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Public-Private Partnerships in Emergency Response

A Case Study of Milwaukee's Civic Response Team

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By Paul Schmitz

Milwaukee's Civic Response Team (CRT) has been a model for using a collective impact approach to organize and manage emergency response. The initiative was launched by Mayor Tom Barrett and Greater Milwaukee Foundation CEO Ellen Gilligan in early March 2020. The CRT includes seven teams that have coordinated philanthropists, public sector leaders, nonprofits, and other community leaders to support physical health, mental health, shelter, food, economic recovery, early childhood education, and K-12 education. In a previous paper,¹ I shared how these groups were formed and their remarkable early success in innovating to address urgent community needs during the pandemic. This paper aims to understand and learn from how the CRT's partnerships between government entities, philanthropy, and providers have worked during the response.²

Overall, the public-private partnerships were uneven across teams and across government jurisdictions and departments. On some teams, the public-private partnership was so integrated that they consistently leveraged each other's strengths to achieve greater impact. Other teams lacked fulsome public sector partnerships and may have missed opportunities for greater impact. The teams that worked well pointed to the importance of relationships, authority, trust, transparency, and consistency, which enabled groups to achieve greater and faster impact. It is clear that Milwaukee and other communities stand to benefit when the public sector, philanthropy, and nonprofits build closer relationships that include more coordinated planning, shared investments, aligned services, and collective impact.

The Shelter, Food, and Early Childhood Education teams illustrate three distinct examples of how the public-private partnerships in Milwaukee's Civic Response have achieved substantial impacts.

1 Paul Schmitz, [*Collective Impact in Emergency Response: A Case Study of Milwaukee's COVID-19 Civic Response Team*](#), Collective Impact Forum, August 12, 2020.

2 At the time of publication, more than 600,000 Americans and 1,200 Milwaukee residents have died from COVID-19. It is important to read this study with a critical eye for lessons learned to support better collaboration in the future and empathy for public leaders who responded in real time to an unprecedented health and economic crisis. The Milwaukee Civic Response Team's work will sustain because these public-private partnerships made a huge difference.

Shelter Team

Perhaps the strongest public-private partnership among the Civic Response teams is the Shelter Team. This team demonstrates the value of having a solid foundation of trust and relationships before a crisis. It is led by Nicole Angresano, vice president of community impact at the United Way of Greater Milwaukee and Waukesha County; Rafael Acevedo, continuum of care coordinator for the City of Milwaukee; Jim Mathy, administrator of the Milwaukee County Housing Division; and Eric Collins-Dyke, assistant director of supportive housing and homeless services for Milwaukee County. They have met every Thursday for more than a year with about ten other partners to care for people experiencing homelessness, to prevent homelessness, and to move more people into permanent housing.

During the past year, the team worked concurrently to meet immediate needs and pursue system changes. They opened three hotels and a new facility donated by the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, Clare Hall, to decompress shelters by two-thirds during the first wave of COVID-19 and provide care to sick or symptomatic guests. They helped transition more than 80 people experiencing homelessness into permanent housing, advocated for an eviction moratorium, and supported partners in launching the Milwaukee Rental Housing Resource Center to prevent evictions. In addition, they launched a new website to link high-quality, flexible landlords with renters.

“The key is that we did not start from scratch,” explained Nicole Angresano. “We had been working together already and weren’t caught flat-footed.” Many of these efforts, such as the Milwaukee Rental Housing Resource Center, had been in the works for years. As Jim Mathy recognized, “The crisis helped push forward initiatives faster than had been planned. We could not have moved the needle this fast if we were working separately.” Eric Collins-Dyke added, “We would not have been able to stand up Clare Hall, transport people, or provide necessary staffing to meet the complex challenges of our clients without United Way and our other partners.”

