

Operation Pufferfish

Building and Sustaining a Department of Neighborhoods and Citizen Engagement in Lansing, Michigan

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In the fevered spring and summer of 2020, the unrest bubbling to the surface in cities across the US was at a full boil in Lansing, Michigan. In late April, with COVID-19 cases spiking in the state, protesters—including militia members armed with assault rifles—crowded in and around the State Capitol, defying and condemning the governor’s “stay home” orders.¹ At the end of May, a peaceful march protesting the death of George Floyd and other Black victims of police brutality turned chaotic following an altercation between protesters and a driver operating her vehicle erratically near the marchers.^{2,1} By late evening, several fires were burning. Glass from broken windows at police headquarters and downtown businesses littered the streets.³ Police used pepper spray canisters to disperse crowds, and reporters on the scene described confusion and dismay on the ground as the chemical fog spread.⁴

Local activists held rallies, circulated a petition, spoke out at city council, and marched to the mayor’s home demanding that the city reroute public funding from police budgets to community organizations and take stronger action to improve policing practices.⁵ With similar events unfolding in cities large and small and COVID-19 poised to hit communities of color especially hard, Lansing joined dozens of jurisdictions in passing a resolution declaring racism a public health crisis.⁶

DeLisa Fountain, a former organizer with a Black-led community organization called One Love Global, was working as a neighborhood resource coordinator for Lansing’s Department of Neighborhoods and Citizen Engagement (DNCE). She had spent the spring pushing COVID-19-related information out to residents through every channel she could find, mobilizing them to participate in the 2020 census, and scrambling to shift the department’s core programs to virtual. DNCE Director Andi Crawford was working double duty in the mayor’s cabinet as chief innovation officer. “As we got to the summer, it was clear that this was going to be a very difficult budget year,” said Crawford. “The hammer was going to come down. You combine that with an election year, and you knew that we were heading for all kinds of stuff.”⁷ The DNCE was a signature initiative of Mayor Schor, a labor of love for Crawford, and a thorn in the side of some who represented the old guard of Lansing neighborhood associations. As a

¹ State police escorted the driver from the scene, reportedly dodging bottles and rocks, before protesters overturned the vehicle and set it ablaze. (See Berg in endnotes; See also Lawrence Cosentino, Skyler Ashley, Cole Tunningley, and Berl Schwartz, “Shards and Tears,” *Lansing City Pulse*, June 4, 2020, <https://www.lansingcitypulse.com/stories/shards-and-tears-without-warning-protesters-hit-with-tear-gas-in-tense-night,14522>.)

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standalone department with hardly any staff, it would be an easy target for budget cuts if residents chose a new mayor.

“Andi went nonstop through the pandemic,” Fountain said. By September, “it was time for her to relax and breathe.”⁸ To regroup and temporarily lighten budgetary pressure, Crawford took a voluntary furlough. “Personally and professionally, I was needing to step back,” she explained. “I knew that I was probably going to be making a change in the coming year. Delisa is an extraordinary professional who has nontraditional credentials. I wanted to step out and allow her some opportunity to shine because I really wanted to look forward and hand off the reins to her.”

“I Have a Horrible Job for You”

In the summer of 2014, Crawford, a South Florida-based consultant in community and public health, decided to move her family back to her beloved city of origin: Lansing. She returned to her steeply gabled white brick home in the city’s east side neighborhood and was looking forward to completing renovations before the house’s one-hundredth birthday. “I thought I had really figured it out,” Crawford said. “I was going to continue to bill at Miami prices but live at Lansing costs. It was going to be brilliant.” She was still settling in when a friend invited her to a networking meeting on the topic of food systems. She found herself chatting with Bob Johnson, Lansing’s director of planning and neighborhood development, about coalition-building work she had done to support community transformation grants from the Center for Disease Control. As she recalled, Johnson smiled and said, “Oh, I have a horrible job for you. Are you interested?”

Mayor Virg Bernero had just zeroed out funding for the Lansing Neighborhood Council, a nonprofit that had served for thirty years as fiscal agent for the city’s neighborhood associations and neighborhood watch groups, after an investigation turned up evidence of financial mismanagement.⁹ The mayor wanted to set up a new nonprofit with a new board to fund neighborhood grants and services. This was the horrible job—in Crawford’s words: “Figure it out. Figure this neighborhood problem out.”

In 2014, Lansing, a post-industrial “legacy city” occupying thirty-six square miles mid-palm in the mitten of Michigan’s lower peninsula, had a growing population of about 115,000.¹⁰ According to the census bureau, about 60 percent of Lansing residents identified as white and roughly a third as Black or multiracial. Though it boasted some of the most affordable housing in the US, nearly half of the city’s residents were renters. Lansing’s city council comprised four at-large members and four ward-based members. The small number of wards relative to the number of at-large members tended to skew representation. In 2020, half of the council and the mayor were residents of Ward 4.¹¹ (See Appendix 1 for maps of Lansing.)

The Grand River ran in a rambling semicircle around the northwestern corner of Ward 4, encompassing its historic downtown, the Michigan School for the Blind, the State Capitol, and city hall. Just south of the river lay the General Motors Lansing Grand River Assembly plant and the post-industrial hipster neighborhood of REO Town. Crawford’s east side home sat across the river in Ward 1, an area rich in grassroots organizations and farmers markets that abutted the college town of East Lansing. It was home to everyone from “artists to auto workers, medical professionals to grad students,” according to Erin Buitendorp, special projects administrator for the city’s public services department.¹² Buitendorp

herself lived in the city's southeastern quadrant, Ward 2, home to expansive green spaces and commuters who worked for the city's major employers: the hospital, Michigan State University, state and city government, and insurance companies. In Ward 3, the southwest quadrant of the city, tidy middle-class neighborhoods gave way to sprawl. "There's no traditional urban planning there," Buitendorp said. "Over time things have become more intentional."

