



# INVESTING IN US:

## RESIDENT PRIORITIES FOR ECONOMIC MOBILITY IN DETROIT

SEPTEMBER 2020



**POVERTY SOLUTIONS**  
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN



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## INTRODUCTION

As the memory of municipal bankruptcy fades from view, millions in community investment dollars currently circulate throughout Detroit, thanks to the efforts of leaders in the public, corporate, philanthropic, faith, and community development sectors. Grassroots leaders and resident organizations continue to invest both cash and sweat equity in the work needed to improve their neighborhoods. Across the city, these efforts are working to reverse decades of disinvestment and neglect at the hands of both political and structural forces, resulting in more streetlights, clean parks, and demolished vacant structures. Beyond infrastructure, the reach of available workforce, business, and early childhood development services expands each year.

Yet only 15% of residents think people in Detroit have benefited from public and private investments in the neighborhoods.<sup>1</sup> Nearly half (46%) of residents think economic mobility is worse today than it was 20 years ago.<sup>2</sup> And Detroit's status as the poorest big city in the country has not changed in a decade, leaving nearly 1 in 5 households to survive on less than \$10,000 a year.<sup>3</sup> While decision makers continue to deploy dollars to improve economic opportunity and combat poverty in Detroit, we must also continue to understand how Detroit residents view the impact of these investments and how they would prioritize taking additional action to accelerate tangible change in their lives.

In a variety of public spaces over the past decade, Detroiters have grappled with questions about how community investment and neighborhood revitalization should happen in a resource-constrained city and shared their visions for a safe, healthy, equitable Detroit. These conversations often happen at the neighborhood level, within the context of neighborhood plans or district community meetings. *Investing in Us* unifies these views into **a city-wide vision of economic well-being in Detroit, from the perspective of its residents.** We think highlighting Detroiters' shared ideas, across neighborhood lines, for how to reduce poverty and improve well-being can help drive policy and philanthropic innovation and complement existing place-based efforts. This report brings together the voices of residents and community leaders, outlining a set of interventions required to make dramatic change in Detroit, as told by those who know it best.

## WHAT IS ECONOMIC MOBILITY?

At Poverty Solutions at the University of Michigan, we focus on economic mobility from poverty, which we see as the result of linked systems that fail people at the bottom of the income ladder and inhibit their ability to live with dignity. Our Detroit Partnership on Economic Mobility, a joint effort between Poverty Solutions and external partners including the City of Detroit, identifies and implements evidence-based strategies to improve the systems that drive economic well-being. We focus not only on those living in poverty, but also those above the official poverty line who are working hard to make ends meet, yet continue to experience hardships like food insecurity or utility shutoffs.<sup>4</sup>

Nationally, there is a growing understanding that **mobility from poverty requires access to not only income, assets, training, and employment** but also demands the equitable distribution of other, more intangible resources: power and social inclusion.<sup>5</sup> The U.S. Partnership on Mobility from Poverty urges us to consider **power, or to what extent people can make choices for themselves and influence others**, as a crucial element to economic mobility. For example, the freedom to search for affordable housing or apply for a well-paying job without the fear of unnecessary background checks could improve the economic prospects of thousands who were formerly incarcerated. Or, universal access to low-cost internet could make it easier for a working parent to compare school options. In a city reinventing itself, the power to influence others is highly valued by residents and community organizations, who want more influence in conversations about neighborhood revitalization and economic mobility. They don't just want the opportunity to speak about what they want, they want to be a part of the decision making.

Lastly, we believe making progress in mobility from poverty means considering **whether individuals and families feel valued as residents of Detroit and included in the fabric of their communities**. Experts tie the concept of being valued in community with access to resources like clean water and healthy food, while exposure to pollution, violence, and other dangers implies a lack of value.<sup>6</sup> In this report, some residents interpret living in disinvested neighborhoods as evidence those in power do not value them and their area is not being included in Detroit's "comeback." We

also examine social inclusion at the individual level, and the ways residents report feeling connected to neighbors and friends. Social inclusion is closely linked to economic well-being;<sup>7</sup> individuals who feel a sense of belonging have people to turn to when their car breaks down or when they are looking for a new job.

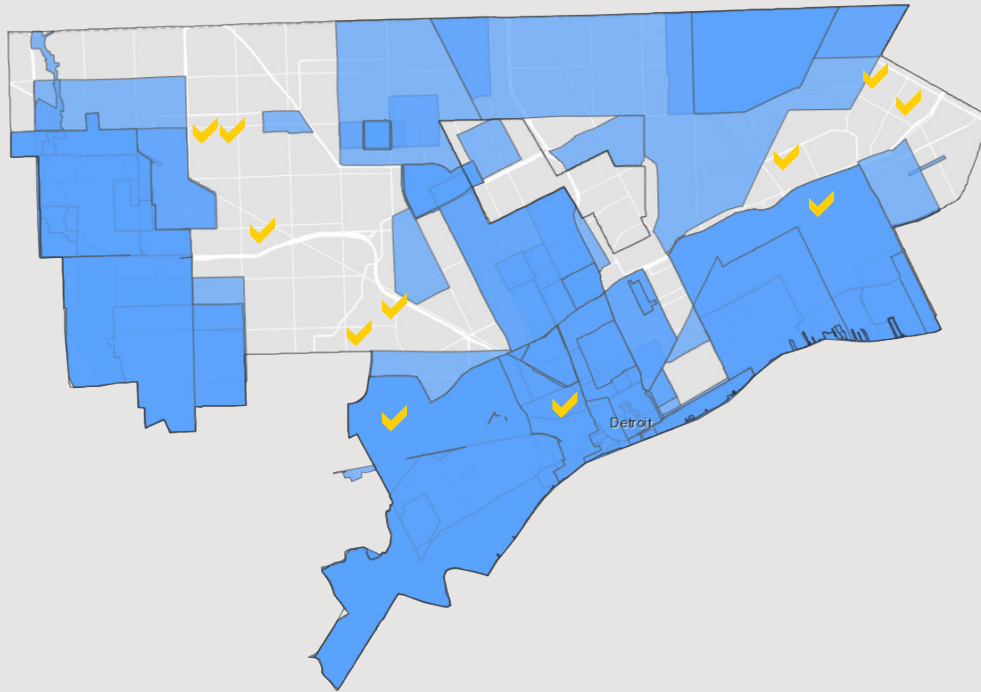
## METHODOLOGY

This report is organized into three sections to reflect residents' visions for mobility from poverty: 1) Investing in Economic Stability, 2) Investing in Resident and Community Power and 3) Investing in Valued Communities.

Often projects seeking to engage with communities begin with new forums that present new opportunities for people to discuss their communities with decision makers. Yet at the start of this work, we recognized that over the last decade, Detroit residents have been speaking out in a variety of public spaces. These spaces include forums like City Council evening meetings, media interviews, and neighborhood planning meetings, among others. Therefore, rather than begin this work by creating new and different opportunities for residents to *speak*, we took the approach of trying to *listen* to what they have said across a number of settings. **We based this report largely on what Detroiters have already contributed to the public conversation on economic mobility because they have already spoken volumes, and now the onus is on decision makers at every level to listen.**

We gathered nearly **550 research sources** to uncover resident views. When reviewing written reports, we looked for quotes from residents or recommendations directly drawn from community engagement and planning efforts. We excluded sources that did not fit these criteria or had resident quotes with content unrelated to economic mobility. This process left us with 402 sources to read in depth. We read **129 neighborhood-level and 60 citywide plans**<sup>8</sup> and reports, authored by community development organizations, the City of Detroit, grassroots organizations, and other groups. As for media, we searched for content using keywords related to economic mobility in Detroit and took a sample of news articles (**81 stories**) and YouTube Videos

FIGURE 1



(55 videos), where Detroit residents were quoted, such as a *Detroit Public TV* story on the poverty-to-prison pipeline. We also read 30 academic journal articles and three books that conducted qualitative interviews with Detroit residents on themes such as self-employment, urban agriculture, food access, and stress. Last, we listened to a sample of recordings of public meetings hosted by city departments, where residents provided public comment on open-ended topics (28 videos). All included sources are listed by type in Appendix A.

The years included in our sources are 2007 to 2019. We included sources from both before and after Detroit's bankruptcy, recognizing that though much has changed since 2013, residents' experiences of economic issues have not changed enough to limit our analysis to post-bankruptcy Detroit.

In gathering these sources, it became evident that some neighborhoods, like Midwest and Moross Morang, and populations, including Arabic speakers and parents of young children, were not well reflected in our research sources. Therefore, Poverty Solutions conducted **12 focus groups** with 103 Detroit residents to gather the perspectives of underrepresented

voices. The blue sections of Figure 1 depict the neighborhood spread of our research sources, while the checks represent our focus group locations.

Using NVivo, a software program designed for use with qualitative or textual data, our research team used a combined deductive/inductive approach to code the data. This means we examined our sources for themes related to economic mobility, such as "education" or "transportation" (deductive) while also allowing codes to emerge from the data itself (inductive). Two members of the research team independently coded the same sources to determine whether each coded the same material in a consistent way. We analyzed the codes for common themes across source types and neighborhoods.

We also invited 10 non-profit organizations to provide written contributions to this report, which have been included in full. We invited responses from organizations with expertise serving residents or advocating for the following categories of economic mobility issues: early childhood, transportation, housing/homelessness, financial stability, immigrant inclusion, health, workforce development, and community power.



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The major limitation of this research is that an unknown number of Detroiters have not publicly shared their opinions on economic mobility issues; these are the residents who may not attend community meetings, speak to journalists, or submit online comments to city initiatives. These Detroiters may have significantly different views than those of the resident voices depicted in this report. **Therefore, readers should not interpret this report as representative of what all Detroiters think about economic mobility issues.**

To mitigate this limitation, throughout the report we cite data from the Detroit Metro Area Communities Study (DMACS), a survey that asks a representative sample of more than 1,200 Detroit residents questions about their experiences and perceptions, exploring topics like community health, entrepreneurship, and safety. DMACS conducts surveys by door-to-door canvassing, phone, and online, and the response data

are weighted to reflect population demographics. This means the DMACS survey includes the views of more hard-to-reach populations whose voices may not be included in the rest of our research sources. Still, we believe readers should interpret this report as a snapshot of the opinions of many, but not all Detroit residents.

## REPORT DETROIT

In order to make our research sources publicly available, we partnered with Data Driven Detroit to complete [Report Detroit](#), a mapping tool that archives most of our research sources, particularly neighborhood reports and studies. This tool gathers the most recent research on Detroit neighborhoods and enables users to search for reports by year, topic, and area of focus.



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## I: INVESTING IN ECONOMIC STABILITY

In Detroit, residents see economic insecurity and its drivers all around them and reliably pinpoint what is lacking in their city. For many working Detroiters, incomes are too low, the cost of living is too high, and employment opportunities are scarce. The K-12 school system is fragmented and under-resourced, and college completion rates are low. Transportation options are costly, limited, and unreliable, which limits access to jobs and education. And it is too difficult for families, both renters and homeowners, to maintain stable and safe housing. **Yet residents and community leaders have expansive and creative ideas to improve economic stability in the city, centered on investments in good jobs, life-long education, affordable housing, and world-class transportation infrastructure.**

*"You need a job, a career, and a hustle — all together!"*

*Regent Park Resident, Poverty Solutions Focus Group, November 2019*

## LOW INCOMES, HIGH COSTS

By Kalena Thomhave and Afton Branche-Wilson, Poverty Solutions

*"A lot of people here are in survival mode."*<sup>9</sup>

– Detroit resident at focus group, November 2019

The most common metric of economic stability is income: how much money does a person have coming into their household? As one of the poorest cities in the country, Detroit is home to tens of thousands of residents who confront high costs with too little household income. According to the Census Bureau, the 2018 median household income for a single person household in Detroit is \$18,281,<sup>10</sup> while the United Way estimates this household requires \$23,796 to meet their basic needs.<sup>11</sup>

Detroiters are well aware of the precarity of their own and their fellow residents' financial situations. "A lot of people here are in survival mode. That's why the crime rate is high," one resident said.<sup>12</sup> "Doing whatever [people have] got to do to survive"<sup>13</sup> was a common theme reiterated among sources across neighborhoods. "It's not an easy life at all," said one resident who relied on rainwater and bottled water following a water shutoff.<sup>14</sup>

**As expected, many residents say low wages are a major barrier to economic stability.**<sup>15</sup> "You have some multi-million dollar, some billion dollar corporations that are paying us \$9 [an hour], and who can live off



of that?” said one Detroit resident. “I believe that the wages should also go up because people are in a dire situation.”<sup>16</sup> Some Detroit residents are working more than one job, a reality that some think is a consequence of low wages. “There’s too many instances in which one would have to have multiple jobs in order to have a living wage,” said one focus group participant.<sup>17</sup> Even families living above the poverty line can struggle to live financially stable lives.<sup>18</sup> Speaking about why the poverty measure wasn’t a surefire measure of economic instability, one resident said, “Some people can be just on the edge and you’re still in poverty, but documentation says you’re not. But the way you live, it says ‘yeah, I am.’”<sup>19</sup>

Beyond wages, **securing social safety net benefits remains challenging and at times leads to feelings of marginalization and increased stress.**<sup>20</sup> “Sometimes you have to go through so much to get help,” said one resident.<sup>21</sup> Many residents said safety net program eligibility guidelines seemed paradoxical and often resulted in unexpected benefits cuts.<sup>22</sup> In a focus group, one older woman explained her frustration with social safety net programs:

*I applied at DHS with no income ‘cause I was laid off, had no income. So I got a Bridge card for \$194, ‘cause I had no income, no money coming in. ... Sometime like four or five months later, I get unemployment. So then, my Bridge card gets knocked down to \$16. Well, for the other five months that I didn’t have an income, those bills didn’t go away. So I still have the bills and I’m still paying five on it.*<sup>23</sup>

“I’m on a few different low-income programs. But it’s still not enough.”

*Old Redford Resident, Poverty Solutions Focus Group, November 2019*

Child care subsidy rules are particularly unhelpful for many low-income parents. One mother said, “The DHS system won’t allow you to make any more than a certain amount and if you do they won’t pay for child care, but how do you keep a job if you don’t have child care?”<sup>24</sup> To be initially eligible for a child care subsidy in Michigan, a family of three cannot earn more than \$27,732 a year.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, child care for an infant and 4 year old in Michigan costs, on average, \$19,281 a year.<sup>26</sup> One community advocate who works with families overcoming homelessness said, “Most of the families we serve are single parents and cannot afford safe, quality child care without a subsidy. If

they begin earning above the threshold to qualify for a child care subsidy they may be forced to quit their job or will refuse promotions that would have them making more money.”<sup>27</sup>

Despite low wages and limited benefits, Detroit residents face high costs of living in the city, including rent, utilities, home and auto insurance, and property taxes.<sup>28</sup> “You’re charging us for higher water, higher electric, higher gas. ... Same amount of water that you’re using and that you’ve been using for 20 years, now all of a sudden it’s a hundred dollars. You’re putting people in a hole, deeper in a hole.”<sup>29</sup>

In our research, residents shared the burdens of living with debt, from loans and bank fees to property taxes. “I can’t even pay the up-to-date taxes [because] I am so busy trying to pay off the older ones so they don’t take the house. It’s been stressful,” said one resident to the Detroit News.<sup>30</sup> An estimated 60% of Detroit households do not have enough savings to cover three months of basic expenses in case of an emergency, a key indicator of financial health, and as a result many take on debt, some of it in the form of predatory loans.<sup>31</sup> Debt itself erodes limited incomes, as past due fees and bank account garnishment eat into take-home pay. “When the money [paycheck] went in the bank, the payday loan people took my money. I needed to pay my bills, you know, [but] they took my money. ... So I had to stop getting the direct deposit, so I could get a [pay-]check to catch up on the little stuff that I couldn’t pay because [the payday lenders] were getting the money,” said one resident.<sup>32</sup>

Several residents shared their beliefs that without targeted financial education, it was too easy to use credit cards and incur debt without full knowledge of the potential negative consequences.<sup>33</sup> At our focus group with Arab Detroiters, residents shared the unique experiences of some immigrant families engaging with the banking system. One resident said:

*I believe banking is a new experience for all of us because back home, we don’t do that. ... We don’t go charge a pop for \$2. Your money, you keep it in the house, or you put it in a bank if it’s a big amount, and that’s all about it. We never write checks. We never receive checks. We don’t have credit cards or debit cards, so it’s a new experience for everybody.*<sup>34</sup>

Driving-related debts, such as tickets and fees, are particularly damaging to workers’ pocketbooks

and can be unavoidable. One resident shared his experiences driving on a suspended license, in a city where not driving may not be an option: “Every time you get stopped [by the police], they go ahead and impose more fees, and then they go ahead and put you back five years,” he said. “So not only are you obligated to pay the fees and fines, but after you pay the fines, you will not be eligible to obtain your license for an additional five years. And I’m a victim of that ... and there’s nothing that can be done.”<sup>35</sup> A recent Detroit Justice Center report situates this scenario in a chain of systemic failures: high insurance and driver’s education costs make legal driving difficult, leading police officers to pull over Black and low-income drivers who they suspect to be driving illegally. Local governments may charge harsh fines and fees for driving infractions and allow non-payment to trigger a driver’s license suspension, which enters workers who must drive into a cycle of debt.<sup>36</sup> In the worst cases, judges in Metro Detroit jail drivers who cannot pay for driving-related misdemeanors, a loss of freedom that further delays payment.<sup>37</sup>

More generally, Detroiters who have been involved in the criminal justice system face a unique set of barriers to balancing income and expenses post-release. “You want to get a job, you want to get housing, and you’re stopped at every turn. And you’re hit with fines and fees and if you’re on tether, it’s \$10-15 a day on top of that. So you’re setting people to fail,” said one resident.<sup>38</sup> Until a recent City Council ordinance outlawed the practice, a landlord could ask about a resident’s criminal background early in the rental application process and thus may have unfairly screened out applicants with past involvement in the criminal legal system.

Critical social service benefits programs still systematically exclude residents with past convictions. For example, a resident with two felony convictions for drug offenses cannot receive SNAP or TANF benefits for life, even after fully completing her sentence.<sup>39</sup> After returning home, parents who finally find jobs have no say over how much of their earnings are garnished to pay back child support accrued during their time in prison. One parent interviewed by the Detroit Free Press owes around \$14,000, earns \$14.50 an hour, and has \$120 garnished from each paycheck. “I’m trying to get myself together,” said the parent. “I’m trying to get my own place, a car. I wanna keep this from hanging over my head.”<sup>40</sup> The majority of Detroit residents support measures to invest additional resources in

helping returning citizens<sup>41</sup> find employment and otherwise “clean up their lives” post-incarceration.<sup>42</sup> **Citywide, nearly three-quarters of Detroiters think it’s a high priority for the city to provide more services for people returning from prison.**<sup>43</sup>

## WHAT WE CAN DO: RESIDENT IDEAS TO BOOST INCOMES AND REDUCE COSTS

- **Raise the minimum wage:** According to the Detroit Metro Area Communities Study, 87% of Detroiters think the minimum wage [\$9.65 as of January 1, 2020], is too low and should be increased.<sup>44</sup> Recent efforts to raise minimum wages have stalled; after Michigan advocates collected enough signatures to put a minimum wage increase on the ballot, the legislature adopted and amended the measure, slowing the rise in the minimum wage such that it’s not scheduled to reach \$12 until 2030.
- **Simplify applying for benefits and resolve benefits cliffs:** To improve the safety net system, residents suggested streamlining application processes and improving customer service among frontline workers administering public assistance programs.<sup>45</sup> “At the Department of Human Services, a lot of workers believe that it’s coming out of their pocket when really they [the clients] are legally entitled to it,”<sup>46</sup> said one resident. We have already seen some positive change in this area; in 2018, in partnership with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, local non-profit design firm Civilla successfully shortened the public benefits intake application and helped redesign the online enrollment portal, which resulted in shorter application and processing times.<sup>47</sup>
- **Consider a universal basic income:** In focus group conversations, some participants suggested a basic income program to support low-income families. Others, however, worried about the effects of a basic income on incentives to work.<sup>48</sup> Currently, Stockton, California; Omaha, Nebraska; and Chicago have basic income pilot programs for low-income individuals. In Stockton, of the 125 participants in the program, 54% are working or looking for work; 33% are disabled, retired, or in school; 11% work as unpaid caretakers; and just 2% were not in the labor force at all during the pilot period.<sup>49</sup>



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- **Reduce costs and expand access to child care:**<sup>50</sup> “The rates of child care is so overwhelming, you’re not even balancing out your rent before you pay child care, and you still need to go to work because your kids need to eat,” said one parent. Child care access is an issue that requires a federal overhaul, but the State of Michigan can and should do more to increase investments, by allocating general or TANF welfare funds to incentivize off-hours care and increasing income eligibility levels, for example.<sup>51</sup> Residents also want to see expanded services: “[Develop] more full-day early childhood education centers where families actually reside that are clean and safe. Have child care that’s open 24 hours,” said one parent.<sup>52</sup>
- **Cut utility costs:** To ease the burden on household budgets, some residents supported income-based utility rates or shutoff moratoria for seniors and families with children.<sup>53</sup> The City of Philadelphia, for example, offers tiered, income-based water rates to residents below 150% of the federal poverty line, as well as a senior discount program.
- **Reduce driving fines and fees:** “People have had tickets and fines from years ago ... that are still on Detroit books, and they did not get their license because they have this restitution or this money that needs to be paid. ... How do we eliminate that?” asked one resident.<sup>54</sup> Detroit Justice Center offers a variety of suggestions, which include: expunge misdemeanor convictions for traffic

offenses, end license suspensions, and create a statewide system that enables low-income drivers to demonstrate inability to pay and more easily resolve traffic tickets without going to court.<sup>55</sup>

- **“Financial literacy for everybody, starting in the lower grades”:**<sup>56</sup> Many Detroiters spoke in favor of expanded financial literacy programming to equip more residents with money management tools, like budgeting, investing and understanding student loan interest rates.<sup>57</sup> Financial literacy “means learning how to use money, how to budget, how to think about your needs with money,” said one resident.<sup>58</sup> Financial health-building services should also work to include immigrant communities in the city, who are more likely to go without a bank account or be unaware of their credit scores than native-born Detroiters, according to a Global Detroit survey.<sup>59</sup> Although financial education alone has little effect on behavior,<sup>60</sup> financial coaching — a distinct approach that pairs clients with coaches to set goals and check progress — has been shown to improve both financial outcomes and behaviors.<sup>61</sup> In 2019, Wayne Metropolitan Community Action Agency launched a partnership with the City of Detroit to offer coaching services to individuals who want to take action on budgeting, money management, and debt reduction.

## TO BOOST INCOMES, FOCUS ON FINANCIAL TOOLS

By Libby Palackdharry, director of economic opportunity services, Wayne Metropolitan Community Action Agency

It is very expensive to be poor. Most of the readily available opportunities for low-income households to access capital and assets, such as payday lending or land contracts, are high-interest or high-risk.

**Financial education is helpful, but is not enough. There is no right answer to learn if you don't have enough income to cover all your monthly expenses.** Practitioners in the field of economic opportunities also believe that focusing solely on education alone fails to recognize the creative resourcefulness of low-income individuals, who constantly make tough financial decisions.

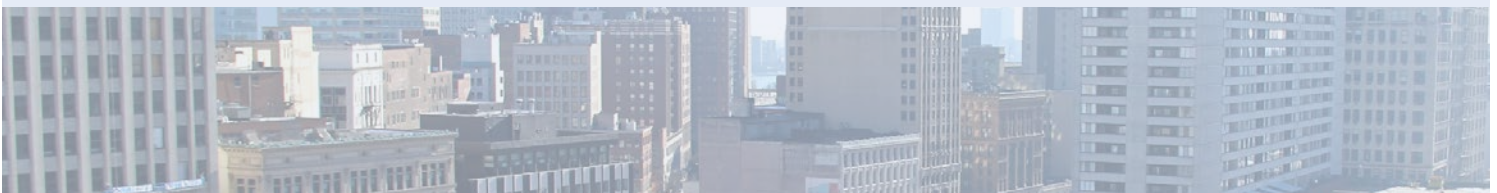
Every client has a unique set of financial goals, challenges and assets. Wayne Metropolitan Community Action Agency's Economic Opportunity Services team helps clients achieve their financial goals by providing financial and housing counseling services, coupled with access to safe financial products.