They were also clear about their lanes and how to best leverage each other’s assets. According to Mathy, “The United Way really trusts government. We can call at the drop of a hat and let them know what we need, and they make it happen. It is very rare to have philanthropy one call away.” Rafael Acevedo agreed. “I had a guest who needed an Amtrak ticket to go stay with family, and I couldn’t do that, so I texted Nicole, and she made it happen in minutes. It’s a simple example, but I can now call on people to do things I can’t. And they can call on me.” Angresano understands that her public partners have red tape and political realities that she doesn’t face. “We have never been this fast or nimble, and it has allowed us to be better partners. The county, the city, and providers are the experts. I trust their guidance and recommendations and simply do what we do best—mobilize human and financial resources to help remove roadblocks and help where they can’t. That enables all of us to spend more time on the bigger systems change work.”

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— Nicole Angresano, Vice President of Community Impact, United Way of Greater Milwaukee and Waukesha County

Food Team

The Food Team had a very different path to partnership, entering a historically competitive environment and achieving impressive impacts. There was no unified coalition or collective impact food security effort prior to the pandemic. In fact, the system was quite siloed, which posed a challenge as food needs became more acute during the early stage of the crisis. Isaac Rowlett, Milwaukee County's director of strategic planning, observed, "I could not for the life of me figure out the policy and politics of the food networks. I can get people on the phone for information, but it was all siloed. Then the team was created, and there were neutral brokers to help us figure out the gap analysis and help." Those neutral brokers were Gina Stilp, executive director of the Zilber Family Foundation; Danielle Nabak, Healthy Communities coordinator for the Foodwise Program at Milwaukee County's University Extension; and a team of 20 partners.

One of their first partners in the collaborative was Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), which had been feeding 77,000 children at school daily and pivoted quickly to operate 20 meal sites distributing 5,000 meals a day. Renee Dudley, who at the time was director of nutritional services, reflected: "I had never seen a collaborative like this. I enjoyed hearing what others' ideas and strategies were. It helped us frame what we were seeing and what was needed." MPS' big challenge was that U.S. Department of Agriculture rules did not allow them to feed adults and restricted meals to in-person congregant seating. Dudley had a staff person dedicated to monitoring state and federal rule changes and credits the CRT's advocacy with helping waive those restrictions. That enabled them to partner with Feeding America to create 25-pound food boxes for families. Dudley observed, "That could not have happened without this group."

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— Renee Dudley, Former Director of Nutritional Services, Milwaukee Public Schools

Nabak and Stilp found that there was limited food systems expertise at the city or county levels, except at the County's Department of Aging, which had quickly expanded meal delivery options to continue safely feeding seniors. Dudley wished she

had known about the county's resources earlier. "No one seemed to know all of the distribution models in the city. We could have probably done more if we had coordinated earlier." Along with MPS, the team worked with the Hunger Task Force, Milwaukee Center for Independence, the Boys and Girls Clubs, Feeding America, local restaurants, and other partners to distribute more than 20,000 meals each week during the height of the pandemic.

Their successes garnered attention and additional public support. The team drew up a set of recommendations, and after persistent outreach, both the city and county used them as a blueprint for directing more than \$2.8 million in CARES Act dollars to food banks, something neither had funded before. Rowlett explained, "Once we got connected to the food work, we were able to think both about immediate needs and also upstream, not just purchasing food but purchasing physical and tech assets that could enhance distribution longer term." Stilp and

Nabak believe that the city needs a food czar, someone with authority to drive planning, policy, and coordination across the system. Stilp explained, “We really need to work with public sector leaders to map the ecosystem and differentiate our responses to chronic versus episodic hunger. The lack of coordination in the system and inability to plan ahead was really frustrating and had a real impact on meeting the needs of families. Now we have made strides to build trust and lay the groundwork for a new commitment to collective action.”

Early Childhood Education Team

The Early Childhood Education (ECE) Team grew out of Milwaukee Succeeds, a cradle-to-career collective impact initiative based at the Greater Milwaukee Foundation. Danae Davis, executive director of Milwaukee Succeeds, and Daria Hall, policy director for the Wisconsin Partnership, a coalition of cradle-to-career programs in Wisconsin, have led the team. While their focus had been lifting up quality education within the sector, they recognized that the pandemic was an existential threat. Milwaukee was immediately at risk of permanently losing one-third of its childcare providers. Both the State of Wisconsin Department of Children and Families and the City of Milwaukee Health Department would be critical to their sector’s survival.

