

### **Background / Context**

The city of Hamtramck, Michigan — a diverse inner Detroit 'burb of approximately 2.2 square miles — is a fractured and conflicted community. Over the past three decades, census demographics have tracked a population shift from 70% Polish Catholic to over 60% Muslims of Bengali and Yemeni heritage. In November 2015, Hamtramck gained national and international attention, after becoming the first American municipality to elect a Muslim majority city council. Between battling aging infrastructure and struggling to provide quality schooling for a dwindling tax base, the city faces internal conflict and division arising from Islamophobia and micro-aggressions based on culturally-divergent ideas of neighborliness.

Thus, Hamtramck is uniquely dually challenged. First, half of the city's population is comprised of immigrants, hailing from some of the poorest regions of the poorest countries in the world with almost no exposure to Western amenities (e.g., toilets, running water, and electricity). Second, the recent national negative rhetoric towards immigrants and Muslims, has exacerbated the newcomers' "non-American" status in the eyes of the established community. In 2004, the Hamtramck City Council permitted the *adhan*, the Muslim call for prayer, to be broadcast over the mosque's loud speakers, increasing tension between Polish and Muslim residents. Despite recognizing its decreased population and taking steps to accommodate the newcomers as best it can, the Polish community feels its proud history is being lost.

Despite the significant religious and cultural differences among Hamtramck's residents and the recent rise in anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric, police reports point to smaller, more peculiar divisions separating the city's ethnic communities. Issues such as poor parking habits, differing views on a house's exterior aesthetic, including dissimilar practices around lawn maintenance or a lack of updated paint, or public nuisances, such as raw garbage odors, fuel Hamtramck's community hostility and ethnic silos. Recent immigrants have not been exposed to community-building lifestyles and the older residents long for the "good old days," such as when Pope John Paul II, the first Polish pope, visited Hamtramck in 1987. A lack of constructive dialogue and inter-ethnic judgement-free intermingling augments intra-community isolation and conflict. Often opportunities to discuss sensitive community issues become confrontational, hostile, and finger-pointing sessions between residents.

### **Project Vision and Goals**

The goal of this project is to build a more tolerant and respectful community that works harmoniously towards the city's future by embedding a civic engagement program, featuring neighborly cooperation between Polish community leaders and civically-minded immigrant youth, in the South Side Block Club (SSBC). Historically, Hamtramck has been divided into 8 Block Clubs (BC) that liaise with the City Council to highlight issues affecting neighborhood well-being. Despite being the most active BC, the SSBC reports numerous residential conflicts primarily around parking habits and apparent lack of house maintenance. Implementing the "Be a Good Neighbor" program will benefit both communities; The Polish residents will gain recognition and honor for Hamtramck's history while the youth, who are more open to change, will gain access to providing fresh perspectives on the community's future.

Broadening the SSBC to represent all Hamtramck residents will create and sustain regular, open dialogue sessions ("Neutral Zones") around issues of neighborliness. This will encourage community-building events to build social cohesion, serving as a model for the other 7 BCs. Our specific goals include: establish a mentorship program between local college students and ethnic youth (approx. 40% of city's population), encouraging their civic engagement in the BCs; create regular, open-dialogue sessions around issues impeding neighborliness' initiate community-building events, fostering greater social cohesion; work with local partner organizations to advance and fund "Be a Good Neighbor" for years to come; create a framework for the other 7 BCs to model.

### **Leadership Team / Local Partnerships**

After two years of interning in Hamtramck, I spent summer 2016 with the community leaders described below to kickstart the “Be a Good Neighbor” program. We designed flyers on proper trash disposal and elimination of raw garbage odors and distributed them to all residents in the SSBC. Based on positive feedback from SSBC residents, the City later mailed the flyers in the water bill to *all* Hamtramck residents, posted them in local shops, and broadcasted them on local TV and radio channels. The City has also printed the “Be a Good Neighbor” slogan on t-shirts and uses it to promote mindful community living. This work has been a defining feature of my college career. I am eager to implement a project for the city’s welcoming residents that will have an immense, positive impact on this community. With a background in Anthropology and with numerous, strong local connections in support, I am confident in my ability to solve any unforeseen issues that may arise.

Both Hamtramck’s City Manager, Katrina Powell, and SSBC representative, Susan Dunn, are supportive of this project and will liaise with the Mayor and the City Council. The nonprofits Hamtramck Community Initiative (HCI), People’s Community Services (PCS), and Michigan Muslim Community Council (MMCC) will provide youth volunteers through already established programs. Each of Hamtramck’s major religious congregations and ethnic groups have affirmed active support for the project. Local clergy representing both mosques and churches are on board. Organizations such as the National Institute for Polish and Polish American Affairs (Piast) and the Bangladesh American Public Affairs Council (BAPAC) have pledged their support, while the Yemeni American Public Affairs Council (YAPAC) has committed \$500 for the project.

### **Implementation and Timeline**

1. Identify Youth for Mentorship Program: *present – June 1*; HCI, PCS, MMCC, and I will cull the ranks of their already existing college-age and youth volunteer pools focused on community service to determine participants for the mentorship program.
2. Educate and Encourage Ethnic Youth: *June 15 – July 1*; Piast Institute, Dunn, Powell, and I will develop workshops on Hamtramck’s history, the current roots of conflict in the city, and civic engagement through the BCs. College-age mentors will work with their mentees to have conversations with the Polish elders.
3. Neutral Zones: *July 1 – ongoing*; Powell, Piast, the mentors/mentees, and I will host the first weekly, safe, no-judgement discussions, where all SSBC residents can voice concerns and suggest ideas in a constructive manner, getting the wheel turning for discussion outside of Neutral Zones.
4. Physical Enhancements and Bonding: *July 10 – August 15*; Each SSBC household will receive plants and plant bulbs to plant or will invite a participant from the mentorship program to do it for them. The volunteers and I will pick up any obvious trash, provide garbage liners to houses, and paint abandoned structures. Residents will also be invited to block parties to “break bread,” where they can share ethnic cuisine, relax, mingle, and create/strengthen ties.
5. BC Summit: *August 20*; A SSBC “awards night” will take place where Powell and MMCC will provide certificates of participation courtesy of the City of Hamtramck. Furthermore, participating homes will receive a “I’m a Good Neighbor” sign for their yard.

### **Sustainability and Potential Impact**

Established partners can offer the mentorship program annually to continue Neutral Zones, BC Summits, and the establishment of civically engaged youth. Thousands of Hamtramck residents, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, recently marched side by side to protest the Trump administration’s immigration ban, showing support for all those affected. Their solidarity not only indicates their willingness to establish social cohesion in Hamtramck, but sheds light on a common denominator; they were all immigrants at one point. In this political climate especially, the “Be a Good Neighbor” project will stimulate and promote social harmony and peace in Hamtramck.