Lifting Families Out of Poverty: Maximizing the Capacities of City Hall

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Introduction

A recent report, *State of Michigan's Cities: An Index of Urban Prosperity*,[1] claims that Michigan cities, whether they are benchmarked against other cities in the U.S. or in their own counties, are not doing well, and that this situation hurts the entire state's ability to rebound economically. High poverty rates in Michigan's core cities are one of the key reasons why the state finds it difficult to attract new business and investment.

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At the same time that poverty rates in Michigan's core cities are increasing, the resources available to local governments to deal with the social and economic ramifications of the increasing numbers of people in poverty are dwindling. State shared revenues are declining while the tax bases of Michigan's core cities are eroding.[1,2] How, then, can local government officials carry out their responsibility for sustaining and improving the quality of life of their cities' residents? Cities across the country are searching for answers to this question,[3] but the need to find answers is particularly acute in Michigan.[4] The good news is that municipal leaders around the country are not throwing up their hands; rather, they are developing innovative ways of using the tools at their disposal to creatively address these issues.[5] Cities as diverse as Corpus Christi and Indianapolis have crafted distinctive poverty alleviation programs by maximizing the capacities they have to lend weight to the work of their non-profit and governmental partners.

Methods

Addressing poverty is not a conventional role for Michigan cities or for cities around the country. Typically, counties, the state, or non-profit service providers take on this mission. Increasingly, however, city officials share Charles Lyons' (former National League of Cities president) sentiment and recognize that they cannot afford to ignore poverty and inequity, but how to address these issues is not clear. Cities are reluctant to take the lead when other entities are charged to do this work. Core cities also lack the financial resources to take on programmatic responsibilities. Particularly in high-poverty cities, the financial cost of any comprehensive poverty alleviation program is daunting. However, as we know from the experiences of cities around the country, it is possible for city halls to lend weight and authority, and even funding and staffing, to the efforts of community partners.

To explore the degree to which Michigan's 13 core cities were maximizing their capacities to lift families out of poverty, we examined city hall involvement in creating and implementing the 10-year Plans to End Homelessness (PEH). We chose to use the homelessness plans because the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA) has mandated each Michigan county produce one, making these plans a common poverty alleviation tool in each of the core cities, and because the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requires that a consortium, typically a Continuum of Care (CoC), write the

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plan for each county.

We compare the 13 Michigan core cities to each other on a variety of measures, and we compare these 13 Michigan cities with two non-Michigan cities: Indianapolis, Indiana and Corpus Christi, Texas. Indianapolis and Corpus Christi were chosen because (a) they are exemplary in the degree to which city staff and programs are connected to the efforts by the Continuums of Care to end homelessness, (b) the political and policy environments are, if anything, more conservative than Michigan's, (c) Indianapolis is a strong mayor system, and (d) Corpus Christi has a council/manager form of government, providing evidence that city hall can be greatly involved in homeless programming regardless of the form of government.

Analysis of the Plans to End Homelessness

When looking through the PEHs as windows into city hall involvement, Ann Arbor and Detroit are the only two cities in Michigan that appear to have "high" levels of city hall involvement. In both cases, the mayor has been directly involved in the plan. In the case of Ann Arbor, the mayor was an author of the plan, and in

Table 1: Evidence on City Hall Website of City Hall Involvement in Ending Homelessness

City	Impression of Embeddedness	Presence of Press Releases or Speeches	Consolidated Plan on Site	Plan to End Homelessness Linked	Homeless Programs Visible	# of Hits on "Homelessness" in Search	# of Hits on "Continuum of Care" in Search
Ann Arbor	Medium	No	Yes	No	No	13	1
Battle Creek	Medium	No	Yes	No	No	7	8
Bay City	Low	N/A	No	No	No	N/A	N/A
Dearborn	N/A	N/A	Yes	N/A	No	N/A	N/A
Detroit	Low	N/A	No	No	No	N/A	N/A
Flint	Medium	No	Yes	No	No	4	1
Grand Rapids	High	Yes	Yes	No	No	5	3
Jackson	Low	No	No	No	No	N/A	N/A
Kalamazoo	Low	No	Yes	No	No	0	0
Lansing	Medium	No	No	No	Yes	10	5
Muskegon	Low	No	Yes	No	No	3	0
Pontiac	Low	No	No	No	No	0	0
Saginaw	Low	No	No	No	No	1	1
Corpus Christi	Very High	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	43	17
Indianapolis	Very High	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	219	75