Wisconsin’s secretary of the Department of Children and Families, Emilie Amundson, joined the team initially and then delegated Tiffany Wilson, director of the Milwaukee Early Care Administration, Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, to become the department’s point person. Davis was impressed. “You can’t underestimate how valuable it is to have a cabinet member engaged and accessible. She has advocated for us and has acted quickly on what her team tells her.” Wilson also found it helpful. “The pandemic forced us to stop and really pay attention and prioritize the people we serve.

I appreciated being able to hear perspectives from other agencies and especially the childcare providers. Danae and Daria were able to influence rules and guidelines for reopening care based on their ability to quickly gather provider and stakeholder feedback.”

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— Danae Davis, Executive Director, Milwaukee Succeeds

The Civic Response Team made emergency grants to 443 providers to keep them open, provided PPE and cleaning supplies to providers, and advocated to the state on how to deploy their \$50 million in CARES Act dollars to strengthen the sector. Typically, the funding would have been distributed through parents, but the team argued for funds to go directly to providers. Davis argued, “We could not afford for the city, specifically Black and Brown communities, to lose providers.” When they learned Latinx providers were not accessing these resources, they worked with the state to develop bilingual communications and webinars to engage them. They also were able to secure funding from Milwaukee County, with assistance from the Mental Health Team, to provide more than 150 providers with mental health training in English, Spanish, and Hmong to support themselves and the families they serve.

Marlaina Jackson, deputy commissioner of the Milwaukee Health Department, was also a key partner. When the state's guidelines for safely reopening childcare based on enrollment numbers conflicted with the city's capacity rules based on building codes, they were able to reconcile them and arrange a webinar to orient providers. Davis reflected: "The Health Department and Department of Children and Families were not talking to each other, but our table helped them connect and be more mindful of each other and their orders." According to Wilson, "Being able to get feedback from diverse providers quickly and utilize it has made us more sensitive to differing local conditions."



Lessons Learned

These three teams demonstrate how public-private partnerships on Milwaukee’s Civic Response Team were **able to achieve impacts that would not have been possible otherwise**. Other teams had similar experiences. The Milwaukee Health Care Partnership had an existing coalition of city and county public health officials, health care systems, and community health centers that created a solid foundation for the Physical Health Team. The county’s Behavioral Health Division worked closely with the Mental Health Team. The K-12 Education and Economic Recovery Teams had more limited participation and less integration of their work with public sector partners, not for lack of trying. They still achieved positive outcomes but felt there were missed opportunities for even greater impacts for children and families.

There also appeared to be differential engagement within the city and between the city and the county. The mayor played an important role in creating the CRT, and city employees have participated actively on a few of the teams, such as housing, physical health, and early childhood. However, several CRT members across teams expressed frustration with the lack of participation and responsiveness from the city. After the CARES Act passed, the mayor invited teams to submit recommendations for use of the funding. The groups appreciated this and hustled to gather input and deliver a set of recommendations built around community needs rather than organizational interests. Most teams never received feedback, and in other cases the feedback was inconsistent and severely challenged by federal guidance, regulatory interpretation, deadlines, and limited capacity. Several teams also expressed their wish that city employees took a more active role. One CRT leader complained, “We are still waiting. It really built skepticism and distrust.”

A new county executive and a new County Board of Supervisors chair were elected one month into the pandemic, and leaders initially worried that a transition might slow down participation and progress. However, both county employees and community leaders reported that the transition was seamless and did not interrupt progress. The new county executive, David Crowley, was elected on a platform of racial equity and was supportive of the efforts. One county staff member confirmed, “This is what the county executive wants us to do, to collaborate with the community to solve people’s needs. Equity is our mission, not a side thing.” The new executive’s transition included several internal promotions. He also has a better relationship with the new county board chair than his predecessors, which several people mentioned has made this work even easier.