As in many US cities, construction of the highway (Interstate 496), which began in 1966, had demolished a crowded, bustling Black neighborhood and business corridor.¹³ At the time, according to Ann Kron, the founder of Lansing's first neighborhood association, Lansing's neighborhoods fell into three categories: "black, white, and 'changing.'"¹⁴ Kron's Westside Neighborhood Association had stood as one of the city's few sites of resistance to redlining and white flight. Like any city of its size, Lansing residences and businesses formed a complex patchwork of dozens of neighborhoods, with thriving and fraying pockets of city life distributed across each ward according to a mix of history, planning, exclusion, geography, and chance. But wherever people lived, Crawford observed, "Neighborhood politics are the most intense politics there are. People care very deeply, obviously, about their home, their block, their experience."

The New Grants in Town

Most members of the newly defunct Lansing Neighborhood Council still sat on the mayor's Neighborhood Advisory Board ("Advisory Board"), which administered small-dollar grants to neighborhood associations. The horrible job Crawford was contemplating involved standing up a new organization to coordinate the city's neighborhood associations and administer roughly \$20,000 annually in micro grants through a board whose own organization had just been cut off at the knees. The Advisory Board's rules held that only registered neighborhood associations—with bylaws, an executive committee, and regular monthly meetings—could compete for grant funds. Grant applicants had to print out a Word document and fill it out by hand. All this tended to skew membership to white homeowners of a certain age, mostly women. As Crawford explained, "The definition of neighborhood really defaulted to being single-family, owner-occupied homes. When half of your city residents are renters, how does that promote equity?"

Crawford decided to take it on as a part-time project: "It was very low risk for me. If the mayor fired me the next day, my son would be fed. Everything would be fine. But it was high risk because I cared a lot about it." With twenty allocated hours a week, no staff, no job description, and few longstanding relationships in the city, Crawford took on a contract role as the city's neighborhood resource coordinator. "I came in with the approach of, 'Okay, we're going to be reformulating this organization. We're going to be giving it some new goals and mandates. We're going to be raising some money for it. And then we'll staff it up and launch it.'" Ideally, with a new organization taking up the administrative work, the board would have time to focus its energy on refreshing its value proposition and advocating for the program. The willingness and capacity of the board to accept this challenge, however, seemed close to nil. "One of the things that Lansing is constantly working through from a citizen engagement perspective is this concept of nostalgia," Crawford explained. "Nostalgia can fuel our future or be an anvil around our ankle that drowns us. When you have a city that has its heyday in the rearview mirror, and that generation is still driving the city in many ways, how do you engage citizens in a meaningful way? The way forward is not to recreate that era. It's an impossibility."

Crawford would need to rely on all her coalition-building skill and experience—and no small amount of luck—to realize a new vision. Mercifully, just a couple of days into her contract, she spotted an RFP for a new pilot grant program from Cities of Service called “City Hall AmeriCorps VISTA Love your Block.”ⁱⁱ The goal was to help cities “work with residents to revitalize neighborhoods, one block at a time” through “impact volunteering.”¹⁵ Each city would receive \$30,000 over three years for small grants to neighborhood volunteers and community groups. To leverage these dollars, Cities of Service also provided two AmeriCorps VISTA members and required participating cities to create city-wide service plans.ⁱⁱⁱ “The application was right in my sweet spot,” said Crawford. “I could tell exactly what the funder was looking for.” Lansing was one of just six cities—most of them much larger—that received the grant. It was the boost she needed, and the foundation of a strategy that allowed her to pull off what she jokingly referred to as “a slow-motion, five-year coup.”

The grant not only tripled the people power at her disposal, but also allowed her to sidestep what promised to be a messy and contentious rehaul of the city’s grantmaking process. “We just built something new, then tried to bring over components of what had been in place previously into that new system rather than try to fix a system and get stuck.” The VISTAs, Crawford said, were “the secret sauce”—a “mighty, ragtag staff” to move the work forward. “Having people who are both internal and external at the same time,” she said, “who can limit their scope to just working on this new thing, especially for a mid-sized city, it’s just magical. People kept saying, ‘This is a breath of fresh air.’”

The Love Your Block grants enabled Crawford and her team to make a fundamental change in grant eligibility rules, expanding the definition of a neighborhood organization from traditional neighborhood associations to any place-based organization that served a defined geography within the city. Just like that, cooperatives, housing complexes, nonprofits, “friends of” groups, faith-based organizations, parent-teacher associations, and any number of other civic organizations were able to access neighborhood grants.

While the Advisory Board’s grants were capped at \$650, Love Your Block grants offered up to \$5,000 plus support from the VISTAs. The application and reporting requirements were more rigorous than Advisory Board grants, “but you get more,” Crawford explained. “We’re going to talk to you about leverage. We’re going to try to seek additional funding. We’re going to walk side by side with you throughout your grant implementation. We are going to involve the city departments and other potential ‘no’ answers on the front end. And then at the end of that, we’re going to try to get all of you together so that you’re talking about your project.” The traditional grants were still available, but there was a new pot of money in town.

Catching Fire

Crawford figured there was no better way to get to know Lansing’s neighborhoods than to stroll through them with local tour guides, so in December of 2014, she launched Walking Wednesdays to do

ⁱⁱ Cities of Service was founded by Michael R. Bloomberg and was a part of Bloomberg Philanthropies until 2014. In 2020, the organization joined the Centers for Civic Impact at Johns Hopkins University.

