

# Building the Engine of Community Development in Detroit

5<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL SUMMIT

A Virtual Gathering of Detroit's Voices of ALL Ages

THE  
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IS NOW NECESSARY.

WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN NEXT IN

**DETROIT  
NEIGHBOR-  
HOODS?**

AND

**WHO  
WILL STEP  
UP?**

## Plenary 1: Facilitated Conversation / Young Leaders Panel

**Hosts: Orlando Bailey, Alondra Alvarez, Yusef Bunchy Shakur**

**Panelists:**

**Izzi Figueiredo**, Michigan Roundtable

**Mohammed Muntakim**, DPSCDoff4EID Campaign

**Gabriela Santiago-Romero**, We The People Michigan

**Landis Spencer**, Detroit Socialists of America

**Nyasia Valdez**, Inside Southwest Detroit + Equitable Internet Initiative

**Nakia Wallace**, Detroit Will Breathe

After calling the session to order, Orlando Bailey posed this question to the panelists:

**QUESTION: A GLOBAL PANDEMIC, A NATIONAL RACIAL RECKONING, A CRUMBLINE ECONOMY, A USA ELECTION AND AN UPCOMING MAYORAL ELECTION. THE IMPOSSIBLE IS NOW POSSIBLE. A NEW “US” IS NOW NECESSARY.**

**IN LIGHT OF ALL THIS, WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN NEXT IN OUR NEIGHBORHOODS?**

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Landis Spencer, Detroit Socialists of America

Izzi Figueiredo, Michigan Roundtable

Landis – Our work in trying to defeat Proposal N failed. We Need to understand why. A lot of great work was done in neighborhoods, but people holding office don't have our best interest at heart *Combining our efforts is the best way to make change in the city.*

Izzi – pre COVID – we were working on a youth program proposal for the Michigan Roundtable. The need for mental health support is number one on my list. *We need widespread adoption of a trauma-informed approach for working with each other.*

It feels like Detroit is still in a difficult place – black pain, black deaths  
Many are grieving with loss of grandparents and loss of financial stability. We need to:

- Build awareness so that WHEN trauma comes, we are ready
- Ask and listen, and understand and break the cycle of generational trauma
- Encourage everyone to ask for what they need when they need it

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**Mohammed Muntakim**, DPSCDoff4EID Campaign

(Muslim Student Association, DPSCD)

**Gabriela Santiago-Romero**, We The People Michigan

**Mohammed** – We had a campaign, led by youth, but with teachers, parents, and others. The Muslim community is large (mostly Yemeni) but public school systems have not honored our holidays in the school calendar. Our effort brought in a big group of people, even from those who didn't share our faith. *The only way forward is our willingness to work together, put differences aside but still celebrate them. We have to have equality and equity for all in our communities.*

**Gabriela** – We make a connection between poverty, policy, and leadership. Through lobbying and kickbacks, bad decisions were made to benefit corporations. *We have to invest real dollars into black and brown communities. Focus on race and class to understand how we got to where we are - learning, unlearning and healing for the work we have to do. As an example, we wanted street lights and roads, bike lanes for community but we only saw this happen when others (whites) moved to Detroit. Invest in leadership. Give them scaffolding tools and voice to work their craft. Start with the young people.*

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**Nyasia Valdez**, Inside Southwest Detroit + Equitable Internet Initiative

**Nakia Wallace**, Detroit Will Breathe

**Nyasia** - People who are most upset by the decisions need to be making the decisions. The Equitable Internet Initiative is focused on getting high speed low cost internet to the neighborhoods (SW, North End, Island view neighborhood); putting up hotspots in parks, other neighborhood locations that are safe. *People in communities can develop answers together, they just need to be asked.*

**Nakia** – First, we must fight against systematic oppression and police brutality: racism. This country saw the largest social movement after George Floyd murder then any other movement in this country. We have to fight for equality for standard of living in our neighborhoods. *People have to fight for themselves – how do we support them? This is what empowerment looks like. Leverage momentum from this movement. Make more meetings public – don't make a decision for the community.*

Second, *we must think critically about everything and everybody*. Leaders need to prove they are leaders. It's OK to break ties with people who are on the wrong side of history, e.g. like the democratic party. *Read and study history*, and understand the ways that change and progress have actually happened in this country. This requires sustained effort and struggle.