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— County Staff Member

Lack of intergovernmental cooperation was a barrier many teams experienced. Along with the State Department of Children and Families and city Health Department crossing signals on childcare capacity and Milwaukee Public Schools and Milwaukee County’s aging

program not connecting earlier about family meals, there were other situations in which city, county, and state agencies were operating in siloed ways that slowed work down or created more confusion for providers. CRT leaders generally understood that various government agencies were scrambling to meet unprecedented urgent needs but wished there could have been more meetings that engaged city, county, and state leaders with community leaders to coordinate and solve problems across domains.

Another important lesson came from the role of the Greater Milwaukee Foundation as the backbone of the Civic Response Team. The staff from the foundation and Milwaukee Succeeds who have facilitated and supported the CRT groups received high marks from all sides as responsive, honest brokers. Ian Bautista, who joined the foundation shortly before being asked to lead the CRT, was singled out for his combination of persistence and diplomacy. It is also clear that the foundation's authority in the community had a role in bringing philanthropists and top public leaders to the table. It was also helpful that most teams were co- led by a philanthropic leader, and those leaders often had influence with governmental leaders and nonprofit partners.

Six themes emerged from interviews with more than 20 leaders in philanthropy, nonprofits, and government:

1. Prior relationships accelerated impact

The Shelter Team hit the ground running on day one. They had established trust, knew their lanes, and leveraged each other's strengths continually. They often made big decisions about resources over texts. In individual interviews, they constantly complimented their peers. The speed with which they solved a series of logistical and human service hurdles to care for people experiencing homelessness during the most chaotic time of the pandemic is a tribute to those relationships.

Other teams were also able to get their work off the ground quickly. The Physical Health Team, with leadership from the Milwaukee Health Care Partnership (MHCP), the Medical College of Wisconsin, and Sixteenth Street Community Health Center (the region's largest federally qualified health center) was also able to move quickly. Members of the team were part of Milwaukee County's Unified Emergency Response Operations Center (UEOC), and their relationships and track record helped them support and build on the county's work. When

the county recognized the urgent need for a testing officer to coordinate COVID-19 testing in the region, the MHCP was able to quickly secure public and private funds to hire and house the position. The CRT was also able to fund, develop, and disseminate integrated multicultural communications quickly during the most stressful

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— Steve Gorodetskiy, Director of Strategic Initiatives, Milwaukee County Dept. of Health and Human Services

periods of the pandemic. Steve Gorodetskiy, who leads the county UEOC, acknowledged their contributions. "The team could fast-track funding with greater flexibility, which helped a lot."

2. Public leaders are most effective when authorized to act

When public leaders were at the table or delegated authority to their staff to act on their behalf, decision making and problem-solving were more efficient. Tiffany Wilson was delegated to the ECE team by Wisconsin's Secretary of the Department of Children and Families and had ready access to her. The ECE team also benefited from having Marlaina Jackson from the Milwaukee Health Department, who served as both deputy and interim commissioner during her time on the committee.

Jim Mathy, from the county and the shelter CRT, reported: "Anything we needed from the county we got. Our track record earned us trust and latitude to move quickly." Rafael Acevedo of the city likewise felt authorized by the city's community development block grant director to speak for the department. But not all leaders felt supported. One public leader who felt limited in their engagement expressed, "It is about culture, and whether you are encouraged and expected to be at the table, to really listen and be authentic. You know if going to those meetings is valued." Having agency leaders participate in meetings or authorize staff to represent them allowed groups to solve problems at the table and move solutions faster.

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— Jim Mathy, Housing Administrator, Milwaukee County

3. Showing up and following up supported learning and trust

Partnerships were often mutually beneficial and built greater trust among government, partners, and the community. Many public leaders reported that the diversity of the CRT teams allowed them to access perspectives and learning that helped them do their jobs better. For example, Isaac Rowlett from the county said, "These groups helped us get the pulse of Black, Brown, and other vulnerable communities. Government often deals with grass tops, not grassroots. These groups helped us go deeper. We could hear raw discussions and see pain points, frustrations, or misconceptions we needed to address." Tiffany Wilson of the ECE team concurred. "I appreciated being able to hear perspectives from other agencies, and especially the childcare providers."

