



## **Detroit Composting for Community Health**

**As part of the Cities Taking Action to Address Health, Equity, and Climate Change Initiative, Detroit was one of six U.S. cities that received support from the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#) and C40 Cities to create transformative community-led projects.**

### **Health, equity and climate risks in Detroit**

From the early 20th Century, Detroit became the centre of the American automotive industry. Known colloquially as Motor City, Detroit is still home to some of the largest car manufacturers, such as Ford, Chrysler (Stellantis North America), and General Motors (GM). The automotive industry fuelled Detroit's economy for decades, resulting in a population boom.

As with other northern U.S. industrial cities, it attracted people from around the U.S. and the world. In the early 20th Century, this included African-Americans, who left southern U.S. states with hopes of escaping racist policies and unjust treatment for an improved quality of life.

Although the automotive industry powered the economic growth of the city and brought job opportunities to millions, it has also had harmful consequences. Detroit residents are exposed to many [environmental hazards](#), including air pollution and lead contamination from nearby [assembly plants](#) and waste facilities.

In Eastern Detroit, an area with a majority African-American population, people live in close proximity to these harmful sources of pollution. The [asthma rate](#) in the neighbourhood is three times higher than the state average, and twice as high as Detroit's.

One of the greatest dangers to health in Eastern Detroit was an incinerator, which exceeded pollution emissions standards [more than 750 times](#) within five years. The Detroit incinerator was burning [3,300 tons of trash each day](#), which was coming into the city from all over the state. After years of

environmental community pressure and mobilisation, the incinerator was closed down in 2018 – a huge success for local activism.

### **What is Detroit Composting for Community Health?**

Detroit Composting for Community Health is a series of composting pilot projects around Detroit led by community leaders and community-based organisations, including Eastside Community Network, Georgia Street Community Collective (GSCC), FoodPLUS Detroit, Sustainable Community Farms, and Breathe Free Detroit.

Together, these organisations are working to increase access to urban farming and composting to improve quality of life for people living in some of Detroit's most polluted areas.

### **What has Detroit Composting for Community Health achieved so far?**

#### **Detroit Community Compost Training Program**

The Sustainable Community Farm, led by Michelle Jackson, provides a green haven for residents. The Farm hosts community events like Juneteenth celebrations and movie nights, as well as being a centre for farming, composting, and growing healthy crops from rich soil.

A fourth-generation farmer, Michelle grows vegetables and flowers and has a composting system in her farm. She has distributed 'Sustainable Veggie Boxes' of farm produce to residents, and has invited experts from local universities, including the University of Michigan, to teach people about soil testing.

The Sustainable Community Farm hosts the 'Detroit Community Compost' training program to equip young people aged 16–24 with urban farming and composting knowledge. The programme provides an entryway for those not currently in school or employment into good green jobs that contribute to environmental sustainability. Michelle has partnered with Marvin Hayes, an expert and leader in composting efforts in Baltimore,

organising visits to [Baltimore Compost Collective](#) for in-depth compost and sustainability training.

### **People's Compost Initiative**

The Georgia Street Community Collective (GSCC) is a community hub in the eastside of Detroit. Mark Covington and Lorraine Covington have been serving their community since 2008 by hosting free events at GSCC including holiday celebrations, backpack and school supply giveaways, coat and clothes donations, and after-school and summer programmes for young people. Many of their initiatives are designed to enable their neighbours to be healthier. Some of the ways they do this is by [hosting a university-affiliated mobile health fair](#) that includes free testing for HIV, COVID-19, diabetes and other illnesses, as well as distributing free healthy food from their on-site farm.

The GSCC joined forces with Renee V. Wallace, community leader and composting advocate, to strengthen the composting system at the farm to create good compost and healthier soil. In collaboration with Renee's community non-profit FoodPlus Detroit, they have expanded their urban farming and composting efforts to train up members of the community. The 'People's Compost Initiative' offers compost training and demonstrations for people of all ages. So far, they have equipped over 70 people with compost skills and knowledge across Detroit.