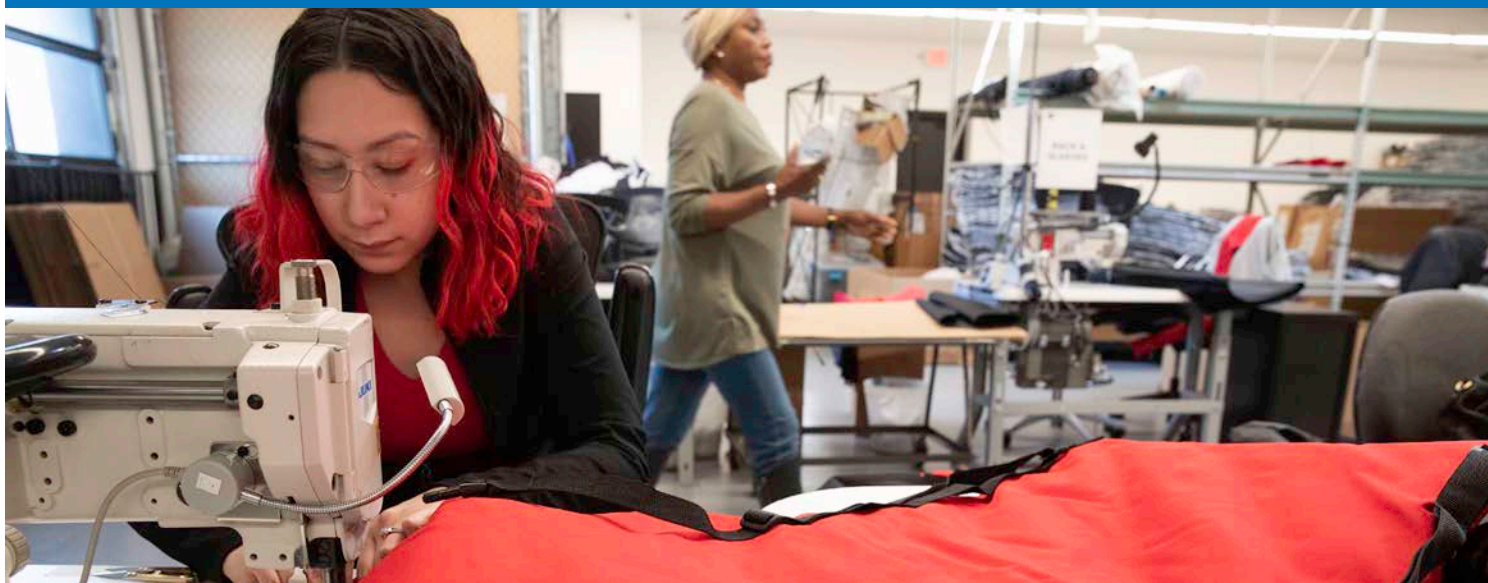
The staff work in partnership with clients to achieve goals like establishing an emergency savings, applying for a Poverty Tax Exemption and navigating through the process of purchasing a home with a safe, affordable mortgage. The staff are able to be educator, counselor, and coach, depending on what the client needs at that time. Our team works to ensure clients have the tools, confidence, and support needed to navigate forward and reach their goals.

In Robert Friedman's book "A Few Thousand Dollars," he emphasizes how access to capital allows people to invest in their own future through things like higher education and down payments on a home. He argues that without access to those few

thousand dollars, people become "locked out of the mainstream economy, unable to add their talents, work, and dreams, unable to share in the bounty of this economy." Over the years, Wayne Metro has developed financial products designed to address this and help clients reach their goals faster:

- Our **You Save We Match** program helps develop savings habits and boost clients' total savings. Clients who participate will save \$25 for six months, and at the end, Wayne Metro will provide a 1:1 match for every month the client saves, creating up to \$300 in savings.
- We also offer the **Save 2 Build** 12-month credit building loan product, in partnership with Justine Petersen. In this product, clients enter into a \$300 loan, paying \$25 a month for 12 months. Each timely payment gets reported to the all the credit bureaus and is matched by Wayne Metro.
- Our **Success Loan** program is a 0% interest loan of \$500- \$2,000 for 6-24 months. Clients can access this loan to address expenses such as paying off other debt at high interest rates, restoring their driver's license, or covering unexpected costs.
- We also **free tax preparation services** to connect our clients with the Earned Income Tax Credit and other refunds, which are the "few thousand dollars" people need. In addition to these products, Wayne Metro helps clients avoid financial crisis by providing assistance for water, utilities, property taxes, and more.





(COURTESY OF CITY OF DETROIT)

## “WE NEED JOBS”:<sup>62</sup> EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING

By Kalena Thomhave and Afton Branche-Wilson,  
Poverty Solutions

*“Most people are more qualified than they think [for high paying jobs], but you gotta go to the suburbs. Why? Because all these white people, they get the good jobs in Detroit, but we’re not offered those good-paying jobs.*

***Why can’t we get good-paying jobs in the City of Detroit and live in the City of Detroit?”<sup>63</sup>***

– Detroit resident at focus group, November 2019

As one would expect, for many Detroiters, the key to economic success lies in having a well-paying job. Yet many residents see the imprint of racism and discrimination on Detroit’s labor market, particularly in highly visible jobs where Black residents are underrepresented. “If you look at any of the work that is being done in this city, and we have travelled the 144 square miles that constitute our city, and we see very few Black people working. And we’re wondering why that is,” said one resident at a City Council meeting.<sup>64</sup> Although the mayor’s Executive Order 2016-1 requires Detroiters work 51% of the hours on certain public construction projects in the city, some residents were rightly skeptical that too few businesses actually

adhered to this rule. “Five months from now, six months from now, are there ... still 51% Detroiters working there? And who’s enforcing it?” asked one resident at the Georgia Street focus group.<sup>65</sup> Of the 55 publicly-funded construction projects covered under the Executive Order as of July 2020, just nine projects employed Detroiters at a level that met the requirement.<sup>66</sup>

Recent research finds there are too few jobs in the city for unemployed Detroiters, and the requirements of jobs that are available largely don’t match residents’ skills.<sup>67</sup> According to an analysis of jobs available on the Detroit at Work website, there are just 15 job openings per 100 unemployed Detroiters in 2019.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, many jobs are located beyond reach for residents without a car. In 2013, a full 77% of jobs in the Detroit-Warren-Livonia region were located 10 to 35 miles away from downtown Detroit, while just 7.3% of jobs were within 3 miles.<sup>69</sup> Of course, Detroit has seen some job growth in the years following municipal bankruptcy, but residents still cite transportation as a barrier, as discussed further in the next section. “We need the employment opportunities, there’s not too many jobs in Detroit. ... I mean there’s higher paying jobs in downtown and midtown, but if you live in the neighborhoods and you don’t have any transportation, then there’s not too many jobs that you can get,” said one Midwest resident. “Like in this neighborhood, what, are you going to work at the liquor store?”<sup>70</sup>

**Residents overwhelmingly said the city should be focusing even more on workforce development training.** According to survey data, three-quarters

of residents believed that providing job training was a very high or high priority in their neighborhood, while a similar proportion prioritize providing work opportunities for young people.<sup>71</sup> But there is a difference of opinion as to whether existing workforce services are actually effective. Some residents shared experiences regarding disappointing interactions with workforce training or employment assistance.<sup>72</sup> As one Detroit resident said, “I’ve spent a lot of time in employment centers. ... Those people are supposedly helping me at those employment centers. I haven’t had a single job.”<sup>73</sup> Others, however, found great value in the city’s network of employment centers and workforce services offered by non-profit agencies.<sup>74</sup>

“Some people cannot read, and if you cannot read what can you do? There needs to be non-skilled labor jobs for re-entering citizens. Non-skilled labor is dead,” said one resident.<sup>75</sup> In addition to insufficient job training services, in a few instances, residents said the lack of basic reading, math, and soft skills holds some Detroiters back from getting jobs.<sup>76</sup> One resident suggested, “We’ve got to mold them again, to where they have the basics down pat, as to how to deal with people, and how to treat people, how to communicate up and down the ladder. How to take responsibility for your actions. How to be accountable for your actions.”<sup>77</sup>

Detroiters with disabilities, older residents, and transgender Detroiters face particular difficulties in the city’s job market, which some see as evidence of discrimination. “There’s a lot of people with disabilities who are really talented, but not a lot of people know they exist, they just kind of put those people off to the side,” said one resident in a focus group.<sup>78</sup> When speaking about the role of employers in providing accommodations to people with disabilities, one advocate said, “They don’t even have to know everything, but they could at least make the attempt, you know? ... Organizations and people out there don’t even try because they feel that it’s so complicated, so complex, it’s too expensive.”<sup>79</sup> These factors may partially explain why so many Detroiters with disabilities are not working: according to a 2017 estimate, **80% of residents who report a disability are out of the labor force.**<sup>80</sup>

Nearly 60% of residents between ages 55 and 64 are not working,<sup>81</sup> which to some stems from pervasive ageism among employers.<sup>82</sup> “I’m interviewing with someone who has experience, but not the level of experience that I have,” said one Detroit resident over 55.

“There are a lot of things that you have to leave off your resume because if you put it on there, it dates you. And you’ve had to take jobs that you normally wouldn’t take, and the salary is not what you would normally be able to get with your experience, your degrees.”<sup>83</sup>

For some transgender Detroiters, the disconnect between their preferred name and the name on their identification often fuels discrimination. “I would look great on paper, but when I showed up not looking like the person with a male name, I’d get shut out,” a transgender community leader shared.<sup>84</sup> According to survey data, transgender residents are more likely to be unemployed and more likely to experience unfair treatment based on gender compared to residents who are not transgender.<sup>85</sup> “There are a lot of trans women in Detroit that don’t have legal jobs because of their name change, so they go into sex work,” said another transgender advocate.<sup>86</sup>

Further, in immigrant communities, some residents have limited English skills, which limits their ability to navigate job applications and interviews. Many employers are not accommodating of this reality, even when the jobs do not require strong language skills. Moreover, newcomers may not know how to transfer employment experience from other countries.<sup>87</sup> Cultural norms among some immigrant groups also prevent women from accessing co-ed job readiness and workforce services, prompting suggestions for women-only training spaces.<sup>88</sup>

In Detroit, as elsewhere, a job doesn’t always mean a good job. Residents have spoken out at City Council meetings and other forums to call attention to unsafe working conditions and poor benefits in Detroit’s labor market.<sup>89</sup> “Dedicated workers like me have been put into a position where we can’t even afford to get sick. If I were to get sick, I don’t have health insurance. I can’t afford it. I can’t afford the health care that my company provides. I don’t have paid sick leave. I can’t afford to see a doctor. Instead, I’m forced to either work through the sickness or lose my wages for the day,” said a downtown security guard.<sup>90</sup> According to DMACS data, just 18% of working Detroiters have employer-offered paid sick leave, and 30% have access to health insurance at work.<sup>91</sup>

“You’re too young to get help from Social Security and too old for them to hire you.”

*North End Resident, Poverty Solutions Focus Group, November 2019*

## WHAT WE CAN DO: RESIDENT IDEAS TO INCREASE ACCESS TO EMPLOYMENT

- **“Making certain that our neighbors have a job”<sup>92</sup>:** Detroiters want employers to hire Detroiters, and they question barriers that employers put in the way. “There are also some barriers, even in the low-skilled jobs, that don’t make sense. For a food service job, why do you need a driver’s license?” asked one resident.<sup>93</sup> According to a recent Poverty Solutions report, driver’s license and auto insurance requirements may prevent 22% of unemployed Detroiters from being able to apply to a 24% of the jobs on the Detroit at Work platform.<sup>94</sup> A large-scale subsidized job program, which has been proven in other cities to connect more disadvantaged workers with employment compared to general workforce services, could help connect Detroiters with work in the nonprofit or public sector.<sup>95</sup> Further, one advocate recommends improving the coordination between the various workforce agencies for potential job seekers, who currently must navigate several workforce programs.<sup>96</sup>
- **Green jobs:** Across the city, residents see Detroit’s vacant land as a major asset to leverage for adult employment. “We should reuse vacant land to produce flowers and food to create local jobs and beautify the neighborhood,” said one Jefferson Chalmers resident.<sup>97</sup> Detroiters envision employment opportunities in creating and maintaining vacant lots, growing the local urban farming and agriculture sector, and developing ecotourism and outdoor recreation opportunities like petting zoos.<sup>98</sup> Vacant properties also could be repurposed as potential sites for green ventures or training centers for agriculture-related trades.<sup>99</sup> According to one study from Detroit Future City, green storm water infrastructure jobs are educationally accessible to many Detroiters because the vast majority require only some college, but more investments in training and workforce development are needed if the industry is to create significant jobs in the region.<sup>100</sup>
- **Working with employers:** Some residents suggested encouraging small neighborhood-based businesses to hire neighbors,<sup>101</sup> while also continuing to lean on large corporations to hire Detroit residents first in new development or construction projects.<sup>102</sup> In 2016, 53% of Detroit



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jobs were provided by small businesses,<sup>103</sup> but lack of access to capital prevents some firms in the city from being able to expand or hire locally.<sup>104</sup>

“First Source” laws in cities such as Washington, D.C., not only require businesses to hire a certain proportion of residents but also provide workforce training and workforce pipelines for community residents, to aid employers in finding local talent.<sup>105</sup> Importantly, such laws may only be as effective as the quality of the workforce training local communities can offer to job seekers.<sup>106</sup> Local organizations like ACCESS and ABISA focus in part on connecting more immigrant Detroiters to employment, but all organizations focusing on workforce issues should ensure their practices are inclusive of these populations by, for example, ensuring all materials are translated and available on paper.<sup>107</sup>

- **Educate employers on providing accommodations to people with disabilities<sup>108</sup>:** “There’s a lot of tax incentives out there that help businesses make their work space accessible,” said one advocate. “I think it’s just the lack of knowledge, education, and a lack of collaboration between the different organizations that do advocate for individuals with disabilities.”<sup>109</sup> New York City’s Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities recently launched a public-private partnership to connect people with disabilities to employment and partnered with the National Organization on Disability to



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implement a public-awareness campaign across the city to encourage employers to hire people with disabilities.<sup>110</sup>

- **Offer citywide access to paid sick days.**<sup>111</sup> Pittsburgh, Oakland, Chicago, and Duluth, Minnesota, are just a few of the 22 cities and counties with local paid sick day laws that cover private employers.<sup>112</sup> As the emergency protections offered to some workers by federal COVID-19 legislation expires, the city could offer more permanent paid sick leave benefits to working residents.
- **Invest in “soft skills” training:** Detroiters want to see more soft skills training programs for both youth and adults.<sup>113</sup> One community leader said skilled employees should both display basic numeracy and be able to interact well with others: “To be a well-rounded, stable, economic individual, you got to be able to count the money. **You got to be able to walk into a business and introduce yourself, and sit down and do an interview.**”<sup>114</sup> Michigan’s Talent Task Force identified 18 core skills, including self-confidence, problem solving, and teamwork, that employers and workforce agencies saw as central to workforce success, including basic reading and math skills.<sup>115</sup> Yet a recent Corporation for a Skilled Workforce report finds a massive gap between demand for

foundational literacy and numeracy skills and capacity of the adult education system, which only serves 2% of adult learners who may need assistance.<sup>116</sup>

- **Extend discrimination protections to LGBTQ residents:** Michigan lacks explicit state law protecting LGBTQ people from employment, housing and public accommodation discrimination.<sup>117</sup> But a recent Supreme Court decision extended Civil Rights Act protections to LGBTQ workers, meaning Detroiters cannot be fired for their gender identity or sexual orientation; in the coming months it will be critical to ensure residents actually benefit from this landmark change.
- **Additional supports for returning citizens:** Many residents want to see more support for residents returning to the community post-jail or prison, asking repeatedly for additional programs.<sup>118</sup> “I just think we need to do things to help people clean up their lives,”<sup>119</sup> said one resident. To connect more Detroiters with legal system involvement to jobs, one advocate recommends the reduction of professional licensing restrictions for individuals with criminal convictions and stronger efforts to encourage developers and employers to honor community benefits agreements that prioritize hiring people who have been incarcerated.<sup>120</sup>



## COACHING FOR SUCCESS IN WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

By Brad Coulter, president and CEO,  
Matrix Human Services

Matrix Human Services' primary role is to give people hope. We help people set goals and then guide them down a path to success. This philosophy is the cornerstone of our social service programs and especially important for workforce development. **Just setting up technical training is not enough. It takes coaching and guidance to bring someone who has been chronically unemployed into the workforce.** With 35% of Detroit's working age population not in the market looking for work (and therefore not counted in the unemployment rate), the obstacles for getting people who are disengaged back into the workforce are significant. Doing so, though, is one main component for revitalizing the city and bringing back neighborhoods. But to be successful, we need to realize the amount of coaching and resources necessary are more than typically offered in traditional training programs.

Matrix's Manufacturing Bootcamp was designed in partnership with EDSI, a national player in workforce training programs. Matrix provides the community outreach and personal coaching while EDSI focuses on classroom teaching and curriculum. Over six weeks, participants learn soft skills, improve reading levels, and gain education on expected behaviors needed in the workplace. In addition, participants receive a small cash stipend each week to help with living expenses. This partnership has proven very successful with over 90% of graduates obtaining full-time employment.

Community outreach to recruit people disengaged from the job market is key. Nonprofits that operate at the grassroots level have the trust of the people they work with. That trust is often needed to get someone outside their comfort zone and not be afraid to try something new. Most have not had success in school or with life and really need the personal touch to help them through the process. Said one 50-year-old graduate of the boot camp who had spent his life in and out of jail: "This is the first thing I have ever accomplished." That statement highlights the need for these programs and why providing resources for personal coaching is so important.

A successful workforce development program depends on teaching the basics. Remedial reading and math lessons are often the first step. Almost 50% of the applicants to our Manufacturing Boot Camp read at or below the sixth grade level. Improving reading is combined with other learning so the trainee can understand the curriculum and, more importantly, be able to read safety posters and instruction manuals when on the job. Financial literacy also is an important component to workforce success. Learning to budget, save money, and ensure unexpected expenses don't derail someone's ability to work is crucial. All too often, loss of housing, car problems, or unexpected medical expenses can impair someone's ability to keep working. Teaching people to budget, as well as making sure they know where to access resources when they hit a rough patch, plays an important role in maintaining steady employment.

Other skills we teach involve how to dress, how to resolve conflict, how to get along with co-workers, why it's important to show up for work, and other basics that many take for granted. Flexibility in programming is also important. Having funders that allow us to tailor each class to the needs of the students versus dictating exact curriculum and procedures proves to be a better approach for client success. The ultimate goal is for students to complete the six week class and find a job.

The current labor shortage, combined with the continued aging of the baby boomers out of the job market, means that active outreach to get people employed is an important mission for our economy. People want to work, but many have been left behind because of inadequate schooling or other circumstances related to growing up in poverty. Programs that understand and address these barriers via personal coaching are one proven way to solve this problem. We believe the Matrix Manufacturing Bootcamp is an example that can be used as a template for how a successful workforce training program can be designed.

## EDUCATION DRIVES SUCCESS

By Kalena Thomhave, Poverty Solutions

*“My inadequate and inequitable education is a direct result of inadequate and inequitable funding.”<sup>121</sup>*

– Detroit student, October 2019

Many Detroiters spoke about education as a necessity to improve economic mobility citywide, from K-12 to college and technical education. **Residents said the city’s public schools are severely underfunded and under-resourced, resulting in students who are not prepared for employment after graduation.** “Detroit schools, and other schools in disenfranchised communities, lack so many resources it is hard to count — everything from the basics like teachers, books, desks, ACs, heaters, all the way to the necessity of clean water,” said a student at Western International High School.<sup>122</sup>

Resource inequities in Detroit schools are largely the result of state policy decisions. Between 2002 and 2015, total revenue for Michigan public schools declined by 30%, most of which was due to reductions in state support for public schools.<sup>123</sup> Michigan is one of just 14 states that do not provide school districts with state funding for capital improvements like new pipes, which leaves Detroit’s school district to cover these fixes from its own smaller budget.<sup>124</sup> Citywide population decline also plays a role in school funding, since enrollment numbers largely determine basic funding allocations. As of the 2015-16 school year, just over 45,000 students attended Detroit Public Schools, down from 169,363 students in 2000.<sup>125</sup> Over the same period, parents increasingly sent their children to charters and traditional public schools in neighboring districts such as River Rouge, as state lawmakers made it easier for students to move to other districts.<sup>126</sup> “Not funding schools affects all of us — the teachers, the students, the parents, the communities. EVERY. SINGLE. ONE. OF. US,” wrote one student. “Lack of education contributes to people not being able to find jobs that pay enough to meet their needs and jobs not being able to find workers who meet theirs.”<sup>127</sup>

Since 2000, Detroiters have lived through the closure of approximately 200 neighborhood schools,<sup>128</sup> which they associate with both negative educational

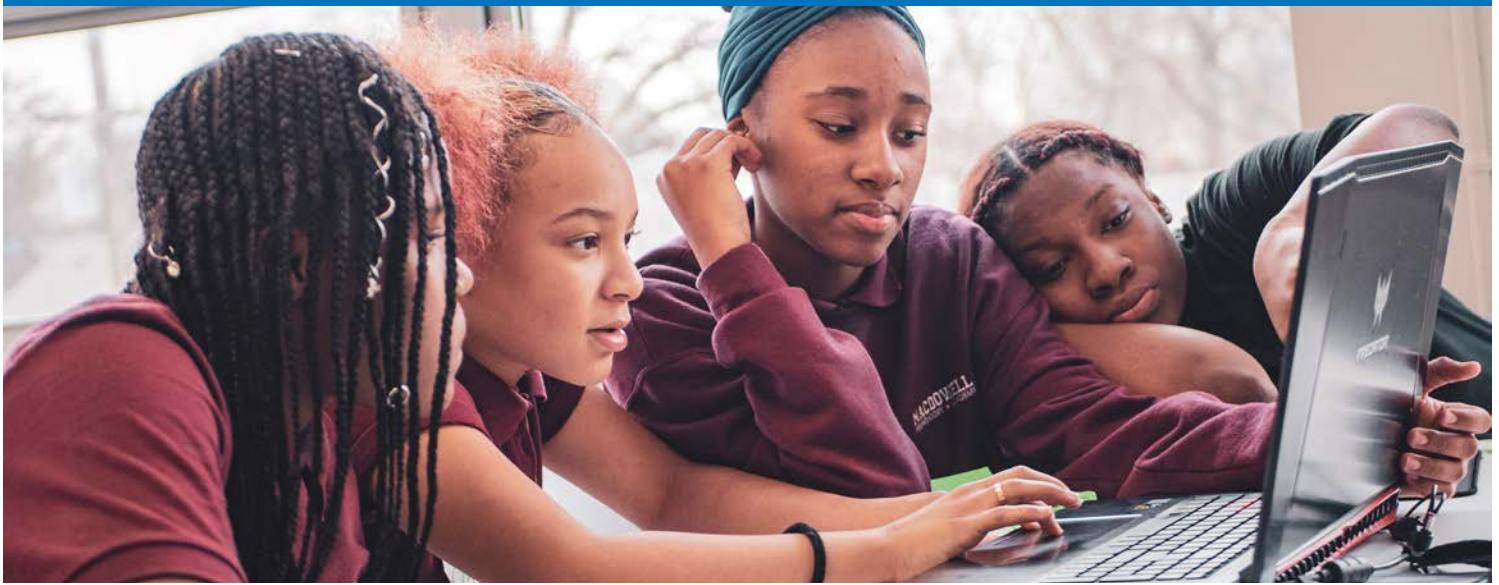
outcomes and neighborhood decline.<sup>129</sup> “In [O’Hair], we had elementary schools, we had a junior high school. ... They’re gone. So, where are our kids going to school? An hour and a half away, on the bus,” said one resident. “We got to wait two and three hours for them to get home. They have work, but they’re tired.” To residents, school closures also mean the disappearance of a crucial community anchor that can tie residents to each other and uplift the community.<sup>130</sup>

*If you have a good school in a community, people will start moving into that community and goods and services flow to where the people are. When you have kids in a neighborhood, people are more apt to have a neighborhood watch. Police respond better. People can fight for playgrounds and safe spaces. ... But when you eliminate schools, tear them down, rip them out of neighborhoods and shut them down without even consulting the neighborhood, then you end up with these deserts and you have parents who can’t afford to move or uproot their families.<sup>131</sup>*

### SURVEY SAYS

**68% of Detroit residents ranked improving public schools as a very high priority in their neighborhood.<sup>132</sup>**

Equally important to their function as a community hub, one of the most basic functions of a neighborhood school is to prepare students for the next step. But here, too, residents describe how Detroit schools fall short. Many residents voiced the opinion that college is necessary to get the kinds of jobs required to maintain economic stability, particularly given the rise of automated technology.<sup>133</sup> “Higher education is important to me and my community because like, it’s jobs out here but just with a high school diploma, it’s not really you know, fit. You need more now, they ask for more,” said one student.<sup>134</sup> **Detroiters point to high costs and educational inequities as major hurdles to college access for young people today.<sup>135</sup>** “While Cass Tech, one of Detroit’s finest schools, boasts its 12 Advanced Placement classes, which is much higher than DPSCD’s average number, Grosse Pointe schools, just miles away, carry more than 20 AP courses,” wrote one student. “My peers and I, in schools throughout the city, are told to be grateful for the bare minimum and ‘opportunities’ we can count on one hand.”<sup>136</sup>



(COURTESY OF CITY OF DETROIT)

**Even for some Detroiters with degrees, the path from a degree to economic mobility is not so clear, since credentials don't always yield wage benefits.**

"I'm paying \$30,000 on this student loan for something that is giving me a job one step above McDonald's," said one University of Phoenix graduate.<sup>137</sup> Balancing education courses with work and child care is particularly complicated for non-traditional college students, leading some to take several years to finish a degree, while accruing debt in the process.<sup>138</sup> Even retired Detroiters may be saddled with student loan debt, either from going back to school or taking out loans to fund a child's education. In 2017, the average loan debt for a borrower in their 60s in the Detroit metropolitan area was \$33,276.<sup>139</sup> Across Michigan, higher education debt has grown significantly over the last decade, increasing by 52% between 2007 and 2017 for students at four-year colleges.<sup>140</sup> At the same time, the state of Michigan's need-based student aid has dropped by nearly 95% over the past 15 years, and by 2019, the state allocated just \$20 in financial aid per full-time student each year, the lowest in the country. By comparison, Ohio and Illinois spent \$217 and \$740 per full-time student, respectively.<sup>141</sup>

Many residents think young people who aren't planning to attend college are underserved by the traditional school system.<sup>142</sup> "I think they need to revamp something, need to step it up and make sure that when a child graduates from high school, if he's not college bound, he should have been placed in some kind of training program," said one resident.<sup>143</sup> In our focus groups, Detroiters lamented the loss of

"The beautiful thing about Detroit is it has grit. ... But with collaboration of all three partners [the school system, the community, businesses] coming together we can bring our school system [up] and we can educate our children much better."