ⁱⁱⁱ Americorps VISTA members work within the US and its territories on projects and programs to alleviate poverty. They receive a living allowance, training, a pathway to federal employment, and either a stipend or the financial equivalent of a Pell Grant to pay for education expenses.

just that, visiting a new neighborhood each week. She quickly realized that the learning went both ways and moved to capitalize on that. “Most people are not talking to city government. Citizens just want it to work. They just want the city to be software that runs in the background of their lives.” Walking Wednesdays were an opportunity for her to show that city government could be responsive: “The ingredient, I think, for great facilitation is sitting down with people beforehand and saying, ‘What do we want to make sure people learn about? What’s great about it here? What do you think needs to happen?’ And if this is a neighborhood that applied because they really want to talk about the park, we make sure our parks director is there, we make sure the public services director is there. And we try to actually solve—actively solve—problems.”

Along with the Love Your Block grants, these efforts began to generate buzz and momentum. “We had a whole lot more people come into the fold,” Crawford said. “People were participating—new people, different people. There was a sense that we were getting somewhere.” In its first year, the board received nineteen Love Your Block applications and funded seven projects that engaged neighbors in beautifying and improving access to parks and trails, starting community gardens, updating athletic fields, and more. (See Appendix 2 for a complete list of Love Your Block Year One grantees.) By October 2016, some 300 Love Your Block volunteers had created eighty-five community events and ten public art displays, removed 125 bags of litter, hosted nineteen community clean-ups, and made contact with over 900 community members.¹⁶

With these successes under her belt and her contract set to expire, Crawford met with her overseers in Mayor Bernero’s office and informed them that in her opinion, creating an independent nonprofit to carry the neighborhood work forward as everyone had intended would not work. “I said, ‘What you need is someone in city hall who is thinking about this all the time, whose responsibility is to move cross departmentally.’” The mayor invited her to write up a job description—and apply. Her first reaction was horror: “I thought, ‘I’m never taking a job in city government. That sounds like the end of my soul. And I’m a consultant and I want to do other things. And this salary is pitiful.’” But another feeling tugged at her: “I don’t want to leave this work. I feel like we’re catching fire a little bit. This is really moving somewhere.” She sought guidance from the leadership at Cities of Service, and they strongly encouraged her to take the job. Playing out during this moment of personal reckoning, consequentially, was the 2016 presidential election. When the results came in, Crawford knew what she felt she had to do. “I don’t know who could have knocked me on my head any stronger to say, ‘This is your part. This is what you do now.’”

A New Mayor and a New Department

In May of 2017, Mayor Bernero announced he would not seek reelection. The leading candidate to replace him was Andy Schor, the sitting state representative for Michigan’s 68th District. Schor asked Crawford to join his cabinet and invited her to design and direct her own department. Eager to elevate her role in city government, she met with Brian McGrain, Schor’s prospective pick for director of economic development, to start planning. Schor took office in January 2018, and his first executive order established the Department of Neighborhoods and Citizen Engagement (DNCE). Crawford would split her time between directing the department and serving as the mayor’s chief innovation officer. She asked that the city’s Office of Financial Empowerment (OFE)—which offered residents financial

planning, education, and banking support through various programs and policies—sit within the department.

Some critics dismissed the new department's work as "fluff." For others, particularly the old guard of neighborhood associations, it was more personal. "There was a whole group that assumed that the new mayor was just going to put it back the way it was," said Crawford. When Mayor Shor announced the formation of the DNCE, members of the Advisory Board called for a meeting. According to Crawford, they "expressed their displeasure that this department was created, and particularly that I was retained. It was ninety minutes on how terrible I was. And then the mayor drove me back to my car and said, 'Please don't quit.' And I said, 'Mayor, I've been dealing with this for three years. I knew exactly what that meeting was going to be.'"

For much of its first year, the department had no official staff, just one or two VISTAs at a time and a graduate student intern from the University of Michigan's course on citizen interactive design. "It was kind of 'that department without a true home,'" said Erin Buitendorp, who started her city government career as a VISTA for the department. As a matter of both governance and physical space, the DNCE sat within the Department of Economic Development and Planning in offices adjacent to a parking garage that happened to be undergoing construction. Planning department staff seemed to perceive their new officemates as only adding to the auditory siege. "We talk a lot," said Buitendorp. "I think the planners were like, 'Please leave. You're nice, but this is a lot. We don't understand you people. You keep coming in with boxes and weird yard signs.'"

In October 2018, DeLisa Fountain, a compliance officer from the city's income tax division with a background in community organizing, became the department's first hire. "I wanted to transition and to use not only what I'd learned from my income tax office experience with the residents, but also my community organizing experience—getting back into the neighborhoods and the citizen engagement part that I enjoy," Fountain explained. "And so now I get to help people in what they see as a friendlier role." Moreover, "it was exciting because it was brand new. This director was completely different. She didn't have the same old, same old thought process of how to do things."

Operation Pufferfish

Crawford, Fountain, and Buitendorp were immersed in the day-to-day scramble of starting an organization from scratch, while keeping on top of ongoing projects. They were processing paperwork for grants, figuring out the budget, corralling information and resources, getting familiar with key neighborhood contacts, standing up new programs, and organizing events. "It was doing a lot of backfill," said Buitendorp, "and then going forward with things that would come up because there would be a priority of the mayor's and suddenly we would have to switch fields in the middle of the day." Fountain recalled, "There were three major events in the first thirty days that really pushed me out into the community, meeting different neighbors and different organizations that I had no idea even existed. It was a little overwhelming, but it was a good overwhelming. It just felt good to feel like that connector to neighborhoods." From her vantage point, it seemed to feel good to residents, too: "We got great responses because they were able to actually call us and talk to us. They weren't getting a run around. They were able to see action happening at the neighborhood level versus having to track somebody down or having to fight city hall."

