



Friday, August 30, 2024

Dear Community Members, Philanthropists, and Civic Leaders,

In light of the recent letter from Chief Jeffrey Norman, I feel compelled to respond not only as the CEO of City on a Hill but as a member of this community who is deeply concerned about the future of our youth and the fabric of our society. Chief Norman's letter addresses the urgent issue of rising youth crime in our city—an issue that has roots far deeper than the symptoms we see today. His words echo what many of us know to be true: our community is at a critical crossroads, one that demands both reflection and decisive, compassionate action.

Understanding the Roots of the Problem

As a mentor once taught me, you cannot fix a problem you don't understand, and you can't understand a problem at a distance. This is why proximity matters. The issues plaguing our youth are not isolated incidents; they are symptoms of a societal system that has been broken for generations. The historical realities of Jim Crow laws, redlining, and the resulting segregated communities have led to the breakdown of families and legacies. Over decades, this chronic neglect has resulted in adults struggling with day-to-day trauma from their own childhoods, leaving them unable to develop healthy relationships with their children. This breakdown is what gives us the crisis we face today.

Our social contract—with each other and with our children—has been fractured. We have allowed a culture of hopelessness, mediocrity, and lawlessness to emerge in a segment of our population, exacerbated by poor housing conditions, lead poisoning, and inadequate access to healthy food, which impairs the brain development of far too many children in our most impoverished neighborhoods. These realities, compounded over generations, have left us with generations of adults who struggle to cope with daily trauma, let alone build healthy, stable relationships with their children. The absence of these relationships and the breakdown of the family unit are central to the problems we face.

The Role of Personal Accountability

Personal accountability is essential to realizing change. It requires us to be honest, to look in the mirror and acknowledge that our current way of navigating these issues is broken. While law enforcement, schools, and other institutions must each play their roles, it is clear that they cannot shoulder this burden alone. Change of this magnitude requires all of us—every part of our community—to engage intentionally, with purpose, and with a commitment to co-creating solutions that empower those who have the most to gain. This is the essence of the community of transformation that City on a Hill is building.

City on a Hill: A Community of Transformation

At City on a Hill, we are committed to being part of this solution. We are not just reacting to the symptoms of these problems—we are addressing the root causes. Now in our 23rd year, under new leadership and a fresh vision, we are emboldened to shape a holistic approach to community well-being and economic mobility. Our approach is rooted in evidence and [research](#) on what works for community-level change.

- **Family Mobility Initiative:** This initiative helps hold parents and heads of households accountable, empowering them to take control of their family's health and well-being while creating pathways to fulfilling work and income.
- **Integrated Health & Wellness Center:** Our center addresses a diversity of health and mental health needs, offering both individual and group therapy settings to help people and groups heal.
- **Training Programs:** We equip people from all walks of life to engage responsibly in the change effort. One such program is our [Removing Racial Residue \(R3\) Workshop](#), which is designed to help participants understand the lingering effects of racial trauma and to equip them with the tools needed to rebuild our social contract.

A Call to Action

And that's the core of what we do at City on a Hill—we're building a community of transformation that's right here, on the ground, where the need is.

At the heart of this transformation is the family. No one can replace the role that family plays in a child's life. However, we can't just point fingers and stay stuck in the past. We have to move forward with solutions that are both bold and grounded in reality. So, my message to the community, to businesses, to leaders, is this: come closer. Don't just observe from a distance—get involved. The change we need in Milwaukee isn't going to happen through good intentions alone.

We ask the philanthropic and corporate community to join us in resourcing this hub of innovation, which is a direct response to the sentiment expressed in Chief Norman's letter. Change as complex as we need in Milwaukee cannot be realized with good intentions alone. It requires a concerted effort, channeling social capital with purpose and intention to support those most in need of change.

Let us not judge from a distance but embrace the truth and get engaged in co-creating solutions—one family, one neighborhood, one school at a time.

Together, we can make Milwaukee a city where every child has the opportunity to thrive.

Sincerely,



Art Serna CEO, City on a Hill