

Solving Problems Block by Block

Clean Sweeps and Neighborhood Improvement in Buffalo, NY

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Around 8:30 am on October 25, 2023, Oswaldo “Oz” Mestre, Jr., director of Citizen Services for the City of Buffalo, New York, called a large group of colleagues to order at the Schiller Park Senior Center. The room smelled of coffee and donuts, and it buzzed with chatter as people stuffed blue plastic bags with informational leaflets, toothbrushes, and bus schedules. Mestre was about to kick off that week’s Clean Sweep, the city’s longstanding program that brought together staff from various city departments and outside community partners to improve the quality of life in Buffalo’s most distressed neighborhoods.

The sunny autumn day marked the final Clean Sweep of 2023 before the program would resume the following May, and Mestre’s words reflected the end-of-season sentiment in the room. He praised participants for their efforts to help residents and for their commitment to collaboration. “I want to commend you all on your swift action and good work last week with the unsupervised three-year-old,” he said, referring to the rescue of a toddler who, during the previous week’s Clean Sweep, had been discovered at home under the care of a family member who was experiencing a medical emergency.¹ After a few words of gratitude, announcements, and reminders, Mestre held a moment of silence for a longtime Sweeps participant who had recently passed away. He then turned it over to Michael Smith. A few decades Mestre’s junior and a relative newcomer to city hall, Smith served as the program’s day-to-day coordinator and went over the logistics of the day. (See Appendix 1 for an org. chart.) With that, it was time for the nearly one hundred participants to hit the streets. (See Appendix 2 for a list of Sweep participants.)

The group started at the intersection of Rogers Avenue and Genessee Street on Buffalo’s East Side. (See Appendix 3 for a map of the Clean Sweep.) As in every Clean Sweep, to ensure everyone’s safety, police had blocked both ends of the streets that would be covered. City workers in orange vests, who had arrived earlier in the morning to trim trees, mow lawns, and clear branches and debris, made way for the second wave of participants, representing city departments and community partners, each starting at opposite sides of the street. A designated “team lead,” almost always a partner rather than a city worker, knocked on residents’ doors and explained the program before introducing the rest of the team. If no one answered, they left the blue plastic bag of materials at the stoop and moved on.² Although participants would finish home visits around noon, many would spend several more hours—that afternoon and sometimes even in the coming days and weeks—following up on unresolved issues.

As Mestre walked down the streets with his crew, he was all eyes and ears—and nose. Noticing the smell of burning wood, he alerted the fire department to an illegal backyard bonfire. He and his team snapped pictures of crooked signs to send to the Signs & Signals Crew, who would fix them within

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hours. Upon seeing tires strewn across a storefront, Mestre pulled out his walkie-talkie and called Sanitation Services to remove them. He listened as Smith told him about a woman whose Section 8 Housing Assistance Voucher was no longer coming through;ⁱ Inspection Services had cited a broken window in her home, and when the landlord did not repair it, the voucher was blocked. The landlord had told the resident that she needed to either cover the difference in rent or move out. “She doesn’t have the money,” said Smith, as he radioed the Fair Housing department, which was also present at the Sweep.³ Mestre encouraged Smith to try and resolve the issue, made a note in his clipboard to follow up, and headed to his car to attend a meeting.

The Clean Sweeps program had grown from an initiative focused primarily on cleanup, enforcing building codes, and policing, to one centered on delivering services and disseminating information to residents to help them solve housing, safety, health, and employment problems. In the early 2000s, people regularly hid in their homes or backyards at the sight of law enforcement during Clean Sweeps. As the program evolved, many residents opened their doors and willingly engaged with Clean Sweeps participants, including community police officers, although some still reacted to the perceived disruption with caution or irritation.

At the end of every season, Mestre and his team drew up a list of suggestions to share with fifth-term Mayor Byron Brown to improve the next year’s Clean Sweeps. In the past, Mestre and Smith had routinely proposed increasing the number of Sweeps, but this year, they were uncertain. Smith was particularly wary: anything above thirty-four Sweeps per year risked compromising the high-quality service the city had worked so hard to cultivate. “I can’t overwork our partners,” he said. “And we can’t overwork our departments, because of course there are other areas they need to get into, and they have their own limitations when it comes to what they can provide the [Sweeps], despite how beneficial the program is to the community.” Mestre reasoned: “We do this because there’s a need. If the need is not there, then we won’t do it,” he said.⁴

As another year of Sweeps was concluding, Mestre considered how he should advise Mayor Brown, who had championed and expanded support for the program every year since he took office in 2006. The mayor’s unwavering support had brought—and kept—the silos together and built a strong reputation for Clean Sweeps. Mestre asked himself: Should Buffalo increase the quantity of Sweeps, welcome more partners, and serve more neighborhoods? Or should they draw a line, hold steady, and do what was possible with the current capacity?

Decline and Slow Recuperation

Oswaldo Mestre arrived in Buffalo in the early 1980s to attend college and became a case worker for a community center upon graduating. Raised by a single mother in low-income housing in New York City’s Spanish Harlem, he soon became an advocate for Buffalo’s underserved. “I grew up as a product of afterschool programs, of people making connections, in a building where people helped each other out,” he recalled. “I was probably the only one in that area who went away to college. I had little old ladies putting \$2, \$3, in my pocket, I knew they couldn’t afford it. I was going to school for myself, but I

ⁱ Section 8 Housing Assistance Vouchers provide rent and home purchasing assistance to low-income families in New York State participate in the private housing market (see: <https://hcr.ny.gov/section-8-housing-choice-voucher-hcv-program>).

felt like I was representing a whole community. That shaped me. . . . I saw people pour into me, and I wanted to pay that back.”