As promised, the team revamped the registration process for civic organizations, streamlining neighborhood grants and incorporating the broadened eligibility criteria from Love Your Block. “We ripped up the entire application process and redid the whole thing,” said Crawford. Building on the connections made during two years of Love Your Block, the team launched SERVE Lansing, a program that brought together residents, city workers, and local nonprofits to “increase citizen engagement, build community response and preparedness, and clean and beautify the community.”¹⁷ Buitendorp emphasized the value of this program in building trust and relationships and coordinating efforts between major service providers like the Red Cross and the United Way.

The department’s ambition to be a “civics teacher for the city” inspired an annual eleven-week Citizens Academy program for residents to learn the ins and outs of city government through tours of municipal facilities and conversations with city staff, council members, and the mayor. Mary Beth Van Horn, a neighborhood association leader who participated, gained a new appreciation for city employees: “People believe that the government is huge, and there's all these people. There's really not as many as you think. And those that are there are wearing four or five different hats!”¹⁸ Van Horn also noted that the experience brought people who would not ordinarily encounter one another into contact—and productive conflict: “Some of the conversations got pretty spicy—because there were groups from different ages, cultures, and beliefs there, and what one word means to me, means something totally different to another. It was good to see it hashed out because that’s needed for both sides to understand. Andi and DeLisa were both there to intercede, to fill in the gaps.” Fountain’s background as a community organizer made her a credible and effective facilitator of these human moments. “You treat people how you want to be treated,” she said, “but you have to be confident in how you approach tables of power. And then you also realize that these are just regular people sitting around what we consider tables of power. They’re normal. They have feelings.”

The department also coordinated the annual LOVE Lansing awards, which recognized neighborhood leaders and neighborhood watch captains for their service. They started a weekly newsletter, “Neighborhood News,” to highlight events and connect community organizations with residents. They held monthly roundtables—to bring neighborhood leaders together to discuss issues and share ideas for projects—and quarterly housing and neighborhood resource summits to connect residents with city and community services. They organized two rounds of participatory budget nights with the mayor and the city finance director. They did Walking Wednesdays. The OFE launched the Lansing SAVE program to raise money for children’s savings accounts. Crawford established a few practices to help everyone stay on top of the tidal wave of activity. “She had a thing that she called the ‘Monday memo,’” Buitendorp explained. “It would break the work up into buckets and then have a ninety-day horizon so that we could keep track of what was coming up. There would always be some surprises, because of course there are things you can't see, but it was helpful—especially if there were days that people were spread in different spots.”

Crawford pulled in any extra capacity she could find, including students and interns from Michigan State and the University of Michigan as well as Americorps VISTAs. “We always called it ‘Operation Pufferfish,’” she said. “We just had to be much bigger than we actually were to try and absorb the aspirations of what we wanted to do.” She also emphasized the need to report out. In May 2019, city council cut funding for a second neighborhood resource coordinator position, and Mayor Schor issued

his first veto to protect it.^{iv} “He took a lot, a lot, a lot of heat about what we were doing. I knew coming in that we were always going to be on the chopping block. You could hide our budget in public service, public works. You could hide fifty of us in there and no one would know. But we happen to be this standalone thing, so being my own PR firm for my department was really important.”

Neighborhoods of Focus

It was particularly important for the DNCE to highlight its efforts and impact in the mayor’s designated “neighborhoods of focus”—two underserved neighborhoods where city hall hoped to foster and facilitate sustainable, community-led, cross-sector support and investment. The Baker neighborhood, nestled in the heart of the city, had Lansing’s highest foreclosure rate. “We looked at all the data from people who’d had financial counseling sessions with us to understand what the unique problems of that neighborhood were when it came to people’s personal finances,” OFE Director Amber Paxton explained. “We found a heavy use of alternative credit—people taking out payday loans. Well that made all the sense in the world once we mapped it, because there were payday lenders on every corner.”¹⁹

While the city was unable to find a bank willing to pay the extra security cost of opening a branch in the neighborhood, it could convene partners to improve neighborhood life in ways that might make banks more amenable. With support from DNCE staff and grants, community partners in the Baker neighborhood created accessible paths in a local park, installed energy-saving retrofits in homes, led neighborhood cleanups, taught skilled trades to local youth, turned a vacant lot into a community gathering space, raised thousands for neighborhood children through Lansing SAVE, and provided meals, zoo passes, art installations, performances, and “family fun days” for residents. The local Lutheran church began passing a special collection plate for Lansing SAVE on each fifth Sunday, inspiring a new program, called “Community Champions” out of the OFE. “We’ve added another church,” Paxton explained, “and the program has raised over \$11,000. It just shows how, when we put a neighborhood lens over our work, we begin to think about it hyper-locally. It changes our approach.” In one year, according to Crawford, neighborhood crimes against persons and property declined by a third.²⁰