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— Tiffany Wilson, Director, Milwaukee Early Care Administration, Wisconsin Department of Children and Families

Amy Lorenz, from Milwaukee County's Behavioral Health Division, found the Mental Health Team a source of both greater learning and impact. "I came in with open ears, tried to understand where I could help break down barriers, and used whatever resources I could bring to support the team's work." Martina Gollin-Graves, the president/CEO of Mental Health America Wisconsin, was grateful. "This was all so groundbreaking. Amy's participation and the way she responded really built trust." Danae Davis of the ECE team argued that transparency mattered most in communication. "Marlaina [Jackson] is always clear what she

can and cannot do with her authority. She is transparent about her limits. I wish others would be that clear.” Tiffany Wilson regretted the limitations often placed on public leaders in these groups. “There were times I wanted to share information and hear from people before making decisions but could not. So, I ended up clarifying and getting quick feedback instead.”

4. Data and community engagement support better planning

Several leaders felt that more community engagement was needed in the process. The effort’s strength in coordinating civic leaders was not matched by attention to community engagement. Several partners felt that more listening, especially to communities of color and immigrant populations, could have helped them identify opportunities and barriers earlier. Tiffany Wilson from the Department of Children and Families felt their process would have benefited from a

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— Sharon Robinson, Director, Department of Administration, City of Milwaukee

stronger parent voice. “It would have helped to hear from parents or even to make some of our meetings open to the public.” Sharon Robinson, director of the city’s department of administration, agreed. “More community engagement would have benefited the group, not just anchor organizations but people on the ground who are closer to and can reach people directly.” Robinson also suggested that having better data analytics may have

improved tracking and management. Rowlett concurred. “If we had a dashboard with better data, we could have managed and maneuvered better. We didn’t all operate with the same assumptions and landscapes, and it would have helped accountability and equity.”

5. Give the public sector credit when credit is due

Philanthropy, nonprofits, and elected officials were often quick to take credit and promote wins in the community. The public employees working on these issues, however, sometimes felt unsung. During this unprecedented crisis, there were, of course, mistakes made and lessons learned while trying to respond to the chaos. Public agencies were often blamed and attacked

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— Government employee

when things went wrong or when people did not like the tough decisions they made for the good of the community. “We were getting besieged at all levels. We were just trying to stay above water, and it is hard to think of collaboration when you are in that position,” shared one public employee. Another put the need more bluntly. “It would have been nice for our partners to show government a little more love. We were taking

a lot of heat in the community. I wish partners were more sensitive in sharing credit with us publicly for what we did well.”

6. Identify and remove system barriers

The pandemic forced the civic response teams to innovate both to meet urgent new needs and to reconfigure services and supports to address chronic needs. The health and economic impacts of COVID-19, especially on Black and Latinx populations, highlighted the ways in which many systems are broken and racially inequitable. Steve Gorodetskiy from the UEOC emphasized, “If we want to move the needle, we need to do better for the people we serve, but that is insufficient. If we don’t change systems, people who have needs will have the same level as before, and we will maintain racial inequities. We have to address why they are vulnerable and be a catalyst for moving systems to prevention and to addressing structural racism.”

The teams built or accelerated plans that strengthened housing protections, food systems, public health, and early childhood education, and those impacts will be lasting. The continued existence of these networks, and the public-private partnerships within them, are systems changes that will lead to better, more responsive, and more equitable social outcomes. The groups are now recommending American Rescue Plan investments from the city, county, state, and Milwaukee Public Schools to address immediate needs and further the systemic changes and work toward racial equity.

Some public sector agencies have shifted how they work as a result of the CRT. Amy Lorenz from the county’s Behavioral Health Division learned from the team that “there are populations that did not trust or feel safe going to big institutions. By pushing resources to the right community advocates and organizers, connecting to trusted people in the neighborhoods, we could help residents get what they need. We have services, but people suffering from the pandemic did not know what they are or how to access them. The problem is we have so many requirements in place for vendors that it rules out funding the grassroots organizations, which are often led by people of color.