the case of Detroit, the deputy mayor is named as the point person for the city's work with homelessness issues. Both cities have also dedicated significant resources to implementing the plan. In Ann Arbor, the city plans to build 80-100 units of affordable housing, and in Detroit, an entire staff position, the Homeless Coordination Manager, has been created and dedicated to developing and implementing the PEH.

> *The websites of Corpus Christi and Indianapolis convey a sense that poverty and homelessness are critical issues being addressed by city hall with local partners.*

Two cities are designated "medium," Grand Rapids and Kalamazoo. In Grand Rapids, the mayor co-chaired the plan's advisory committee, though no specific role for the city is mentioned in the plan. In contrast, in Kalamazoo, the city is listed as a lead entity in two of the plan's objectives but does not appear to have taken a lead role in the creation of the plan, even though they are represented in the CoC. Also of interest is the fact that Kalamazoo is the only city in which Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) had a visible role in creating or implementing the plan. The rest of the Michigan cities are designated as "low," because while the city is often mentioned as a target of advocacy, it is not a direct agent of change. In none of the "low" cities was the city listed as an author, a member of the advisory committee, or explicitly mentioned as a member of the CoC.

Because of the role of county government in providing human services, one would expect that county government agencies would be much more involved as authors or agents of action steps in the plan. Indeed, this is true. In every plan, there is county involvement as authors or members of the advisory committee to the plan, and in eight of the cities the county is mentioned as an agent of implementation. Even so, four plans made no mention of county government as an agent in action steps or initiatives (Battle Creek, Bay City, Grand Rapids, and Kalamazoo).

Corpus Christi and Indianapolis are both rated "high" involvement cities. In both of these cities, not only was city hall involved in the planning process, but they were leaders of it. City hall in Corpus Christi is actually the lead agency in the county's CoC and funded the development of the plan by a consulting group. A deputy mayor in Indianapolis was one of the leaders in the planning process there. Moreover, in both cities, city hall is mentioned throughout the plan as an agent of change. In Indianapolis, the plan is viewed as Mayor Peterson's plan. Corpus Christi's plan is being implemented through the department of community development and many of the initiatives are funded through a dedicated 1/8 cent sales tax.

Analysis of the City Hall Websites

Table 1 presents a snapshot of city hall's involvement in programs to end homelessness as evidenced on city hall websites. If, indeed, websites convey the priorities and work of the organization, then we would expect that if issues of homelessness and connections to other organizations working on this issue are important, this importance should literally be visible on the website. We recognize that some of the websites are very sophisticated, and others are not. Indeed, 4 of the 13 cities have websites without

Table 2: Results of Survey with CoC Leaders on City Hall Involvement

City	Involved	Nature of Involvement										
		Endorsed	Planned	Met	Sponsored	Financed	Staffed	In City Plan	New Program	Existing Program	New Partners	City Priority
Ann Arbor	Very	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓		✓
Battle Creek	Very	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓	
Bay City	Somewhat		✓	✓				✓				
Dearborn	Very		✓	✓				✓				
Detroit	Very		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				
Flint	Somewhat	✓										
Grand Rapids	Very	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
Jackson	Somewhat											
Kalamazoo	Very	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lansing	Very	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Muskegon	Very	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓				✓
Pontiac	Somewhat											
Saginaw	Somewhat	✓	✓	✓				✓			✓	

search engines, making parts of the data gathering impossible for these cities. We also recognize that the sophistication of the search engines themselves may differ. So, while this may be an imperfect measure, it is still useful comparatively, both between Michigan cities themselves and between Michigan cities and the two non-Michigan cities.