*Resident, American Black Journal Roadshow, September 2017*

in-school enrichment programming that ensured students in their generation were ready to enter the world after high school with practical skills.<sup>144</sup> "At one time we had schools where we had guys taking mechanics, carpentry, home economics. We don't have that no more, and that's hurting us."<sup>145</sup>

## WHAT WE CAN DO: RESIDENT IDEAS TO BUILD OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM

- **"Better schools, from building to teachers":**<sup>146</sup> "I am valuable and my education should be valued. Funding schools adequately and equitably is the first step to achieve that," wrote one student.<sup>147</sup> School funding equity in Detroit would require significant changes to funding formulas at the state level. One option would be for the state to fund local capital improvements via grants or per-pupil capital allowances.<sup>148</sup> Second, schools should receive more per-pupil funding based on their populations of low-income students, English language learners, and special education students, since serving these students equitably brings additional costs.<sup>149</sup>

Detroiters offer a variety of additional ideas to deploy more resources to public schools, such as raising teacher pay<sup>150</sup> and offering more in-school tutoring and free out-of-school tutoring. “I think that they need a place that they can go, where there is free tutoring for them,” one resident shared. “My daughter wanted to learn Spanish. She was having a hard time. In order for me to get her a tutor, I needed to have a lot of money. I couldn’t afford that.”<sup>151</sup>

- **Reopen and/or preserve neighborhood schools:**<sup>152</sup> Cody Rouge’s community vision calls for city leaders to “preserve local schools as educational institutions that perform well, prepare students for their future, and act as spaces for community building.”<sup>153</sup> In Brightmoor, some residents think community schools could offer parent resource centers for caregivers “to find information about school and about topics of interest in the community such as foreclosure prevention, landlord and tenant law, food assistance programs, adult education, tool lending, safety, etc.”<sup>154</sup> DPSCD’s Parent Academy offers a similar service, hosting free courses on topics like budgeting, nutrition, and coding throughout the city.
- **Create community “educational and school support programming”:**<sup>155</sup> “A literacy program should be established at every community center, and every community center should be opened,”<sup>156</sup> said one resident at a City Council meeting. Some Detroiters see community spaces in the neighborhoods as ideal venues for enrichment-style programming, including mentoring, arts and sports. One student suggested, “Homework clubs, a place where kids have confidence or feel like they can have confidence.”<sup>157</sup>

At an Eastside community meeting, residents suggested creating “circles of support for parents and students attending school on the Eastside.”<sup>158</sup> As discussed in the next section, the nonprofit Brilliant Detroit takes this approach, and converts houses in residential neighborhoods into early

childhood spaces for families and children to participate in enrichment programs promoting literacy and fitness.

- **More preparation for post-secondary life:** Detroiters want to see interventions aimed to better prepare students for life after secondary school, and they called for increased skilled trades and college counseling resources,<sup>159,160</sup> along with more experiential learning opportunities such as home economics and leadership.<sup>161</sup> Some residents were particularly interested in ensuring that youth had access to programming to build skills around entrepreneurship and business formation.<sup>162</sup> These suggestions align with public and nonprofit initiatives underway: the Detroit College Access Network is working to build capacity in Detroit high schools around SAT prep and college counseling, while the school district plans to make career academies, including Entrepreneurship and Construction, available at every school by 2021.
- **Expand non-loan higher education funding, for youth and adults:** To address financial barriers to college completion, residents on the Eastside suggested that corporations provide more scholarship opportunities for students living near new development projects.<sup>163</sup> To address resource gaps for working Detroiters who want to go back to school, a few residents suggested that large employers, like DPSCD, create tuition assistance programs for employees.<sup>164</sup> In fact, the Detroit Regional Chamber is currently working to encourage employers in the region to take the lead of Discover, which pays universities directly for the cost of employees who want to continue their educations, rather than tuition reimbursement, which can be cost-prohibitive for lower-income adults.<sup>165</sup> Moreover, the state’s new Michigan Reconnect program, if fully funded, would provide a tuition-free pathway to a certificate or associates degree for adults over 25.



(COURTESY OF CITY OF DETROIT)

## EQUITY STARTS WITH EARLY CHILDHOOD AND COMMUNITY

By Cindy Eggleton, co-founder and CEO, Brilliant Detroit

The root of ensuring kid success in neighborhoods lies in community and connection. Jasmine, a mother of four at our Osborn neighborhood hub, once said to me: “Organizations are there for programs and services, but a community is there for each other.” Alongside Jasmine, we at Brilliant Detroit build kid success neighborhoods where children are ready for school, reading at grade level by third grade, and living in healthy and stable families. We repurpose abandoned houses in the middle of neighborhoods into early childhood hubs, where high-quality programs and families can connect and create powerful atmospheres in which children can grow. Community is truly the glue that holds it all together, and young learners are placed at the center of all that we do.

Our learner and community-centered approach is for two reasons: first, 90% of a child’s brain develops by age 3, which means that well before a child starts kindergarten, their early experiences are setting them on a particular path forward. Second, it takes more than a single tutoring program to ensure a child is on track for reading. Instead, an array of holistic support for whole families must be available, and the best place for this support is in the neighborhoods themselves.

In Detroit, we estimate that nearly 75% of children are not ready for kindergarten, meaning that they haven’t developed enough early literacy, self-regulation, and healthy attachment skills. If they start kindergarten behind, they’re likely to stay behind. And if they’re still behind after third grade — that critical year when children move from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” — their odds of catching up are slimmer yet. Brilliant Detroit was born to address this crisis by connecting families with organizations providing evidence-based, high-quality programming in the fields of education, health, family support, and community building.

This focus on community connects with exciting trends in school-based learning as well, namely place-based education (PBE). PBE reimagines the classroom of learning as the community and connects students and school staff to address local issues and learn along the way. The Boggs School on Detroit’s East side and the Southeast Michigan Stewardship coalition based in Ypsilanti are two important examples of PBE, which is another way to weave stronger ties in communities between institutions and families.

So much learning takes place in communities. As we move forward during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, let us do so with learners at the center and community in our hearts. Coordinating our resources to spark the self-actualization of children and families is what powers kid success neighborhoods.



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## “RELIABLE, AFFORDABLE TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS”<sup>166</sup>

By Ashleigh Johnson and Afton Branche-Wilson, Poverty Solutions

*“I see bus riding as connected to employment, which is connected to housing which is connected obviously to foreclosures. ... The bus system isn’t working right yet. It’s improved significantly from what it once was, at the bottom, however, it needs a whole lot of work still.”<sup>167</sup>*

– Detroit resident at City Council meeting, June 2019

Investing in transportation as an anti-poverty strategy means working toward a Detroit where all residents have access to reliable transportation within their means. Residents envision a system with increased frequency, connections to regional destinations, reduced bus fares for low-income people, and car insurance they can afford. Currently, unreliable bus transportation and unaffordable auto insurance keeps many residents stuck in place.

Detroiters want to walk to schools, jobs, and local businesses, but many feel these are too far from walking distance.<sup>168</sup> **An estimated 34% of Detroit**

**residents do not have a car to use at home.**<sup>169</sup>

Without close neighborhood services or a reliable personal vehicle, thousands of Detroiters are reliant on an often-disconnected transit network. According to the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, 40% of households in poverty in the region are beyond a 30-minute transit trip to a supermarket, and 65% of households with seniors are beyond a 30-minute transit trip to any health care facility.<sup>170</sup> This lack of access results from policy choices to cut transit: between 2000 and 2013, Detroit lost 37% of its transit service, the second highest loss among large cities.<sup>171</sup> In Jefferson Chalmers and Aviation Sub, long-term residents believe that bus line cuts have negatively affected the quality of their neighborhoods by making them feel “locked in.”<sup>172</sup>

Deemed slow or unreliable, buses have a reputation of being a last resort, inferior to driving a private vehicle. About 1 in 4 residents reported missing an appointment, work, or forgoing a trip because they did not have a way to get there, according to DMACS data.<sup>173</sup> “The bus system is not on time ... you know cars break down every now and again, which stops us from doing the things we need to do,” said one focus group participant.<sup>174</sup> Long wait times and late Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT) buses are frequent sources of frustration and have even cost some residents jobs.<sup>175</sup> Even on time service is still infrequent enough to affect residents’ employment decisions. “Amazon is hiring, yet Amazon is on 17 [Mile] and Vancouver, and I’m all the way east,” said a

resident at our focus group. “Now I might wing it and do the two hour ride bus to get there, but now I’m off work at 11:30 at night. And the buses stop running. If I don’t get that last bus ... well.”<sup>176</sup> Residents with disabilities face added challenges securing public and private transportation that serves them well. “I’m a wheelchair-bound passenger of public transit,” said another resident at a city council meeting. One of the things that I found is that transit is not really set up to handle wheelchair passengers very well, and it’s the whole system.”<sup>177</sup>

“I rode from far west to the east side on Saturday — it took two hours. I rode the bus four times in the last month, and all four times the wind-chill factor was near zero — and the buses didn’t come on time. ... We as citizens are not getting the customer services that we should get.”

*Resident, City Council Meeting, February 2018*

Further, the cost and availability of transit can limit participation in education and community programs.<sup>178</sup> “With the charterization of much of Detroit’s K-12 education and the closing of many neighborhood schools, K-12 students now travel farther to get to school than ever before, many of them relying on public transportation,” said one transit advocate. “Buses not arriving on time or not at all leads to lateness and absences (perceived by school officials simply as truancy), intensifying educational inequalities and worsening long-term outcomes.”<sup>179</sup> This excerpt from *Abandoned Families*, developed based on interviews with low- and moderate-income women in Metro Detroit, illustrates the nexus between education and transportation:

*Sometimes when Nichelle did not have enough money to pay everyone’s bus fare she did not go to class. Sometimes all of them (including her children) stayed home — often enough that the district’s truant officer sent a warning letter, noting that if her sons missed any more days of school they could be held back. Unable to manage, Nichelle ended up withdrawing from several of her classes.*<sup>180</sup>

Due to the high cost of auto insurance, car notes, and repairs, car ownership can contribute to financial hardship for the average resident. Auto insurance

premiums cost Detroiters \$5,414 a year, on average, compared to \$1,277 for Cleveland residents,<sup>181</sup> while Michigan’s rough roads mean more maintenance costs for drivers. “One of the obstacles that my family members are experiencing are high car payments and fixing the car. A lot of us, because your credit’s not that good ... it’s hard to make ends meet paying a car note so that you can get to work to pay the car note,” said one resident at a Westside focus group.<sup>182</sup>

## WHAT WE CAN DO: RESIDENT IDEAS TO INCREASE ACCESS TO TRANSPORTATION

DDOT has made significant improvements in the past few years, from installing wireless internet to adding more frequent services on highly-used routes. New mobility options like MoGo bicycles and Bird scooters help some residents fill a transportation gap, but these can be geographically or financially out of reach for some low-income Detroiters.<sup>183</sup> Yet regional efforts remain stalled: the Regional Transportation Authority has introduced a mass transit framework, supported by the majority of Detroit residents, but at present there are no implementation plans. In addition to support for funding regional transit, Detroiters have a variety of ideas for how to build on transit momentum and improve access in the short and long term.

- **Improve and expand mass transit service:** Residents want to see “cleaner buses, more reliable service”<sup>184</sup> and restored bus services that were previously cut.<sup>185</sup> Others specifically point out the need for regional or local rail services, to access the airport, suburban communities that are currently hard to reach by bus, or even just within the city where the existing Q-Line light rail doesn’t go.<sup>186</sup>
- **Lower auto-insurance premiums and better road conditions:**<sup>187</sup> Low-income Detroiters are disproportionately impacted by sky-high auto insurance premiums and roads in disrepair. Thus, residents are eager to see results from recent legislation passed by the Michigan legislature aimed to increase choice in auto insurance options, which went into effect on July 2.
- **Low-income bus fares:** “One of the things [the bus system] really needs is what I would call a low-income fare. For those people who are below the



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poverty line and some who don't work, those [who] get SSI [and get] less than \$900 a month who ride the bus," suggested one resident.<sup>188</sup> A recent DDOT bus fare increase offered additional service hours to Detroit riders, but exacerbates fare affordability issues. A handful of localities across the country have initiated low fare programs, often in partnership with private or nonprofit agencies. King County, Washington, has an ORCA LIFT program, for example, that provides discounted fares for residents living under 200% of the federal poverty line. The program is partially funded through sales taxes and administered in partnership with social service agencies.<sup>189</sup>

- **Put car-sharing vehicles throughout the neighborhoods:**<sup>190</sup> "The sharing of cars will help our people get to work and school," said one resident at a community planning meeting.<sup>191</sup> PhillyCarShare, a nonprofit car share program recently acquired by Enterprise, allows local drivers to pay \$5-10 a month to access vehicles located across the city. In Los Angeles, a recent pilot placed electric car-sharing vehicles in low-income communities, combining efforts to promote transportation equity with greenhouse gas emission reductions.<sup>192</sup>

- **Van or shuttle services:**<sup>193</sup> Though New York City is well known for its extensive transit network, residents in the outer boroughs still experience service gaps. An estimated 100,000 riders a day instead hail "dollar vans," privately operated shuttles that travel on main thoroughfares and cost \$2-\$3 a trip.<sup>194</sup> Similar to the GOAL line pilot, which provides children with transportation to after-school programming, Detroit could test a dollar van initiative in partnership with a private agency to connect Detroiters near shuttered DDOT lines with transportation to essential services. While some residents see this option as a useful complement to existing transit, others worry about cost, capacity, and access for Detroiters with disabilities.<sup>195</sup>



## TRANSPORTATION IS FREEDOM: PUBLIC TRANSIT AS A PRECONDITION FOR ECONOMIC MOBILITY

By Motor City Freedom Riders

The Motor City Freedom Riders is a Metro Detroit organization of bus riders, organizing and advocating for transit justice. Public transit is not just a way of getting around; it is a pillar of racial and economic justice. Transportation is the public good by which all other needs and public goods may be accessed. Education, employment, medical care, nutrition, and housing all depend on a person's ability to physically reach them. **As a result, inequality in the ability of people to move is a multiplier upon all other inequalities, and justice-seeking efforts in other areas inevitably collide with the problems of transit.**

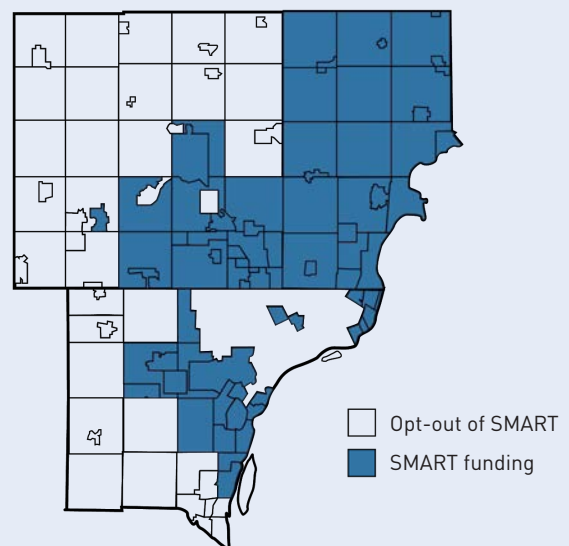
Public resources tend to be allocated according to the distribution of political power. The State of Michigan plans to spend \$3 billion to shave a few minutes of driving time off a single 6.7-mile stretch of I-94. At the same time, the state starves public transit agencies of funding and actively impedes their ability to raise funds locally. Transit in Metro Detroit is funded at a lower rate than in any other large metro area in the country. Our perspective is that transit is so disastrously deprioritized because the people who depend on it have so little political power, being overwhelmingly the poorest people in our city and region. The work of the Motor City Freedom Riders to improve public transit is therefore focused primarily on building power for Detroit's bus riders. We engage in direct outreach to other riders, hold public meetings for riders and transit supporters to participate in grassroots transit advocacy campaigns, and hold "Transit Organizing 101" trainings to develop their skills and strategic thinking for political action.

While it remains true that transit within the city of Detroit poses a serious barrier to residents getting to jobs and more in the city, we need to think of the problems of transit and poverty in relation to a broader regional geography. Most employed Detroit residents commute outside of the city for work, and Metro Detroit has the highest level of job sprawl in the country. This economic reality is not reflected in the transit service that is available. Metro Detroit remains the single remaining large metropolitan area

in the U.S. lacking a funded regional transit authority. Instead, **we have a fragmented system between city and suburbs, with two basic barriers to the freedom of movement of people who depend on transit.**

The first is the soft barrier of the city limits, with the challenges of moving between SMART busing system (which operates in suburbs that have opted in) and DDOT (which, except for a few routes extending into bordering municipalities, operates only in the city of Detroit). Their service is not coordinated, and depending on one's route, it may be necessary to get off a DDOT bus at the city limits and wait as long as 45 minutes for the SMART bus to arrive to continue the journey. This problem has been partially mitigated by the rollout of SMART's FAST service on three corridors, which provides seamless express service between Detroit and the suburbs. Expansion of FAST to new corridors (which would require new funding) would go far to improve this situation, as would the passage of a funding measure for a fully regional transit plan.

The second is a hard barrier, which **is the boundaries of suburbs that have opted out of SMART service. These communities have no transit service at all, and even when some routes pass through them (see the "Swiss cheese" map of SMART service below), passengers cannot board or disembark.** Some of our members have resorted to complex commuting measures to get to jobs in opt-out areas, such as taking the bus as far as possible before taking a



rideshare for the rest of the way. The story of James Roberston, known as “the walking man,” is simply a more extreme example of this. His commute was so arduous because Rochester Hills — the location of his factory job — is an opt-out community. For most riders, jobs, education, and medical care behind this opt-out wall are simply inaccessible. By funding suburban transit in this piecemeal fashion, we allow the wealthiest areas in the region to escape paying for public goods and the inertia of segregation to persist into the future. This problem could be addressed at several scales. Local governments can opt their communities into SMART service. The Oakland County and Wayne County commissions can decide to opt the entirety of their counties into SMART, as Macomb County has done. And most importantly, the passage of a funding measure for the Regional Transit Authority can fund transit across the entire region without opt-outs.

**Despite being the ones directly served by transit, riders themselves are rarely consulted for the development of new transit plans.** In our organizing, we work to elevate the voices of ordinary riders and seek a broader democratization of transit decision-making to better include their vital input. Anticipating the obstruction of the proposed four-county regional transit plan in 2018, the Motor City Freedom Riders pursued a regional plan between Wayne and Washtenaw counties, which have transit-supportive

leadership. We held a series of bus rider town halls and planning sessions to gather input about what riders would like to see in a two-county plan and to experiment with what a more participatory process of transit planning could look like. We rigorously demonstrated that this plan was financially viable with the smaller available tax base and used it as the basis of our organizing campaign to put a two-county measure on the ballot.