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**Orlando** *then transitioned the group to open discussion.*

**Yusef** – We want to get our youth involved. Get them involved like with what we are doing here. Think about those who are also suffering from economic or social brutality. In Duggan's administration people continue to get their water shut off and pushed out of neighborhoods – this is a form of violence.

**Yusef** *then asked for a Moment of Silence for the black and brown men and women who have died from police violence.*

**Orlando** – Izzi was talking about this new normal, an acknowledgement of mental health and trauma we have faced as Detroiters. With the lens as people of color, we don't really get into this. We tend to sweep mental healths issues under the rug like the uncle in the movie Soul Food. How do we make this happen in our communities?

**Izzi** Putting this care into action can look like a lot of different things. Start with nonconventional practices such as yoga or meditation. Make a connection between the physical body and the mind. I have personal experience with “community care circles” with Detroiters with Disabilities, and it was powerful.

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**Yolanda Jackson** - Gabriela talked about bike lanes. How did this happen? One thing we need across the city is civic education. How the budget works, and how to hold our elected officials accountable. People don't know who their council members are. Next year is a political battleground with council members and mayor up for election. We have to inform people, and discern the truth from the lies.

**Gabriela** – I agree that the public civic education piece is very important. We have held a lot of research workshops, for example on who the large corporations are in the community. We want to ramp that up in 2021. We have a team and want to serve as a resource. We want to work on delivering the budgets and policies that people want to see.

**CED** – thanks to all on the panel. I am a medical student at Wayne State. As the country rallies for resurgence in this fight, health care is looking at their role in this. What is the role of physicians in this space? How can we contribute on a granular level to housing, development and economic education?

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**Orlando** – There is a concern about vaccine distribution and safety from the pandemic.

**Landis** – My sister has struggled through most of her 20's against significant medical bias against black women – its important that we tackle this. For example, doctors not believing the level of pain that someone is in.

**Nakia** – Part of what brought people to the streets is the disproportionate way COVID impacted the black community. There are still 27 million people without health insurance. Many thrown into this pandemic have not been given the resources that they need. Many who work in the medical community don't have their own health care, and can't be safe.

We need for universal health care in this country, and a call for health and safety as a basic right. We don't see medical directors/physicians saying that our current system leaves too many people without options. It's not surprising that COVID is taking such a toll.

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Notetaker: Rich Pirrotta

**Izzi** – From a mental health perspective, believing their patients about their pain is a good start. Just recounting traumatic experiences can be tremendously stressful. For people of color, reaching a healed state is really not possible. Danger remains in their lives and can occur again.

**Yusef** – What about learning from elders but still being able to be yourself?

**Landis** - There is a big gap between the lived experiences of youth and what our elders experienced. My dad was 73, and a baby boomer. We need to be our authentic selves, but we have to explain to others where we are. For example, having a “defunding the police” dialogue with grandparents when we want to use dollars for community centers and health care. We have to learn to meet them where they are at.

How to do this with community leaders – a really hard question.

**Nyasia** – It's definitely an uphill battle. Older members in the community think internet is a luxury! But with the pandemic, the only way to connect is through the internet. Being able to let people come to their own conclusion is key. Just give a listen to the younger people.

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**Nakia** – I really enjoy the question, as I was raised by grandparents and great grandparents. They look at a situation and understand if this was a life or death matter.

I don't believe that everyone is a leader just because the mayor said so. Look at what people are saying. Publicly address it and call it out. We wrote a letter to City Council president – it was respectful but still called her out. Just because it's a different generation, it's okay to disagree. People much older have been on our side for a long time! Gravitate towards them. Samuel Hameer is one of the elders who is on the right side of history, and never left it. He wants a world where people can live freely with a good quality of life.