Southwest Lansing was selected as a second neighborhood of focus in partnership with the county health department, whose data showed high levels of lead and other environmental health hazards. Southwest’s visual landscape featured wide avenues, strip malls, and vast expanses of asphalt; it was a neighborhood in search of a center. A point of local pride, however, was the former Pleasant Grove Elementary School at Pleasant Grove Road and West Holmes Road, where Malcolm X had spent his formative years.²¹ Prior to its selection as a neighborhood of focus, Paxton had reached out to Crawford about the school, which was slated for redevelopment, and the intersection. “There was this group of small businesses—very mom and pop,” said Paxton. “There was a hair salon, a dance school, a grocery store, and a caterer.” She confided that she was not sure how to promote cohesion, and Crawford suggested creating a network of those business owners. “We jumped in my car and drove

^{iv} A vote to override the veto failed (4-4) in council. The adopted budget for FY2020 included \$60,000 for the position. (<https://content.civicplus.com/api/assets/60d95289-e78c-47f4-a10c-9249b496c81f?cache=1800>).

over there,” said Paxton, and “by the next day, we had a business association”—the Southwest Action Group, or SWAG.

On a Walking Wednesday filmed by Lansing Public Media the following fall, SWAG president Rachelle White led city leaders on a tour through Southwest. She presented the hoop house at the Southside Community Center that provided neighbors with fresh, local produce year-round. At Beacon Park, Ward 3 City Councilmember Adam Hussain presented a new soccer field, and Mayor Schor recounted working with neighbors in the mud and rain to install the new playground (co-funded and designed by the community with matching funds from the Michigan Economic Development Corporation). Residents hoped to create a half-mile ADA-compliant walking trail to connect Beacon Park with a new “town square” at the corner of Pleasant Grove and West Holmes. SWAG had already purchased an easement from a neighboring homeowner and secured a \$100,000 community development block grant for landscaping and public art to make the corner “a beacon for Southwest Lansing.”²²

“It’s just that neighborhood lens,” said Paxton. “It’s making the city’s efforts more efficient and more effective because we’re concentrating them, which sounds so simple. If we’re trying to change part of the city or all of the city, it just makes sense to do that in bite-sized pieces where you take this neighborhood and find out what they need, and then you get that delivered. It’s going to take us a long time if we’re doing three a year, and we get that, but that’ll be three neighborhoods that got resources that they didn’t have the year before.” For other neighborhoods, of course, there was always the opportunity to apply for neighborhood grants. “I love seeing how excited the neighborhoods get around that time,” said Fountain. “The ideas flow. They get creative. These are all volunteers that just want to make their neighborhood, their space, their community better.”

For Crawford, the neighborhoods of focus were civic labs for bringing communities and city workers of all stripes together: “How I envisioned the department was not to build a huge vertical stack underneath the Department of Neighborhoods, but to really use it as a way to pull together city departments—especially the citizen-facing departments—and make them work more harmoniously. Neighborhood stuff is our first really horizontal crosscut.” While the city could help bring in resources, it relied on residents to communicate their needs and priorities and pitch in. “It’s definitely having an impact on the residents,” said Paxton, “because they get concentrated, intentional resources.” On the question of whether the DNCE was succeeding in coordinating efforts across city departments, she was a little less certain: “I think we have work to do. We could be working more closely with other departments. I think that’s something that both Andi and DeLisa have set as a priority.”

2020

COVID-19’s arrival in Michigan in March 2020 marked both an abrupt end to the DNCE’s high-touch approach to citizen engagement and an opportunity to demonstrate the value it had created over the previous two years. “We never paused,” said Fountain. “We just shifted and pivoted.” The Neighborhood News already went out to hundreds of neighborhood leaders with deep communication networks. “When the pandemic hit, and we had to go into crisis communication,” explained Crawford, “the mayor really leaned on this department heavily.” Throughout the first month of the pandemic, the

DNCE would send out a daily bulletin at 4 pm. “It gave us a chance to interpret what the governor put out,” said Crawford. “We divided it in two sections: ‘How do I get help?’ and ‘How can I help?’”

As it became clear that it would be a long time before they could resume business as usual, the department reprioritized. “We began focusing on the census,” said Fountain. They set up a phone bank system targeting the areas of the city least likely to respond and recruited city workers from other departments to make calls from city-owned cell phones. “We also asked, ‘Do you need any resources? Do you know that you can dial 211 and get access to resources?’ And we asked them to do a well check on their neighbors.” By mid-May, they had called over 10,000 residents, and Fountain turned her attention to the DNCE’s core programming: developing a virtual iteration of Citizens’ Academy, amping up the department’s social media presence, and creating bolder, more eye-catching graphics. She promoted the neighborhood grants and application procedures using live posts on the City of Lansing’s Facebook page, the city TV department, and a podcast with the Advisory Board.

Above all, Fountain wanted to ensure the department was responsive to residents, “just being there for people when they called, or when they emailed us, or when they wanted to talk.” She attended neighborhood meetings and hosted drop-in hours on Zoom, but also made accommodations for folks who were less tech savvy: “We tried to make it as inclusive as possible. I would mail out applications, porch drop applications if necessary. I said, ‘You can drop them off or I can pick them up. Just leave them right on the porch and I’ll just grab them.’” As with so many people around the country, the lines between work and home life blurred for Fountain: “My son would be in the car with me, and we’re on our way to the grocery store, but I’ve got to drop off this application somewhere, dropping things off and picking them up on the weekends, because our neighbors work, just like I do. It took a lot of flexibility and a lot of understanding.” Fountain’s kids, having spent their early years tagging along for community events during her time as an organizer, tolerated it well. “They kind of have that already built in,” she said, “the service aspect of things.”