On other occasions, we have used rider surveys, community meetings, and general assemblies to allow the general public of Detroit bus riders to guide our decision making about what demands to put forward. In fall 2018, DDOT announced a plan to raise fares by 33%, to unify its fare structure with SMART's. Given that upwards of 85% of DDOT riders have incomes below the poverty line, we (and virtually all riders we spoke to) thought this fare hike was unacceptable and sought to come up with other solutions that could preserve the very real benefits of the plan without further burdening the city's poorest residents. We put forward three possibilities at a bus rider town hall, and we organized to gauge support for each. Expanding reduced fare eligibility to include low-income riders received the strongest support, so we took it up as a new campaign. **Ultimately, it is power for riders themselves that can fix our broken system and open new possibilities for freedom of movement and upward mobility in Detroit.**





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## “KEEP [DETROITERS] IN THEIR HOMES”<sup>196</sup>

By Ashleigh Johnson, Poverty Solutions

*“They sell you off to the highest bidder and that just sucks. The house has been in my family for forty years. Why can’t they buy a vacant home instead of putting someone out on the street?”<sup>197</sup>*

– Resident, as quoted in *How to Kill a City*, 2018

Housing stability is deeply connected to economic success, but residents report significant obstacles to finding and maintaining affordable, safe housing. In a variety of forums, residents argued that market rate and quality rental housing options are unaffordable to the majority of Detroiters, particularly seniors and people with disabilities.<sup>198</sup> Per 2018 estimates, around 72,000 renter households, just over half of renters, spend 30% or more of their income on rent, while 38,500 households spend 50% or more of their income on rent.<sup>199</sup> “All of your basic needs, you can’t meet them when you’re paying 60% of your income for housing,” said one resident. “We’re tired of hearing that you don’t have [money for affordable housing] when it comes to the residents who have paid and stayed.”<sup>200</sup>

Finding affordable and accessible housing can be particularly complicated for low-income Detroiters with disabilities. One advocate explained, “You have someone who has a disability or multiple [disabilities] coming in, [and they] need assistance with housing, but they only get \$771 a month. ... Then you have to find something that may be accessible or accommodating to them, and it’s very difficult to find things in that budget.”<sup>201</sup>

On top of cost concerns, some renters confront substandard and dangerous rental properties, and they feel powerless to negotiate improvements with their landlords.<sup>202</sup> “There is garbage housing in Detroit. ... They’re slums. It’s not safe. You got animals coming in on you — raccoons, bugs. They won’t fumigate. They will not help pay anything towards the water bill. ... They won’t even do the repairs,” said one parent advocate.<sup>203</sup> In turn, landlords express that rents are too low for them to be able to afford rental home improvements, while the costs of keeping up with compliance can shrink already thin profit margins.<sup>204</sup>

Detroiters’ visions of affordable housing includes both renters and homeowners, with interventions to promote both mixed-income and mixed styles of housing in communities, including single-family homes and duplexes.<sup>205</sup> Although there is a desire for new housing and development, some renters fear displacement and gentrification, and they observe widespread evictions and increased housing costs

as evidence it's already here.<sup>206</sup> However, concerns about gentrification are not universal. While 29% of residents worry that it's becoming too expensive to live in their neighborhoods, 45% of residents do not, according to a fall 2019 DMACS survey.<sup>207</sup>

Not surprisingly, whether residents think creating more affordable housing is a top priority differs by income. Over half of residents (52%) who earn less than \$10,000 a year see creating more affordable housing in their neighborhood as a top three priority, compared to just 21% of Detroiters who earn over \$50,000 annually.<sup>208</sup> "Some of the apartments have waiting lists a year out. ... They want \$800 for something that should be \$200 a month," said one low-income resident. "[Families or parents] don't let you move in like they used to, so we really need something to help with that housing piece, a little better than we really have right now."<sup>209</sup>

Just as renters struggle with monthly housing costs, for low- and moderate-income homeowners in Detroit, the triple burdens of homeowner's insurance, home repair, and property taxes all undermine financial security. Homeowners are often unable to purchase or afford homeowner's insurance to protect their investments, and an unknown proportion of the city's homes are uninsured. With an average structure age of 72 years, much of Detroit's housing stock likely needs serious, and costly repairs.<sup>210</sup> To address these conditions, residents overwhelmingly want home repair grants. Many do not consider the existing 0% interest loan product a feasible option,<sup>211</sup> since residents without homeowner's insurance, enough income, or the required credit qualifications can't get approved for the loan.<sup>212</sup>

Residents shared troubling stories of losing their homes due to predatory lending or years of property tax over-assessments. "I have a lot of history in this house, and to just see it all snatched away, it's kind of heartbreaking," said one resident facing foreclosure.<sup>213</sup> An unknown number of residents in similarly serious financial and emotional situations have taken the extreme measure of walking away from their homes.<sup>214</sup> Although the tax foreclosure crisis has abated, tax delinquency still threatens thousands of homeowners across the city. In 2018, the Quicken Loans Community Fund estimated that **58,933 Detroit homes were tax delinquent, three-quarters of them occupied.**<sup>215</sup> It's too early to tell whether Pay

as You Stay, the city's new program aimed at reducing delinquent tax burdens, will help keep a significant portion of low-income families in their homes.

Many residents are concerned about the experiences of the most vulnerable Detroiters in the housing market and want to see more housing built specifically to support people experiencing homelessness.<sup>216</sup> Detroiters who have experience in the shelter system spoke of shelter quality issues, such as residents sleeping in chairs and a limited number of beds for single people and men with children.<sup>217</sup> One resident pointed out the irony of homelessness in a city with thousands of vacant homes:

*There are so many families living in a home far too small, are homeless, or are in the process of losing their home. Detroit has an obscene amount of houses that could be repurposed for families to use. But with all the bureaucracy, the homes are left to sit, be vandalized, rot, and then burned down. Irony.<sup>218</sup>*

Transgender residents are more likely to experience homelessness than cisgender Detroiters, according to survey data from 2018.<sup>219</sup> Speaking of transgender women, one community leader said, "A lot of them don't even have real homes because they're being excommunicated by their family members. They're being tossed to the streets with nowhere to go."<sup>220</sup> Others experience housing discrimination, where potential landlords reject rental applications only after noticing the difference between an applicants' birth name and their preferred name.<sup>221</sup>

## WHAT WE CAN DO: RESIDENT IDEAS TO INCREASE HOUSING ACCESS

Over the past several years, the city and its partners have developed and implemented strategies to promote affordable rental housing and homeownership for legacy Detroiters. From the resident perspective, however, there still is room for improving existing programs to ensure more residents have access to safe, affordable housing.

- **Increase public and affordable housing:** Residents support deep affordability to address homelessness and unaffordability, and they see the city's vast vacant and abandoned housing stock as an opportunity to permanently house

**SOLUTIONS SPOTLIGHT** .....

COTS is currently renovating an eight-story property on Peterboro in Midtown into 56 units of 2- and 3-bedroom fully-furnished, long-term apartments for families. Most importantly, the units will be deeply affordable, targeting families who have experienced homelessness.



Ruth Ellis Center is building a 43-unit supportive housing development targeting young LGBTQ Detroiters, which will combine health services with largely subsidized rent.

more Detroiters. In Jefferson Chalmers, residents repeatedly said they wanted housing efforts to be led by local community development corporations, not for-profit developers or the city.<sup>222</sup> “We need more public housing and better public housing. There are 90,000 properties already owned by the government, so that can be the solution,” said one resident at an Outlier Media community engagement session.<sup>223</sup>

To achieve affordable housing goals, policymakers and developers must define what is “affordable” at a level that actually covers Detroiters, since affordable housing thresholds are based on area median income, which includes higher-income Oakland County. One remedy, according to advocates, would be to invest big in the city’s housing trust fund at levels similar to other cities such as Pittsburgh, which commits \$10 million annually to its fund.<sup>224,225</sup>

- **Improve public programs to promote ownership:** “The Land Bank still needs to be explained better to most people, also [it] sells too often to investors and landlords,” said one Warrendale resident.<sup>226</sup> Residents want additional support with navigating Detroit Land Bank Authority regulations and purchasing programs, as well as support post-purchase on issues such as how to deal with contractors.<sup>227</sup> The newly announced Rehab Academy, which would teach on topics such as how to scope repairs and how to contract out repair work, should address these concerns if fully implemented.<sup>228</sup>

- **Enforce rental ordinance laws and promote tenant rights:** Detroiters believe tenants’ rights should be better protected and educational training and legal assistance should be offered to tenants to navigate landlord-tenant issues.<sup>229</sup> The implementation of recent efforts to provide tenants legal representation in eviction proceedings could go a long way toward helping tenants realize their legal rights. Further, LGBTQ advocates have long campaigned to explicitly outlaw housing and other forms of discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity, and the issue may be on the ballot in fall 2020.
- **Create more accessible home repair options:** In spite of the city’s existing home repair programs, the need for additional home repair resources is top of mind for many residents. One popular idea is to expand funding for home repair grants, perhaps through corporate sponsorships to fund repairs for homes owned by seniors.<sup>230</sup> In other cities, such as Milwaukee, low-income residents living in homes with health and safety hazards can access a range of home repair financing options, including deferred interest loans and partially forgivable loans. Residents also see expanding access to tool lending libraries, which currently exist in a few neighborhoods, as a viable way for their neighbors to make small repairs on their own without incurring debt.<sup>231</sup> Another idea, from a community engagement session: “Detroit Public Schools should partner with neighborhoods and builders/trade programs to teach housing rehab. Ann Arbor has a similar program. The money from the sale could be re-invested into the program. This can create safe walking routes, more vibrancy, affordable housing, and graduates with skills.”<sup>232</sup>



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## COTS' TWO-GENERATION APPROACH

By Nicole Carbonari and Delphia Simmons, COTS

For over 35 years, COTS has served the most vulnerable members of the Detroit community. Over time we noticed an increasing number of families with children enter our emergency shelter only to see these children return years later as adults with children of their own. We realized that while we were providing vital housing to hundreds of families experiencing homelessness, we were not addressing what was, more often than not, the root cause of that homelessness. We were witnessing cycles of generational poverty that housing alone would not eliminate.

With the realization of poverty as the driver of homelessness and our need to address it came our theory of change for disrupting generational poverty. After making the necessary organizational changes to put theory to practice, COTS's focus is now exclusively

on engaging families to develop economic self-sufficiency and stabilized environments to create a multi-generational impact and ultimately break the cycle of poverty. This innovative approach is called Passport to Self-Sufficiency™. Passport to Self-Sufficiency™ (PTS) is COTS's poverty reduction and alleviation framework used across all programs and projects in the organization. Using a two-generation, whole-family approach, we partner with families who are currently or at risk of experiencing homelessness to provide long-term services that are person-centered, strengths-based, and trauma-informed.

Often the resources and services offered by human service organizations are prescribed and regulative, with very little room for innovation or awareness of the unique needs of each individual. **PTS takes a strengths-based approach that results in each family co-creating their pathway out of poverty alongside a PTS Mobility Coach. It is a collaboration with an understanding that each parent knows what's best for their family and what self-sufficiency looks like for them.**

Relationships are the foundation for this human-centered approach. Connection between the people in our organization, our strategic partners, and the families we partner with helps to create or enhance a positive social network of love and care. True connection and partnership with families is the backbone for long-term commitment that helps families to overcome barriers to their success. The PTS Mobility Coach and the head of household partner to set goals across five domains: Housing and Family Stability, Economic Mobility, Health and Well-being, Education and Training, and Career and Employment. These five domains also have been identified as critical to self-sufficiency through extensive research by Economic Mobility Pathways in Boston. Their research incorporates Harvard University's findings on poverty and brain science, toxic stress, executive functioning, and self-regulation.

All of our work is done through a lens of intergenerational mobility. Knowing generational poverty is often at the root of cyclical poverty, it is imperative to support, coach, and offer resources to not only the heads of households (parents) but to their children as well. To this end, COTS uses a whole-family approach, providing mobility coaching not only to parents but also to their children.

The effects of instability, family stress, worry about physical safety, and constant change on the lives of poor and homeless children and youth is often invisible to them, their parents, and the community. But these factors impact not just their behavior and their academic performance but also their ability to see themselves as architects of their own lives and to successfully shape their lives. With this in mind, COTS coaches support each child as they set goals that focus on the development of social-emotional and executive functioning skills they need to navigate challenges and create a successful future.

Through one-on-one interviews, focus groups, listening sessions, and surveys, COTS engages families in our programs to learn what is working and how we might enhance our approach. This direct insight from our families informs our work and allows us to better serve our mission to break the cycle of poverty for this generation and beyond.





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## CONCLUSION

Detroiters have a clear sense of the interlinked systems that undermine economic success in their city, from the lack of jobs to low wages and the high cost of basic necessities like water and rent. Policies and programs that increase access to jobs, raise wages, increase education equity, promote accessible transportation, and provide affordable housing are foundational to a city where every resident has access to economic stability. While these issue areas are not unexpected, this process enabled us to get a better understanding of the specific, concrete changes Detroiters hoped to see in their lives to drive economic success and reduce material hardship.





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## II. INVESTING IN RESIDENT POWER

Power is the ability to “make choices and craft a future”<sup>233</sup> for yourself, your family, and your community. These capabilities are related to having economic tools — with a business loan, a father can act on his desire to launch a new venture — but also stem from beliefs. Research shows that people, at all income levels, who report a greater sense of control are less depressed and healthier, while those who feel less agency experience worse health outcomes.<sup>234</sup>

In this section, we explore the various ways Detroiters talk about power and autonomy at both the individual and community level. Some residents describe local conditions that get in the way of their ability to make economic progress — obstacles, for example, to starting a business or finding information about social services. And inaccessible public meetings pose literal obstacles to Detroiters with ambulatory disabilities. At a macro level, we see residents and community leaders sometimes feel disempowered by neighborhood investment and development processes, and instead they yearn for real influence in decisions that affect their community. Throughout, we foreground ideas to invest in building resident power and agency.

## ECONOMIC AGENCY: GROWING, OWNING, AND EARNING IN DETROIT

By Kyra Hudson and Afton Branche-Wilson, Poverty Solutions

*“The reason I’m engaged in farming is self-determination. It is important for us to create for ourselves and define our own realities.”<sup>235</sup>*

– Detroit farmer, 2011

Detroiters see great potential to generate economic value and influence community development through different forms of income generation and entrepreneurship, including growing food, owning land, and starting businesses, but they feel limited in their ability to capitalize on these opportunities.

Some residents who participate in gardening projects **describe food cultivation as a way to gain power and reduce dependence on others**, while addressing the food access issues throughout the city.<sup>236</sup> “I feel more empowered by growing my own. I have experienced not having it, and I felt powerless. [Grocery stores] can

*“We’re not rich. We can’t build expensive condos or lofts, so we’re going to have to be creative in getting people back. We have to use the assets here. And what we have is open space to farm.”*

*Brightmoor resident, Pride (2016)*

come and go. ... If I grow it myself, I know what's going to happen. I get more peace of mind knowing that I can grow it, freeze it, dry it," said one female farmer.<sup>237</sup> A Detroit Food Policy Council resident survey highlights two key factors needing improvement to increase participation of marginalized groups in Detroit's food system: access to capital, followed by mentorship in food service industries.<sup>238</sup>

Many **groups want to own land and property to create community-owned and managed spaces and thus gain control over neighborhood development, but they experience institutional roadblocks.**<sup>239</sup> For example, a number of residents find unaffordable prices and unclear city processes impede wider access to community ownership.<sup>240</sup> "I intended to purchase lots from [the Land Bank] to start gardening, and they would only sell them at investor prices with strict guidelines that make it impossible for a working person to purchase and rehab the land into gardens," said one resident at a city council meeting.<sup>241</sup> Community capacity is another hindrance to success in grassroots community development efforts: "People have grand ideas but don't know how to put them into service — me included," said one community organization leader.<sup>242</sup>

## SURVEY SAYS

**65% of Detroiters ranked making it easier for someone to start a small business as "very high" or "high" priority for their neighborhood.**<sup>243</sup>

Similar to the promise of land ownership, **residents in neighborhoods across Detroit are optimistic about the potential of entrepreneurship and micro-enterprise to create greater prosperity.**<sup>244</sup> Micro-enterprises, defined by Prosperity Now as businesses with fewer than four employees,<sup>245</sup> are all over Detroit; their owners cut hair, take care of neighbors' children, or operate small retail shops, for example. The size of this sector is hard to quantify, as many microbusinesses are in the informal economy and thus not well captured in surveys. But the 2012 Survey of Business Owners by the Census gives an estimate in the tens of thousands; 97% of the estimated 50,000 Detroit businesses owned by people of color that year were microbusinesses with no employees.<sup>246</sup>

**"Permit fees for vending in public places are cost-prohibitive for small and emerging businesses — reduce or eliminate them to enable residents' businesses and culture to thrive!"**

*Southwest Resident, City of Detroit Neighborhood Framework*

In conversations about community economic development, residents prioritize supporting these small businesses, because they bring jobs and locally-owned assets to the neighborhoods.<sup>247</sup> "We have African American businesses that's been in this neighborhood, stayed when nobody else wanted to stay, and can't get the help that they need," said one resident.<sup>248</sup> However, residents describe two sets of challenges to building strong resident-owned businesses in their neighborhoods: local market conditions and the high costs of doing business in the city.<sup>249</sup>

**According to DMACS, one-third of Detroiters feel there are "little to no" or "few" opportunities for someone to become an entrepreneur in the city, although 44% say there are some opportunities.**<sup>250</sup>

In Brightmoor, residents are concerned that even with the innovation and creativity that exists in their community, investors and new employers don't perceive their area as a "business community," due to lack of branding or safety concerns.<sup>251</sup> Some residents in Banglatown wish there was more infrastructure to support residents who hope to start businesses and greater profitability for existing businesses so they can support higher employee wages.<sup>252</sup> Residents also brought up complaints about the physical environment, including business corridor cleanliness and zoning issues.<sup>253</sup> The City of Detroit's Strategic Neighborhood Fund initiative aims to address these issues in 10 communities by deploying dollars to strengthen commercial corridors and public infrastructure like streetscapes and parks. If successful, SNF efforts could do much to improve neighborhood market conditions that residents have identified.

Residents also cite financial barriers to stronger small businesses, including the lack of startup capital, permit fees, and business taxes.<sup>254</sup> Detroit entrepreneurs also may suffer from racial discrimination in seeking financing; studies show that businesses owned by Black and Latino owners are more likely to pay higher

interest rates than similar white owners or get denied for bank loans altogether.<sup>255</sup> In the years following the recession, researchers found that some Black and Latino business owners “did not bother asking for credit to banks. ... They did not believe they would get it ‘because they are in Detroit,’” one said.<sup>256</sup> Asking for capital from family and friends also proves difficult. “There’s so much poverty in Detroit that we don’t have the resources, whether it’s technical assistance or actual capital to start a small business from our family and friends, which is where most small business owners get that from,” said one advocate.<sup>257</sup>

In seeking to regain control of their economic lives post-release, returning citizens must clear all of the above hurdles, plus additional stigmas and restrictions. Residents convicted of criminal offenses in Michigan face over 400 collateral consequences in the areas of employment, education, and occupational licensing.<sup>258</sup> One Detroit resident who served time for a felony wanted to go into psychology upon release, only to discover that Michigan requires residents with criminal backgrounds to disclose their status when applying for a license.<sup>259</sup> The stigma surrounding a recent criminal history further interfered with his efforts to get an internship while in school. “I was literally turned away from 20 different institutions. And what we was often hearing was that I just didn’t have enough years under my belt away from the criminal justice system,” he said.<sup>260</sup> Some formerly incarcerated individuals ultimately go into business for themselves, choosing to become small business owners or micro-entrepreneurs.<sup>261</sup> “It’s probably the most difficult thing one can imagine,” said one person with a criminal record of finding employment. “I found that it became where I had to reinvent myself if you will, and the only opportunities I found were through self-education and entrepreneurial talents.”<sup>262</sup>

### WHAT WE CAN DO: RESIDENT IDEAS FOR ECONOMIC SELF-DETERMINATION

Detroit has a robust small business support ecosystem to help residents start and grow their own business ventures. ProsperUs, for example, provides training, advice, and micro-lending to neighborhood businesses and entrepreneurs, while the Build Institute offers a range of resources, including business growth courses and pop-up space. A forthcoming research project conducted by University

of Michigan, the Build Institute, and other partners will evaluate to what extent this ecosystem delivers outcomes in wealth creation and upward economic mobility in the city.

- **Provide more technical assistance:** To support Detroit-owned businesses, residents demand more technical assistance in a range of areas, including navigating city processes like permitting and registration.<sup>263</sup> One resident who moved to Detroit from Yemen said, “If we can have the guidance of how to do the taxes for your business [that would help] ... because business here is different. [In Yemen], you do it by yourself, and then you’re good to go. Here, you need to open this [thing]. You need to get this permit. You need to get that permit.”<sup>264</sup>

One advocate also pointed out the critical role of **“trusted connectors” to actually link residents to existing services.** “It’s not enough to simply expand capital and technical assistance. If the providers remain disconnected from the residents who could benefit from the capital and [technical assistance], then it doesn’t matter.”<sup>265</sup> Funders and city officials should continue to invest in programs to equip residents with development funding and tools. Existing examples include Detroit Future City’s Working With Lots, which provides grants and technical assistance for vacant lot transformation, and Better Buildings, Better Blocks, which teaches residents about small-scale real estate development.

- **Access to land:** “It would be much better if the land bank would make it easier for existing residents to purchase lots to use for green space at a lower cost,” said one resident.<sup>266</sup> Reducing costs, offering more capacity building support, and relaxing regulatory guidelines are just a few ways policymakers can expand land access to more residents with limited financial resources.
- **Access to capital:**<sup>267</sup> Detroiters would also benefit from greater investments in alternative lending tools such as micro-loans, where lenders do not ask borrowers for collateral or good credit to take out loans. Lending circles, operated in Detroit by Southwest Solutions, bring together a small group of entrepreneurs who offer micro-loans to each other on a monthly basis, without regard to credit. Nationally, the model has been proven to reduce



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debt and increase credit scores for participants, many of whom are micro-entrepreneurs of color.<sup>268</sup> Residents and community leaders also suggest direct material support to businesses, such as subsidizing rent or rehabbing vacant storefronts for pop-up shops.<sup>269</sup>

- **Better connected businesses:** One way to promote small and micro-businesses is to ensure neighbors are aware of ways to support them. In Brightmoor, residents suggested a directory to push the idea of “shopping the block.”<sup>270</sup> In Southwest, the business association created an app listing local business and events for residents and visitors. In the Hope Village community, supporting businesses also means connecting them to each other; their neighborhood plan calls for connecting value-chain partners together such as vegetable growers and pickle makers to promote a local entrepreneurial ecosystem.<sup>271</sup>
- **Invest in community ownership and alternative business models:** Detroit is home to a movement of social entrepreneurs, who don’t primarily want to turn a profit but instead aim to build a thriving community through economic means.<sup>272</sup> At a Poverty Solutions focus group, one resident urged policymakers to “make community ownership the default. ... So it’s not just, ‘Oh, there should be community input,’ no the community should have *ownership*.”<sup>273</sup> Some focus on **community land trusts for commercial and residential space as a way to achieve these goals.**<sup>274</sup>

In one version of this model, the community owns a nonprofit that purchases land and/or buildings, then leases the land out for community-oriented goals like affordable housing or small businesses. According to experts, community land trusts demand a wide range of skills, from real estate acquisition to legal expertise, which suggests a role for capacity building support and pro bono services to promote their use in Detroit.<sup>275</sup> Cooperative business ownership is also a popular idea among Detroiters, who share a variety of ideas around which industries would lend themselves to shared ownership, including food, solar installation, and graffiti removal.<sup>276</sup> There is already exciting work going on in these fields: Center for Community-Based Enterprise and Detroit Justice Center have been focusing on worker-owned businesses and land trusts, respectively, while the Detroit People’s Food Co-Op is set to launch soon in the North End.

- **Reduce restrictions and increase re-entry support for people with criminal convictions:** “I think that also we need some money going towards working with the people that need the expungements. ... I would use the money on people,” offered one resident in a focus group.<sup>277</sup> In addition to ensuring programs serving this population are fully funded, stakeholders should support policy changes at the state level to further assist people with prior convictions; for example, advocates are pushing the governor and state legislature to end the lifetime ban on food stamps for residents with two or more felony drug convictions.



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## KNOWLEDGE IS POWER: TROUBLES ACCESSING INFORMATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

By Kyra Hudson, Poverty Solutions

*“It’s a lot of programs in the city, but we don’t know about it, to be honest with you ...”<sup>278</sup>*

– Detroit resident at focus group, December 2019

Detroit residents describe a **significant information gap, which prevents access to mobility-related programs**.<sup>279</sup> In our research, we heard repeatedly that Detroiters have trouble finding various kinds of information, from job postings and energy efficiency resources to zoning hearings and parent support services.<sup>280</sup> Speaking about finding city-related information, one resident said, “It’s not easy to maneuver and if you don’t know who to contact for what, a lot of people end up calling the wrong people ... then they just get discouraged. So you have a city of discouraged individuals.”<sup>281</sup>

Without the right information, a resident may not know how to dispute a thousand dollar water bill or save their home from foreclosure. “Because I didn’t get the right information, because I didn’t know, I wouldn’t be dealing with [this foreclosure]. ... I kept hearing about the poverty exemption, but by the time

“I didn’t realize there were certain resources for parents until my little girl was in kindergarten. If I would have known about these resources when she was freshly born, it would have made a difference in her education.”

*Parent, Hope Starts Here, 2019*

I actually got the knowledge for how it could help me, it was sad that it was too late,” said one resident to U-M researchers.<sup>282</sup> There is not one database or information source in Detroit that unifies city, nonprofit, and grassroots resources, and existing social service databases, like United Way’s 2-1-1 hotline or Aunt Bertha, may not be widely known. “Barriers to employment and access to programs and services are one and the same,” said one social service provider. “Programs align with the needs of community stakeholders, however this alignment is hidden within the lack of access and engagement with the community the program is designed to serve.”<sup>283</sup>

Detroit’s massive digital divide is another factor in the information gap and prevents many residents from gaining access to information. Twenty-seven percent of Black Detroiters and 20% of Hispanic Detroiters do not have high speed internet, while nearly half of residents (47%) making less than \$20,000 a year go without high speed internet.<sup>284</sup> Therefore, social services information primarily distributed online likely misses many low-income and non-white Detroiters.