No Michigan city appears to have embedded the PEH into the way it does business.

When compared to Corpus Christi and Indianapolis, Table 1 shows that no Michigan city appears to have embedded the PEH in the way it does business. Strong-mayor city Indianapolis has many of the mayor's press releases on homelessness issues accessible on its website. Even though community partners are the lead agents in virtually all initiatives and programs addressing homelessness, city hall keeps the issue and the work of partners visible at all times, thereby adding weight to the significance of the issue and the work. For example, a search on the word "homelessness" results in 219 hits; Ann Arbor, the Michigan city with the highest number of hits, has just 13. Corpus Christi, a council-manager city, not only has the PEH on its website, but it also has yearly updates on progress made on of the plan's action steps. Homelessness as an issue and as a focus for city and intergovernmental programming is clearly visible on its website. Both cities' websites convey a sense that poverty and homelessness are not only critical issues, but are being addressed through city action and the work of its partners.

Analysis of Community Partners' Perceptions of City Hall Involvement

Table 2 outlines a continuum of capacities that the city halls have to add weight and legitimacy to the work of community partners in lifting families out of poverty. At the very least, the city council can endorse the work of the community partner. The next level of involvement is to participate in meetings about the issue. These two levels of engagement, endorsement and participation, indicate to the community partner that the work is important and connected to the priorities of the city. Contributing resources, whether its time, staff, or dollars, is another level of involvement. Some of these resource investments come at a low cost to city and yet can be leveraged by city hall partners in various ways. Finally, incorporating community partner-endorsed initiatives into the way city hall does business is yet another level of involvement. Creating new or changing existing programming is a structural and budgetary commitment to the work that may be beyond the ability of some cities. Corpus Christi has created new programs and changed existing programs to combat poverty, in part because Texas law allows a city to pass a dedicated sales tax for such purposes. Creating new partnerships is way to add a city hall presence, and therefore add weight, to the priority of poverty reduction without bringing the work of poverty reduction into the city hall itself. Also, in many ways, Indianapolis is an excellent example of how this strategy can both add tremendous value to the work and make it a community-wide priority in a way that no community partner could.

Summary Analysis of City Hall Involvement in the Plans to End Homelessness

Only in Ann Arbor and Grand Rapids does a view through each of the three windows of analysis show the same thing. Community

partners rated both cities as very involved, and each city scored a "high" and a "medium" in the other two measures of city hall involvement in ending homelessness. Detroit, one of the only two Michigan cities that scored "high" in the PEH analysis and received high marks from community partners, could more fully maximize its capacities to add weight to this issue by making issues of homelessness more directly apparent on its website. Several other cities (Battle Creek, Kalamazoo, Lansing, and Muskegon) received high marks from their community partners, yet the other two windows showed a different picture. This suggests that city hall is more involved in these issues than is easily apparent to the public. In these cities, the city hall(s) could make much more effective use of their capacities to lift up the issue of homelessness, demonstrating the commitment that they clearly have to end homelessness.

Policies & Practices for Maximizing the Capacities of City Hall to Lift Families Out of Poverty

As Charles Lyons said,

We cannot wait for the state and federal governments to act. The primary focus for city leaders must be on what we can do in our communities and regions to begin to turn things around... For local elected officials, the challenge is to work locally and regionally while at the same time calling on other levels of government to fulfill their responsibility for making American a nation of, by and for all the people.[6]

This research uncovers the kinds of policies that can help Michigan's local elected officials meet this challenge.

City halls may be more involved in issues of homelessness and poverty than is apparent to the public.