Seeing residents continue to engage with and rely on the DNCE for information and support amid the anxiety and social upheaval that gripped Lansing throughout the summer of 2020, gave Crawford confidence she had built something durable and valuable. “In a time of crisis, you better have built in a whole lot on the front end so that you have some degree of trust,” she said. “I believe that our department remained a trusted voice even if other parts of the city maybe didn’t.”

As she contemplated her future and the needs of Lansing’s neighborhoods, Crawford began to feel that the time was ripe for her to move on. She believed that in Fountain she had found a wise and resourceful partner who was more than ready to step into her shoes. Fountain, however, had doubts. “My first thought is always my kids, taking care of my family,” she said. Giving up the protections of a civil service job she needed felt risky. She had relied on public benefits for food and housing in the past. “That twinge of fear about losing my job—it was nerve-wracking.” Mayor Schor was up for re-election in 2021. If he lost, a new mayor might appoint someone else, or do away with the department altogether. On the other hand, the community organizer in her reflected, “Now I’m on the inside and I can fight for change.” Believing that the DNCE had a platform and a portfolio of programs for people in Lansing whose experiences were more like hers, she wondered, “How can I insert an equity lens in every program that we have for our neighborhoods? How can I be more inclusive? How can I bring in new organizations?”

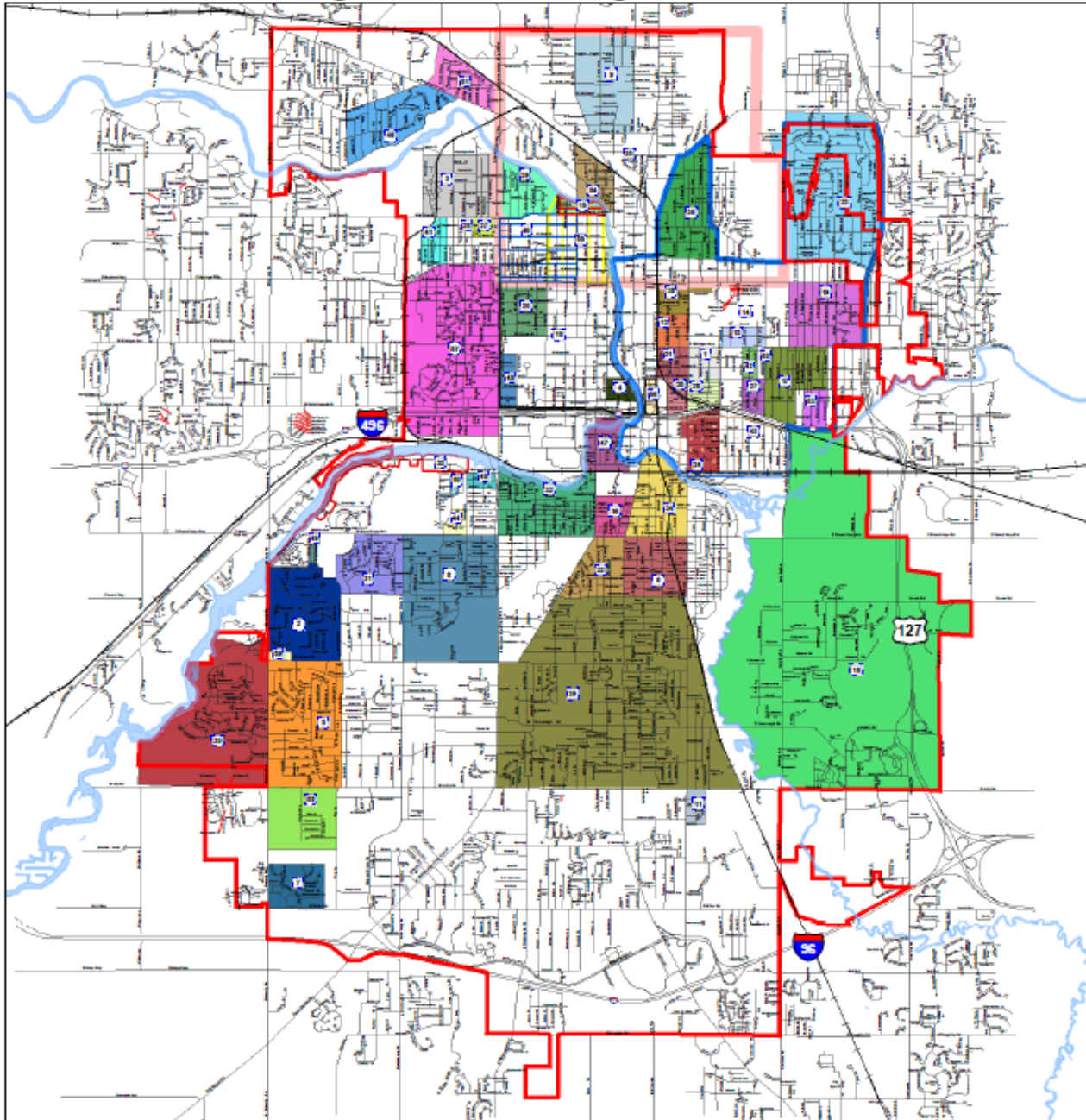
What kinds of changes she could push for—and at what rate—remained uncertain, but she resolved to try. “It’s never comfortable to change,” said Fountain. “I’ve got to know what my purpose is, and I’ve got to know what my goals are and try to reach those.”