“It is important for those of us in large systems to learn from this and see some of our self-imposed barriers. And then where we do need to hold requirements, we can provide technical assistance to groups to help meet them.”

— Amy Lorenz, Milwaukee County Behavioral Health Division

We had to really examine what we need in terms of risk and requirements, what is truly important.” Through Lorenz’s leadership and advocacy, the county did provide grants to a variety of grassroots organizations. Now the effort is a model for the county’s new Racial Equity Contacting Workgroup, on which Lorenz serves. “It is important for those of us in large systems to learn from this and see some of our self-imposed barriers. And then where we do need to hold requirements, we can provide technical assistance to groups to help meet them.”



Recommendations

The pandemic was a stress test for collective impact as an approach. The level of urgency was extreme, as racial inequalities in COVID's health and economic consequences were felt across the community. Leaders had to be creative, adaptive, and fast. In this environment, it was both necessary and remarkable for leaders and groups to collaborate well. **In just weeks, they housed hundreds of people, delivered thousands of meals, built and promoted a COVID-19 testing system, distributed hundreds of thousands of masks, provided families with technology to connect to school, rescued childcare providers, and soothed anxieties and grief among our most vulnerable populations.** Any analysis of what worked or did not must be read within the context of systems and organizations stretched beyond their limits.

It is clear that **close coordination and partnership among public sector leaders, philanthropists, and nonprofit providers resulted in more effective social impacts.** While many collective impact efforts have broken down silos among organizations and occasionally across sectors, it is rare to see these three groups working in such an integrated fashion. It is clear that in the groups that worked well they each found the experience benefited them and led to better decisions and work. Each sector can take lessons from this to support better collaboration and collective impact.

Some **public sector leaders and agencies felt too stretched** to participate actively in these collaborative efforts. **Yet others who did participate found that they helped them get more done and built greater trust and support in the community.** If agency leaders are not able to participate actively, it is important that they delegate authority to staff who have ready access to them. **Trust comes from active participation but also from following up and being responsive** to the teams. It is also important that any public leaders or staff be transparent about their boundaries and limits at the table and what they can and cannot do. Finally, **intergovernmental conversations should be a priority,** especially with providers who often have to navigate differing and competing goals and requirements. Better coordination across government entities can enable more efficient and often more equitable work.

The **philanthropy and nonprofit sector can begin by being more sensitive** to the needs of their public sector partners. Many define their work as more efficient and effective than government. However, there are public sector leaders and initiatives that demonstrate inspiring levels of innovation and commitment. Lift them up and share credit with them. **Philanthropists should build stronger relationships with elected and appointed leaders through regular meetings to coordinate planning and investments around shared goals, leveraging each other's strengths.** Philanthropic leaders also have influence they can wield on behalf of nonprofits and public agency staff to encourage public leaders to participate in these teams and help move systems changes that are preventing progress. They can also use their influence to convene intergovernmental coordination.

The Civic Response Teams also demonstrated the value that is added when nonprofit organizations come to the table with a **focus on community opportunities and needs instead of their organization’s particular programs and interests**. It was clear from interviews with philanthropists and public leaders that those organizations who asked their teams “how can we help?” instead of pushing their own programs earned greater admiration. Finally, nonprofits have an important role in helping **bring community voice and leadership to these coalitions**, to offer lived experience expertise to planning and conversations with public leaders.