Residents who are not online find out information through flyers, community meetings, door-to-door engagement, and by word-of-mouth around the community.<sup>285</sup> But as residents describe, these communication tools are limited in reach and seem to contribute to both the information gap and feelings of powerlessness.<sup>286</sup> **“If you have places you know that you can go for information, you can thrive. But if you have no access to any of that, you feel lost,”** said one community health leader.<sup>287</sup> Living in a depopulated neighborhood, which limits people-to-people information sharing, widens the information gap. For Detroiters who speak a language other than English, it’s even harder to access relevant information, since many programs, services, and community events are only available in English.<sup>288</sup>

### WHAT WE CAN DO: RESIDENT IDEAS TO CLOSE THE INFORMATION GAP

- **Expand access to home internet and free Wi-Fi connection spots.**<sup>289</sup> The City of Detroit’s first ever director of digital inclusion is charged with implementing an action plan to expand internet, data, and device access. In spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic sparked major progress in this area, as 51,000 students in the Detroit Public Schools Community District received wireless tablets and internet access for six months. Months later, officials announced an expansion of the technology distribution to high school students and recent graduates of private and charter schools. However, there’s still room for progress to reduce the digital divide, since over 50,000 Detroit students attend non-DPSCD schools.
- **A comprehensive online directory and calendar:** Create an organized, open access, and easily accessible digital directory of resources and meetings across the city.<sup>290</sup> Alternatively, a campaign to better promote 2-1-1, both to residents and service providers not listed, could help drive easier access to information.
- **Physical community information hubs:** “Someplace where people can go to find out how to do things (check deeds, check landlords, find out about community meetings, etc.),” suggested one Brightmoor resident.<sup>291</sup> Some residents want a centralized, physical place to find information, while others want to see smaller hubs more catered to specific communities, such as a bulletin board, parent resource center in a school, or information kiosk.<sup>292</sup>
- **Translate all community information materials** into English, Spanish, Bangla, and Arabic, and ensure information is available via off-line formats.<sup>293</sup>
- **Mobile information hubs:** Expand efforts like Hope Community Outreach and Development’s planned mobile resource unit, which was conceived and will be led by youth ambassadors to promote environmental and safety efforts to residents who cannot attend meetings.<sup>294</sup>
- **Amplify role of organizations as information distributors:** “I think that the various community centers, churches, or whomever can do more advertising spots on the radio, TV, and flyers,” suggested one resident.<sup>295</sup> Residents believe block clubs, nonprofit organizations, churches, and community groups should have a more institutionalized role in how information gets shared throughout Detroit.<sup>296</sup> “There are several things that are going through zoning appeals, but we were not aware of them,” said one community member at a City Council meeting. “We’re asking for a process to be put in place where we can have the community leaders to at least be on a listserv. ... It makes us be reactionary to things as opposed to being proactive.”<sup>297</sup> Another group suggested that funders and non-profits allocate funds to the creation and distribution of community newsletters.<sup>298</sup> Last, though the method is resource- and time-intensive, residents and local community leaders stress the importance of incorporating face-to-face methods into outreach processes for all programs or services.<sup>299</sup>

## CENTERING COMMUNITY VOICES

By Afton Branche-Wilson, Poverty Solutions

*“Remember those who have spent their time in this city, the long years of taxation and spending ... their voice must and shall be heard.”<sup>300</sup>*

– Detroit resident at city council meeting, July 2019

In the previous sections, we explored residents’ insights into how access to information, land, and capital can facilitate economic self-determination for individuals. Here, we dig into the concept of power and autonomy at the community level and find that **Detroiters unequivocally want more power and influence over economic revitalization plans and want to be considered partners in the work.**<sup>301</sup>

“Listen to the residents instead of listening to all these big money pockets that you’re giving all these tax abatements to. But you’re not listening to the people that are here in the community,” said one resident at a council meeting.<sup>302</sup> Many residents do not feel heard or considered by city leaders, foundations, or developers as decisions are made about planning and neighborhood development, and they have consistently voiced these concerns for nearly a decade.<sup>303</sup> In addition, the suspicion that lending one’s voice doesn’t actually lead to change leads some to feel a strong sense of planning fatigue.<sup>304</sup> One resident said of neighborhood planning efforts, “Now I done been here 20 years and after two years of this I was like, ‘You know what, I’m breaking away from those meetings because they’re going nowhere.’ We’ve been dealing with this issue for 25 years and yet it has yet to get solved, and I am frankly tired of having the conversations.”<sup>305</sup>

To some residents, feeling ignored by decision makers is related to the process used in gathering information, wherein the topic of a community

meeting is pre-set or only certain community groups hear about meetings and others don’t.<sup>306</sup> Others simply mention final projects that seem disconnected from resident input, or worse, directly contradict resident wishes.<sup>307</sup> Speaking of a nonprofit project, one resident said, “They had the funding, they came in, but they didn’t include us, they didn’t explain things to us. ... They asked us, like, little surveys here and there. But that’s not what they came in kind of saying in these meetings. It’s not what we as a community put down. It’s not what we dreamed of happening.”<sup>308</sup> Another resident talked about conflicts between government hearings and working hours: “While I’m sitting at my job, I can’t get out there and present my idea. There’s a conflict between when the people who make the decisions are making decisions and when you have to be at your job.”<sup>309</sup>

### WHAT WE CAN DO: RESIDENT IDEAS TO AMPLIFY COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- Detroiters in our research urged decision makers to **incorporate resident voices early in policy development** and create more “open, transparent, and inclusive” planning processes.<sup>310</sup> For funders, increasing community power also means creating mechanisms for community to participate in setting funding priorities and finding ways to decrease their own political influence, according to a report by Allied Media Projects and the Detroit People’s Platform.<sup>311</sup>

One way to democratize agenda-setting power is through participatory budgeting and grantmaking, an innovative process where residents decide how public or private funds are spent. Invest Detroit, a nonprofit business and real estate investor, recently completed a participatory budgeting project in Southwest Detroit. One resident said of the participatory budgeting process, “Some of the reasons residents want to stay involved because this experience gave them hope that a different reality, a real democracy, is possible. We live in a false democracy with limited voice and agency.”<sup>312</sup>

- **Partner with residents as equal contributors:** Many Detroiters want to participate in the revitalization of their own communities, and they resist the idea of having things done for them or to them by community organizations, city leaders, or universities.<sup>313</sup> “There should be more

“My question is how can we, the citizens of the city of Detroit, be more engaged in [city] contracts, because we live in the city of Detroit, we work in the city of Detroit, and we raise kids in the city of Detroit ...”

*Resident, City Council meeting, 2019*

community involvement in the distribution of community funds,” said one Westside community leader.<sup>314</sup> Another aspect of this theme came out in discussions about volunteer work, where some residents wanted to reduce the use of students and volunteers in the community who are not from Detroit and instead more intentionally build community power and capacity to do work.<sup>315</sup>

**Residents suggested that people in power hire residents with lived experience, appoint them as board members, or even invite them to serve as pro-bono partners in the work.**<sup>316</sup> “[There’s] a lot of people with a lot of expertise who stayed in the city. They have a lot to offer, and I don’t think the city utilizes that. Reach out to them, let them work, tell them what you need, tell them the truth, what you trying to work on, and see if you can get people to volunteer,” said one resident in a focus group.<sup>317</sup> In a few conversations, residents voiced support for establishing community advisory councils, as a mechanism to cede government power to the neighborhoods.<sup>318</sup> Community Development Advocates of Detroit is currently working on a Neighborhood Action tables initiative, which aims to regularly bring together residents and institutions in a way that allows for shared priority-setting and monitoring of community development practices in their neighborhoods.<sup>319</sup> Similarly, students and youth advocates have been pushing for a student to be elected to DPSCD’s school board. “The students are the ones who experience these problems first hand, so they should have a say in the decision-making processes that will directly impact them,” wrote one student leader.<sup>320</sup>

Wayne Metro takes an innovative approach to partnering with residents in community development. The Detroit Neighborhood Residents First Fund supports the development of neighborhood leadership opportunities to help residents create a hyper-local social network to advocate for improvements in their communities.<sup>321</sup> Further, its Seeding of Detroit grants give power to residents as grant makers; local residents who participate in the organization’s Regional Advisory Councils review and select local Seeding grantees, who are small, Detroit-based nonprofits.<sup>322</sup>

- **Invest in capacity building and share knowledge with grassroots leaders:** In Springwells, the community plan voiced support for “training and developing community leaders by working with residents of all ages, [and] building upon existing skillsets.”<sup>323</sup> Further investments in existing efforts like City Council’s District 6 Leadership Series, Building the Engine of Community Development in Detroit’s Capacity Building and Certification initiative and ARISE Detroit’s Neighborhood Summit could make capacity building training more widely available to residents and the grassroots organizations they lead. In particular, some residents want more training on how to access programs and apply for grants, as one leader put it, “so there is a better opportunity for [residents] to also maybe participate in developing their own businesses or learning how to become developers themselves.”<sup>324</sup> Some residents and community leaders want more explicit information about how they can influence or navigate government processes like neighborhood planning.<sup>325</sup> “I would like to encourage the City Council to create more opportunities for letting the neighborhoods learn how to at least contend with and be at the table with some of the development forces,” said one resident.<sup>326</sup>

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## NOTHING ABOUT US, WITHOUT US

By **Dessa Cosma**, executive director, **Detroit Disability Power**

Detroit Disability Power (DDP) emerged from a gap in the social justice and progressive political landscape in Detroit. Despite people with disabilities comprising 19% of our city's population, there has been minimal civic engagement, organizing, or voter turnout of this large and diverse group. Most essentially, the work of DDP is to dismantle ableist systems that keep people with disabilities poor, isolated, and politically powerless. Ableism is the systemic discrimination of people with disabilities, and it manifests at the personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural levels. A school or government entity not providing American Sign Language interpreters or not having a policy about providing language access at public events is institutional ableism, as is holding public meetings in buildings that cannot be accessed by those with wheelchairs or walkers. We combat ableism through organizing people with disabilities and our allies; training nonprofit leaders, activists, educators, city officials, and others about how ableism operates and how to do things differently; and by building strong relationships within the local disability community.

**There are more than 126,000 Detroiters with disabilities, including those with hearing, vision, ambulatory, cognitive, self-care, independent living, and mental health disabilities.** More than 100,000

disabled Detroiters are African American, more than 6,000 are Latinx, nearly 1,000 are Asian American, and nearly 750 are Indigenous, meaning that a vast majority of our community members are facing economic, political, and social barriers because of their disability status *and* their race. Additionally, more than 70,000 are women, who likely encounter gender discrimination as well. Across racial and gender identity, and types of disability, our community experiences high levels of poverty and limited economic mobility. The improvements DDP wants to make are intersectional, as well, and will benefit all Detroiters.

Disability is overrepresented in low-income communities, which are often on the receiving end of systemic oppression and more likely to be exposed to unsafe conditions, including polluted air and water. While disability is a normal part of human diversity, we also know that oppression and environmental injustices cause more disability. The cultural devaluation of disabled lives, particularly those with additional marginalized identities, hinders progress toward a Detroit that works for all of its residents. **Until those in positions of power design services, programs, education, and infrastructure that works for low-income, disabled Detroiters of color, we will not — *cannot* — be a thriving city. We can't leave nearly 20% of our neighbors behind and expect to succeed.**

While discrimination in hiring is half the story of incredibly high rates of unemployment, another

primary factor is outright neglect. There is no office or team of officials in Detroit city government working proactively to ensure that we are not falling through the cracks or that policy decisions or investments are benefiting our community. While we have civil rights protections through the Americans with Disabilities Act, generations-old local infrastructure does not reflect the values of accessibility and inclusion this 30-year-old federal legislation seeks to mandate.

Our role is to raise these issues to those in positions of power, sharing our personal stories of struggle, as well as our ideas for a more just and inclusive society. Through lifetimes of navigating a world not built with us in mind, we have tremendous skill in creative problem solving, adaptability, tenacity, and knowing when to ask for help. These are skills necessary not only for dismantling ableism, but they also are much needed in a city striving to achieve social, economic, and public health.

Disability activists engage City Council, the mayor and department directors in myriad ways to educate them and to push them to action:

- We make presentations about inaccessible infrastructure (like housing, public transit, and polling locations) to the City Council.
- We make public comments at budget hearings, explaining how resources aimed at our success are good for all Detroiters.
- We file complaints with the civil rights office, pushing them to have a stronger process for enforcement and a more proactive approach.
- We meet with and train department leaders and staff, who like most Americans don't know what ableism is or how deadly it can be.
- We evaluate polling locations for accessibility and train election officials about how to respectfully engage disabled voters.

- We review city housing policy, raising questions about investment in accessible housing and pushing decision makers to do better.
- We organize town halls, call our elected officials, write letters, and march in the streets.
- We build community with each other to bolster our spirits and deepen the relationships necessary for the long fight ahead.

Disability activists and organizations in Detroit have come together in the last year to demand a fully staffed and funded, proactive, public-facing Office of Disability Affairs. Such an office (which most major American cities have some version of), would work across the 44 city departments, across levels of government, and in collaboration with residents to identify barriers disabled Detroiters face and collectively determine solutions. It can model true civic engagement and disability inclusion. **Rather than neglecting us or telling us what we need, the Office of Disability Affairs we seek is responsive and engaging — nothing about us, without us.** In January 2020, in its first order of business in the new year, City Council passed a resolution in support of such an office. But securing adequate resources and an appropriate structure continues to be the work of a coalition of organizations and activists determined to build power for people with disabilities and to institutionalize inclusion in the city of Detroit.

People with disabilities may currently fall at the bottom of every quality of life indicator, but this is not inevitable. These sad statistics are the result of decisions made by people who do not understand or do not care about our community. We need and deserve more. We demand a place at decision-making tables. What we have to offer is not for us alone.



## CELEBRATING WINS: POLICY CHANGES FROM COMMUNITY ADVOCACY

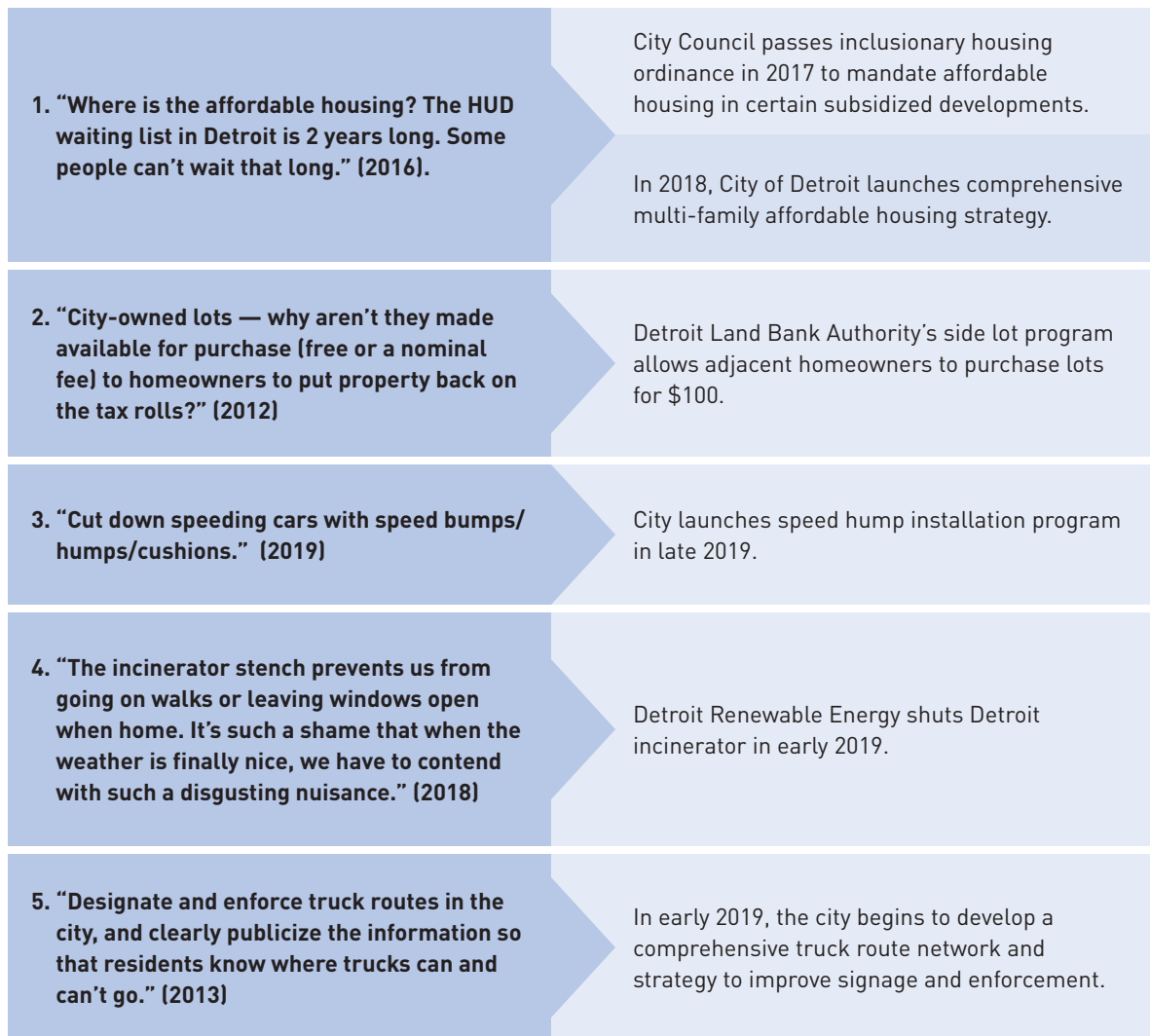
*“They need to take some of our ideas and use them.”<sup>327</sup>*

– Jefferson Chalmers resident at planning meeting, July 2018

As we discussed previously, some Detroit residents feel they lack power to truly influence policy and public investments, in spite of countless hours spent attending planning meetings and giving public comment to elected officials. Most Detroiters who get

involved in this work say that simply being invited to provide feedback on neighborhood or citywide efforts is insufficient. They want to know how their input has impacted the process. “Community engagement is more than just listening to us rank imperatives,” said one resident in 2012. “Please be more transparent about how community feedback is actually being incorporated into technical planning.”<sup>328</sup>

But in reviewing our sources over the past decade, we did see connections between what residents said and what policymakers did in later years. **Here, we share a selection of recent Detroit policy changes that followed resident feedback.**



<p><b>6. “This request is for more funding for animal control. Routes to school, they’re not safe. ... There have been far too many incidents in the past 3-4 weeks with stray dogs.” (2018)</b></p>	<p>In late 2019, the city announces more staff, funding, and new structure for Detroit Animal Care and Control department.</p>
<p><b>7. “I need residential parking. I just want to go home and park. That’s all I need right now.” (2017)</b></p>	<p>In March 2019, City Council passes residential parking ordinance.</p>
<p><b>8. “We need better policy. And whenever they are making our policies it needs to be opened up to the community to be a part of that.” (2019)</b></p>	<p>In early 2020, City Council President introduces community engagement ordinance to mandate community input on certain types of city-initiated proposals, including Master Plan amendments and land sales.</p>

Residents and community organizations do have the power to shift city decisions, but city leaders should improve how they communicate these policy or program changes back to the community. Without a clear sense that their time and expertise is valued, residents may lose confidence in their own ability to make a difference, and as a result may participate less in future community engagement processes.

**CONCLUSION**

We heard from residents how they view their sense of power in shaping their own economic destiny, shaping the future of their neighborhood, and shaping the future of their city. Throughout, we suggest a number of concrete programs and policies that could be implemented to address resident concerns: expanding resources and technical assistance for residents to start their own business; finding new ways to enable residents to shape Detroit’s vacant land; transmitting critical information through hyper-local channels; and translating the outcomes of planning efforts more publicly.

But what runs throughout these concrete areas for action is the theme of having a seat at the table. To continue to build resident power and agency, all of those in traditional seats of power must do more to uplift residents as advocates, decision makers, and change agents.

## COMMUNITY ORGANIZING, LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT, AND A COMMUNITY RESPONSE TO REMOVING BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT FOR FORMERLY INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS

By Branden Snyder, executive director,  
Detroit Action

Despite a booming national and state economy, joblessness for Black and Brown residents of the city remains the key challenge to Detroit's full recovery. There are a number of social barriers present that disadvantage Black and Brown Detroiters, including the disinvestment in our region's public schools, our inadequate public transportation system within the region, and the structural barriers faced by Detroiters who have had contact with the criminal legal system. Current data trends tend to indicate a larger percentage of young Detroiters are unemployed and, thus, living in poverty than the overall population of the city. As the COVID-19 virus impacts communities of color, Black and Brown millennials are feeling the brunt of this crisis. One poll found 52% of Americans under the age of 45 have either lost their job, been put on leave, or had their hours dramatically cut as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, compared to 26% of people over the age of 45. These social barriers often prevent Detroiters from accessing well-paying jobs and further entrench our area's income inequality. **While Detroit Action is committed to ensuring that local residents have access to adequate housing and well-paying jobs, regardless of their background, our collective work with other community groups and allies must address the root causes of income inequality in our neighborhoods.**

Failure to finish high school and a lack of access to job training programs in the region makes a major difference in many Detroiters' ability to get good quality employment. The poverty rate among Detroit residents who fail to finish high school was 52.1% in the latest government data, while the poverty rate for Detroiters with a bachelor's degree was 12.6%. Almost half of adult Detroiters are not participating in the labor force, and 39.4% of Detroit residents live below the poverty level. While past incarceration and the failure to finish high school have a major impact upon employment, that is only one part of the problem

that plagues too many Detroiters. **Every year, 3,300 Wayne County residents return to the community from prison. Of those citizens, 70% are still unemployed three years after their release.** These issues compounded are creating a mismatch between the skills of Detroit's adult population and the skills needed for many of the jobs available in the city.

Worse, many of these Detroiters face heightened competition for jobs from more highly skilled and socially mobile suburbanites for a number of entry-level positions within the city and are being pushed toward jobs far outside the city. About two-thirds of Detroit residents — some 115,000 people by one recent estimate — commute to the suburbs for work each day, often in warehouse, retail, or other service jobs. Only about 65,000 working Detroiters actually work within the city limits. Meanwhile, close to 200,000 suburbanites commute into the city every day where jobs, especially in the greater downtown area, require the education and skills many Detroiters lack.

Detroit has made important strides in terms of official policy to encourage the hiring of former offenders — most notably, the "Ban the Box" ordinances and policies that Detroit Action worked to establish in 2010. As important as these elements are, our view (which is based on our direct experience) is that their full impact will not be realized until the "hearts and minds" of two key constituencies — those directly impacted by the criminal justice system and businesses themselves — are addressed successfully.

**Confronted repeatedly by rejection in the job market, in housing, and elsewhere, many men and women who have been directly impacted by the criminal justice system understandably become discouraged and disconnected not only from the world of work, but also from key community institutions that foster positive, productive relationships and social capital.** In too many instances, their lives lose purpose and meaning. Unsurprisingly, 2-out-of-3 of them re-enter the criminal justice system within three years of release from incarceration. With each passing year, more and more major employers in the region have concluded that both the smart thing to do from a business perspective and the right thing to do from a community perspective is to offer employment to well-qualified individuals who have paid their debt to society for past offenses and who want now only to become peaceful, productive members of their

community. Even so, both anecdotal evidence and labor market research indicates that many employers are extremely reluctant to hire individuals with records of past offenses and even effectively decline to hire them as a matter of policy, legality notwithstanding.