Appendices

Appendix 1 Maps: Neighborhood Organizations and Demographics

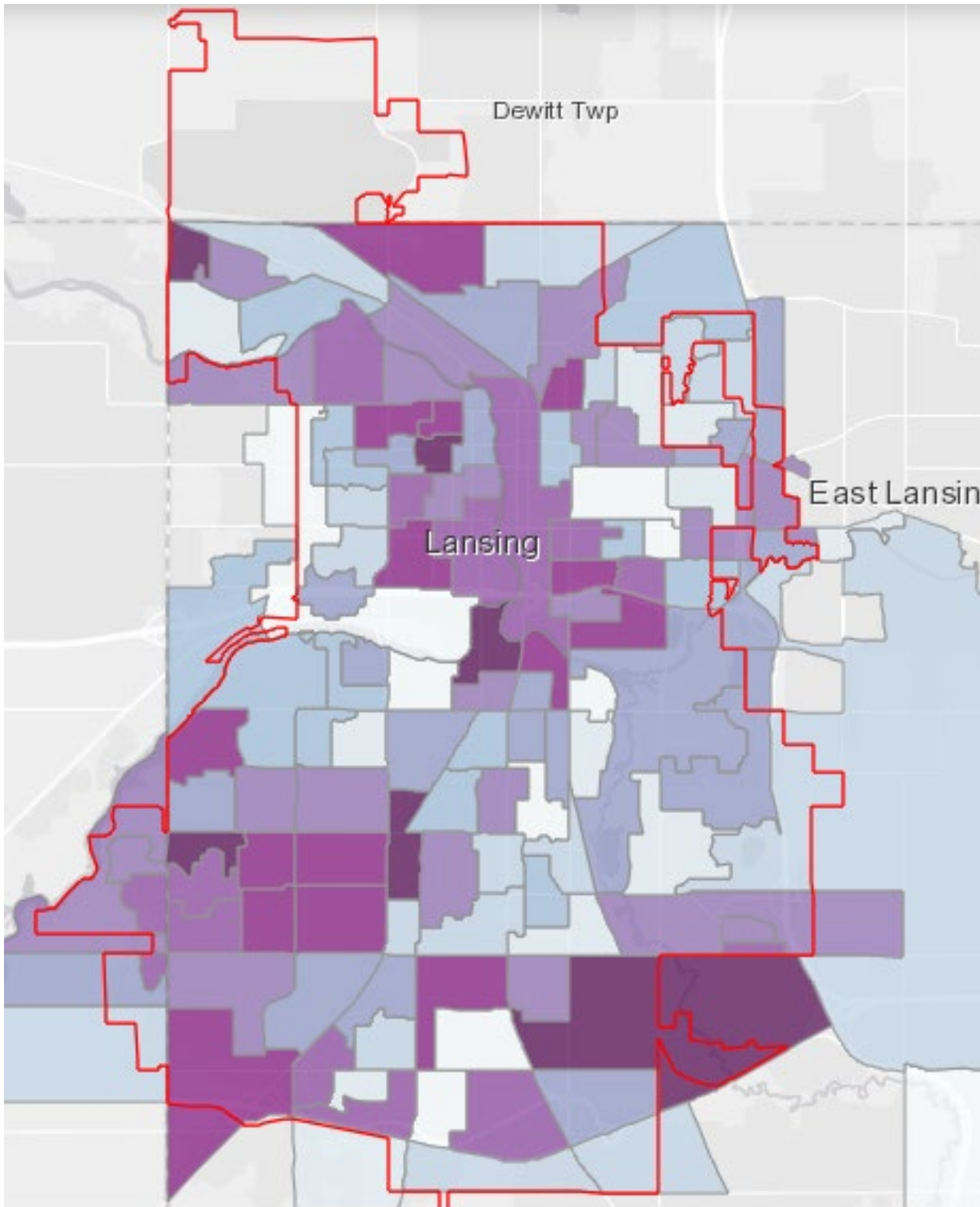
The map below shows the geographical position and reach of fifty-nine neighborhood associations in Lansing as of 2008.

Neighborhood Organizations



Source: City of Lansing Information Technology²³

Map of Lansing cross-indexed by race and income. Darker shaded areas have the highest proportion of people of color living in poverty.



Source: City of Lansing Equity Dashboard²⁴

Appendix 2 Love Your Block Grants, Year 1



Grantee	Project Name	Description	Outcome
EagleVision Ministries/International Dream Center of Lansing (\$5,000)	Love Your Block Adopt a Block	Clean up overgrowth blocking Edmore Park from the River, create a partnership to build relationships within the community, and add park programming.	Create a more usable park for neighbors and add an opening to the river.
Holmes Street School Community Garden (\$1,200)	Garden Improvements	Add a rainwater wall, lights, worm pipes, wooden paths, and boxes to the garden.	Beautify and add donation plots where volunteers can share responsibilities and collaborate.
Lansing Soccer Club (\$4,000)	Everett Park Restoration	Replace infrastructure; restore soccer field turf; create a welcome sign and message board; and install nets, a dog waste center, 2 trash cans, and litter signs.	Reduce the risk of vandalism and add features to make the park more inviting and sustainable.
Moores Park Neighborhood Association (\$2,300)	Entrance Beautification	Create a welcoming entrance that mimics the historic brick columns located at the park entrances.	Bring people together to create a sense of community identity and neighborhood pride.
Old Oakland Neighborhood Association (\$5,000)	Westside/Dunnebacke Parks Trail Project (Part of a larger revitalization project on the Westside.)	Help complete trail development tasks and fund a demonstration project to raise awareness of the trail project.	Engage volunteers to join the Annual Spring Workday to install landscape fabric and trail signage.
PLACE and Prospect Place Neighbors (\$3,500)	People, Projects, Places, & Partners	Connect unemployed young adults with façade work on neighbors' properties.	Teach unemployed youth skills to qualify for jobs and strengthen the community socially and physically.
REO Town Commercial Association (\$4,000)	REO Town Pocket Parks	Turn two sections of Riverview Church's parking lot into a public seating area and recruit local artists to design and build more bike racks.	Provide additional seating at neighborhood restaurants and create a valuable infrastructure for special events.

