared for coordination, such as time, approximate area, and confidence level.
- Participation is opt-in and can be limited to defined roles such as trained staff, safety teams, or approved community partners.
- Escalation is governed by rules and roles. Alerts are routed to designated leads for confirmation and appropriate escalation.

Why now	What changes	What Chicago can test
ShotSpotter is gone, replacement options are under review, and the city is still searching for a more legitimate model.	Move from police only machine alerts toward shared awareness across residents, trained partners, city staff, and police.	A ward or district pilot with clear governance, training, privacy rules, and measured escalation thresholds.

1. Why Chicago Needs a New Model, Not Just a New Vendor

What This Model Is Not

To address common concerns up front, the community-centered model described in this paper is not intended to do the following:

- It is not a replacement for law enforcement or emergency response. It is an early awareness and coordination layer aligned to clear escalation rules.
- It is not continuous recording or neighborhood audio surveillance. Gunshot detection can be designed to run on-device without storing or uploading raw audio.
- It is not a public dispatch system and it does not publish public incident maps or suspect identification.
- It is not deputizing residents or encouraging vigilantism.

Chicago is already in the middle of a public conversation about what legitimate public safety technology should look like. The city ended its ShotSpotter relationship after criticism over efficacy, bias, cost, and law enforcement misuse, but it did not walk away from the broader need for faster awareness of gun violence. [1]

By early 2025, Chicago had already begun reviewing replacement technologies through a request for information and request for proposal process. Public reporting said the city had received responses from 15 companies, including several offering gunshot detection technology, and that future contracting would be shaped by research, field testing, and public concerns over trust and transparency. [2]

At the same time, Chicago's public safety conversation has increasingly emphasized community voice, local legitimacy, and practical alternatives that involve neighborhood organizations and trained civic actors. That creates room for a different model.

2. The Limits of Current Approaches

Chicago has largely been pushed toward two familiar models. The first is fixed acoustic detection. The second is camera based detection. Both may have a role in specific settings, but both are institution first systems. They are built around government or vendor infrastructure watching communities, not around communities becoming aware and organized in real time.

Comparison of Approaches

Criteria	Fixed acoustic network	Camera based system	SplitSec model
Primary structure	Fixed outdoor infrastructure	Fixed cameras and video analytics	Opt in smartphone network
Typical alert flow	Machine alert into police or operations channel	Video flagged into security workflow	Local awareness plus defined escalation path
Trust profile in Chicago	Has faced cost, legitimacy, and governance debates in Chicago	Often raises heightened surveillance concerns in Chicago contexts	Designed to support trust-building with opt-in participation and clear governance

3. A Community Centered Model for Gunshot Awareness

A community centered approach starts from a different premise. Public safety is strongest when the people closest to an event can become aware quickly, take sensible protective action, and feed that awareness into a defined response structure.

That does not mean residents replace police. It does not mean the city deputizes the public. It means the city creates a trusted awareness network that shortens the time between danger and action.

In practical terms, this model can include four operating layers: willing residents, trained community partners, city staff in relevant field roles, and law enforcement or emergency personnel engaged through clear escalation rules.

Participation layers for a Chicago pilot

Layer	Illustrative role in the model
Willing residents	Receive awareness, protect themselves and family, and contribute to a broader local safety picture on an opt in basis.
Community partners	Violence prevention teams, block clubs, faith organizations, and trained neighborhood leaders who can help assess and coordinate locally.
City staff	Park, school, transportation, or field personnel who operate in defined zones and need timely awareness.
Police and emergency response	Engaged through thresholds and escalation rules that prioritize legitimacy, speed, and accountability.

4. Why SplitSec Fits This Moment

SplitSec offers a different theory of deployment. Instead of requiring the city to cover large areas with permanent hardware, it allows Chicago to stand up a distributed awareness network using smartphones carried by real people in real places.

Instead of centering only on police notification, it can support local awareness, designated community or city leads, and responsible escalation to law enforcement. Instead of forcing the city into an all or nothing surveillance debate, it offers a lighter and more flexible operating model.

The result is not simply another detection system. It is a framework for shared situational awareness.