**Pat Butler** asked – can you define “community”?

**Gabriela** – Each has their own definition. “A group of people that align on values and needs”. My communities are: Immigrant, Southwest, LGBTQ

**Yusef** – “Community” does not mean “neighborhood.” They are different. We have to know the lingo in how we engage.

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**Brian Silverstein** – How do we keep people in Detroit in their communities and give autonomy over how they live? DPD has spent \$330 million on activities that don't help.

**Landis** – It's a great question around guaranteeing housing and water. The Quasi-public entity "Detroit Land Bank" is sitting on over 50,000 vacant houses/ lots. It makes no sense, it's capitalistic greed. Is the Mayor owned by developers? With equitable development – the city improves as people's lives improve. Use the right metrics – not metrics that a "new yoga shop opened up." If anyone can have an affordable housing guarantee, we should be able to do it in Detroit.

What is an affordable housing guarantee? Seeing housing as a right, ending homelessness, stopping foreclosures, etc. Homelessness costs more in medical, police incidents, and other costs than it does to house people. The first step is housing people before other steps can be put into place.

**Nyasia** – There are so many factors going into housing and water in Detroit: flipping houses, lack of house insurance. People unable to buy their childhood home back because they don't understand the process. And it's hard when people are only making minimum wage. Current solutions are not working. Car insurance too expensive and requires tradeoffs.

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**Phyllis** – I am encouraged as a senior citizen to hear the panelists. Thanks for your efforts in the continued struggle. There are significant health disparities for people of color, especially women of color. I see every day the medical dismissal of this group. Look at it from an intergeneration lens. I'm excited about the footprints that this generation is leaving. We had a panoramic view of the inequality in water in Flint and failed to capitalize on that.

**Cristin S** – what is the role for people outside the community proper? Chief Craig is talking about outsiders coming into our communities.

**Nyasia** It's about leveraging resources. Sometimes the city government/other officials listen to others with resources and money first. You have to first be accountable to the area where you are living.

**Nakia** – When we look at history, like the Freedom riders, it took people from other communities to help. Same with slavery and the power of outside agitators. The powers that be try to sow division to ignore the problem. We need to stand next to each other and support each other's fights. If Detroiters could successfully fight for housing, water and education on our own, we would have won that fight a long time ago. The Malik Green convictions happened because we were connected with people in other places. MLK went wherever it was necessary to go.

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**Bryan Cook** – I am President of Association of Minority Architects. Community Development starts with architecture. There is a disconnect in the terms that we use. How do we get aligned? We have done a free architecture camp last 6 years for High Schoolers. We want to expand to not just young people but make others aware of the common language. I am encouraged by the young people. We want to serve as a resource. There are only 2,000 black architects out of 250,000 in entire country!

**Orlando** – language can serve as a barrier – but we want to translate it. How are you having conversations about the build environment in your areas?

**Izzi** – In any of your work, you need to be able to share your idea and then share again in simpler terms. You should have a few main points that you can state for someone. Restate if need be to reinforce the message. Be prepared for questions to be asked of you, and to communicate the answer in another way if necessary.

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**Orlando** – I saw the same when I was with the East Side Community Network. Professions have technical expertise... We created a planning and neighborhood approach with three main points: Education, translation, and facilitation. We have to also take into account that the professional doesn't have the only answer/experience, others may have this as well. Be mindful about who we think the educators are – make sure things are well facilitated. Make room for trauma to speak, and don't be mad or uncomfortable when trauma comes out.

**Jihan** – Outsiders are coming into Detroit to do work. I was born and raised in Hamtramck – streets are half in and half out of Detroit! We have a different trash cycles on the same street. How do you work with us? Are we really a part of this city?

**Mohammed** – We do consider Hamtramck to be part of Detroit. Similar issues, similar challenges. I live on one of those half-in, half-out streets

**Orlando** - Do residents in Hamtramck feel like they are outsiders to Detroit?

**Jihan** – Not so much. People think of historic Polish people – not the people of color who live there. School systems are different. We do share state level and congress-level reps. Ballot proposal for police/fire was a challenge for the community on the same street. We tend to be perceived differently if we are from Hamtramck.

