

Operation Pufferfish

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

Epilogue

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DeLisa Fountain stepped into the role of director of Lansing's Department of Neighborhoods and Citizen Engagement (DNCE) in the autumn of 2020. It was the end of a summer of racial reckoning and the beginning of a school year unlike any that had come before. "The pandemic hit my oldest two sons' mental health hard," said Fountain. "Staring at a computer screen, it was not healthy."¹ Her work frequently found her staring down a webcam as well, wondering if this setup was sustainable for anyone.

Her two staffers in the neighborhood division and the team at the department's Office of Financial Empowerment (OFE) were also feeling the strain. "We all have families at home, and we're trying to balance this work-life thing," Fountain explained. "How do we still get the programming, still get things done, but maintain a balanced life? We had to decide what we were keeping, what's working, what's not working."

"Make This Position Yours"

The public had certain expectations based on their experiences with former director Andi Crawford. Fountain did not want to let anyone down, but, she recognized, "I am not Andi Crawford. I learned so much from her, but I had to remind myself, 'Make this position yours.'"

As Lansing acclimated to life during COVID, Fountain and her staff agreed to drop the daily newsletter and simply refer residents to a webpage they updated once a week, giving the team some space to respond to needs surfacing in neighborhoods. "We saw a lot of trash complaints because people couldn't eat in restaurants," said Mayor Andy Schor. "They were picking up their McDonald's, driving down the road, and throwing it out the window."² In response, the DNCE facilitated neighborhood cleanups across the city. "We were getting cleanup supplies to people, getting public service involved so that the trash trucks can come pick up the stuff. It was really community-driven," said Fountain. These kinds of events, according to Schor, attracted a younger demographic than the typical neighborhood association activities did: "That adult with their six-year-old isn't going to skip dinner on a Tuesday night at 6:00 to be at a two-hour neighborhood meeting when the kid wants a bath and dinner, but they will bring the kid out on a Saturday afternoon to do a cleanup." DNCE grants that

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brought neighbors together to install communal features like bike racks, gardens, and new neighborhood signage had a similar effect.

Financial Support and 311

The inequitable distribution of pandemic-related financial burdens was also a major concern for the DNCE. To push out information and resources for struggling residents, the OFE created a page on the city's website called "Managing Your Finances During COVID-19" and hosted a series of informational videos on Facebook with live question and answer sessions. The city secured a grant to hire an additional financial counselor, and the OFE worked with district courts to ensure that residents who attended a free financial counseling session could have outstanding fines and fees waived.

The slowdown in activities due to the virus created space for Mayor Schor to launch a 311 call service. He had always intended for the DNCE to facilitate resident-facing interactions with other city agencies, so the department was a natural home for 311. This work brought the DNCE into close collaboration with every department in the city that residents might hope to reach through 311.

Responding to Rising Gun Violence

During the pandemic, rising gun violence in Lansing hit communities of color especially hard.³ In March 2021, sixteen-year-old Darrell Smith III died after being shot in the Lansing-Eaton neighborhood on the city's south side. Smith had grown up alongside Fountain's eldest son. "This year has been emotional and tragic for so many families in the Lansing area," Fountain wrote in an op-ed for the *Lansing State Journal*. "I have heard the pain in a mother's cry as the casket is closed for the final time. This time I had to hold my son up as he cried for his friend."⁴ At the time of Smith's death, the city council was working with county government to raise funds for a three-year partnership with Advance Peace, a national nonprofit that worked with likely perpetrators of gun violence through mentorship and employment fellowships. The mayor asked Fountain to represent the city in the project.

During community conversations organized in response to the violence, Fountain observed that many of Lansing's youth-serving organizations expressed a need for more funding and physical spaces to do their work.⁵ The city decided to channel unused funds from the 2020 budget to community organizations, in part through new Community Youth Programming grants administered by the DNCE.⁶ By the end of the year, Lansing had awarded over \$150,000 to local youth programs.⁷

Neighborhoods of Focus

The city had just announced a third neighborhood of focus when COVID-19 arrived, and the lockdown dealt a serious blow to the kinds of community-building activities the department had envisioned. Of the initial two neighborhoods of focus, Southwest had become a bright spot, attracting new business and establishing a shared sense of place. Efforts elsewhere, however, had stalled. "We just need to rebuild our trust," said Fountain.

To that end, Lansing was making incremental progress. The Mayor's Racial Justice and Equity Alliance issued a set of recommendations and appointed a diversity, equity, and inclusion officer and a board to oversee implementation. A new equity dashboard was helping residents and city leaders visualize and

utilize data to respond to inequities. The city invested \$2 million from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) in an equitable economic development initiative. But these resources could only go so far to create mutual understanding among a diverse population. Bringing people together as neighbors and fellow citizens, as the DNCE did, with care and intention, remained critical for Lansing's progress on equity and inclusion.

Shall We DANCE?

Little by little, the DNCE picked up its pre-COVID programs. Citizens Academy graduated an in-person class that was, according to Fountain, "diverse in age, diverse in race, diverse in abilities. It was just a beautiful class." The OFE celebrated ten years of free financial counseling.

In March 2022, the mayor signed an executive order to move the city's arts commission, which oversaw public art and arts grantmaking, under the DNCE. "It just made the most sense," said Schor. "Plus, because they were the Department of Arts, Neighborhoods, and Citizen Engagement, it could have spelled DANCE!" Fountain, however, was an unapologetic acronym-spoiler: "I want neighborhoods to always stay front and center. Not saying that I shouldn't and not saying that I don't think about arts, but I'm always bringing neighborhoods to the table, wherever I am." The DNCE became the DNACE.

As for her favorite program, the neighborhood grants, Fountain was able to triple the number of grants available for 2023 with additional funding through ARPA. "If the only barrier to completing that project in your neighborhood is money, then let's get that in your hands and let's get that done," she said. "It is so much easier for you guys, for the neighborhoods to do it because you know what you want."

For his part, Mayor Schor was proud that the city had developed the infrastructure to better support neighborhood-centered and resident-driven work: "I don't know what the future holds, but I do know that, for whatever situation arises, we have a department that's ready to navigate that situation."

Endnotes

¹ DeLisa Fountain, interview with Gaylen Moore, January 25, 2023. Quotes from Fountain are from this interview unless otherwise noted.

² Andy Schor, interview with Jorrit de Jong and Gaylen Moore, March 16, 2023. Quotes from Schor are from this interview unless otherwise noted.

³ Kara Berg, “A Wave of Gun Violence in Plaguing Lansing. Here’s What City, Community Activists Are Doing About It,” *Lansing State Journal*, May 27, 2021, <https://www.lansingstatejournal.com/story/news/2021/05/27/lansing-gun-violence-on-rise-solutions-whats-next/7427007002/>.

⁴ DeLisa Fountain, “Lansing is Preventing Youth Violence Through Community Programs,” *Lansing State Journal*, September 8, 2021, <https://www.lansingstatejournal.com/story/opinion/contributors/viewpoints/2021/09/08/supporting-community-youth-activities-can-deter-gun-violence/5693565001/>.

⁵ Fountain, “Preventing Youth Violence.”

⁶ Kara Berg, “Lansing to Give Extra Money from 2020 Budget to Youth Organizations to Battle Violence,” *Lansing State Journal*, July 26, 2021, <https://www.lansingstatejournal.com/story/news/2021/07/26/lansing-give-extra-money-youth-organizations-battle-violence/8090359002/>.

⁷ City of Lansing, “State of the City Address 2022,” 33:01, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vssz6Rb3iF0>.