At the time, Buffalo was in a decades-long process of economic decline. The Erie Canal, which opened in 1825, had fueled the city’s ascent from a small frontier town in the late 1700s to a center of manufacturing, shipping, and culture by the mid-twentieth century. At its peak in the 1950s, Buffalo was home to a burgeoning economy and over half a million people, as well as a “panoply of architectural riches and elegant parks.”⁵ But the completion of railroads, highways, and the St. Lawrence Seaway—which unlocked a direct route to the Atlantic—made the Erie Canal obsolete, and Buffalo, like other cities along America’s Rust Belt, succumbed to the effects of deindustrialization.

Not all Buffalonians felt the city’s decline equally.⁶ In particular, a history of redlining—discriminatory federal housing policies that denied loans and mortgages to Black applicants—contributed to unequal outcomes. In 1993, a local paper described Main Street, which separated the city’s West Side and majority-Black East Side, as “Buffalo’s very own Berlin Wall . . . dividing rich from poor, the haves from the have-nots.”⁷ The late 1900s and early 2000s saw repeated bids to reignite the city’s economy. By 2004, no other US city had amassed more federal redevelopment assistance than Buffalo on a per capita basis.⁸ By the 2010s, many observers commented that the city was undergoing a renaissance, citing efforts to rebuild lakefront property, ongoing construction of a new medical campus downtown, and repurposing of old buildings into new hotels, restaurants, and cultural sites.⁹

But even as the city welcomed an influx of immigrants,¹⁰ Buffalo’s population in 2020 was only about half what it had been at its peak in the mid-twentieth century,¹¹ and inequality remained stark. In 2022, 31 percent of Buffalo’s Black residents lived in poverty, compared to 17 percent of non-Hispanic whites.¹² Over 75 percent of the Black population lived on the city’s East Side, which also held 94 percent of its vacant lots.¹³ Compared to about 70 percent of whites, only about 35 percent of Black residents owned homes, a pattern that had held steady for four decades.¹⁴ Furthermore, Buffalo’s poverty rate was 24 percent,^{15,ii} compared to 13 percent nationwide,¹⁶ and its crime rate was nearly double the state average.¹⁷ In addition to these systemic inequities, the city was rocked by a series of tragedies in 2022, including deadly fires,¹⁸ a major blizzard,¹⁹ and a racially-motivated terrorist attack.²⁰

Investing in Neighborhoods and Relationships

After his work at the community center, Mestre began his career in government in the mid-1990s. He served as director of Weed & Seed, a Department of Justice program in Buffalo with a strong policing component. The program also featured efforts to serve neglected neighborhoods by cleaning debris, boarding up abandoned homes, and encouraging resident engagement through Block Clubs.^{iii,21} Mestre’s organizing experience and relationship-building skills paid dividends in forging relationships with city hall officials, community partners, and residents alike. In 2002, Mayor Anthony Masiello launched the Clean Sweeps program to reduce property deterioration and address quality-of-life issues

ⁱⁱ In 2022, 34 percent of the Hispanic/Latino population lived in poverty, as did 26 percent of the Asian population and 17 percent of whites (see: <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST1Y2022.S1701?q=poverty%20in%20buffalo>).

ⁱⁱⁱ Common in some US cities, Block Clubs are neighborhood organizations that provide residents an opportunity to socialize and address common challenges like safety and keeping common spaces clean.

in troubled areas. When Mayor Brown took the helm in 2006, Mestre was the obvious candidate to lead the program, but his new role turned out to be challenging.

Initially, the city conducted seven to eight Sweeps each year,²² and the primary focus was law enforcement.²³ Over a three-hour effort, more than fifty officials from the city, state, and federal government—including US marshals, immigration services, police officers, the fire department, animal control, social services, cleanup workers, and representatives from cable companies looking to cut illegal lines—arrived unannounced in underserved neighborhoods.²⁴ While the police cracked down on illegal activity, the cleanup crew removed trash, filled potholes, power-washed graffiti, and repaired signs, and code inspectors cited violations and boarded up or demolished abandoned properties.²⁵ The sudden presence of officials could be overwhelming for residents and often generated complaints.²⁶

The city selected which neighborhoods to tackle based on police reports of crime activity, but departments did not always agree on which areas to visit, and sometimes the city's assessment seemed arbitrary. According to original participant Lou Petrucci, who retired as deputy commissioner of Permit and Inspection Services in 2021, "Police and inspectors would meet to try and identify streets. Our focuses were always completely different. Police always wanted the ones with the high number of crimes; we were always looking for the quality of housing. Our argument was like, 'Hey, just because there's a lot of crime doesn't necessarily mean that it's a street that has poorly maintained housing.'" ²⁷ The city's interventions, moreover, were not always the most efficient use of resources. "[W]e did some streets where there were like four houses and a lot of sites of former buildings—all we did was mow vacant lots," recalled Petrucci.

Drawing on his roots as a community organizer, Mestre steered the Clean Sweeps towards a greater focus on building resident trust and capacity. After some trial and error, he largely eliminated the surprise element. A city memo noted, "Entering these communities unannounced to serve justice just did not solve the social problems that continued to plague the streets of Buffalo."²⁸ As the Sweeps evolved, some of the more enforcement-focused participants—like parole, immigration, the K-9 unit, and cable cutters—dropped from the program, and the focus shifted to what Smith called "restorative civic intervention." Instead of immediately writing a citation for a caved roof, for example, inspectors might have informed residents of grants and other programs to help resolve the problem. And instead of issuing a citation for an elderly person's unmaintained yard, Mestre or Smith might have asked community groups to coordinate a volunteer cleanup with the resident.