Detroit Action is a grassroots member-led, community-based organization fighting for political power and economic justice for Black and Brown working-class Detroiters. By training participants as leaders to act on issues that create safe, thriving communities, Detroit Action hopes to shift the hiring culture of Detroit to employ returning citizens and those struggling to find and maintain employment. Service and hospitality employers can meet their workforce needs with a pipeline of committed workers trained, developed and recruited via our partnership with local faith, labor, and community leaders. At a time when baby boomer workers are aging out of the workforce, employers need all the new candidates they can find. For all of the city's residents to be fully incorporated in its resurgence, those who were formerly incarcerated and other low-income residents must be central.

Currently, we are building a workforce development pilot to connect our membership and the broader community who have been impacted by the criminal legal system. **The Good J.O.B.S (Job Opportunities for a Better Society) Now Project would act as a hiring hall for local employers by systematically recruiting and bringing together individuals who face ongoing discrimination in the job market because of a record of past offenses and others within our community who struggle at finding employment.** We propose the Good J.O.B.S Now Project as a venue to address the "hearts and minds" of these two key constituencies directly. Incarcerated residents must get key survival skills, connections and relations needed to prosper and reintegrate into our community post-incarceration. Through a combination of holistic interventions, hands-on coaching using a traditional community organizing model of leadership development and deep relationship building with key leaders, JOBS aims to provide comprehensive support and resources to program participants in order to achieve long-term employment.

We recruit Detroit Action members, their families and Detroit residents with industry experience as well as residents of targeted neighborhoods with high poverty and high underemployment, so employers have access to a ready workforce and workers have access to jobs. **Our training consists of weekly community organizing training modules that will provide necessary pre-employment and ongoing leadership training and foundational skills, such as literacy, numeracy, and telling a personal narrative.** We believe that for our participants this will enhance their job skills, restore their hope, and develop their collective capacity to undertake leadership in our community.

Next, so employers and workers can match for the right hire, we create the opportunity for our participants to build strong relationships by meeting face-to-face in small groups with metro-area employers to tell their personal stories. Finally, by coupling the opportunity to build direct relationships with employers with key community relationships, we are able to provide support for our participants as they go through the program and after they are employed. By connecting participants to key partners, such as local labor unions and to Detroit Action, we believe that we can strengthen workforce retention and stability and improve industry workforce performance over the long-haul, as workers move through multi-employer career pathways and gain social capital.

We believe that access to good, living-wage jobs is key to the ability for all Detroit residents to have the freedom to thrive in their neighborhoods. As our city and region hopes to rebound from decades of divestment, the scars of the housing and tax foreclosure crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic, it will be important for the city to think about how they can work together with community groups and our most marginalized residents toward solutions. If our city is truly interested in equity, then we must work together to remove the many barriers that Detroiters continue to face.





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## “OUR RESPONSIBILITY AS CITIZENS”:<sup>329</sup> AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW OF INDIVIDUAL POWER

By Ashleigh Johnson and Kristen Seefeldt,  
Poverty Solutions

*“In my mind, poverty is a mentality. And of course, there are factors that affect it, and manifest themselves into reality.”<sup>330</sup>*

– Detroit resident at Eastside focus group,  
December 2019

Rather than prioritizing how systems block economic mobility, some residents feel strongly that their neighbors also have the power to improve their economic circumstances and their communities, but a limiting mindset gets in the way. According to this viewpoint, overcoming economic obstacles is a choice that more Detroiters can make, but they lack the personal motivation or discipline to do so.<sup>331</sup> “[Meijer] hired a lot of people from Brightmoor, but they also had to fire a lot of people from Brightmoor. Because if you don’t have a work ethic or a work mode you don’t realize that you just can’t call off work,” said one resident.<sup>332</sup>

Some residents believe there are abundant social and economic resources in the city, but residents do not take enough advantage of available

opportunities. “The city will help, the government will help, but they’re not gonna get you out of your bed. You have to do it yourself,” said one focus group participant.<sup>333</sup> Similarly, some residents also pointed to individual mindsets and behaviors as the reason for neighborhood decline.<sup>334</sup> “The problem is that people don’t want to get up and work, they want stuff given to them, they tear up everything, they steal everything not nailed down, so what do you expect, yeah, the community is going to be messed up. It’s our own fault,” said one resident.<sup>335</sup>

These views are not necessarily surprising, given the nationwide divide in people’s beliefs about what causes poverty in the U.S. A Pew Research poll conducted in 2014 found that while half believed poverty was caused by circumstances not under one’s control, a significant minority — 35% — believed that poverty is caused by a lack of effort. This belief is even held by some individuals (28%) who have low incomes.<sup>336</sup>

A number of Detroiters also refer to their fellow residents as financially irresponsible and cite frivolous spending as an explanation for economic insecurity.<sup>337</sup> As one resident put it, “Countless times that I’ve been at the liquor store and I’ve seen somebody with they last \$50 and they spend 60% of that on liquor, Newports, lotto tickets, and buy the babies Ramen noodles and microwave dinners. You know it’s about discipline. Put that money in a shoebox, you know stack it up, and then upgrade.”<sup>338</sup> Residents sometimes expressed disappointment in

youth behaviors in particular and called for more role models and involved parents.<sup>339</sup> “Read a story to a child, so ... they’re interested, they get an imagination, they have goals, they’re able to imagine what they could be, and then find out how to get there. These kinds of things are absent, because we are not as cohesive as we need to be [as a community].”<sup>340</sup>

Attitudes such as these reflect what scholars refer to as the “culture of poverty” narrative, a view that poverty is the result of and is perpetuated by poor choices, many of which stem from growing up in so-called “disorganized households” and dysfunctional communities. Although a great deal of research refutes these ideas, there are persistent narratives that point toward bad individual behaviors and poor choices as hallmarks of families with low incomes.<sup>341</sup>

However, our resident conversations about the “culture of poverty” were not one-sided. When focus group discussions turned to this theme of personal responsibility, some residents brought up potential underlying reasons for their neighbors’ apparent lack of motivation. One woman pointed to the effect of the family environment on individuals: “If you’re in a household that’s 100% dysfunctional, your mind is not even at a point where you can think, ‘Well let me go out here and try to get this job or let me try to better myself’ because the basic needs are not being met.”<sup>342</sup> Others talked about the role of negative self-esteem and poor treatment by service providers in preventing

people from taking positive actions to improve their economic situations.<sup>343</sup> In describing how she would intervene to alleviate poverty in Detroit, one resident described how she saw these mechanisms at play in the lives of poor families:

*You have to do all these things to meet the requirements that’s been so shameful for us. We want a box of food, I don’t want to be on TV carrying a box. ... I’m not looking for a job until I feel better about myself. I’m not going back to school until I feel like I can read enough to pass the test so I don’t have to start at the very bottom of college. The respect when I come [to an office], the secretary have to be nice.*<sup>344</sup>

One resident mentioned the role of systemic racism in poverty and neighborhood decline, saying:

*Until we look at the elephant that’s sitting in the room, you can blame the people, you can blame the families, you can blame the individuals that just don’t want nothing. You can do all that that you want. But, [nothing will change] unless you understand the forces that are instigating a lot of the behaviors.*<sup>345</sup>

At Poverty Solutions, we too view poverty as the result of failed, intersecting systems, and we focus our efforts on identifying policies and programs that work to dismantle their ill-effects on families and neighborhoods.





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## “WE HAVE OUR OWN VALUES”

By Fay Givens, CEO, former American Indian Services

Poverty in our society is viewed as a personal failure rather than a failure of the system. People of color make up the majority of the poor, while society locks up more poor people and spends far less on their education and health care. The poor are viewed with disrespect and disdain, and seeing the poor through a distorted lens means they are not heard or seen. They are denied sympathy and understanding, and poverty is blamed on personal behavior. They must depend on the state for survival at the expense of their dignity.

**The United States is more concerned with minimizing costs, social control, management, and discipline than seeking to eliminate the problems of poverty, nor are they willing to take responsibility for the inequities and racism that has created the situation in the first place.**

American Indians gave up 96% of our land, which became the United States of America. The federal government undertook a legal as well as moral obligation to make up for what was illegally taken from us. The federal government has failed to live up to its responsibility; it has failed to meet any of the things it promised. The disparities in health care, mental health care, education, and housing show clear evidence of discrimination and denial of equal protection under the law.

We filed a lawsuit against the national Indian Health Service in 2004 trying to get health care for Indians in the city, since less than 1% of these funds are allocated toward Indians in urban areas. American Indians are the most underserved population related to health care of any group of people; in Michigan, according to the American Community Survey, 11.8% of American Indians are uninsured, compared to 5.1% of the white population and 6.5% of the Black population. American Indians have a far lower life expectancy and higher rates of diseases, including diabetes, TB, and alcoholism. At American Indian Services, we provided health care, cultural services such as Pow Wows, and wellness programs that include a seasonal farm stand. But we were desperately underfunded, and due to repeated cuts to our budget since 2014, this summer we closed our doors after 49 years serving the community.

A major solution to reduce poverty is affordable housing, higher wages, and affordable health care. Indian women make 58 cents for every dollar made by a white man. Private developers cannot be counted on to develop affordable housing, so the government must do it. A profit motive should be eliminated in order to accomplish that. Second, health care and benefits systems also play a major role. Co-pays and deductible need to be eliminated for those below the poverty level on all medical plans, including Medicaid. Social Security disability needs to be substantially increased. In society now, if you are ill or disabled, you will also be poor. Disability payments are woefully

inadequate to provide for anyone's needs. Lastly, the vast majority of private sector workers lack union protection, which means corporate America is winning. Unions are the strongest advocates in the country for higher wages, benefits, and better working conditions. Union members earn one-third more in wages than non-union workers. Detroit fast food workers are pushing for wage increases, but unfortunately, they haven't succeeded yet in organizing and forming a union.

**Entrepreneurship is viewed by many as an answer to poverty, yet almost everything works against the poor in advancing that idea.** Property, property taxes, insurances, city inspections that are always required are expensive and out of reach. Businesses can spend thousands just to open; building inspections, electrical inspections, and worker's compensation represent thousands of dollars in business costs. If loans are financing these operations, a person can be deeply in debt the day they open.

Technical assistance and expanded resources are also often mentioned as avenues for expanding and shaping economic destiny by those in poverty, yet the people in power make the assumption that the poor can never be trusted and will cheat if given a chance and that any resources to them must include total supervision. We have encountered these command and control tactics, as well as other forms of emotional

injury motivated by hate or fear of other groups. It is called institutional trauma and is motivated by the devaluing of another person's race. It is acutely felt by Native people, who endured residential schools that forced Indian children into five generations of forced assimilation. Children were taken from their families and forced to adopt mainstream society's values, culture, language, and religion. This forced assimilation had a devastating impact on Indian people and communities. Many children were abused, sexually, physically and spiritually. The schools left a historical and emotional legacy of shame and loss, which we feel is the root cause of addiction as well as other social problems facing Native communities today.

We combat that by bringing our community together. For years, we had a self-help group for survivors of boarding schools, and we've run after school and summer youth programs. The young people learn how to do all the things that are unique to our population, and while they're with us to do that, they're learning about our value system that we tenaciously cling to. We don't want what you have, we have our own values. We don't care about visibility, **we want equality; we want to be able to have decent education, decent health care, raise our children, keep them in our culture, and maintain our ancient belief systems, our religion.**





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### III. INVESTING IN VALUED COMMUNITIES

In the previous sections, we explored how mobility from poverty begins with economic stability, but it also relies on a person's access to power, or the ability to influence her environment and make choices. Social inclusion is the final dimension of economic mobility, which is related to, but distinct from power. The U.S. Partnership on Poverty defines social inclusion as "a person's sense that they belong and are included among family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, other communities, and society. ... [This] being valued in community facilitates access to material and cultural resources — including access to nutritious food, clean water, and safe environments."<sup>346</sup> There's also a connection between feeling valued and well-being itself; researchers have documented links between higher feelings of social status and better health and well-being,<sup>347</sup> while individuals who feel discriminated against have worse physical and mental health.<sup>348</sup>

In Detroit, there is a widespread sense that the government just does not value the most under-resourced communities and is not including them in the growth of the "new Detroit." And across the city, committed residents and community groups consistently speak out against inequities in access to environmental protection, community health, and safety. Although many feel that their neighborhoods are excluded from the city's comeback, residents report high levels of social inclusion *within* their neighborhoods and count on strong relationships with each other, which yield important but overlooked economic benefits.

## “IT’S DEVASTATING TO US”:<sup>349</sup> RESIDENTS FEEL NEGLECTED AMIDST REVITALIZATION PLANS

By Ashleigh Johnson and Afton Branche-Wilson,  
Poverty Solutions

*“They got downtown so nice, but it’s not for us ... look how they treat us, they don’t want us.”<sup>350</sup>*

– Detroit parent at focus group, November 2019

Both before and after Detroit’s municipal bankruptcy, residents believe that those in power perceive their neighborhoods to be unworthy, compared to other moneyed interests. “Go walk through any neighborhood in the city and tell me that the city cares about neighborhoods. How can you put lights on trees Downtown but not streetlights in the neighborhoods?” said one resident in 2013.<sup>351</sup> Residents use different examples later in the decade to illustrate their experiences of feeling devalued; dark streets and slow police response times are no longer evidence of community neglect, but instead undervalued communities lack economic development activity.<sup>352</sup> “I live on the Westside and there’s nothing happening in my area. Where’s the money for my area? It seems like by design my area will fail,” said one resident at a 2017 City Council meeting.<sup>353</sup> Living through years of neighborhood decline, followed by what feels like uneven development and inequitable policy choices, some residents express feelings of distress and sadness about the state of their communities. “I’m emotionally upset because of our Chadsey [school] being closed, our Munger [school] being closed. They’ve stolen our parks that’s all it is. We need more, our kids deserve more, the families deserve more,” said one Southwest resident in 2012.<sup>354</sup> “They’ve already selected where they want to put their money and where they want to build up the city. They already selected where they’re going to just let it die off,” said another resident in 2019.<sup>355</sup>

Of particular concern to some residents are development decisions that appear to mostly benefit corporations or newcomers. At times, residents interpret this as a value judgement on what is worth investing in.<sup>357</sup> “... And now these companies are coming in because the area has been rezoned and it seems to me that you guys are more for these companies than you are for the long-time residents, and I just want to know what are you guys going to do for me and my neighborhood,” said one resident at a 2018 evening City Council meeting.<sup>358</sup> At a city planning meeting, one Jefferson Chalmers resident said, “The reality is that what the city is planning, in our perception, looks like they’re developing the next Detroit. We feel like we’re being left out.”<sup>359</sup>

*“We have been Jim Crow with our property taxes ... My home is not worth \$80k-90k, but you charge me that for my property taxes, then when I can’t pay it you turn around and foreclose on me. Its racist policies in Detroit that have kept us down.”*

*Resident, YouTube Video, July 2019*

Many Detroiters see discrimination and racism as the underlying reason for the unequal distribution of opportunity, both within Detroit and within the metropolitan region. “It feels inequitable,” one resident said to Urban Institute researchers. “It feels like white people are favored ... that we value those residents over long-term African American residents.”<sup>360</sup> Some feel that this institutional and structural racism shows up in the form of Black residents’ relative lack of access to employment and financial capital.<sup>361</sup> Speaking of her experience seeking down payment assistance, one resident said, “They didn’t give me a dime. But there were 10 white people in there, you know they weren’t from Detroit, they got the money so quick, they got those houses so quick, and I’m like ya’ll aren’t being fair at all.”<sup>362</sup> When asked in a recent DMACS survey who benefits more from investment in the city’s neighborhoods, 39% of Detroiters said white people, while 31% said both white and Black people benefit the same, and just 7% said Black people.<sup>363</sup>

It’s not hard to find quantitative data to support residents’ perceptions of disparate outcomes across racial and ethnic lines. In the housing market, white homebuyers in 2017 received 44% of all mortgages in the city, though they represent just 14% of the city’s

### SURVEY SAYS

**Who benefits more from investments in Detroit’s neighborhoods? 61% of Detroiters said wealthier people, while 17% said both wealthy and poorer people benefit about the same.<sup>356</sup>**

population.<sup>364</sup> And many well-paying jobs in Detroit’s Downtown and Midtown are filled by suburban commuters with college degrees, many of whom are white.<sup>365</sup> And the COVID-19 pandemic has tragically hit non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic Detroiters the hardest; both groups were more likely to lose their jobs in the months after the state shutdown compared to white residents, and have higher mortality rates from the virus.<sup>366</sup>

Too often, according to residents, living in Detroit means feeling that outsiders devalue your city.<sup>367</sup> “I have noticed how people from the suburbs coming to the city destroy the city. We get a bad rep and they go home,” said one neighbor of an Airbnb property.<sup>368</sup> Some see anti-Detroit bias as a reason, for example, that regional transit efforts have stalled; one advocate attributed lack of progress to the “fear of more people of color having access to suburban communities.”<sup>369</sup> To one O’Hair resident, these biases are rooted in Detroit’s majority-Black status:

*Anytime Detroit is mentioned, it’s always the murder capital, the poverty capital. ... If you go on YouTube and look for videos about Detroit, they always have these terrible, horrible stories about these neighborhoods nobody even recognizes, and that’s based on institutional racism. The fact that, when you talk about Detroit, you don’t talk about the fact that there are 200 active community groups in this city, fighting to make better outcomes for us.*<sup>370</sup>

### WHAT WE CAN DO: RESIDENTS SUPPORT INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT

**The overall solution to racial inequity and community disinvestment is to invest equitably in and across the city and ensure “racial equity [is] central in all decisions,”** as suggested by one resident.<sup>371</sup> “I think they need to spread the wealth. They take the federal dollars and target certain areas and they leave other areas out,” said one Midwest resident.<sup>372</sup> Residents specifically cite several ideas for action that are in the process of taking shape, including accelerating demolitions in non-Hardest Hit areas, cracking down on speculating property owners, and increasing support for minority contractors.<sup>373</sup> Overall, residents across the city envision inclusive development, which offers the same promise to legacy, Black, and poor Detroiters as it does to other groups.

### “A CLEANER, HEALTHIER, SAFER ENVIRONMENT”<sup>374</sup>

By Afton Branche-Wilson, Poverty Solutions

*“We’re proud of our city, we don’t want to be #1 of asthma rates but we are. We should be #1 in taking care of our residents.”<sup>375</sup>*

– District 6 resident at council meeting, May 2017

Outside of Greater Downtown, thousands of Detroit residents feel ignored amidst the city’s revitalization, and they think those in power underfund and undervalue their communities, which has led to inadequate access to basic amenities. For too many Detroiters, living in the neighborhoods means overexposure to dangerous threats like pollution, speeding, and blight, without sufficient resources to nourish their health and well-being. Residents describe in detail exactly the changes they seek, from green alleys to healthy food, community centers, and safe streets.

### ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS THREATEN HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Across the city, residents report the presence of **serious environmental dangers, including air and noise pollution, chemical contaminants, noxious smells, blight, dumping, and recurring flooding.**<sup>376</sup>

Some Detroiters see these dangers as a result of environmental racism and indifference from decision makers.<sup>377</sup> As one Southwest Detroit advocate put it, “Who has the ear of the [Michigan Department of Environmental Quality]? Do you think they’re listening to a bunch of poor Black people — as we’ve been identified — or Latinos, or people of color? No.”<sup>378</sup> One common reason for trash or illegal dumping, according to locals, is that outsiders just don’t value the city or its residents.<sup>379</sup> When asked what she didn’t like about living in Detroit, one resident said: “I guess the way we are perceived. The way the outside looks at us. [They] think ‘oh it doesn’t matter if we bring a truckload of tires and dump them in their neighborhood because they don’t care.’”<sup>380</sup>

Many residents, particularly from Southwest and parts of the Eastside, have been outspoken about their experiences with the **negative physical health and emotional effects of living in poor**

**environmental conditions**, reporting the toll of living with asthma, respiratory problems, and other ailments.<sup>381</sup> In Detroit, the prevalence of adult asthma is 29% higher than the rate in Michigan, while 8% of children tested in 2013 had elevated blood lead levels, the second highest rate in the state.<sup>382</sup> Some affected Detroiters report feeling stress and anxiety from their exposure to environmental threats and drained by the labor of dealing with those issues, like reporting illegal dumping and scrubbing emission dust from property.<sup>383</sup> From 2015 to 2019, there were just over 41,000 reports of abandoned vehicles and illegal dump sites in the city of Detroit — a significant portion likely reported by residents themselves.<sup>384</sup>

## SURVEY SAYS

**67% of Detroit residents said reducing air and water pollution was a very high priority for the city to address in their neighborhood.**<sup>385</sup>

In a few instances, Detroiters also point out that dirty and polluted environments led residents, especially those with children, to stay inside and avoid interacting with their community.<sup>386</sup> “There’s so many abandoned places. They got piles of garbage, contributes a lot to rodents and maggots and that type of stuff. And, the kids have to play around this. ... It causes big problems. Like, with my son ... I keep him close to me because of the environment,” said one Eastside mother.<sup>387</sup>

Residents also make more direct links between environmental threats and financial insecurity and suspect that low property values are related to poor environmental conditions, which leaves residents who want to move stuck in polluted communities.<sup>388</sup> Both in surveys and in public forums, residents who saw flooding said they could not rely on state, local, or federal government for help.<sup>389</sup> “I had a flood and I called it in. ... The next time it was nothing but mud. ... All I wanted was some help, and I couldn’t get it,” said one resident at a City Council community meeting in 2018.<sup>390</sup>

## WHAT WE CAN DO: RESIDENT IDEAS TO GREEN DETROIT

Detroiters have fought to be heard about the environmental harms they confront every day. In various settings, residents have also shared their expansive and creative visions for a cleaner and greener city, often in partnership with local organizations.

- Detroiters support additional **environmental policy and regulatory solutions**, such as making and enforcing regulations to hold companies accountable for air pollution and mandating buffers between industrial facilities and residential areas.<sup>391</sup> In areas where truck traffic disrupts quality of life, residents spoke out in favor of stronger law enforcement actions against truck traffic on residential streets; the Department of Public Works is in the process of piloting a truck routes overhaul in Southwest Detroit. Residents also want access to multifamily recycling, which the City’s Department of Sustainability is currently planning.<sup>392</sup>

“Detroiters want to live in a beautiful, clean environment. We want to breathe clean air, drink and swim in clean water, garden in clean soil, and play in clean parks.”

