

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

Kiran Cunningham and Hannah McKinney
Kalamazoo College

Key Issue: The high poverty rate in Michigan’s core cities is a key reason the state finds it difficult to attract new business and investment. Innovative municipal governments around the country have found ways to leverage their own limited resources to build capacity for poverty-alleviation work in the community.

Methodology: To explore the degree to which Michigan’s 13 core cities were maximizing their capacities to lift families out of poverty, the research examines city hall involvement in creating and implementing the 10-year Plans to End Homelessness (PEH). Michigan core cities are compared to each other and to two non-Michigan cities, Indianapolis and Corpus Christi, both of which have done a great deal to effectively address homelessness issues. The research takes a 3-pronged approach to consider capacity: examining PEHs for evidence of city hall involvement, examining city websites for evidence of homelessness as an important issue, and surveying key community partners to assess their impressions of city hall involvement.

City Hall Involvement with Plans to End Homelessness

	Impressions from analysis of the PEH	Impressions from analysis of the website	Community Partner's Impressions
Ann Arbor	High	Medium	Very
Battle Creek	Low	Medium	Very
Bay City	Low	Low	Somewhat
Dearborn	N/A	N/A	Very
Detroit	High	Low	Very
Flint	Low	Medium	Somewhat
Grand Rapids	Medium	High	Very
Jackson	Low	Low	Somewhat
Kalamazoo	Medium	Low	Very
Lansing	Low	Medium	Very
Muskegon	Low	Low	Very
Pontiac	Low	Low	Somewhat
Saginaw	Low	Low	Somewhat
Corpus Christi	High	High	
Indianapolis	High	High	

City Hall Involvement in Plans to End Homelessness

Only in **Ann Arbor** and **Grand Rapids** does a view through all 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, city hall could make much more effective use of its capacities to lift up the issue of homelessness, demonstrating the commitment that it clearly has to end homelessness.

State-level Policies to Support Local Policy Environment

- Create tools for local jurisdictions to fund poverty reduction initiatives
- Allow dedicated funding sources identified for use in fighting poverty
- Eliminate obstacles to forming effective partnerships between jurisdictions, and between cities and community partners
- Incentives for forming effective partnerships between jurisdictions
- Incentives for effective partnerships between cities and community partners (e.g. housing trust fund)
- Allow city halls more of a formal role in workforce development and human service delivery
- State incentives for poverty reduction that city halls can leverage in work with community partners

Policies & Practices for Cities

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 key community-created documents

The city council needs to be involved by...

- Formally endorsing community and city hall initiatives
- Being present at important events and community meetings
- Making poverty reduction a priority of the city

Jointly, the mayor and city council need to be involved by...

- Committing to implementation of endorsed plans to reduce poverty
- Aligning city hall resources with endorsed plans
- Requesting periodic scorecards showing progress

City Hall needs to embed the work into the way it does business by...

- Making poverty reduction initiatives visible on city website
- Getting city staff participation in poverty-reduction initiatives
- Using city hall resources to leverage community resources
- Creating accountability measures
- Regularly reporting to the council and community
- Updating city’s consolidated, strategic and comprehensive plans to include poverty reduction priorities