"I had to make sure that the right type of intervention occurred," Mestre explained. "[O]ne time . . . we were knocking on doors, and all of a sudden, in one house we saw people jumping out the window through the back and running out. . . . it was folks who were here illegally. And we were not there to arrest them. We had received a tip on the street that somebody was housing too many people in one apartment. And we wanted to help them. We wanted to go after the person doing it, but not the people who were living there."

To tackle the roots of the issues affecting underserved communities, Mestre needed to find a way to better understand residents' needs, cultivate trust among both Clean Sweeps participants and the communities they served, and improve how departments and partners worked together. He recalled that when he first took the helm, "Police did their thing. Fire intervention did their thing. Building

inspectors did their thing. And only when something happened, they collaborated. We should be collaborating to problem-solve, to predict—to be a little more collaborative from the beginning. Because when something happens, if that’s the first time you’re working together, that’s a problem.”

Data and Blind Spots

In 2008, Mestre spearheaded the launch of the 311 Call and Resolution Center, Buffalo’s non-emergency hotline, which fell under his purview in the Division of Citizen Services (“the Division”). Previously known colloquially as “the Mayor’s Complaint Line,” the new title signaled changes afoot: “I wanted our citizens to see this as an opportunity to resolve an issue . . . not just a place for them to vent,” said Mestre.²⁹ The call center used a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system to record and log incoming calls, catalog them according to their location and nature, monitor progress, and follow up with residents. The city also launched a Self-Service Portal that allowed residents to submit and track city-service requests online.³⁰

Mestre and his team soon began using 311 data to make decisions about which neighborhoods to visit during the Clean Sweeps and which participants to involve.³¹ Preparing for the Sweeps now required planning, analysis, and implementation stages.³² By layering information from 311 calls on 911 data, police reports, and other indicators, the Division created heat maps of the neighborhoods most in need.³³ (See Appendix 4 for a list of indicators and Appendix 5 for a sample heat map.)

“People are calling us and telling us about potholes, stray dogs, loud noise. Aside from abating particular issues, what does the data tell you? Well, where there’s smoke, there’s fire. We’re able to map the data and use that to coordinate our efforts,”³⁴ Mestre explained. The Division also considered reports from city councilmembers who advocated for more Sweeps in their districts. In 2021, the city refined its use of data to guide decision-making and started using a system called Building Blocks, which leveraged property and code-enforcement data to calculate priority scores for blocks and neighborhoods.

Not everyone jumped on board with the more data-informed way of doing things that came with the launch of the new 311 system. “I really had to convince people,” recalled Mestre, noting in particular the challenge of swaying the police, whose reports had previously driven decisions around the Sweeps. Although department heads now came together to collect and interpret data and make decisions around the Clean Sweeps, the CRM system also allowed the city to monitor follow-up, progress, and resolution after each Sweep, and this helped determine departmental budgetary allocations.³⁵ “I was a union official, and we had great pushback,” Petrucci said, adding that he tended to respond by saying: “‘Don’t you want to get credit for your work? Don’t you want to know where these things are happening?’ . . . Initially, it wasn’t an easy sell.” Mestre also recalled this resistance from city officials: “They said, ‘The data is going to tell on me,’ and I said, ‘No. It’s going to tell an even better story.’”

While using data allowed Clean Sweeps to reach more residents and fostered a more objective assessment of need and performance, some participants felt that it created its own blind spots. Board of Block Clubs President Debbie Lombardo, who was an original community partner, noted that the city went into some areas repeatedly while rarely or never visiting others. “What I would hope to find is a neighborhood that never heard about starting a Block Club, that didn’t really understand the concept

of 311. And us being able to explain that and introduce them to the Division of Citizen Services, our community police officers, our behavioral health team, whatever the case may be,” she said. “We go into a lot of neighborhoods time and again because the data tells us the need is still there.”³⁶

Mestre’s team recognized these challenges. In response to “311 deserts”—areas that registered few calls—they ramped up outreach and engaged Block Club leads and other community members when reviewing the data. To alleviate any fear residents might have of calling, they made the 311 call line as anonymous as possible, dumping the server every forty-eight hours. To ensure that a range of neighborhoods received Clean Sweeps, the program serviced at-risk areas in all nine council districts each season. “Councilmembers love Sweeps in their districts, and we assure them that each district will get at least one Sweep a season. We need that broad support,” said Mestre. “But I have the data to show which neighborhoods in the districts we need to go into.”

Growth and Trade-offs

The program grew from eight Clean Sweeps in 2002, to fifteen in 2006,³⁷ to around thirty-four per year in 2023. Mestre estimated that the number of community organizations participating had at least tripled since he took the helm. Each Sweep serviced around 200 properties. About once a month, the city conducted double Sweeps where they visited two neighborhoods with distinct needs in one morning; on these days, they might service a total of 300 properties.

The growth of the Clean Sweeps entailed some marginal expenses for the Division and departments in terms of planning and supplies, but the primary cost was participants’ time. “I have a reputation of trying to ramp it up every year, how many properties we serve, how many families we see. And now it’s a joke that’s like, ‘Okay, this might be the limit,’” said program coordinator Michael Smith. He noted that staffing and budgetary constraints were the primary reasons community partners dropped out or declined to join. There were also questions regarding efficiency and effectiveness. While the ability to coordinate and troubleshoot in real-time had clear advantages, some wondered if city departments could accomplish more if they set their own priorities and followed their own protocols. Did swarming a neighborhood really outperform the traditional division of labor?