*Detroit Environmental Agenda, 2013*

- Detroiters support **expanding existing initiatives to build up green infrastructure**, reduce flooding, absorb pollutants, and remediate contaminated soil. Examples include rain gardens, green alleys, and native plant corridors.<sup>393</sup> “We need to grow more of our own food, clean our air and water through strategic use of plants,” said one resident.<sup>394</sup>
- Some residents also see a clear opportunity to **use the city’s vacant and green spaces to generate economic value**. Solar energy production, for example, is a popular idea to generate renewable energy; some residents envision vacant lots, residential spaces, and even public schools as viable places for solar infrastructure installation.<sup>395</sup> It Starts at Home, a grassroots nonprofit in the Midwest neighborhood, explicitly focuses on buying



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vacant lots and installing solar panels to reduce electric bills. “Solar canopies will keep money in the community so we will have more money to send kids to college and get better educated,” said one of the founders.<sup>396</sup> Several organizations are already doing this work across the city, including Greening of Detroit and GenesisHOPE. Perhaps mentions of green initiatives reflect Detroiters’ desires for expanded investments in urban agriculture or the wider availability of these opportunities across neighborhoods. However, not all Detroit residents want the expansion of agriculture everywhere in the city and want to preserve or restore the urban feel in their communities.<sup>397</sup>

- Residents also make evident the **connection between investing in environmental improvements, particularly reducing blight and neighborhood safety.**<sup>398</sup> “Keep moving that blight,” said one resident. “Just making it safe for children to walk, safe for people to catch buses, just making it safe, period.”<sup>399</sup> A recent Wayne State study backs this up; after examining the hyper-local effects of more than 9,300 demolitions over five years, researchers found significant reductions in crime, including violent and property crime.<sup>400</sup> In addition to blight reduction, some residents in neighborhood planning sessions expressed support for crime prevention through environmental design, which promotes principles such as increasing “eyes on the street” and

lighting installation to promote safety.<sup>401</sup> In the 48217 community located at the Southwestern tip of Detroit, where industry coexists with homes and apartments, the conversation about safety and the environment also includes health, where residents think neighborhood security means being secure in health too.<sup>402</sup>

## **MORE THAN CLINICS: COMMUNITY HEALTH MEANS FRESH FOOD, AFFORDABLE WATER, AND COMMUNITY SPACES**

### **Food and Water Systems**

In over a dozen community conversations, residents requested **expanded access to healthy, fresh food in their neighborhoods.**<sup>403</sup> “We have too many food deserts in this city,” said one mother at a focus group. “Don’t even have decent food, and in order to be able to get to the decent food, you have to have transportation.”<sup>404</sup> Today, Detroit has 71 full service grocery stores,<sup>405</sup> but it seems not all provide residents with sufficient food. Residents in various forums<sup>406</sup> said they shopped outside their neighborhood for food, in some cases even if there were closer options. In one study of several neighborhoods in Northwest, residents were mostly unhappy with local grocery stores due to price, food quality, and selection.<sup>407</sup> Many residents secure food through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (food stamps) and the city’s network of food banks, pantries, and churches, which requires significant knowledge of how to



navigate systems.<sup>408</sup> “Churches and stuff give out free food. ... You just gotta know which ones to go to,” said one Northwest resident.<sup>409</sup> To rely on these systems also means dealing with sometimes spoiled or outdated free food or living in fear of being cut off from food benefits.<sup>410</sup>

Too many low- and moderate-income Detroiters struggle to pay unaffordable water bills, current and past, and live under the risk of water shutoffs. In the summer of 2018, an estimated 5,300 occupied households experienced water shutoffs in Detroit, a significant decline since 2014.<sup>411</sup> Yet for many residents and community activists, who see water as a human right, even one shutoff represents a failure. “I feel total shame every time I hear about a water shutoff. ... And I feel for the people that are being denied water because I’m old fashioned and I believe that water is a human right,” said one resident at a City Council meeting.<sup>412</sup> A recent study of low-income residents in the Detroit metro area found 80% of residents on water assistance programs pay over 4.5% of their income for water, which the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency considers an unaffordable rate.<sup>413</sup> Unaffordable water affects overall financial health, since residents find it hard to stay on top of other bills when water rates remain high; more than 8-out-of-10 low-income households in the metro area reported cutting back on monthly expenses to pay their bills.<sup>414</sup> Of course, water shutoffs also have severe health and safety spillover effects. Citing a study that linked living on a block with a water shutoff to adverse

health outcomes,<sup>415</sup> one community leader explained, “What we know is that when one house is shut off from water on a block, it increases the probability of health contamination for that block by 100%. We also know that water shutoffs have driven up foreclosures, which is counterproductive to what we say we want to see in the city of Detroit.”<sup>416</sup>

## WHAT WE CAN DO: RESIDENT IDEAS TO INCREASE WATER AND FOOD ACCESS

- **Institute income-based water rates and end shutoffs:**<sup>417</sup> “People want to pay their bills. Give them the opportunity to pay a number that makes sense for them,” said one community leader.<sup>418</sup> Income-based repayment plans and a moratorium on shutoffs are popular solutions to the water crisis. Local leaders could establish a robust income-based water plan, following the example of Philadelphia, which includes a bill cap at 2% of monthly income for residents making less than half of the federal poverty line,<sup>419</sup> and extend shutoff protections initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Invest in nutrition education for adults:**<sup>420</sup> Detroit has a rich network of organizations working on nutrition education in schools, but there are relatively few resources for parents. “[I would want to] incorporate something about better eating, something about that because we are obese in this city. And we need somebody to establish and



focus mainly on that,” said one parent when asked how she would spend funds to reduce poverty in Detroit.<sup>421</sup>

- **Expand access to fresh food sales:** “More major grocery stores should be available inside the city at an economical price. The transportation to go to the stores outside the city is very poor,” said one resident in an interview with the Health Department.<sup>422</sup> The most straightforward path to increase access to healthy food in the community is to grow retail food options, by building more grocery stores and supporting more farmers markets, per residents.<sup>423</sup> Cities have a variety of policy levers to support these aims, including changing the zoning code to allow retail sales on urban farms or simplifying food retail permitting.<sup>424</sup> To encourage private sector investments in Detroit neighborhoods, the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation completed retail studies in several communities, which make the business case for food retail; DEGC could continue this work in all Detroit neighborhoods. Funders and cities can provide support to co-ops through direct monetary contributions, providing low-cost land, or giving residents subsidies to join.<sup>425</sup>

In addition to full-service grocery stores, supporting produce stands and corner stores can expand food access to low-income families at lower cost. “Healthy Corner Store” initiatives, often launched by city health departments, combine financial incentives, marketing support, and community outreach to increase healthy food on offer at local corner stores.<sup>426</sup> Detroit could join Philadelphia; Tupelo, Mississippi; and St. Louis in launching a corner store effort citywide.

- **Expand fresh produce home delivery services:**<sup>427</sup> In Seattle, a partnership between a local farm and the city enables parents to use matching SNAP dollars to pay for fresh produce, which is delivered to their children’s school.<sup>428</sup> Mobile food markets, which operate like farm stands on wheels, could also increase the reach of produce in Detroit. Twin Cities Mobile Market, operated by a food equity nonprofit, served an estimated 8,500 residents in 2019.<sup>429</sup>

## CENTERING THE COMMUNITY: ENSURING EQUAL ACCESS TO LAND AND FOOD IN A CHANGING DETROIT

By Detroit Food Policy Council

The effects of decades of disinvestment and systemic racism are impossible to miss in Detroit –not only in the familiar images of neighborhoods with homes in disrepair, but even in the sparkling images of “New Detroit.” The shiny new buildings and bustling shopping and dining districts cover over the reality that many longtime Detroiters have been left out of that economic rebirth. Yes, we have new chain grocers adjacent to some of the most stable neighborhoods in the city and developments taking up formerly vacant land, but for the majority of Detroiters not much has changed.

Detroit Food Policy Council’s mission is food justice for Detroiters, specifically “a City of Detroit in which all of its residents are hunger-free, healthy, and benefiting from a robust food system.” We accomplish this in a number of ways. Two ways that are most relevant to this report are our work for improved grocery stores and for land access for urban growers.

Our grocery store work began in 2012 and has evolved through the years. Most recently, we have ensured that all 70 independent grocery stores in the city have personal protective equipment for employees and hand sanitizer for shoppers and staff, along with posters and stickers that communicate social distancing principles to remind people of the best practices they should be following while in the store. That project was accomplished by the Detroit Grocery Coalition, a DFPC-led collaboration with Wayne State University, the Detroit Health Department, Fair Food Network, Eastern Market, and more.

Previous to that, the Detroit Grocery Coalition has been working on the Great Grocer project. **Contrary to the “food desert” narrative that swirls around Detroit, the majority of Detroiters have a full-service grocery store within a mile of their home — the question is if those stores offer quality, fresh food**

**at a reasonable price, in a way that respects their customers and community.** We have supported a study of each store to rate them on a series of criteria, and we are matching community organizations with their neighborhood stores to continue keeping them accountable. Our eventual goal is to have a publicly available rating system so consumers can easily determine how well their neighborhood grocery stores stack up. Food security is one of the most important aspects of economic well-being, and Detroiters deserve places to purchase fresh food that are clean, well-stocked, and treat their customers well.

Our land access work supports policy change that will allow urban growers to purchase or lease their land to ensure its viability as a farm for the long term. **Detroiters have been growing food on vacant lots for decades; however, as development pressure has increased in the city, many growers have found the land they have been farming for years is suddenly a hot commodity and they’re either priced out or never given the opportunity to purchase the land at all.** Growers have seen years of work destroyed when they are unable to come to terms on a piece of land. The process for purchase or lease from the city of Detroit can be a long, convoluted process.

Our policy advocacy in the area began with our founding in 2009, and in 2019, this culminated in the city undertaking a review of its processes for approving and monitoring land-based projects. DFPC was a consultant to that work and helped guide the creation of several guides for growers to help them navigate the process more easily. The review also resulted in city staffers becoming better informed about urban growing practices and how they differ from simple vacant lot maintenance, as well as reviewing internal sales and approval processes.

As Detroit contends with the forces of gentrification, growing economic inequality and the devastation wrought by COVID-19, hearing the voice of community and acting on those principles is more important than ever. **The people of Detroit have always been the strength of Detroit, and all major investments should center community needs.**

## Health Care

Thanks in part to Michigan’s expansion of Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, 92% of Detroit residents have health insurance<sup>430</sup> — yet having insurance doesn’t equate to being able to afford services. “I know a few senior ladies that had to move out of Detroit. We can’t afford to live here anymore, and it’s because of the expensiveness of health care. We’re paying most of our Social Security checks to this,” said one woman at a District 6 community meeting. Due to low incomes in the city, thousands of residents simply cannot afford to pay for health care or prescriptions and go without important health services.<sup>431</sup> When asked what kinds of problems they experienced seeking health care in the past year, 7% of residents said they did not fill a prescription because they could not afford it, 4% said they couldn’t see a doctor due to copay costs, and 9% said the services they wanted were not covered by insurance.<sup>432</sup>

want to participate in a job training program or other initiatives. “It’s a battlefield outside and you take them to these programs, but then you expect them to perform on a normal level,” said one resident.<sup>438</sup>

Rather than biological conditions, some residents highlight neighborhood decline, violence, and blight as key underlying reasons for emotional distress in the community.<sup>439</sup> “I think that I would invest in rehab programs. ... It’s a lot of youth that are drug addicted ‘cause they’re depressed,” said one resident. “Because of the circumstances of the plight of the neighborhoods can be depressing.”<sup>440</sup>

According to survey data, 71% of residents see increasing help for people with mental health problems as a very high priority for the city to take in improving community health.<sup>441</sup> The treatment gap is clear; **48% of residents in the Detroit-Dearborn-Livonia area who need mental health care are not treated**, while a full 81% of individuals with substance use disorders in this area are not treated.<sup>442</sup> Here too, cost is a likely barrier. In Michigan, outpatient behavioral health care is four to six times more likely to be out-of-network than medical care.<sup>443</sup> Indeed, the community mental health system, which is where Detroiters would go to seek affordable care, is severely underfunded; one estimate puts the gap at \$133 million.<sup>444</sup>

## WHAT WE CAN DO: RESIDENT IDEAS TO EXPAND ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

- **Invest big in health care services.**<sup>445</sup> To residents, an overarching solution to health care barriers is to increase the availability and lower the cost of services, including health clinics, drug rehabilitation centers, and mental health providers.<sup>446</sup> “If we had a community health center, then I believe my brother’s cancer would have been taken care of and wouldn’t have gone so long,” one resident shared.<sup>447</sup> While much of the power to make impact in this area rests with the federal government and private sector, Michigan and local actors still play a role in health care access. Added public and philanthropic investments in nonprofit community health centers, which offer sliding scale fees to patients, could increase access to affordable health care services.<sup>448</sup>

### SURVEY SAYS

**42% of Detroiters said they were worried about not being able to pay medical costs for normal health care.**<sup>433</sup>

Transportation barriers also keep a significant number of residents from enjoying full access to care. Five percent of residents, or 13,300 households, said they could not get to a health care provider due to transport costs in the past 12 months, and 16%, or 42,600 households, said they had no one to take them to the doctor if they needed to go.<sup>434</sup> Transportation issues reflect the city’s spotty public transportation network but also a shortage of health care services. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services considers nearly the entire city of Detroit a medically underserved area that lacks access to sufficient primary, dental, and mental health care professionals.<sup>435</sup>

Many residents across the city cite mental health care as a critical and underappreciated barrier to living a stable life in Detroit.<sup>436,437</sup> “You can’t do much without mental stability. You can’t eat, you can’t sleep, you can’t breathe,” said one Westside resident at a focus group. Some residents see **mental health challenges as a direct obstacle to economic mobility**, noting that someone struggling with trauma, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or depression may not

- City initiatives can also **increase access to existing services**: In Dallas, city officials focused on decreasing the uninsured rate by training city staff working in community centers and child care services as health care enrollment navigators.<sup>449</sup> In New York City and Baltimore, residents can call designated city hotlines to gain access to medical and behavioral health care, including addiction treatment.<sup>450</sup> Through its Connections2Care model, New York City integrates mental health services into existing community-based organizations through training existing staff to provide non-clinical mental health services and offer referrals for clinical care.<sup>451</sup>
- **“Invest in treating trauma inside the community”**:<sup>452</sup> Beyond clinical services, many Detroiters support the development of more alternative methods to promote healing from trauma, such as **restorative justice or holistic wellness centers**, which offer services such as meditation and conflict resolution.<sup>453</sup> An area for intervention could be to increase funding and support to organizations such as Healing By Choice!, a network of wellness practitioners in Detroit that partners with nonprofit groups to offer services. One service, Care Circles, combines conversation and treatments like massage and acupuncture.<sup>454</sup>

**Recreation and Community Spaces**

Between 2005 and 2015, Detroit residents lived through the painful closures of over 75 recreation centers and parks due to dwindling city resources.<sup>455</sup> From Brightmoor to Moross-Morang, Detroit residents see community centers and recreational spaces as significant community assets and consistently highlight the lack of these services in public forums.<sup>456</sup> “I don’t want to have to get in my car to drive to a park. ... We should be able to interact with our neighbors and neighbors’ kids,” said one Brush Park parent.<sup>457</sup> Survey data tells a slightly different story: more than half (56%) of residents say they are satisfied with the availability of parks and playgrounds in their neighborhoods and 47% are satisfied with libraries and recreation and community centers; perhaps residents in public forums represent the 29-33% of residents who are dissatisfied with these amenities.<sup>458</sup> The city is currently implementing a comprehensive parks and recreation improvement plan, and funders

**FIGURE 2: COMMUNITY SPACES IN DEVELOPMENT, FUNDED BY KRESGE FOUNDATION KIP:D GRANTS**



are increasingly supporting community-driven efforts to build innovative neighborhood hubs and spaces across the city. (Figure 2).

It’s clear residents think these are worthy initiatives. In a variety of forums, Detroiters have spoken up in support of more investment in parks, recreation centers, and community spaces.<sup>459</sup> **According to DMACS data, nearly 7-out-of-10 residents think investing in places like libraries and recreation and community centers is a high priority for their neighborhood.**<sup>460</sup> As expected, residents are particularly interested in the development of more creative spaces for children to play.<sup>461</sup>

While parks and recreation spaces are described clearly as places to play, exercise, and enjoy the neighborhood, residents sometimes see community spaces as distinct places that promise a wider set of exciting possibilities. **“It seems neighborhood centers would most provide what’s missing. They’d bring in needed services and foster community, which is vital to connection, safety, life, and excitement,”** said one resident.<sup>462</sup> In the Banglatown



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community, residents envision women-only spaces that offer both education and training activities, as well as children’s play activities.<sup>463</sup> Some groups envision community spaces as an explicit alternative to jails and prisons. In 2018, Detroit Justice Center and Designing Spaces, Designing Places gathered youth to design and program their own community safe spaces as jail alternatives.<sup>464</sup> At the forum, one group of youth participants described their ideal community recreation center as a place “to help prevent gun violence and harmful behavior by providing sports teams, clubs for kids, a gym, pool, relaxing space, and counseling. The recreation center will provide people with job opportunities by developing their social skills. The vision for the center is a big open spaces full of color and lots of natural light.”<sup>465</sup>

**WHAT WE CAN DO:  
IDEAS FROM RESIDENTS TO BOOST  
GATHERING SPACES**

- **Repurpose former public sites as community centers:**<sup>466</sup> “There is an old school that is just sitting there being an eye sore. Why not use the building to make a rec center? A place where kids can go and be safe and active as well offering classes and job training.”<sup>467</sup> The city estimates it would need \$550,000 to convert the former Sherill Elementary School structure into a park, which is one of 20 planned former school conversions the city hopes to fund through 2026.<sup>468</sup>
- **Deploy funds to increase capacity of existing spaces:** Detroit is home to a network of nonprofit organizations that have found ways to transform

unused spaces like schools and abandoned homes into thriving community hubs. For example, the Downtown Boxing Gym, Brilliant Detroit, and Durfee Innovation Center are leaders in this practice and serve as models with great potential for expansion with full funding.

- **Increase transportation to facilitate access:** At a City Council meeting, one resident asked, “Have you thought about making some kind of transportation to get people to the recreation centers?”<sup>469</sup> The GOAL line pilot is an example of a similar initiative, where buses transport students in Northwest Detroit directly from school to after-school programming sites.
- **Transform vacant land into gathering space:**<sup>470</sup> “I think I would use residential vacant land for communal purposes. Have bonfires, rent swimmobiles in the summer, market area, meeting space, picnics, sack races, and, of course, farming. Having such a place that adults and young people alike shared would improve safety while promoting and teaching a long-term blue print for civic engagement.”<sup>471</sup> There are existing funding initiatives to support community groups who want to beautify vacant land, such as Detroit Future City’s Working with Lots program. But these programs require a high-capacity implementing organization, which not all neighborhoods have. The city could develop and fund a long-term, sustainable strategy for green land reuse that takes into account residents’ desires for usable public spaces.

**DESPITE PROGRESS, MANY DETROITERS WORRY ABOUT CRIME, POLICING AND TRAFFIC SAFETY**

*“What actually cuts the root causes of violence is affordable housing, recreation centers, good transportation. ... That’s what actually reduces crime the most significantly.”<sup>472</sup>*

– Detroit resident at city council meeting, March 2019

In conversations about their communities, **Detroiters repeatedly bring up their experiences feeling unsafe** and insist on serious changes in community safety, but they have mixed views of how investments in safety should be made. Walking to school, going to play, traveling to work — it seems resident worries about crime and safety pervade daily life for many families.<sup>473</sup> “I am concerned about when my daughter has to catch the bus. She catches it on Dexter and Fenkell, but she has to pass through abandoned buildings that are open,” said one parent.<sup>474</sup>

Over the last decade, the city has invested heavily in public safety-related initiatives, like installing 65,000 street lights and demolishing more than 20,000 abandoned buildings.<sup>475</sup> However, most residents still have concerns about personal safety. According to 2018 DMACS data, a majority of Detroiters (80%) worry about being a victim of a crime, though a significant portion (29%) of these residents are just “a little worried.”<sup>476</sup>

In public forums, residents have shared their anxieties about stray dogs, violent crime, and illegal activity like drug dealing, loitering, and prostitution in their communities.<sup>477</sup> Fears of crime and danger limit some residents from playing outside or taking walks, in this way directly undermining community health and basic quality of life.<sup>478</sup> One focus group participant also reflected on how neighborhood violence erodes community connections, because it “causes people to be more reserved, less outgoing, less trusting of each other, less friendly.”<sup>479</sup>

**Dangerous traffic came up dozens of times in neighborhood planning and city-initiated public conversations as a serious threat to community safety.**<sup>480</sup> “Speeding cars is one of our biggest

problems and sources of fear in everyday life!” said one resident at a Cody Rouge and Warrendale planning meeting.<sup>481</sup> In 2019, Metro Detroit (Detroit-Warren-Dearborn), ranked as the 18th most dangerous metro area for pedestrians among 100 other metro regions.<sup>482</sup> In recent years, the city of Detroit has taken promising steps to address traffic safety by installing more speed humps on residential streets and protected bike lanes, though some residents wished for more engagement and education around bike lanes first.<sup>483</sup>

**WHAT WE CAN DO: RESIDENT IDEAS TO IMPROVE PUBLIC SAFETY AND REDUCE CRIME**

In conversations about public safety and crime, there’s a striking difference of opinion across the population. **Some residents prioritize increased law enforcement, while others want less policing and more community investments.** A third category of solutions doesn’t take a stance either way, but centers on building community infrastructure and demolishing vacant homes to drive safer neighborhoods.

- **Law enforcement solutions:** Many residents want to see greater police presence in their neighborhoods through increasing community policing patrols, traffic enforcement, park security, or Project GreenLight cameras.<sup>484</sup> Some Detroiters called for hiring more police and increasing support for existing police officers through higher pay and health benefits.<sup>485</sup> Several years ago, when police response times were at national lows, some residents interpreted this as a sign their city was not important. When asked in 2013 if a 911 call would result in police response, one resident said, “They probably wouldn’t come. You know why they wouldn’t come? Because this is the land of forgotten. This is where people don’t supposed to exist.”<sup>486</sup>
- **No more investments in policing, spend on community:** Rather than spending more on law enforcement, a number of residents think city resources should be deployed toward other projects to benefit the community.<sup>487</sup> **Critically, residents and activists have been outspoken on this issue for years, before calls to defund police departments gained national attention in summer 2020.**<sup>488</sup> After the tragic killing of Aiyana Stanley-



“If I could change something in my neighborhood, it would be gangs, homeless people, abandoned houses, population of murderers, [and more] programs.”

*Student, Regent Park Neighborhood Plan, 2014*

Jones by a Detroit police officer, one youth activist said in 2016, “It’s time to remove resources from the police department and dedicate them to improving the quality of life for the city’s marginalized communities.”<sup>489</sup> These

residents almost always shared these opinions at City Council meetings or with journalists, not within the context of neighborhood planning discussions.

“Prioritizing health and safety does not necessarily mean prioritizing policing. A lot of things that go into health and safety are mental health services, clean water in schools, and housing. We need resources, not incarceration,” said one resident at a council meeting discussing city spending on facial recognition software.<sup>490</sup> Making connections between poverty and crime, many residents support **focusing on education and employment as a public safety strategy**.<sup>491</sup> “The only way that we’re going to stop the crime is to help the youth and increase jobs. Some of them aren’t eating or going to school,” said one District 6 resident.<sup>492</sup>

Detroit is home to innovative thinking around safety and community justice, led in part by groups like FORCE, Live Free Detroit, and the Detroit Justice Center. **To build a safe and just Detroit, resident**

**community leaders look for measures to reduce mass incarceration and address the systemic root causes of violence, like structural racism.**<sup>493</sup>

Rooted in these approaches, strategies to prevent violence include investments in conflict resolution and de-escalation training in schools and community centers to offer restorative justice programming.<sup>494</sup> Lastly, at a neighborhood gathering on the Eastside, community leaders argued that crime prevention comes from “strengthening community ties, critical connections, and relationships where we care for each other” and called for a transformative Justice Center in the neighborhood to promote these links.<sup>495</sup>

- **To improve safety, continue to spend on neighborhood infrastructure:** To reduce general feelings of being unsafe in community, residents want to see a variety of infrastructure investments, including:
  - Indoor places for youth to play and connect<sup>496</sup>
  - Bus shelters, benches, and lighting near bus stops<sup>497</sup>
  - Traffic calming and enforcement, including speed humps and non-residential truck routes<sup>498</sup>
  - Bike lanes and better pedestrian crossings<sup>499</sup>
  - Maintained commercial properties and vacant lots<sup>500</sup>
  - Abandoned house removal<sup>501</sup>



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## SOCIAL CAPITAL YIELDS ECONOMIC BENEFITS

By Afton Branche-Wilson, Poverty Solutions

Undeterred by feelings that their disinvested communities are excluded from Detroit's comeback, many residents feel included *within* their communities and prize their relationships with each other. "One of the things that I hold dear is the cohesiveness of the community, and the community, how they band together, how the community sticks together to take care of everyone," said one resident.<sup>502</sup> In a variety of neighborhoods, residents mentioned they appreciate living in a place where people look out for each other.<sup>503</sup> Social inclusion and neighborhood networks remain a critical, if underappreciated, element of strategies to improve economic mobility and general well-being in Detroit.

Living in a tight-knit community and having strong social connections contributes to overall quality of life, but according to the U.S. Partnership on Mobility from Poverty, we should also think of social capital as "a web of relationships that has economic benefits."<sup>504</sup> In Detroit, many **residents' community ties help stabilize their economic and social circumstances** in a variety of ways. First, social networks provide help for vulnerable neighbors in challenging times, from money and transportation to child care and housing.<sup>505</sup> "Sometimes cooperation and collaboration can bypass some real rough patches, because you're not dependent on [money], you're dependent on

the community," said one resident at our O'Hair community focus group.<sup>506</sup> Social connections are particularly important for new immigrants to Detroit from non-English speaking countries, who sometimes team up with friends and family to translate critical information.<sup>507</sup> **Citywide, just under three-quarters of residents (73%) said they have someone in their lives who could loan them a small amount of money if needed.**<sup>508</sup> Supporting family members financially can be challenging for residents with limited incomes, however. One resident, for example, said providing food, shelter, and financial assistance to her unemployed family members while raising grandchildren was one of her main obstacles to making ends meet.<sup>509</sup>

"The way that a person would move up [economically] is being a part of an organization where you're getting information, where you're networking and meeting people and getting tips and things like that."