The very first thing city hall needs to do is to lift up issues of equity so that they are constantly part of the public's awareness. This can be done in multiple ways. The mayor needs to be involved by…
- Using the bully pulpit
- Making speeches and writing news releases
- Being present at important events
- Writing the forward or preface to important community-created documents

The city council needs to be involved by…
- Formally endorsing community and city hall initiatives
- Being present at important events
- Being present at community meetings
- Making poverty reduction a priority of the city

In addition, city hall can change the way it does business by actively prioritizing poverty reduction as a city goal. Then, city hall can free resources to address issues of poverty. Jointly, the mayor and city council need to…
- Commit to implementation of endorsed plans to reduce poverty
- Align city hall resources to aid in the implementation of endorsed plans
- Request periodic scorecards showing progress

This research uncovers the kinds of policies that can help Michigan's local elected officials meet the challenge of homelessness.

City Hall needs to embed the work into the way it does business by...
- Making poverty reduction programs, plans, and community partner initiatives visible on city websites
- Ensuring city staff participation in poverty-reduction initiatives
- Using city hall resources to leverage community resources
- Creating accountability measures to record progress and diagnose shortcoming
- Reporting to the council and community regularly
- Updating the city's consolidated, strategic, and comprehensive plans to include poverty reduction priorities

State-Level Policies that Would Create a Better Local Policy Environment for Lifting Families Out of Poverty

Governors and state policy makers play a critical role in bringing together the diverse stakeholders from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, all of whom are needed to create an integrated network of resources and protections necessary for low income families to save and acquire assets.[7]

MSHDA has made $13 million available for housing-related initiatives in 2008-2009. These initiatives are focused on chronic homelessness, domestic violence, homeless youth, homeless families, and housing first. Expected outcomes from these initiatives include aligning the states' work with local plans and enhancing collaboration between local units of government, CoC's, community-collaborative service providers, local businesses, and local philanthropic entities. While $13 million for the entire state will not solve the homelessness problem, it could be leveraged better if the state intentionally created an environment where these kinds of collaborations could flourish. This is the kind of environment in which the capacities of city hall to lift families

Table 3: Comparison of the 3 Windows into City Hall Involvement with PEHs

out of poverty could be truly maximized. In such an environment, incentives would exist for city halls and their partners to develop innovative strategies to tackle this issue. The state could provide mechanisms that enable local governments to better leverage the state's commitment to the issues by:

- Providing better estimates of the homeless population and sub-categories within this population that cities can use to establish need and secure funds from non-governmental sources
- Increasing funding for housing, services, and supportive planning activities through state-level partnerships between departments, developers, foundations, and other possible funders
- Creating new funding for housing and services by redirecting

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or targeting existing federal resources (e.g., using TANF dollars for housing-related programs)
- Funding a state-level housing trust fund
- Enabling local jurisdictions to create their own housing trust funds

- Creating "one stop" service centers for families and individuals who are homeless or at risk of homelessness (e.g., a family self-sufficiency center such as in Arizona)
- Strengthening Workforce Investment Board programs geared toward employing homeless adults
- Finding ways to increase access to SSI and SSDI for homeless individuals
- Allowing city halls more of a formal role in workforce development and human service delivery
- Allowing dedicated funding sources identified for use in fighting poverty
- Creating a state discharge policy for those released from prison or other institutions
- Creating stronger anti-predatory lending practices
- Adopting regulatory guidelines for sub-prime and non-traditional mortgage products

Notes

1. Michigan Higher Education Land Policy Consortium. (2007). *State of Michigan's Cities: An Index of Urban Prosperity.*
2. City of Grand Rapids. *Impact of Revenue Sharing*. Retrieved from http://www.ci.grand-rapids.mi.us/index.pl?page_id=4847&topic_id=141.
3. U.S. Conference of Mayors. (2007, January 24). *Repairing the Economic Ladder: A transformative investment strategy to reduce poverty and expand America's middle class*.
4. Austin, J., & Affolter-Caine, B. (2006). *The Vital Center: A Federal-State Compact to Renew the Great Lakes Region*. Brookings Institution.
5. Cunningham, K., Furdell, P., & McKinney, H. (2007). *Tapping the Power of City Hall to Build Equitable Communities: 10 City Profiles*. National League of Cities.
6. Charles Lyons, then council member of Arlington, Massachusetts.