Many city staff members and partners credited the Clean Sweeps with helping them increase their impact. “[I]t’s slower because you’re engaging with the community. You’re finding out what they need,” said a community partner. “But it’s much more effective. Whenever you have a group of people meeting, it can be sloppy, occasionally a little unruly, but the end product is so much better.”³⁸ At the same time, others raised concerns about diminishing returns in growing the Sweeps program. “If all we did was Clean Sweeps five days a week, I don’t think we’d get as much done or have it as organized as we do now . . . There’s a limit to it, there’s a role and a purpose for it, but I don’t think it’s the way to bring services to the city everywhere, every day. We wouldn’t be able to address all the city’s needs that way,” said a public works employee.³⁹

At the end of each season—and sometimes more often at partners’ requests—Smith provided a report summarizing the Clean Sweeps’ accomplishments. Reports included the number of homes and residents visited, types of outreach carried out, primary issues uncovered in each district, and progress made on resolving them. In particular, community partners whose performance was evaluated in

terms of outreach appreciated Clean Sweeps as a platform. “We literally put these organizations in front of roughly 7,000 to 8,000 properties a year. So . . . that reflects well on their organization, and therefore they’re incentivized to join us,” said Smith. He added that knocking on people’s doors as a member of “Mayor Brown’s Clean Sweep” had a legitimizing quality as compared to other forms of outreach. Still, the time investment was significant. One of the longest-running participants, Tracey Fest, who represented the University of Buffalo Smile Team (a dental services provider), said of being a partner, “You don’t just get to come out because the temperature’s great—no. We start in April. We go through the first week of November. It’s a commitment.”

Maintaining city departments’ collaboration across leadership changes was also a challenge. “How do you pull everybody in and say, this is where we are? How do you get everyone to play in the sandbox?” Mestre reflected, noting the difficulty of inviting new department heads to participate and suggest improvements while protecting the core of the program. “That’s constantly a challenge. But I can push forward because of the mayor’s authority and my relationship with him. The mayor says, ‘I’m going to let you do your thing. I’m going to trust you.’ And I keep him informed. And the successes we have, he’s going to wear that.”

Shoulder-to-shoulder and Face-to-face

Mestre continued to refine the vision for the Clean Sweeps program over the years. A 2016 city memorandum lauded it as “a holistic prevention program” that worked to “meet residents *where they are*.” With an aim to “sweep” an increasing number of Buffalonians “by the storm of unity,” the initiative was described as “the epitome of ‘it takes a village.’”⁴⁰

The new era of Clean Sweeps tackled four areas: (1) Education and Outreach, focused on engaging with residents and providing literature on which city department could assist them with specific complaints; (2) Restoration and Beautification, aimed at mitigating deterioration by boarding up homes, maintaining vacant lots, and removing debris; (3) Code and Law Enforcement, focused on community safety; and (4) Health and Human Services, centered on offering health services through referrals, examinations, and pop-ups.⁴¹ Code and Law Enforcement was run exclusively by the Division and staff from the Buffalo Police, Buffalo Fire, Permits and Inspections, and crime prevention programs, while the three other areas involved a collaboration of city departments and community partners.⁴² (See Appendix 2 for the participant list.) Mestre attended nearly every Sweep and Mayor Brown was present at many, as was the city council member for the particular district.

At the annual Clean Sweeps kick-off meeting, Mestre asked experienced community partners to recommend new ones. Although candidates were subject to Mestre’s approval, the Division welcomed them in an organic manner. Smith described the partner-intake process as “really conversational. We have created this culture around the Clean Sweep where everybody is pouring in to make the program itself better. So, if anyone sees a gap, they know to talk to [Mestre] or me and say, ‘Hey, you might want to reach out to this person.’ They would act as that bridge. Then that’s how the program grows.”

Being on the ground, in turn, broadened participants’ perspectives. Tracey Fest, who was officially only there to offer information on dental services, offered much more in practice. She observed, “The Clean Sweeps help you to better understand the population that you are trying to serve. And it forces you to

see what the needs are. It's in your face." Once, she helped an orphaned teen biking by find a dermatologist who accepted Medicaid. Fest explained, "I know his mom and dad are up in heaven saying, 'I hope somebody is helping my kid navigate life.'" Another time, she encouraged a young mother who approached her with what Fest guessed was a post-partum health issue to see a doctor. Fest was the one to knock on the door that day in October 2023 when they discovered the unattended toddler. Assuming the child's caretaker was upstairs, others had encouraged her to leave, but Fest insisted on staying and asked a community police officer to perform a wellness check. They found the older family member in a catatonic state and facilitated timely medical attention. They also connected the mother, who wasn't home at the time, with someone to discuss navigating the mental health system for the family member.

Longtime partner Dana Estrada, who taught active shooter awareness and emergency preparedness to community members in the city, felt similarly about defined roles versus helping residents in practice. "People joke with me, 'Dana, stay in your lane,'" said Estrada. "But I notice everything," like dogs on too-short chains, she said, or electrical cords strung through windows that might cause fires.⁴³

City departments also credited face-to-face interaction with helping them be more effective on the job. Petrucci, the inspection services official, noted that their data systems were frequently several months out of date, and only by visiting the sites and talking to residents could he confirm the status of the properties. He added, "You would find out oftentimes that the city's priorities were [at odds with residents']." As an example, he explained that the city might be hyper-focused on addressing vacant housing, while residents might have other concerns, such as transportation or sidewalks.