*O'Hair resident, Poverty Solutions Focus Group, December 2019*

Participating in a community network like a block club facilitates access to information about programs and services, like home repair and Poverty Tax Exemption workshops.<sup>510</sup> "The best thing we have going on is the block club. We have concerned neighbors and people in the block club committee just letting you know what's going on," said one resident.<sup>511</sup> Many residents also believe that coming together as neighbors is an effective way to resolve community problems,



especially in the years of city budget cuts. In Detroit, residents report high levels of collective efficacy; **63% of Detroiters feel that people in their neighborhood are willing to help their neighbors, while 48% said they lived in a close-knit neighborhood.**<sup>513</sup> Several studies find that higher reported levels of collective efficacy, one measure of social inclusion, is associated with lower levels of violence and abuse and better health outcomes.<sup>514</sup>

Unfortunately, homeowners sometimes overlook renters as worthy contributors to community improvement work and intentionally exclude them from critical neighborhood networks.<sup>515</sup> One focus group participant in the O’Hair community described it this way: “There’s a form of classism when people start talking about renters: ‘Those renters! And they’re doing this, and they’re doing that!’ when that’s not helpful. ... So we reach out to our renters and try to include them into the community. This is what Detroit is going to have to do so that we can take ourselves seriously and rise as a renaissance city.”<sup>516</sup>

Even with the importance of community interaction and social ties, some residents across the city felt **a decline in neighborhood cohesion over the past decades.**<sup>517</sup> “Our children are bused away, and I think that really takes away from the camaraderie in the neighborhood. When we were small, the kids would all walk to school together, we’d walk back home together. Now the children are bused to different communities, they only see each other if they live on the same street, and I think that’s really divisive in the neighborhood,”<sup>518</sup> said one Midwest resident. Several community leaders pointed out that their neighbors, particularly those in their 30s and 40s, may not engage with community efforts like clean-ups and neighborhood meetings.<sup>519</sup> Even if community activities seem beneficial to organizers, some residents may not participate because they are dealing with more urgent issues at home. One resident described how, when recruiting her neighbor to join a community group, she heard from him that her organizing was not as important as his water shut-off at home.<sup>520</sup> In response to the question of how to get better community meeting turnout, another focus group participant said:

*It’s not that we would never want to come out to certain things, but if you have a fear of always being shut off for something and you have a fear of being*

*homeless or something, then you don’t come, you don’t show up. And you want to do better and you want your family to be better because you always want your kids to have something better, but when you’re dealing with it, you don’t know what’s going to happen to you next.*<sup>521</sup>

**Social inclusion, within neighborhood efforts or larger social systems, is harder to come by for some groups of Detroiters.**

LGBT Detroiters face overt discrimination, exclusion, and even violence. Speaking of transgender residents, one focus group attendee who worked in the field said, “They want to be called their pronouns. And people are disrespectful. And they wanna be respected. They’re really fighting for that respect, and they want people to know who they are but they want to be safe too. Because homophobics and other things want to attack you, so really they’re looking for safety.”<sup>522</sup> These biases not only prevent some LGBT residents from full inclusion in neighborhood networks,<sup>523</sup> but they also interfere with their pursuit of secure employment or housing. To address these ills, Detroit’s strong community of LGBT organizations — including Ruth Ellis Center, SAGE Metro Detroit and LGBT Detroit — offer crucial safe spaces for residents to connect socially and find material support, while pushing for inclusivity and visibility in society writ large.

For immigrant Detroiters, obstacles to full inclusion are more subtle and less fueled by overt discrimination, but those obstacles still limit access to the connections that can drive economic mobility. First, language barriers may get in the way of both neighborly interactions and participation at grassroots community meetings. Even for neighborhood planning meetings, advocates point out that immigrants don’t participate, sometimes due to cultural differences. “We need to be doing more to invest in outreach to these newer residents — who often come from cultures that don’t have public planning exercises — to ensure their participation, which will help them identify a sense of belonging,” said one community advocate.<sup>524</sup> Detroit Our City, a series of neighborhood conversations focused on the shared experiences of native and immigrant Detroiters, aims to help bridge some of these gaps and build social networks within communities.

In a few instances, residents reported having social networks but not enough to help them get ahead.



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In one study, foster youth reported feeling “left behind” by caseworkers, who want to help but due to capacity cannot serve as the mentors teens say they need; in turn, service providers pointed out the lack of mentorship services for boys in the foster system within the city.<sup>525</sup> More generally, residents point out the need for more role models and mentors for children in the city, including when reflecting on their own past. “To be totally honest, I didn’t have any mentors. I just acted out whenever I could. I had nobody to reach out to talk to on a consistent basis. Had somebody stepped in my life early on in my life, I probably would have chosen a different path,” said one owner of a community center.<sup>526</sup> When asked if he could change one thing about his neighborhood, one Regent Park resident said, “More positive things that’s active to be impacting us and more positive role models.”<sup>527</sup> Of course, useful peer mentors are important for adults too; one resident pointed out the mismatch between her career aspirations and the work experiences of her network:

*I don’t really have nobody to talk to, give me some good job leads [for the] type of thing I might want to do. Because you know, everybody I talk to ... it’s not very many people with high school diplomas. All they jobs is hard labor type of work.*<sup>528</sup>

At its most extreme, having negative influences can get you into trouble. Some residents reported to researchers that neighborhood ties can turn into opportunities for illegal activities.<sup>529</sup> “Once you come

over here, you move over here, what you ain’t doin’ you will be doin’ because that’s all it is right here in this neighborhood to do,” said one resident.<sup>530</sup>

## WHAT WE CAN DO: IDEAS FROM RESIDENTS TO NOURISH SOCIAL NETWORKS

- Funders can invest in efforts to build more “community support systems beyond just the family,”<sup>531</sup> including neighborhood gathering spaces, block clubs, and community activities like walks, clean-ups, and cooking classes.<sup>532</sup> Residents also lift up time banks, networks where people give and receive services to each other, as another way to drive connections and formalize neighborhood support systems.<sup>533</sup> Southwest Detroit has had a successful time bank, the Unity in Our Community Time Bank, for 10 years.<sup>534</sup> For job seekers, community organizations could establish clubs or support circles, similar to those offered by public housing agencies in Baltimore and Los Angeles.<sup>535</sup>
- **Ensure all youth have access to mentors** — “The relationship between the adults here is they all treat you like family, you can come here and you don’t feel unwanted,” said one student who participates in the Downtown Boxing Gym.<sup>536</sup> “Everyone treats you like one of them.” Detroit has a rich network of organizations that offer mentorship programming, including Boys and Girls Clubs of Southeastern

Michigan, Big Brothers Big Sisters, and the Downtown Boxing Gym, but funding restrictions limit their reach.

- To drive immigrant inclusion, residents say nonprofits and city agencies should **hire more frontline workers from immigrant communities or people who speak languages other than English.**<sup>537</sup> “Wherever is the community, they feel more safe, more trusted, if they have someone who looks like them, maybe talk like them, and inviting them to whatever is happening with material that is translated,” said one focus group participant from the Arab community.<sup>538</sup> Cody Rouge’s neighborhood plan also calls for “developing a ‘welcome wagon’ system for newcomers who hail from other countries by finding residents in the community who can volunteer to be a ‘buddy’ for the new family.”<sup>539</sup>
- “Get actively involved in your community. This will be the best way to advance the LGBT community here in Detroit and to advance Detroit itself,” said one LGBT community leader.<sup>540</sup> One Black transgender advocate pushed for **more inclusive social services programming:** “For programs in Detroit, we need to think, ‘Would there be an LGBT program or a women’s program?’ Whatever program that has to do with the people of Detroit has to be a lot more inclusive.”

## CONCLUSION

*“Detroit is coming back, but the economic revival and resurgence is not for the people of the city. It’s not for Detroiters. It’s for outsiders. ... It’s not being planned for women who struggle in these poverty-level jobs.”<sup>541</sup>*

– Detroit food pantry director, 2017

In community forums across the city, Detroiters are raising alarm bells about the development of a new Detroit that doesn’t seem to include their neighborhoods. Many — but not all — residents surveyed think new investments, even when they are placed outside of Greater Downtown, disproportionately benefit wealthier, whiter, and newer Detroiters.<sup>542</sup> These Detroiters perceive forms of exclusion in how neighborhood investments are made and also in their neighborhoods’ overexposure to unhealthy and unsafe conditions from pollution to poor quality food, which can negatively impact an individual’s ability to secure economic stability. To create a Detroit where every resident in every neighborhood feels valued, residents insist on spreading investment dollars equitably, such that clean streets, recreation amenities, and safe communities are accessible to all. Despite, or perhaps because of, the unequal spread of neighborhood opportunity, many residents feel they can count on people in their neighborhood to help out in a pinch. Therefore, in addition to expanding equity in community investments, funders, non-profits and policymakers should also invest in Detroit’s great strength: its rich community of neighbors, which can ensure all Detroiters feel included in community efforts.

## INVESTING IN IMMIGRANT INCLUSION TO BUILD ECONOMIC MOBILITY FOR ALL

By Steve Tobocman, executive director,  
Global Detroit

The voices and perspectives of Detroit's immigrant families are often overlooked when we discuss poverty and economic mobility in Detroit. Yet, they represent a critical part of the conversation. Over the last five years, according to the American Community Survey, while Detroit has witnessed a decline of nearly 30,000 residents (or more than 4% of its population), the number of immigrants residing in Detroit has grown by over 5,000 residents (or 14.5%).

Detroit's immigrant families experience higher poverty rates — in the nation's poorest big city — and are far less likely to be receiving any form of public assistance. **According to the 2018 American Community Survey, 39% of Detroit's foreign-born households live in poverty compared to 30.6% of the citywide average, a rate nearly 30% higher.** For immigrant families with children, the rate is 47.2%, slightly higher than the citywide rate (45%). Immigrant households in Detroit are far less likely to be receiving Social Security than U.S.-born households (16.1% versus 34.8%, respectively) and far less likely to be receiving food stamps or SNAP benefits (30.3% versus 40.3%, respectively).

In fact, immigrants in Detroit are more likely to be working, but earning less per worker. More than 4-of-every-5 immigrant households in Detroit (81.7%) had earnings, compared to 63.2% of U.S.-born Detroit households. Yet, immigrants experience substantially lower median earnings (18% lower for males and 9% lower for females).

Global Detroit is a regional economic and community development organization focused on the inclusion of immigrants to drive the growth, revitalization, and broadly shared prosperity of Detroit and Southeast Michigan. Our work in Detroit's neighborhoods is built upon the knowledge that immigrant inclusion is critical to Detroit's revitalization and our region's growth. We work to ensure that immigrants are intentionally included in our region's community and economic development strategies as means to build



(COURTESY OF CITY OF DETROIT)

a vibrant city and thriving global region with strong neighborhoods, healthy families, successful small businesses, and a rich and diverse cultural life.

Over the past decade, Global Detroit has worked closely with immigrant residents and small business owners in the Banglatown neighborhood straddling the Detroit-Hamtramck border, as well as in Southwest Detroit, Brightmoor, Cody-Rouge, and across Northwest Detroit. We have engaged immigrant residents and their neighbors in several community planning processes, as well as surveying residents on a variety of issues, conducting focus groups, and connecting them with vital services.

Immigrant Detroiters share many of the same barriers to economic mobility as their U.S.-born Detroit neighbors. They often face their own unique set of barriers as well. Perhaps the biggest barrier is inclusion. **Rarely are policy solutions in and for Detroit developed with immigrant communities in mind.** At its most basic level, this means that language access is often limited and services are only provided in English (or, in some cases, English and

Spanish, leaving out thousands of Arabic- and Bangla-speaking households). Additionally, immigrant families often face additional cultural barriers to accessing opportunities for economic mobility. These cultural barriers may include a need for women-only spaces and different approaches to lending, but they can extend to recognizing that many institutions (government, educational, and even nonprofit) are foreign to Detroit's immigrant families that may come from cultures where such institutions are places to avoid, rather than seek help.

Beyond linguistic and cultural access, Detroit's immigrant families are often left out of program design. With higher workforce participation and employment rates and lower public benefits usage (and often ineligibility because of status), immigrant families may not be able to attend workforce development, educational programs or asset-building classes. Moreover, the design of such programs may not speak to the unique cultural experiences or legal realities that immigrants face. If, for example, affordable housing solutions are predicated on improving credit scores to provide low-income Detroit residents the opportunity to attain a mortgage to become homeowners and no local financial institutions lend to the undocumented, then the solution to affordable housing is, by nature, non-inclusive of some immigrant families.

**The past decade, however, has represented a marked shift in Detroit's efforts to build a more inclusive city and welcome immigrant families.** Global Detroit has worked diligently to build awareness of immigrant contributions and to advocate for immigrant inclusion in several public policy initiatives and programs, including tax foreclosure prevention, small business expansion, neighborhood planning, and energy

efficiency initiatives. The city of Detroit has declared itself a welcoming city, launched a Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs and Economic Inclusion, a Detroit City Council Immigration Task Force, a Municipal ID card, written a refugee resettlement plan, and invested in language access to city services. In fact, in the New American Economies Cities Index, ranking America's largest 100 cities for their immigrant welcoming efforts, Detroit earned a top 10 ranking.

Still, there is more work to do. In the near term, strategies and programs designed to facilitate economic mobility must be immigrant inclusive in design and implementation. **Initiatives must invest in "trusted connectors"— essentially highly trusted matchmakers who live in or know the community well and can link families to the resources and opportunities they need.** Global Detroit is not only working to connect immigrant families with asset-building and economic mobility opportunities today, but the organization is working to help public and private-sector institutions as well as nonprofit and philanthropic organizations develop inclusive policies, programs, and practices.

There is strong evidence that immigrants can play a crucial role in helping Detroit neighborhoods stabilize their populations and improve their quality of life. Detroit remains an attractive place for many foreign-born because of its access to regional manufacturing jobs, low cost-of-living, and ability to host growing ethnic communities. More needs to be done so that Detroit's rapidly growing immigrant population builds stronger connections to their neighbors and their new neighborhoods. By actively including immigrants in the design and implementation of economic mobility solutions, we can build an equitable and prosperous Detroit.



FIGURE 3: A SELECTION OF COMMUNITY VISIONS AND VALUES

“Expand workforce development and employment opportunities. ... Foster family security and wealth-building capacity ... increase home ownership and assets ...”

*Northwest Detroit: Neighborhood Revitalization Vision and Strategic Framework, 2018*

“Embrace our financial, ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity with intentional planning that will not displace residents and will engage the community as an integral part of the process ...”

*North Corktown Neighborhood Association, Sustainable Development Plan, 2018*

“The Grand/Woodward Community will be a vital retail and commercial center that provides goods, services, and jobs to residents and to the broader region. ... Families will have the educational resources to succeed in school and in life.”

*Grand Woodward Quality of Life Plan, 2012*

“By the year 2031, 100% of the residents of HOPE Village are educationally well-prepared, economically self-sufficient, and living in a safe and supportive environment.”

*HOPE Village, A Community Strategic Vision, 2016*

“We will transform all of Detroit into a just, equitable, beautiful, and economically thriving city. ... Such a city would be characterized by accountable, visionary economic development guided by democratic processes at all levels ...”

“The centers would act as second homes by providing food and housing, feature lots of natural lighting in the learning hubs, with classrooms, study spaces, and recreation areas that have a direct connection between indoor and outdoor spaces. Community-based businesses, job training opportunities, and jobs at the center would start to decrease criminal activities.”

*A Story of the Community, Restorative Justice Youth Design Summit, 2019*

“We can solve our issues as a community by developing opportunities for youth. ... Protected places will provide the opportunity for [youth] to unite and create a future where they will prosper and uplift themselves and their communities ...”

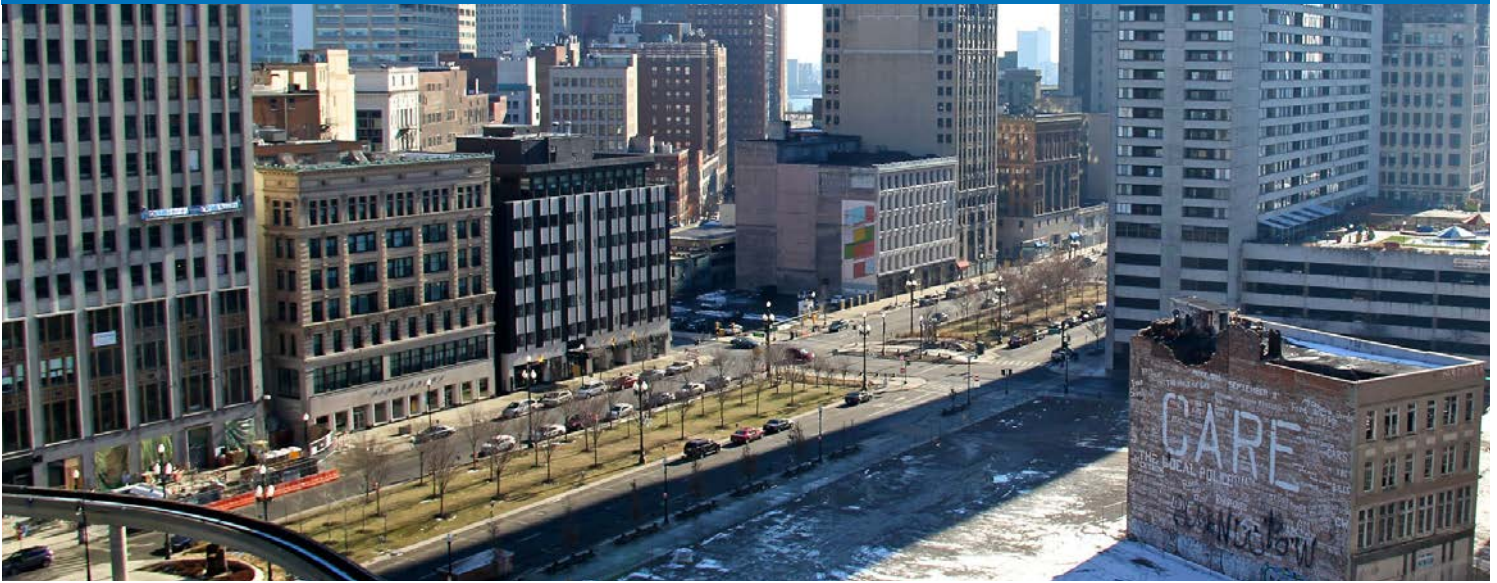
*“Story of the Community,” Restorative Justice Youth Design Summit, 2019*

“Such a city would build and maintain functional, equitable infrastructure, a just economy, and a thriving ecosystem of powerful community-based organizations that nurture and sustain beauty, culture, creativity, environmental justice, and ecological health, and implement holistic approaches to public safety and health.”

*Changing the Conversation: Philanthropic Funding and Community Organizing in Detroit, 2017*

“Banglatown is a neighborhood in which ... residents are educated, informed, and empowered to access the information and resources they need to better support their families. ... Residents feel informed and empowered to activate positive change in their community.”

*Vision + Action Plan for Banglatown, 2016*



## CONCLUSION

Detroiters' visions for economic mobility center on greater access to economic opportunities and more power to influence their lives and their communities in a city where health, well-being, and safety is found on every corner. While the details for how to achieve these goals may differ slightly by neighborhood, Detroiters share common ground on what's needed to advance their communities and have spoken these truths for years, in a variety of settings.

Throughout our research, we heard that Detroiters want all to enjoy the basic elements of economic success — good jobs, quality education opportunities, accessible transportation options, and affordable expenses — and have seen progress over the last decade, but conditions for the average resident have not changed quickly enough. Systemic racism, ableism, and other forms of discrimination pervade the city, and residents demand change in what's offered to their neighbors. "My people are just as smart, just as intelligent, got just as much drive as anyone in the world. But, the suppression of them is always coming to the end of the line, never getting a second thought, never getting that support system. ... But [others] have second and third chances, because they have a support systems in their institutions, to keep them above that poverty line,"<sup>543</sup> said one Northwest Detroiter. Residents' ideas to promote economic success include both policy changes —

reducing the burden of water bills, for example — combined with place-based and human services investments, such as affordable rental housing and more post-secondary job training for youth. Across the city, many view Detroit's oversupply of vacant land as an opportunity to develop a green jobs sector that puts residents to work in sustainable, low barrier-to-entry work, while beautifying blighted communities.

Second, beyond basic resources, we heard that Detroiters want more power and control over the tools needed to determine their own path toward economic stability, like land and capital. There is great belief in the promise of small businesses and collective ownership initiatives to drive a Detroit where residents can build their own wealth and determine the future of their neighborhoods, but these efforts need more direct supports in a city where the median household earns less than \$32,000 a year.<sup>544</sup> Residents also point out that the lack of access to information about available resources is itself an obstacle to taking advantage of opportunity; we noticed in our research that residents sometimes suggested creating programs that already exist, which indicates the need for better outreach and communication strategies.

Residents don't just want greater control over their own economic lives. They also demand more democratic neighborhood and economic development processes, and they critique programs "done for" rather than "done with." "Find out what the residents need and

want. And provide that, rather than tell the residents “This is what you’re going to get,” said one focus group participant.<sup>545</sup> Designing policy and programs with residents as partners leads to interventions that respond directly to their needs, which is particularly important to ensure the priorities of Detroiters from marginalized groups, such as residents with disabilities, are not ignored. We did observe several examples where residents’ voices were heard, such that policy or program changes were announced after Detroiters spoke out; city leaders should do more to communicate these wins to residents.

Lastly, Detroiters want to feel included in the city’s economic development efforts, which they observe as being uneven and targeted toward “six figure folks” or certain communities.<sup>546</sup> “There are places you don’t have opportunities. ... One side of town is different than the other side, and they get more over there than they get over here,” said one Aviation Sub resident. “So I think equality of opportunity is important.”<sup>547</sup> Residents point to overall neighborhood neglect and overexposure to specific health and safety threats like blight and poor quality food as evidence that their communities are not of value to decision makers. By contrast, living in a valued community facilitates access to clean environments, health amenities, and safe spaces, among other necessities. To see these goals realized, Detroiters want greater investments in local infrastructure that support community health and safety, as well as more aggressive intervention to hold bad actors accountable.

Although their neighborhoods may lack sufficient services, many Detroiters take great pride in their neighborhood organizations and in the community connections they’ve built, which facilitate access to information, connection, and even financial support. Similarly, several of our co-authors emphasized the

importance of relationships in their program models. They build physical spaces designed to nurture these relationships and utilize coaching techniques to leverage them for economic and educational success.

Residents’ visions for economic mobility in Detroit are expansive, and conversations about increasing economic mobility in the city should be too. Reducing poverty and growing stability in Detroit should begin with a focus on living-wage jobs, good schools, affordable housing, and accessible health care, among other foundations of economic well-being. But we must also invest in efforts to build resident power, nurture residents’ social networks, and ensure the equal inclusion of marginalized groups and neighborhoods in all of the above. Power and inclusion are essential elements of economic mobility; when residents demand to be heard and call out for their communities or identities to be considered, they are asking for what they and their families need to live stable and successful lives. The first step to advance more inclusive conversations about economic mobility is to take the time to consider what residents, community leaders, and local organizations have already shared (for example, as depicted in Figure 3) and use future engagement efforts to further refine and co-design solutions. Second, those in power must include residents and community leaders in setting the agenda and facilitating conversations, not just providing feedback or answering surveys on pre-set topics. We hope that moving forward, city officials, funders, and service organizations renew their commitments to Detroiters as partners in the work of building a thriving city for all, where each resident has equal access to the resources and relationships they require to pursue economic stability and prosperity.



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