

Detroit Action Commonwealth: Who We Are, What We Do

Founded in early 2008 at a soup kitchen on Detroit's East Side, **Detroit Action Commonwealth (DAC)** is a membership organization that develops individual and collective power to challenge and change root causes of poverty, homelessness, and injustice. We address issues that affect DAC members, their families, and the broader community, including conditions in homeless shelters, acquiring personal identification, interacting with the criminal justice system, housing, transportation, health care, and employment. The organization is nonpartisan and nonprofit and will seek 501(c)(3) status in the near future.

More than 3,500 individuals have participated in DAC activities to date, and some 1,500 have signed up as DAC members. The organization has three chapters that meet regularly (at the two Capuchin Soup Kitchens and at St. Leo Parish Soup Kitchen), and DAC has been invited to start chapters at two additional locations. Weekly meetings at the oldest chapter, at the Capuchin Soup Kitchen on Conner Ave., typically number 50 to 75 participants. The other two chapters are growing steadily and meet bi-weekly. The DAC board, which consists entirely of individuals who use the soup kitchens on a regular basis, meets bi-weekly.

1. DAC addresses immediate needs as it challenges the underlying conditions and institutions that create and perpetuate those needs.

Obtaining official ID. The difficulty that many low-income and indigent Detroiters face in obtaining official State photo identification has been a central issue for DAC from its inception. Such identification is necessary for individuals to obtain a job, rent an apartment, return to school or enter job training, purchase a bus pass, apply for their Social Security benefits, or access many other essential services. As one DAC leader put it, "Without ID, you don't exist."

Operating entirely with volunteers and with financial support from the Capuchin Soup Kitchen, DAC has assisted more than 1,700 individuals to date in acquiring the various documents required to obtain a Michigan Personal Identification Card—including birth records, school transcripts, Social Security documentation, and registered-voter cards—as well as the IDs themselves.

Partnering with the Center for Civil Justice, DAC negotiated successfully with the Michigan Department of State in 2009 so that ID card fees are now waived statewide for applicants who provide evidence that they are currently receiving benefits from the Michigan Family Independence Program (FIP) or State Disability Assistance (SDA) program or from the U.S. government's Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) programs. DAC also succeeded in persuading Wayne County to amend its ordinances to enable indigent applicants born in the county (excluding Detroit) to obtain certified copies of their birth records at half price.

Promoting employment, reducing crime. Steady employment has been shown to be an effective deterrent to criminal recidivism. With this in mind, DAC provided leadership in the “Ban the Box” campaign that persuaded the City of Detroit to change its employment practices and, subsequently, those of municipal vendors and contractors to eliminate the item on job applications regarding prior criminal offenses, thereby deferring any background check until after the applicant has been interviewed. This policy promotes economic self-reliance and public safety. DAC has also assisted dozens of teenagers and older adults in obtaining jobs and paid internships with local nonprofit organizations, the City of Detroit, the U.S. Census, and private businesses.

Improving neighborhoods. DAC negotiated with Detroit’s Department of Public Works to have trash receptacles installed and serviced along a three-mile stretch of Conner Ave. between I-94 and East Jefferson Ave. The organization identified more than a dozen dangerous abandoned houses near the soup kitchens and succeeded in getting the City to demolish them. DAC also conducts its own neighborhood cleanups during the summer months and has collaborated with the City and private contractors to get the grass cut along neighborhood sidewalks.

Improving homeless shelters and warming centers. From its first days, the Detroit Action Commonwealth has focused on promoting the respectful treatment of our homeless brothers and sisters. DAC leaders identify and research problems in homeless shelters and approach shelter operators with respect and resolve to rectify the problems. In January 2011, when it was revealed that the mayor’s office had withdrawn funding for emergency warming centers, DAC acted immediately to get the funding reinstated.

Promoting justice for all. For nearly two years, DAC met with court officials, law enforcement officers, attorneys, and social service agencies in Wayne and Washtenaw Counties as part of DAC’s campaign to initiate a street outreach court through the 36th District Court (Wayne County). The first session of Street Outreach Court-Detroit convened at the Capuchin Soup Kitchen on June 12, 2012. Scheduled to meet on a monthly basis, it is modeled after similar courts that operate with great success in Washtenaw County, Michigan and in a number of other places, primarily in Western states.

Outreach courts (so named because they are typically conducted at sites other than courthouses) have been shown to be cost-effective ways to promote public safety and justice, as well as guiding formerly chronic offenders into productive lives. The courts offer a means for indigent individuals with outstanding warrants for nonviolent, mostly minor, offenses to have their cases negotiated and closed provided that they have successfully completed their own action plans that they have established in collaboration with a social worker or other suitable professional. Such plans could include successful completion of a substance abuse program, obtaining a GED or a steady job, participation in a regular drug or alcohol abuse mutual support program, or other appropriate actions.

2. DAC develops individual and collective civic capacity: power.

DAC builds and strengthens the capacity of the least advantaged of Detroit residents to identify their *own* issues, devise their *own* strategies, and work together to advance opportunity and justice. Toward that end, DAC fosters effective citizenship and develops community leaders and leadership.

Fostering effective citizenship. DAC recognizes that citizens have a right and a responsibility to participate in public governance, an essential first step of which is active engagement in the electoral arena. Operating in a nonpartisan fashion, DAC has registered more than 1,500 Detroiters to vote. But that is just the first step. DAC leaders research and report on key issues that affect DAC members and the broader community. They invite public officials to meet publicly with local residents and participate in discussions of those issues and practical strategies to address them. DAC does not endorse candidates for office; but the organization encourages participation in the electoral process through its voter education and mobilization activities. To foster full and effective citizenship, in early 2012 DAC negotiated successfully with the offices of the Wayne County Clerk and the Detroit City Clerk to change the polling location for the precinct in which the Conner Ave. soup kitchen is located from a site nearly three miles distant to a community center only a few blocks away.

Building and strengthening community leadership. Leaders engage other people in pursuit of shared goals. Successful leadership entails a willingness to listen deeply to people's concerns and aspirations. It encourages mutual learning and the nurturing of "leaderful" communities. It fosters mutual respect and accountability. And it requires measures of courage and creativity. DAC builds and strengthens individual leaders and collective leadership. It accomplishes that through regular workshops and reflective engagement in the practical work of community leadership. DAC chapters also serve as sites in which young adults learn the craft of community organizing, working directly with the organizations' leaders under the mentorship of experienced community organizers.

Contact information:

Detroit Action Commonwealth
c/o Capuchin Soup Kitchen
4390 Conner Ave.
Detroit, MI 48215

Greg Markus, founding organizer
gregmarkus@gmail.com

Molly Sweeney, lead organizer
molly.anne.sweeney@gmail.com

Clark Washington, DAC board member
clarkw1954@yahoo.com

Mary Jones, DAC board member