Police officers, in particular, saw the benefits of striking up informal conversations with residents. A district chief and former captain of Community Policing, Tommy Champion said, "It falls in line with the concepts and strategy of community policing because essentially you're helping people resolve the quality-of-life issues, which helps them grow confidence in you to be able to trust you with larger issues."⁴⁴ Another police officer noted, "[The Clean Sweeps] are very, very important to us because we get to have that face time with citizens, we get to hear their complaints and you'll be amazed at the amount of information they're willing to give one-on-one [. . .] Some of that information hasn't been available to us in other forums. These are things we learn firsthand talking to people because they feel comfortable in that environment."⁴⁵

At times, however, Clean Sweeps participants struggled to provide what Smith called "culturally-informed care." Some newer team leads needed training on how to engage sensitively with the community. For example, trainings informed participants of the cultures present in different neighborhoods; everyone was told to use a standard greeting of "Good morning, Mayor Brown's Clean Sweeps," and leads were reminded to knock on doors in a way that did not intimidate residents. Smith also recalled a situation where they found three school-age children at home. One member of the team wanted to report them for truancy, but upon digging deeper, Smith realized the two younger children were sick, and the older one was looking after them so the mother could go to work. Some participants, moreover, applied what they learned during Clean Sweeps to help make their work outside the Sweeps more effective. Upon receiving feedback that a lack of cross-cultural understanding was impeding effective code enforcement, for example, the inspections department increased the diversity of its staff.⁴⁶

Residents, in turn, had conflicting opinions on whether Sweeps enabled the city to serve them better. “[The Sweep] made us smile for a minute, [but] after the next weekend it was back to normal [...] it was just a good gesture. That’s about it,” said one resident.⁴⁷ Others, however, found that the Sweeps had a motivating effect on the community. “People took pride in the way the street was maintained [during Clean Sweep]. And now they know that’s what they’re expected to do,” observed a resident.⁴⁸

Trust Amidst Tragedy

Buffalo faced one of its most tragic moments on the afternoon of Saturday, May 14, 2022, when an eighteen-year-old white man carried out a mass shooting at Tops Friendly Markets on Jefferson Avenue on the city’s East Side. He shot thirteen people with an assault rifle, killing ten. Eleven of the thirteen victims—and all the ones who died—were Black. Minutes before the shooting, the perpetrator, who had driven about 200 miles from his home, posted a 180-page manifesto detailing his racist motivations.⁴⁹

The community was overcome with grief, anger, and fear. The racially-motivated terrorist attack also caused immediate practical problems. Back in 2003, then-councilperson Brown had worked hard to convince Tops to open when no other supermarket wanted to invest in the community, and the store remained the only one in the area. The attack turned it into a crime scene, forcing it to close and creating a “food desert.”⁵⁰ In the days and weeks that followed, makeshift markets popped up alongside vigils to fill the void.⁵¹

Mestre and Mayor Brown both lived just a few minutes away from Tops. “This was deeply personal for me,” said Brown. “It was a shattering event. We needed to find a way to love on our community.” He knew the store had provided more than accessible food; it was a neighborhood meeting spot to socialize and a banking center to cash checks and pay bills.

Brown also knew they had to tread carefully. Like so many US cities, Buffalo had its own anti-police demonstrations in recent years following law enforcement’s murder of George Floyd. The mayor brought together his trusted advisors, including Mestre, for ideas on the best way to support residents. It did not take long to decide to do several Clean Sweeps in a row, with an emphasis on mental health, banking, and food services. “There were all these organizations coming in to help the community. We asked ourselves: ‘What is the one arm we have that is already doing this engagement?’” Mestre recalled. “And the answer was the Clean Sweeps. We came in with all these services and became part of this bigger mobile town square. We weren’t scared of working with a lot of partners.”

Estrada noted that, because the city and participating partners had established relationships in the community over a long time—by 2022, Brown’s administration had done over 400 Clean Sweeps—“[I]t didn’t feel unnatural to be there . . . [I]t wasn’t the government coming in after this traumatic situation. We had been there a week and a half before . . . I was handing out those brochures [on active shooter awareness],” she said. “It wasn’t like a city who’s not involved in their community suddenly shows up.” She recalled how, during one of those visits, she “stood on a porch . . . and hugged a woman for about five minutes.” Lombardo echoed Estrada’s sentiments: “I never came across anybody who was not happy with us being there . . . which could have happened.”

In the weeks following the attack, the city conducted six Clean Sweeps in the Jefferson Avenue neighborhood.⁵² Crisis services played an active role, handing out information on mental health services; the following year, they became a regular partner. The attack also prompted other community-based organizations to join the Sweeps, including Buffalo Hope, the Buffalo Urban League, and the National Witness Project, which offered resources related to employment, education, and mental and physical health.

