

A.J. Watson

National Director of Becoming A Man, Youth Guidance

2018 Surge Fellow

At his core A.J. Watson is about helping people thrive, not just survive. Over the course of his career he has worked across the public, private and non-profit sectors to meet people where they are and make connections that allow them to reach their full potential.

As the National Director of Youth Guidance's innovative Becoming A Man (B.A.M.®) program he is responsible for leading a team of more than 160 highly-trained BAM staff members that meet young men where they are, both physically and emotionally, and through a process combining counseling, mentoring and rites of passage takes them on a journey to learn, practice and internalize the knowledge, skills, mindsets and values necessary to become responsible and contributing young men. And it's working.



Prior to joining the team at Youth Guidance, A.J. had a productive career in Corporate America and electoral politics, where he honed his analysis, sales and organizing skills in roles for Fortune 200 firms such as GE, Target and Wells Fargo and on a gubernatorial campaign. A.J. has also spent 15 years as an executive trainer and consultant for FOCUS Training, a leadership training and development firm, where he further developed his skills as a facilitator, public speaker and learner of new dance moves.

During his time as a political organizer and working in neighborhoods decimated by economic upheaval A.J. began to uncover his true passion for impacting the life outcomes for young men of color through education and made his transition into the non-profit sector.

In 2012 A.J. completed the Education Pioneers fellowship and worked for CASEL, the leading organization in the field of Social and Emotional Learning, where he oversaw efforts to attract, develop and retain top-tier talent by creating a goal oriented, high-performance culture and supported CASEL's policy and advocacy efforts. He has also done consulting work for IDEA Public Schools, a public charter school network in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas and named the 2016 Best Charter School Network.

A.J. earned his Bachelor's of Business Administration in finance and political science from Howard University and his MBA in human capital and strategy from the University of Michigan Stephen M. Ross School of Business. He resides in Chicago with his wife Stacey and their two daughters Gabrielle and Alexandra.