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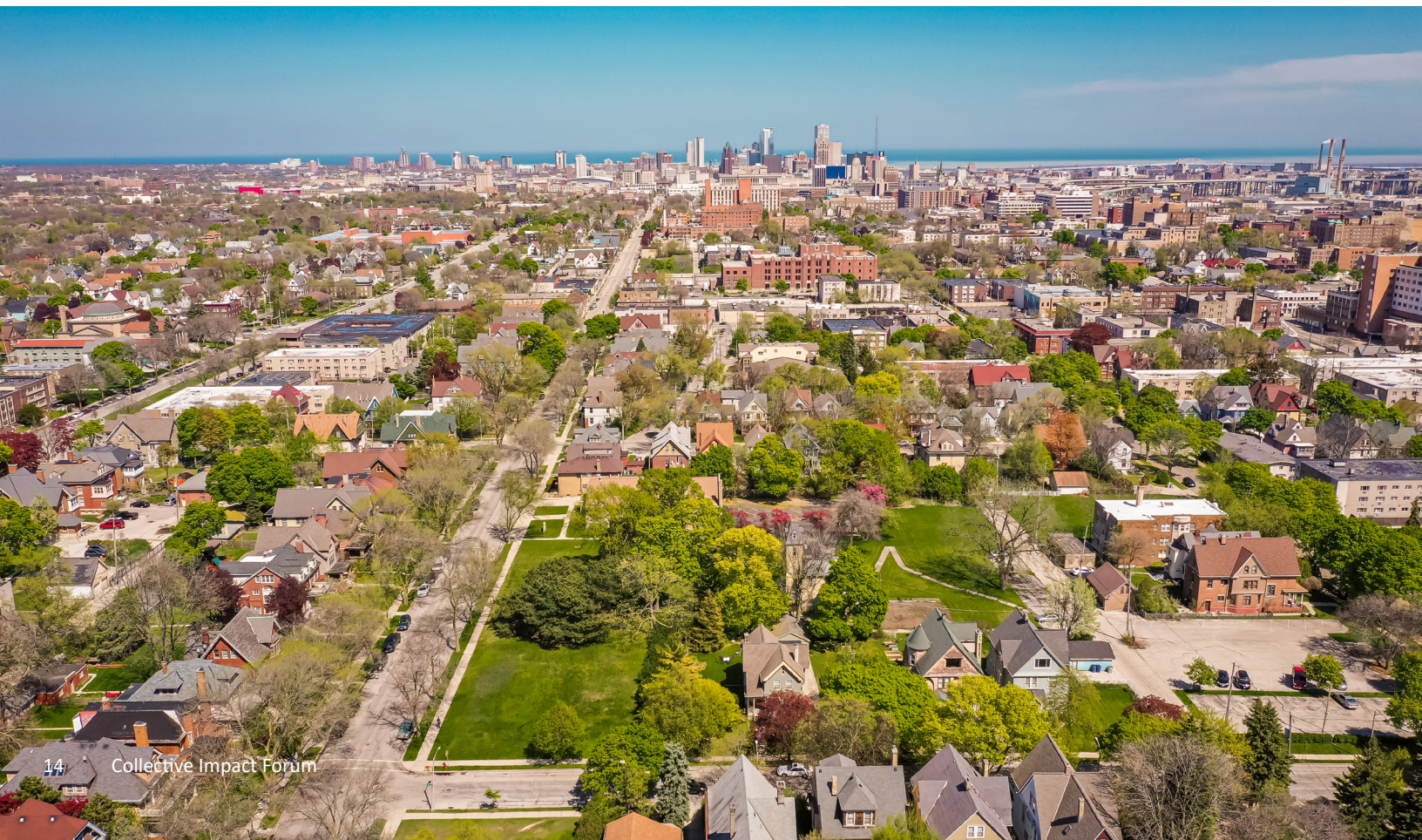
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Thank you to the Greater Milwaukee Foundation for the opportunity to listen in, learn from, and be inspired by the work being done in my home community. Thank you to all of the public, philanthropic, and nonprofit leaders who shared their experience and lessons with me. This is the second paper on Milwaukee's Civic Response, and I truly am grateful for all that was done under tremendous pressure to support our community during this crisis.

I am very grateful to be associated with the Collective Impact Forum and for my colleagues' support.

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For more information about this report:

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Paul Schmitz builds the collective leadership of organizations and communities to achieve greater social impact through his roles as senior advisor at the Collective Impact Forum and CEO of Leading Inside Out. He is also the author of *Everyone Leads: Building Leadership from the Community Up* and the former CEO of Public Allies, where he helped more than 5,000 diverse young adults begin careers working for community and social change. Paul is a faculty member of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute, was a social innovation advisor to the Obama White House, and has been named three separate years to *The Nonprofit Times* list of the 50 most influential nonprofit leaders in America. He lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, with his wife and five children.

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