The Future of the Clean Sweeps

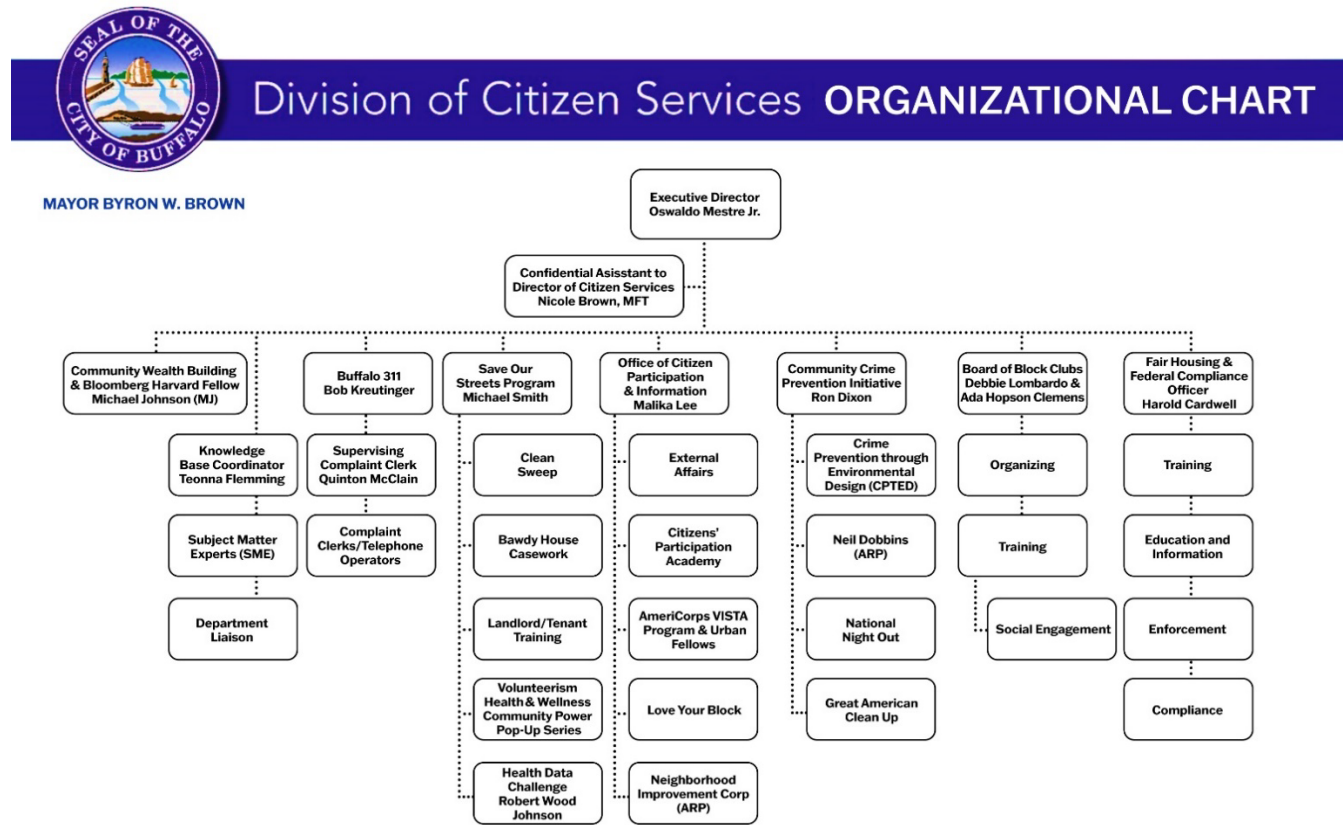
As the 2023 Clean Sweeps season came to a close, Mestre walked by the memorial that stood in the Tops parking lot before driving back to his office. He thought about his memo to the mayor. While previous years' memos had called for growth, he was not sure that was the right path this time around. Even with many partners at their limit, he knew that some residents continued to fall through the cracks. On one hand, much more work could be done in the neighborhoods; on the other hand, it wasn't clear if and how the city could continue to expand what some considered a radically collaborative approach to neighborhood improvement.

As Mestre returned to his car, his phone rang. It was Smith. The tenant with the missing Section 8 Housing Assistance Voucher was no longer in danger of losing her home. Smith had brought over Harold Caldwell, the Fair Housing compliance officer, who confirmed it was the landlord's responsibility to fix the window, not the resident's. Working with representatives from the Buffalo Urban Renewal Agency, Home Headquarters of Western New York, and NeighborWorks Community Partners—all partners on the Clean Sweeps—they informed him of his duties and options.

Mestre checked off the note to follow up on his clipboard, and he smiled. In the old days, even *if* the woman had dared to contact city hall and known how to navigate the various city departments and community organizations, it would have taken weeks, perhaps months, to sort her situation. Now it was resolved within a day.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Division of Citizen Services Organizational Chart



Source: City of Buffalo, adapted for accessibility

Appendix 2 Clean Sweeps Participant List

Health & Human Services

- Buffalo Urban League – Buffalo Hope – Provides educational and social support services.
- Kaleida Health – A healthcare provider offering a range of medical services.
- Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center – Specializes in cancer treatment and research.
- UB Public Health Mobile eHealth Unit – Provides health education and services.
- National Witness Project – Cancer prevention and early detection in underserved communities.
- Crisis Services – Provides emergency mental health services and crisis intervention.
- Parent Network WNY – Offers support and education for parents.
- Independent Health – Offers health insurance plans and wellness programs.
- Cinq Care – Provides healthcare services focusing on patient-centered care.
- Erie County Family Planning Clinic – Provides reproductive health services.
- Erie County Cancer Services Program – Offers cancer screening and prevention services.
- Evergreen Health – Offers health and human services with a focus on marginalized communities.
- BestSelf Behavioral Health – Provides mental health and addiction services.
- Child and Family Services – Offers mental health and family support services.
- Community Health Center of Buffalo – Provides comprehensive health services.
- Erie County Department of Health – Manages public health services and programs.
- Molina HealthCare – Offers health insurance and healthcare services.
- Family Justice Center of Erie County – Supports victims of domestic violence.
- Fidelis Care – Provides health insurance plans.
- GBUAHN (CinqCare) – Offers health management and coordination services.
- Jericho Road Community Health Center – Provides comprehensive healthcare services.
- Buffalo Center of Health Equity – Focuses on health education and equity.
- University of Buffalo Smile Team – Provides dental health services.
- Buffalo General Hospital – Provides comprehensive medical & health services.
- Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center – Specializes in cancer treatment and research.
- Buffalo Police Athletic League (PAL) – providing preventive programming for youth.
- Elderwood Health Care – Provides long-term care and rehabilitation services.
- Fidelis Care NY – Offers health insurance plans.