7   Hoffman, L. (2006). State Policy Options to Encourage Asset Development for Low Income Families. *Issue Brief*. National Governors Association Center for Best Practices.

About the Authors:

Kiran Cunningham is the Kurt D. Kaufman Professor of Anthropology at Kalamazoo College. **Hannah McKinney**, Vice Mayor and former Mayor of the City of Kalamazoo, is Professor of Economics and Business at Kalamazoo College and author of *The Development of Local Public Services, 1650-1869: Lessons from Middletown, CT* (Greenwood Press, 1995). Together the two developed the Convening Our Community project, bringing local jurisdictions throughout Kalamazoo County together around land use cooperation. Cunningham and McKinney also regularly conduct research on behalf of the National League of Cities.

Visit http://ced.msu.edu/ to obtain a copy of the full report summarized in this brief.

About the Series:

The Urban Policy Research Series addresses critical urban policy issues facing our State by connecting Michigan's core city mayors and legislative leaders with its finest urban scholars. By supporting of policy research on priority issues identified by mayors themselves, the Policy Research Series mobilizes practical scholarship concerning urgent issues facing Michigan's older central cities. In 2007, with support from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation through the MIHELP consortium, Michigan scholars were invited to propose policy research and analysis projects concerning specific issues identified as of high priority to members of the Urban Core Mayors. Six projects were selected, and researchers were commissioned to conduct the first of what is intended as an annual cycle of targeted policy research.

The resulting policy forums, Policy Briefs, and Research Reports is intended to provide current, credible and practical information for local and state officials as they consider important public policy decisions that will affect Michigan cities. By supporting the development of a growing network of scholars actively researching issues that have practical implications for urban and metropolitan Michigan, the Urban Policy Research Series is also intended to increase the capacity of the higher education community to contribute its unique added value to the ongoing civic discourse that shapes Michigan's local and state policy environment.

About the Partners:

The Urban Policy Research Series is the result of a partnership between elected leaders in local and state government and Michigan's higher education community. Special thanks to Faron Supanich for his leadership in coordinating this project, and Graham L. Pierce for preparing this report for publication.

The **Urban Core Mayors** is a bipartisan, multi-regional group established in 1992 to work together for local and state solutions to common problems facing Michigan's core cities. Urban Core Mayors members include the Mayors of Ann Arbor, Battle Creek, Bay City, Dearborn, Detroit, Flint, Grand Rapids, Jackson, Kalamazoo, Lansing, Muskegon, Pontiac, and Saginaw.

The **Bipartisan Urban Caucus** is a bicameral, bipartisan network of legislators, established in 1995 by legislators seeking to develop a state policy agenda to support the revitalization of Michigan's core cities.

The **Center for Community and Economic Development** is a Lansing-based unit of Michigan State University's Office of University Outreach and Engagement. Established in 1969 to initiate and support innovative problem-solving strategies to improve the quality of life in distressed communities throughout Michigan, CCED provides a multidisciplinary capacity to respond to the complex, interrelated issues of communities. In fulfilling its mission to engage university resources in support of Michigan communities, CCED has provided assistance and information to the Urban Core Mayors since 1993. For more information visit http://www.ced.msu.edu/

The **Michigan Higher Education Land Policy Consortium** (MIHELP) is a public-private, multi-university, inter-disciplinary partnership between Michigan State University, Wayne State University, Grand Valley State University, and Public Sector Consultants, headquartered at MSU's Land Policy Institute. Established in 2005 with generous support from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the mission of MIHELP is to help make Michigan's urban and metropolitan areas vibrant and successful communities by addressing the fundamental research and outreach void in urban and metropolitan issues in the State. For more information