Why this matters in Chicago

- It is easier to pilot at ward, corridor, campus, park, event, or district level.
- It is often easier to communicate to residents because it is opt in and smartphone based.
- It gives local organizations and field personnel a practical role in awareness and coordination.
- It can support city learning before any large infrastructure or procurement commitment.

5. What a Chicago Rollout Could Look Like

A Chicago deployment should be designed as a partnership model, not an app launch. The city could sponsor an initial pilot in selected wards or neighborhood safety zones with participation from city staff, vetted community organizations, trained volunteers, and willing residents.

Each participant would operate inside a clearly defined alert structure with named roles, geographic boundaries, and escalation rules. The operating goal would be to create local awareness quickly, enable assessment by designated leads, and engage police or emergency response through defined thresholds rather than by default on every uncertain event.

Illustrative operating flow

Possible gunshot detected	Local network becomes aware	Lead assesses and confirms	Police or EMS engaged if threshold is met
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6. Trust, Governance, and Legitimacy

Any public safety technology in Chicago will be judged on governance as much as performance. That means a credible pilot should put rules, transparency, and community oversight at the center of the operating model from the beginning.

Principle	Why it matters
Voluntary participation	Residents should be able to choose whether to participate. The model works best when it is clearly opt in.
Defined alert access	The city should specify who receives alerts, under what conditions, and with what accountability.
Community partner role	Neighborhood organizations should have a formal role in pilot design, review, and feedback.
Privacy clarity	The purpose must be awareness and coordination, not resident surveillance.
Auditability	The pilot should produce reviewable logs, response metrics, and lessons learned without becoming opaque.

7. A Practical Pilot for Chicago

Pilot Success Metrics

A credible pilot should be evaluated on measured outcomes and governance adherence, not anecdotes.

Suggested metrics include:

- Time from first detection to awareness for designated roles (for example, community leads and safety staff).
- Percent of alerts that follow the defined escalation path, including confirmation steps and appropriate 911 escalation when warranted.
- False alert rate by zone and time of day, with documented tuning and governance response.
- Audit log completeness, including timestamps for detection, confirmations, and escalations.
- Community trust indicators, gathered through structured feedback with partner organizations and ward stakeholders.

Chicago does not need to answer this citywide on day one. A smarter path is to launch a focused pilot in one or more wards or neighborhood safety zones where there is strong local leadership and a credible community partner ecosystem.

The pilot should measure more than possible detections. It should also test who becomes aware, how fast decisions are made, whether residents feel informed without feeling surveilled, and whether community partners view the model as empowering rather than extractive.

Suggested pilot questions

- Can local awareness be created faster in the immediate area of concern?
- Can trained community and city leads coordinate more effectively?
- Can the city build a response model that supports both safety and trust?
- Can a ward level pilot produce a practical playbook for broader deployment?

Recommendation

Chicago should test a community centered gunshot awareness pilot that combines city sponsorship, neighborhood level participation, clear escalation rules, and strong governance. The goal should not be to replicate the old model with a new vendor. The goal should be to build a more legitimate, collaborative, and practical public safety layer for the city.

Conclusion

Chicago does not need to choose between doing nothing and reinstalling another controversial layer of fixed surveillance. There is a third path.

The city can support a new kind of gunshot awareness network that is local, participatory, privacy conscious, and structured around shared responsibility. It can help residents, city staff, community organizations, trained volunteers, and police work from a more common awareness picture without collapsing everything into a police only technology model.

SplitSec is well suited to help Chicago test that future because it gives the city a way to help more people become aware, connected, and prepared when seconds matter most.

Selected Public Sources

Citation key: [1] Chicago decision on ShotSpotter. [2] City procurement and RFI or RFP materials and response counts.

- WBEZ, reporting on Chicago's replacement search for gunshot detection technology, including the request for information and request for proposal process. [2]
- ABC 7 Chicago, reporting on the end of ShotSpotter in Chicago and the city's exploration of alternatives. [1]
- Chicago Community Commission for Public Safety and Accountability, statement from the 12th Police District Council encouraging broader community based safety approaches.
- Chicago Sun Times and Associated Press reporting on performance, cost, and controversy surrounding ShotSpotter in Chicago. [1]