Code & Law Enforcement

- Buffalo Police Department – Engages with Community for safety and building capacity with residents.
- Buffalo Police Department, Behavioral Health Team – Trained officers partnered with qualified mental health professionals (BHT clinicians). This is a co-responder program.
- Violence Prevention (SNUG) – Focuses on reducing violence through community interventions.
- Buffalo Peacemakers – Focuses on conflict resolution and community safety. Street outreach workers
- Department of Public Works – Animal Control – Offers help with nuisance animals.
- Department of Permits & Inspections – Ensures compliance with city codes and regulations.
- Office of Fair Housing – enforcement of Fair housing rules and codes within the city.

Beautification & Restoration

- Mayor's Impact Team – Cross-sector team of city departments to address chronic quality of life issues.
- Olmstead Parks Conservancy – Manages and maintains public parks.
- Department of Public Works – Manages infrastructure and public spaces, streets, signs, and signals.
- Division of Real Estate – Property and land maintenance of City of Buffalo's Real Property Assets.
- Department of Forestry – Manages urban forestry and tree maintenance.
- Department of Parks – Oversees the maintenance and programming of public parks.
- Buffalo Sewer Authority – Manages wastewater treatment and sewer services.
- Department of Public Works, Recycling Division – Provides information of various citywide recycling efforts.
- Buffalo FBI – Federal law enforcement agency. Disseminates information and volunteers for beautification.

- Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) – Provides employment services and job training for justice affected individuals and supports clean up and training efforts in the community.

Education & Outreach

- Board of Block Clubs of Buffalo and Erie County – Block clubs are registered groups of people who have homes and families on any given block in the city and have organized to improve their quality of life.
- GYC Ministries - Provides community support and outreach services. Street outreach workers
- FeedMore WNY - Addresses hunger and food insecurity in the community.
- Commission on Citizens Rights & Community Relations - Protects the rights of citizens.
- Department of Citizen Services – Facilitates Block Clubs, 311, Clean Sweeps, etc.
- Buffalo 311 – provide citizens with access to city services, city information and non-emergency city services.
- Buffalo Employment & Training Center (BETC) – provides employment / training outreach and information.
- Buffalo Fire Department – Engages with community on Fire safety and builds capacity with residents.
- 211 WNY – Connects people to community services and human services information.
- Family Justice Center of Erie County – Supports victims of domestic violence.
- Heart of the City Neighborhoods – Offers housing and community development services.
- Neighborhood Legal Services – Offers legal assistance to low-income individuals.
- Department of Community Services – Provides senior services, accessibility, youth services and training.
- Ivy Lea Construction – Specializes in home improvement and construction.
- Department of Law – Handles legal matters for the city.
- TJCPR Consulting – Offers consulting services focused on community development for skill job and trade.
- Buffalo Federation of Neighborhood Centers – Provides educational and social services.
- Home HQ – Provides affordable housing and community revitalization services.
- Buffalo State College – Higher education institution.
- Say Yes Buffalo – Promotes education and scholarships for Buffalo students.
- Local Support Initiatives Corporation (LISC) – Supports community development initiatives.
- Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus – IC SUCCESS – Promotes education and research in health/life sciences.
- Goodwill – Good Skills – Offers job training and employment services.
- Community Action Organization of WNY– Masten Resource Center – Provides community support services.
- Neighborhood Works Community Partners – Promotes homeownership and community development.
- NY Youth Opportunity – Focuses on youth development and education.
- Service Collaborative of WNY – Engages volunteers in service projects and various AmeriCorps initiatives.
- Lead 716 – Focuses on leadership development and education.
- Belmont Housing Resources – Provides housing assistance and education.
- Mayor’s Office of Strategic Planning – Supports city planning and economic development.
- Department of Social Services (Erie County) – Provides social services and support.
- University District Community Development Association, Inc. – Community development and education.
- Buffalo Urban Renewal Agency (B.U.R.A.) – Supports urban renewal and development with the city.
- Buffalo Peacemakers – Focuses on conflict resolution and community safety.
- WNY Law Center – Provides legal services and advocacy.
- Primetime Energy – Focuses on energy education and services.
- Buffalo Federation of Neighborhood Centers – Provides educational and social services.

Source: City of Buffalo

Appendix 3 October 25, 2023, Clean Sweep Map and Table

Source: City of Buffalo, adapted for accessibility

Week 26, 10/25	
COUNCIL DISTRICT:	LoveJoy
POLICE DISTRICT:	E
TOTAL PROPERTIES:	121
# Residential:	89
# Vacant:	13
# Commercial:	8
# Other:	10
CBG Priority Score:	70.27

Appendix 4 Clean Sweeps Indicators/Filters

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Clean Sweep Indicators/ Filters

Codes Violations

- ☐ Abandoned/Blighted properties
- ☐ Board up Request
- ☐ Debris build up

Vacant lots

- ☐ Overgrown Grass
- ☐ Debris

Block Club Complaints/Community Complaints

Police Department intelligence

- ☐ Shots Fired
- ☐ Drug Activity
- ☐ General Ongoing Nuisance Behavior

Dog Complaints

- ☐ Abundance of Unregistered Animals
- ☐ Neglected animals
- ☐ Animals causing disturbance/possible threat to community