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**Gabriela** – I understand the historical context for Hamtramck and Highland Park. Your lived experience is really valuable to this work; holds the answers to our questions and needs.....We need the bridges and the civic education. Keep asking the right questions!

**Yusef** – we just need people to care! You don't have to be from Harvard, we just need you to engage. Don't use the language of oppressors. Don't negate our roles. Show each other respect. Build authentic relationships.

**Taylor Barrow** – I am a med student at Wayne State with CED. We have the "Healing Between the Lines" program – taught how health should be handled. It was bringing in community activists to teach alongside doctors. Ego in organizing is a challenge. What are some tactics to raise up certain voices and have others take a step back?

**Yusef** – Like minded people choose those who we like. We have to be authentic with ourselves. Put the people before ourselves. What is a leader? I might speak out. That might make me a spokesperson, but not a leader. If someone is arguing about their values, then they are in it for themselves. If someone is saying "We ain't our ancestors", just get away from them.

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**Orlando** – Ego unchecked with rugged individualism, is a tenet from white supremacy. There is no room for ego in our work.

**Nakia** – as a young black woman born out of poverty, grown men tend to assert themselves over black women in organizing spaces to gain more authority because they are physically imposing. You can't concede to the erasure of your own existence or your own voice. It's okay to call out the ego's – we have to let people know. It's not an easy thing to do – but required. This is what radical love looks like. We want to win but it matters *how* we win and how we relate to each other. Don't ever participate in your own erasure. Period!

**Orlando** Two remaining questions for panel:

- 1) Next year there is a series of elections – what are we doing and how are you approaching it?
- 2) Cooperative ownership and community land trusts

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**Nakia** – our organization is known for direct action. There is not a politician in this city that doesn't know we will do a car caravan around your house and be on your front lawn. It is important to call out city council on the \$650 million in taxes stolen from Detroiters from over-assessed property values. It's not about the candidate most likely to cut deals. It's a "lesser of two evils" approach. How can we sustain the movement we already have? Power isn't changing minds and hearts, it's getting people to do what you need them to do. For the candidates, ask the questions, for example, where do you stand on Detroiters being displaced?

**Orlando** – Mayor Duggan is running again. Is there any competition?

**Izzi** – We are trying to launch an online virtual youth space (16 to 21 years old) to Learn about social justice together and educate each other. We want to encourage through teaching and awareness building.

**Landis** – DSA and other orgs are looking at this and considering other people for positions. Looking to challenge those in power. In France – politicians are afraid of the French people. In US, the people are afraid of the government. We have to reverse this.

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**Orlando** – What about cooperative ownership/community land trusts?

**Phyllis** – We are looking at it ever since Katrina – to establish quality affordable homes for people that had been displaced. Grounded Solutions is a firm engaged by the City of Detroit. 21 CDOs are also looking at it. Reverend Ross in North End has already started. How can we help people build wealth in their communities? We need to change our AMI, and we know that ours is skewed because of income data from other cities around Detroit.

**Alondra** then began to wind down the discussion as time elapsed.

**Alondra** – Thanks to everyone! Have to end the conversation, which is my least favorite part. I am moved and inspired by you all! Think about what you did in 2020 as well as what you are planning for 2021. Acknowledge all the great things you've done in 2020.

**Yusef** – We covered a lot in the landscape of Detroit – It reflects how big the city is. In certain parts you can be in poverty, and turn the corner and you are in the middle class. Action requires that we build the relationships. It's bigger than Mayor Duggan and Chief Craig. It can only grow through this BECCD process. Young people represent the energy that is necessary. In Detroit we failed in passing the torch. We need to maintain the balance. This was a fruitful conversation.

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**Orlando** – intergenerational discourse and collaboration is important. It facilitates the discussion from both sides – old and young. That theme that is reoccurring.

How can some of these movements be integrated with community development? Are there linkages that can happen as result of this conversation?

Confronting and deconstructing the mental health issues that have come from past trauma was also an important theme. How do we build the processes to make sure we make room for that? Who isn't at the table? We have to have an informed response for people when their trauma comes out.

**Yusef** -- Every voice in our neighborhood is valuable.