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Battle Creek Leaders Announce the “Village,” a Community-led Collaboration to Improve Outcomes for Minority Residents

Battle Creek, Mich - Leaders representing Battle Creek’s Black, Burmese and LatinX communities today announced the “Village” a comprehensive plan in which they will work together to achieve equity and prosperity for all members of the Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) community. The Village’s reemergence plan centers around systems change, breaking down historic barriers and creating access and opportunity four key pillars: industry and food, education, health and wellness, and personal growth and advocacy.

The Village is led by a steering committee of local community leaders: Pastor Chris McCoy, executive director of New Level Sports Ministries; Jose Orozco, executive director of Voces; Tha Par, executive director of The Burma Center; and, Pastor Richard Bailey, a pastor for Truth in Action Ministries. These community leaders work in partnership with the Village management team that includes Damon Brown, founder of R.I.S.E. Corp; Deborah L. Sallee, president of the A. Philip Randolph Institute (APRI) Greater Battle Creek Chapter; Kyra Wallace, president and CEO of the Southwestern Michigan Urban League (SWMUL); and, Dr. Elishae Johnson, owner of Eudemonia PLLC.

The Village is built upon years of intensive community planning that began in 2007 when New Level Sports Ministries developed the Faith Community Village planning process in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Battle Creek. This was followed by two subsequent community development plans that incorporated the needs, disparities, challenges and opportunities present in the Burmese and LatinX communities, all of which were aimed at alleviating social and economic barriers.

“Our community knew it was essential to work at a higher systems level to influence change, but first we needed to identify our greatest areas of need so we could be focused in our approach,” said Pastor McCoy. “We learned through these planning processes and by listening to our community, that we must control our future. We needed to build a Village - one in which we are leading design and implementation, instead of allowing others to design it for us.”

The Village is organized as an initiative of United Way for Battle Creek and Kalamazoo Region (UWBCKR) and supported through the W.K. Kellogg Foundation’s Catalyzing Community Giving (CCG) grant program. CCG is a national grant that supports communities of color in using philanthropy to become agents of their own change and to positively impact the lives of children and families in their communities. In 2020, the Kellogg Foundation provided the seed funding for the Village, taking the fundamentals of previous planning processes and applying them across BIPOC communities in Battle Creek. To date, W.K. Kellogg Foundation has invested nearly \$1.4 million in the Village.

“The United Way recognizes that communities of color across our country have been afflicted by systems of oppression – from education and housing to criminal justice,” said Nakia Baylis, Ph.D., senior director of data and equitable systems at UWBCKR. “We are so grateful to the W.K. Kellogg Foundation

for partnering with us to help break down those systems in Battle Creek by promoting the development of children, strong families and neighborhoods, and increasing access to economic development.”

While serving and advocating for the needs that are unique to their specific communities, the Village leaders will work collaboratively on issues and opportunities that affect all BIPOC residents in Battle Creek, with each leading a planning pillar.

The Village has been hosting community conversations to learn from residents about their critical needs and considerations for each of the planning pillars. Engagement and feedback from the residents will inform how the Village prioritizes and structures planning and actions going forward. The African-American and Burmese communities engaged in meetings earlier this spring and Orozco will be host conversations for the LatinX community in the coming weeks.

Building on his long-term dedication to helping the Black community build wealth and ownership in Battle Creek, Pastor McCoy is charged with leading the industry and food pillar, which will focus on the food economy and climate change, land and home ownership, workforce development, dollars retained in BIPOC communities, and group economics. Damon Brown of R.I.S.E., a reintegration program for returning citizens, is managing this pillar in partnership with Pastor McCoy.

Tha Par manages the health and wellness pillar, which will seek to advance culture and community pride, creativity and innovation, parent engagement, and mentorship and leadership networks. Dr. Elishae Johnson of Eudemonia, PLLC, a practice providing telehealth counseling and consultation, will manage this pillar with Par and Brown.

“The Village’s focus on health and wellness aims to reduce generational trauma in communities of color by addressing the different sources of trauma. For the Burmese community, the current conflict and violence between Myanmar’s military and pro-democracy demonstrators is a recent source of stress,” said Par. “Together, we will leverage our diversity to create one community that views everything through an equitable lens to effectively address different historic trauma within all oppressed groups.”

Par will also be focused on stabilizing the Burma Center’s infrastructure and establishing it as a key hub and resource for the community.

Jose Orozco will be managing the education pillar, working to unite the BIPOC community in Battle Creek around high quality educational resources and alternative education programs that will prepare residents for diverse employment opportunities and career advancement. Kyra Wallace will be managing this pillar in partnership with Orozco. This includes supporting family engagement, culturally relevant teaching and spaces, youth entrepreneurship, and community education support systems. Orozco said, “education is the foundation of true systemic change and through this effort, we are demonstrating to our young people how shared goals can be reached with and for all communities of color.”

Orozco became executive director of Voces in Feb. 2020, just weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted the community and demanded a quick pivot in priorities for the organization. Orozco’s future focus will entail building capacity in the organization as it emerges from the pandemic, which includes creating a place-based hub for the LatinX community. “A critical priority is to find a

location within our community that will provide adequate space for administration, programming and community gathering,” said Orozco.

Pastor Bailey is leading the personal growth and advocacy pillar. This will be bolstered by programs that focus on leadership, management and succession, civil and human rights, and collective ownership.

Pastor Bailey said, “our path forward is designed around solutions that will help our community become economically independent including community development corporations and a neighborhood credit union, which will create job opportunities and build and sustain prosperity.” Deborah L. Sallee, president of APRI Battle Creek, a civil and workers rights organization, will be managing this pillar in partnership with Rev. Bailey.

There are also several programs being offered to support and advance Battle Creek’s BIPOC community. Throughout the pandemic, cohort leaders and their respective organizations have been managing COVID-19 relief efforts such as vaccination clinics and food distribution. On April 27, the Burma Center kicked off a 55-day health challenge and, on May 1, applications opened for the Washington Heights Entrepreneurial Fund, a \$2 million fund for entrepreneurial and real estate development projects in the historic Battle Creek neighborhood through a partnership with Battle Creek Unlimited and New Level Sports Ministries. [Click here](#) for more information. Additionally, Voces started a summer learning program on June 7, which runs through August 15.

Along with today’s announcement, the Village launched a web page and social media platforms to help keep the community informed and engaged throughout the planning and implementation process. A print community newsletter “The Village Voices” is also planned for distribution to Battle Creek’s BIPOC community and other stakeholders, and will be translated into Spanish and Burmese. The website is <https://changethestory.org/village/>, and the Village can be found on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#) and [Tik Tok](#).

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