Rodent Complaints

- ☐ Rats
- ☐ Skunks
- ☐ Ground hogs

Streets and Sanitation Complaint

- ☐ Abundance of Potholes
- ☐ Abundance of abandoned tires

Overgrown shrubbery

- ☐ Removal of drug and weapon hiding places

Socioeconomic Factors

- ☐ Unemployment
- ☐ Poverty
- ☐ Educational Attainment

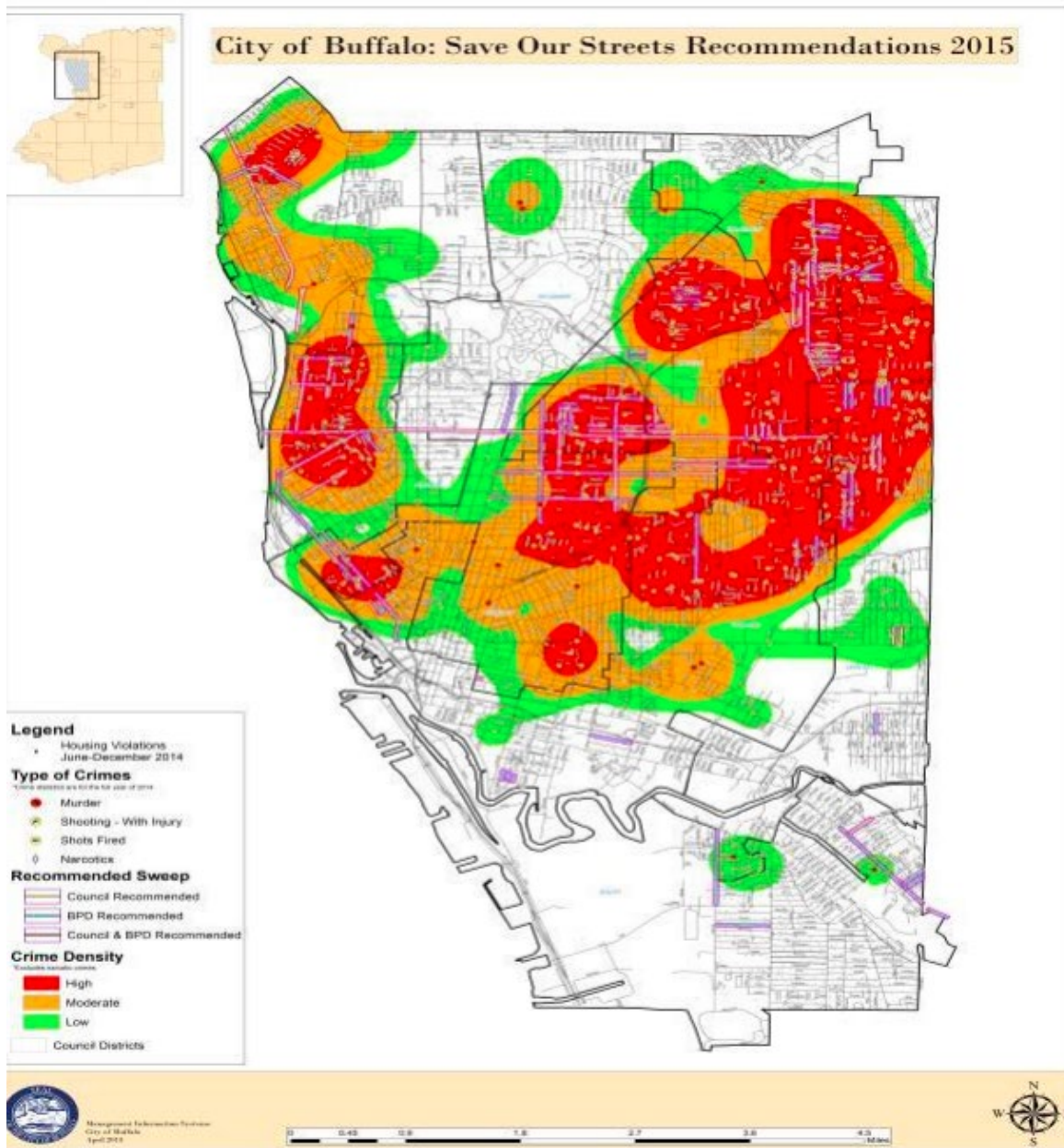
Gang Activity

- ☐ Truancy
- ☐ Large congregations on corners and in front of homes
- ☐ Tags-Graffiti

Source: City of Buffalo ("2015 Operation Clean Sweep," Division of Citizen Services PPT presentation)

Appendix 5 Clean Sweeps Heat Map

This map of Buffalo depicts factors considered in deciding where to conduct Clean Sweeps in 2015. The legend indicates housing violations; types of crimes (murder, shooting with injury, shots fired, narcotics); recommended sweeps (by council, the Buffalo Police Department, or a combination); and crime density (high/red, moderate/orange, and low/green). The color red is predominant on the northeast side of the city.



Source: City of Buffalo ("2015 Operation Clean Sweep," Division of Citizen Services PPT presentation)

The City of Buffalo's government website describes Save Our Streets as follows: "Under the leadership of Mayor Brown, the Save Our Streets (SOS) Task Force is comprised of various law enforcement and government agencies. The charge of the Task Force is to empower residents in the community and improve the quality of life in the City of Buffalo by ridding residential properties of drug activity, nuisance properties, and other neighborhood issues in a collaborative manner." "Save Our Streets Program," City of Buffalo, accessed May 5, 2025, <https://www.buffalony.gov/599/Save-Our-Streets-Program>.

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