

Take a Second Look at Detroit

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The City of Detroit has been in the news lately, mostly in ways that make it seem like the city is beleaguered with one problem after another. A new emergency manager has been appointed who recently published [a report of the City's finances](#) that makes the prospect of looming bankruptcy seem even greater. Then there are the ongoing issues of rising crime, declining population rolls, and failing city services. Yet, in spite of what you hear and read trumpeted daily, there are many individuals and organizations working quietly and tirelessly in local neighborhoods to improve life for residents and/or children. They realize the challenges to their beloved city, yet they continue to strive to make it better. This type of passion and commitment is what keeps hundreds of thousands of people living in Detroit. This is why people, young and old, continue to move into the city, hopeful that better days still are ahead. Along with support from political leaders, the business community and philanthropic community, these local champions are the ones that keep the city viable. In their honor, we invite you to take a second look at Detroit.

One ongoing effort to improve the city, by enhancing the developmental outcomes of children, is being led by the Skillman Foundation. In 2006, the Foundation launched its Good Neighborhoods community change initiative, a 10-year \$100 million commitment to Detroit families in six areas of the city. Our teams (the University of Michigan-School of Social Work Technical Assistance Center and the University of Illinois at Chicago) provide intellectual leadership and technical assistance to this effort, working closely with the foundation, residents, neighborhood stakeholders, and other partners involved in the change process. We have facilitated and participated as residents and others in the six neighborhoods gathered to discuss urgent matters, review social and economic indicator data, generate action plans, elect governing boards, and initiate activities to improve the lives of young people in the city of Detroit.

In addition, [there are many funded improvements that are either scheduled or ready to be implemented in the city of Detroit as well as existing jewels](#). Examples include the M-1 Rail system on Woodward Avenue, state of the art wastewater systems installations along Joy Road in the Cody-Rouge neighborhood, and a new Whole Foods Market and two Meijer supermarkets underway. These improvements benefit both long time residents of and newcomers to Detroit. And a public - philanthropic partnership recently spearheaded by the Kresge foundation generated a promising strategic framework plan called "Detroit Future City."

But perhaps most importantly, there are committed residents who continue to contribute even through the coming bright future may still seem a bit distant and cloudy. These include **Hanan Yahya**. As a high school student, Hanan Yahya spent her free time engaging her peers in Chadsey/Condon to participate in neighborhood revitalization efforts, park clean-ups, community meetings, and trainings to build capacity in Arab American community organizers. She worked to reach across cultural divides to be inclusive in community outreach strategies. After receiving a scholarship to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and starting classes in the fall of 2012, Hanan returned to her own community for service as part of the Semester In

Detroit program. This winter Hanan started her own ACT prep class for high school students to be held at a local library in Chadsey/Condon so that she can continue to build capacity in others and prepare them for success. Young people like Hanan represent the future of Detroit and demonstrate that capacity comes in many forms.

Another example is **Bertha Marsh**. Instead of cutting back since retirement, Bertha Marsh has become even more active in her community. She volunteers every day at Osborn High School, providing tutoring for students, training parents how to organize around issues related to education, and connecting with local nonprofits to find resources to meet students' needs. Mrs. Marsh traveled to Chicago with a group of residents and stakeholders from Osborn last December to learn from the Logan Street's parent mentor program model. Applying lessons learned, she is helping to develop a local parent mentor program in Osborn. Mrs. Marsh is a changemaker. If a student needs help learning, she teaches. If a parent needs information, she finds it. If a student needs a winter coat, she gets someone to donate it. If you walk into Osborn High School, everyone knows Mrs. Marsh. Seniors like Bertha represent the long term strength of the City and demonstrate there are many that have given their lives to keep Detroit great.

One final example is **Martin-Louis Escobedo**. It is true that many crimes are committed by young men of color in the city of Detroit. But what doesn't get publicized is the fact that many of these young men are not only turning their lives around, but some are even turning around their communities. Martin is a teenager who lives in Southwest Detroit. He used to be a gang member. When he decided to get his life on the right track, it was not enough to merely *stop* his involvement with gangs. Martin decided to become a youth cadet and be an active participant in the crime prevention effort in his community. He trains others in his neighborhood – both youth and adults – how they can be part of the solution. People like Martin show that there is potential in all of us, but that it sometimes must be harnessed for good to keep communities strong.

So rather than shake your head at the headlines that you hear about the City of Detroit, we invite you to take a second look at the city where we live and/or work. Like many urban cities today, Detroit has challenges, but it has also has a celebrated history and many strengths. Take time to get to know the people that keep the city going, giving of themselves to halt what might have been a swift decline in some distressed communities. Better yet, join in to assist with the work that is already underway. Add your commitment to make a better tomorrow for Detroit!

NOTE

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The published article can be found at: <http://www.ceosforcities.org/blog/take-a-second-look-at-detroit>