Source: Lansing Department of Neighborhoods and Citizen Engagement

Endnotes

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- ² Kara Berg, “How a Woman’s Vehicle Ended Up on Fire in Lansing During Police Brutality Protest,” *Lansing State Journal*, June 1, 2020, <https://www.lansingstatejournal.com/story/news/2020/06/01/how-womans-vehicle-ended-up-fire-lansing-during-protest/5308126002/>.
- ³ Berg, “Police Brutality Protest”; Anna Liz Nichols, “Updated: Police Remove Woman After Allegedly Threatening to Kill Lansing Protesters,” *Michigan Advance*, June 1, 2020, <https://michiganadvance.com/2020/06/01/woman-arrested-after-allegedly-threatening-to-kill-lansing-protesters-her-car-was-destroyed/>.
- ⁴ Lawrence Cosentino, Skyler Ashley, Cole Tunningley, and Berl Schwartz, “Shards and Tears,” *Lansing City Pulse*, June 4, 2020, <https://www.lansingcitypulse.com/stories/shards-and-tears-without-warning-protesters-hit-with-tear-gas-in-tense-night,14522.>; Nichols, “Police Remove Woman.”
- ⁵ Sarah Lehr, Megan Banta, and Craig Lyones, “‘We Won’t Be Ignored’: Protesters push Lansing Mayor for Action,” *Lansing State Journal*, June 7, 2020, <https://www.lansingstatejournal.com/story/news/local/2020/06/06/protesters-march-andy-schors-house-demand-resignation/3168760001/>; Chase Goff, “Lansing Citizens Call for Mayor Schor’s Resignation,” *Spartan News Room*, June 29, 2020, <https://news.jrn.msu.edu/2020/06/lansing-citizens-call-for-mayor-schors-resignation/>; Lansing City Council, minutes, June 8, 2020, <https://lansingmi.civicclerk.com/Web/Player.aspx?id=913&key=-1&mod=-1&mk=-1&nov=0>; Lansing City Council, minutes, June 22, 2020, <https://lansingmi.civicclerk.com/Web/Player.aspx?id=914&key=-1&mod=-1&mk=-1&nov=0>.
- ⁶ Lansing City Council, June 22, 2020.
- ⁷ Andi Crawford, interview with Gaylen Moore, March 11, 2021. All other quotes from Crawford from this interview or an earlier interview with Jorrit de Jong, Warren Dent, and Gaylen Moore conducted on March 25, 2019.
- ⁸ Lisa Fountain, interview with Gaylen Moore, March 25, 2021. All other quotes from Fountain from this interview unless otherwise specified.
- ⁹ Todd Heywood, “Financial Investigation: Lansing Neighborhood Council Assets Frozen,” *Lansing City Pulse*, August 11, 2014, <https://lansingcitypulse.com/stories/financial-investigation,6089>.
- ¹⁰ United States Census Bureau, “City and Town Population Totals: 2010-2019,” <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2010s-total-cities-and-towns.html>.
- ¹¹ Elena Durnbaugh, “Half of Lansing City Council Lives in Ward 4. Would More Wards Help?” *Lansing State Journal*, October 27, 2021, <https://www.lansingstatejournal.com/story/news/2021/10/27/half-lansing-city-council-lives-ward-4-would-more-wards-help/8453013002/>.
- ¹² Erin Buitendorp, interview with Gaylen Moore, April 20, 2021. All additional quotes from Buitendorp from this interview.
- ¹³ Matthew Miller, “From 2009: Interstate 496 Construction Left a Complicated Legacy,” *Lansing State Journal*, December 3, 2018, <https://www.lansingstatejournal.com/story/news/local/2018/12/03/interstate-496-integration-redlining-highway/2160699002/>.
- ¹⁴ “Ann Kron Obituary,” Legacy.com and *Lansing State Journal*, April 8, 2017, <https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/ljsj/name/ann-kron-obituary?id=15755159>.
- ¹⁵ Cities of Service, “Love Your Block, 2018-2018,” John Hopkins University, <https://citiesofservice.jhu.edu/program/love-your-block-2015-2018/>.
- ¹⁶ “Ann Kron Obituary.”
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- ¹⁸ Mary Beth Van Horn, interview with Gaylen Moore, April 21, 2021.
- ¹⁹ Amber Paxton, interview with Gaylen Moore, April 22, 2021. All additional quotes from Paxton are from this interview.

²⁰ Megan Banta, “How Groups Are Helping Lansing’s Baker-Donora Neighborhood Gain ‘a Little Bit of Power,’” *Lansing State Journal*, July 16, 2019, <https://www.lansingstatejournal.com/story/news/local/2019/07/16/habitat-for-humanity-baker-donora-neighborhood-revitalization-rock-the-block/1683378001/>.

²¹ City of Lansing, “Walking Wednesday – Southwest Lansing,” October 8, 2020, video, 19:44, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wv4eizpvPSQ>.

²² City of Lansing, “Walking Wednesday.”

²³ City of Lansing Information Technology—GIS, “Lansing Neighborhood Organization Maps,” June 4, 2008.

²⁴ City of Lansing, “Diversity & Equity Dashboard,” <https://www.lansingmi.gov/981/Diversity-Equity-Dashboard>.