Community-Academic Research Partnerships Focused on Poverty Solutions

The projects outlined below are being co-sponsored by U-M Poverty Solutions and the Detroit Community-Academic Urban Research Center (Detroit URC), a partnership among the U-M Schools of Public Health, Nursing and Social Work, the Detroit Health Department, Henry Ford Health System; and nine community-based organizations (Community Health and Social Services, Inc., Communities In Schools, Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation, Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice, Eastside Community Network, Friends of Parkside, Institute for Population Health, Latino Family Services, Neighborhood Service Organization).

These community-academic research partnerships are unique in that they are committed to using a collaborative community-academic research approach. Using this approach, academic researchers and community representatives work as equal partners to pursue action-oriented research questions and interventions strategies that will benefit the communities involved. These research teams receive one-on-one training and mentorship from the Detroit URC, which is widely recognized as a national leader in community-based participatory research. This training and mentorship focuses on building strong partnerships and identifying strategies for putting research into action.

Here are brief descriptions of the first round of these community-academic projects:

**Barrier Busting in the HOPE Village Neighborhood Network**

Sometimes small barriers, solvable with relatively minor amounts of funding, present major obstacles for those living in poverty. For many Detroit residents, these barriers prevent them from making progress toward their goals of economic self-sufficiency. Through a partnership between the Ross School of Business and Focus: HOPE, a nonprofit civil and human rights organization based in Detroit, this project team will introduce and evaluate a “Barrier Buster” pilot program that provides small grants to address these challenges. This new barrier buster approach is intended to promote economic self-sufficiency among low-income Detroit residents, and has the potential to inform future programming in the region and across the country.

- Academic researchers on the project are both from the Stephen M. Ross School of Business. The Principal Investigator (PI) is Michael Gordon, Arthur F. Thurnau Professor of Business Administration, and the Co-PI is Noel Tichy, Professor of Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management.
- Community partner representatives and Co-Investigators are all from Focus: HOPE. They include Debbie Fisher, Director; Stephanie Moore, Youth Education Program Director; and Julie Phenis, Operations Manager.

**Helping a House Remain a Home**

Each year, non-payment of property taxes causes thousands of Detroit residents to lose their homes to tax foreclosure. Detroit’s exceptionally high tax rate disproportionately burdens low-income residents, threatening their ability to maintain homeownership and attain long-term financial stability. Michigan law (MCL 211.7u) requires local governing bodies to make a Poverty Tax Exemption (PTE) available for homeowners in poverty who own and occupy their property. By reducing or eliminating property taxes for low-income homeowners, this policy works to alleviate poverty by decreasing household tax burden and preventing the devastating financial consequences of property tax foreclosure. While approximately 12,000 homeowners living in poverty qualify for the PTE, the policy remains underutilized by residents in need. In partnership with the United Community Housing Coalition (UCHC), the Healthy Environments Partnership (HEP), a long-standing community-based participatory research partnership, and a researcher at the U-M School of Public Health, this project will evaluate the effectiveness of the policy and study potential factors that may hinder or facilitate its access. Findings will inform best practices across local governing bodies to strengthen this policy’s ability to alleviate poverty in Detroit and statewide.
• Academic researchers for the project are both from the U-M School of Public Health (SPH) Department of Health Behavior and Health Education (HBHE). The PI is Roshanak Mehdipanah, Assistant Professor, and the Co PI is Alexa Eisenberg, a pre-doctoral candidate.

• Community partner representatives and Co-Investigators, both from the UCHC in Detroit, are Ted Phillips, Director, and Michele Oberholtzer, Tax Foreclosure Prevention Project Coordinator.

**Improving Health and Strengthening Communities**

Health and poverty are inextricably linked. Health problems interfere with work and education, and poverty exacerbates health problems, producing a cycle of negative influence that maintains both poverty and ill-health. An effective approach to improve health is through community health workers (CHWs), recruited from and working in their home neighborhoods. Such positions also provide jobs within those same neighborhoods, lower costs for health care and insurance providers, improve health outcomes for community members, and increase economic attainment along multiple dimensions, in a positive cycle that works against poverty. This project will develop a new model for employing community health workers to serve the Detroit Cody-Rouge neighborhood. It will involve a unique partnership between investigators from U-M’s Institute for Healthcare Policy and Innovation (IHPI), the Detroit Health Department, Joy-Southfield Community Development Corporation, Inc., and five Detroit Medicaid health plans. This unique model has the potential to be the largest infusion of CHWs into a community from an allied network of health care providers and to significantly improve the physical and economic well-being of residents in Detroit.

• The academic researcher and PI for the project is Michele Heisler from U-M's Institute for Healthcare Policy and Innovation.

• Community partner representatives include David J. Law, Executive Director of Joy-Southfield Community Development Corporation, Inc. (JSCDC) in Detroit; and Abdul El-Sayed, Executive Director and Health Officer of the Detroit Health Department.

**Preserving Low-Income Housing in Detroit**

The Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program is the nation's largest source of financing for building or rehabilitating affordable housing. The sale of the credits provides equity to help finance the production of decent affordable housing for low-income renters who are in or near poverty, many of whom are elderly or disabled or have experienced chronic homelessness. But once projects reach 15 years of operation, investors sell their ownership, often leaving affordable housing projects in need of new sources of capital to provide much needed maintenance. In Detroit, more than 5,300 units will reach 15 years between now and 2020, so finding solutions to restructuring financing and management is an urgent need. For more than a year, U-M researchers have teamed with a Detroit LIHTC task force to analyze the financing and ownership to preserve decent affordable housing after this critical timeframe. Through this partnership, researchers will determine strategies that can help address the looming crisis. Analysis of solutions is integrated into all parts of the research, and the work will produce recommendations with partners who can implement these through their roles in the affordable housing industry.

• The academic researchers are both from the U-M Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning. The PI is Professor Margaret Dewar and the Co-PI is Associate Professor Lan Deng.

• The community representatives, both from Community Development Advocates of Detroit, are Executive Director Sarida Scott and Policy Director LaToya Morgan. Additional members of the team include: Julie Schneider, of Detroit Department of Housing and Revitalization; Tahirih Ziegler and Victor Alba, both from the Detroit Local Initiatives Support Corporation; Dennis Quinn and Yulonda Byrd, from Cinnaire; Tim Thorland, Southwest Housing Solutions; and Kirby Burkholder, IFF.

The grant proposals funded were selected based on multiple factors. These included: the quality of the research design (including the appropriate research methodology); feasibility of completion of the proposed study during the funding period; relevance of proposed research effort to communities involved; extent and feasibility of community and academic partner involvement; and degree to which the study builds knowledge about the effectiveness of interventions, programs and policies seeking to reduce or alleviate poverty.

*Learn about these and other projects at poverty.umich.edu/research-projects*