### **Compost Warriors at Wayne State University**

Through a strong partnership between FoodPLUS Detroit and Georgia Street Community Collective (GSCC), Wayne State University, one of the leading higher education institutions in Detroit and in Michigan, has been transformed into a waste-conscious and sustainable campus.

The 'Compost Warriors' programme involves composting and sustainability training sessions for students, empowering them to be ambassadors on their campus. The students were trained to conduct quality control checks on the food scraps collected from the cafeteria and retail outlets and to weigh, document, and transport collections to the GSCC farm for composting. Each year, they have rescued an average of 16,000 lbs of food

waste – totaling 40,000 lbs to date – to be transformed into rich compost for the urban farm.

The dining service staff have also visited the GSCC farm to understand how their partnership is contributing to a better, healthier soil supply for community members. This composting pilot has inspired a whole new approach and mindset for Wayne State University dining services and campus.

Now there's a campus-wide composting collection system, dining services have information about composting front and centre in the dining hall, and the head chef is exploring the possibility of collaborating with GSCC to grow farm-fresh ingredients to feed students on campus.

This pilot project focused on creating an integrated compost system that actively engaged students and residents, expanded GSCC's farming and composting capacity, and produced quality compost for the Eastside and college campus communities.

### **Partnership with Mother Earth Foundation**

The Detroit team fostered a relationship and learning exchange with the [Mother Earth Foundation \(MEF\)](#) based in Quezon City, Philippines. The MEF works with city governments, young people, waste workers and other civil society groups to advance a zero waste approach in the Philippines.

For two and a half years, the Detroit team met and exchanged ideas with MEF to improve their composting practices and scale up their efforts to the city level. In 2022, some Detroit team members were able to travel to Quezon City to see the initiatives for themselves and meet with the staff in person.

During the two week visit, the Detroit team learned about and visited the Material Recovery Facilities (MRF) initiative that MEF had instituted, as well as schools that the MEF has partnered with to make them zero waste. The teams completed a [waste assessment and brand audit \(WABA\)](#) together.

WABA is a two-step process, which firstly documents the types and volume of waste created in a region. The second step is to identify which companies are the biggest polluters in the region, using the product labels on the waste. This helps to build more effective strategies to reduce waste and recycle more.

When the Detroit team returned home, they also conducted a WABA with the help of a local waste facility. This exercise is just one of the ways in which the learning exchange between the two cities has inspired action towards improved composting methods and Detroit's longer-term goals towards zero waste.

The MEF staff from Quezon City also had the opportunity to travel to Detroit in 2023, to learn more about the city and its composting pilots. This visit included a presentation from MEF staff on their composting and waste initiatives, delivered to the city council's organics committee. This has helped inspire new ideas about how to bring city-wide, community-led initiatives into Detroit.

### **Policy windows**

The local composting pilots have also enabled a policy win at the city level, thanks to advocacy efforts of the Green Taskforce. In February 2022, Detroit City Council called for the Department of Public Works to institute a pilot programme for food waste by adding a third bin for organic material. This three-bin system would make composting more accessible to people all across Detroit.

Through these various approaches to urban farming and composting, community leaders and compost advocates have empowered Detroit residents and students to farm, compost, and come together to cultivate healthy food and vibrant community spaces.

This project included the leadership and participation of the following people (in alphabetical order): Daryl Pierson (formerly at Wayne State University), Grace Maves (formerly at Wayne State University), KT Andresky (Breathe Free Detroit), Lori McPhee (Georgia Street Community Collective)

Mark Covington (GSCC), Marvin Hayes (Baltimore Compost Collective) Lorraine Covington (GSCC), Michelle Jackson (Sustainable Community Farms), Renee V. Wallace (FoodPLUS Detroit), and Richard Ackerman (Eastside Community Network), and Wayne State University Compost Warriors.

*Support for this project was provided by the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#) as part of the Cities Taking Action to Address Health, Equity, and Climate Change Initiative. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.*