



WHERE THE STORIES ARE—THE NAMES, FACES, STRUGGLES, AND SUCCESSES OF COMMUNITY SHARES

## POOREST CITY IN THE NATION

### ***Policy Matters Ohio lets the numbers tell the stories of working class Ohioans***

**Policy Matters Ohio** tells the stories of working class Ohioans with real data. What impact will the governor's proposed tax plan have on YOUR life and YOUR family? Are YOU one of the many who are "going broke" in America? What will "social security" mean when YOU retire or what does it mean now to your elderly parents? What COLOR is your paycheck if you're not a white male employee?

Policy Matters Ohio is a nonprofit policy research organization that seeks to broaden the debate about economic policy in Ohio. Policy Matters provides real-world analysis and high-quality research focused on issues that matter to low- and middle-income workers in Ohio. Policy Matters strengthens democracy by providing Ohio's citizens with the essential tools to participate in the public discussion on the economy.

**Poorest city: a social justice problem**—Policy Matters is one of many member organizations who face the reality of the "poorest city" label every day. Most of Shares' organizations serve low-income Clevelanders—the most down and out among us. Nearly every one of Shares' member organizations has a "poorest city" story to tell—particularly how poverty is not an isolated issue and that the real story is a much bigger, much more complex one. Shares' organizations speak to the interconnectedness of issues: how poverty is linked to health care, discrimination, homelessness, mental illness, addiction, domestic violence, worker's rights, crime, and more.

## COMMUNITY SHARES AND CULTURAL ARTS

### ***1. Where arts and social justice intersect***

**Cleveland Public Theatre** (CPT) has been a member of Community Shares since 1992, and CPT founder James Levin is a member of Shares' Board of Directors. Drawing on CPT's longstanding commitment to social justice (creative partnerships with inner-city children and low-income men in transition, innovative stagings of social justice-themed productions, etc.), in 2002, Levin encouraged Shares to add a special arts initiative to its biannual membership process. This resulted in Shares' Board articulating criteria for organizations that accomplish social justice through the arts, and Shares welcomed **Near West Theatre** and **Independent Pictures** to its family of supported member organizations. Community Shares offers a non-traditional, alternative source of annual funding for these arts organizations who successfully combine quality cultural arts experiences with a larger mission to educate, advocate, and create change.

### ***2. GORDON SQUARE ARTS DISTRICT—Shares organizations collaborate to realize their shared vision of Cleveland's Detroit Shoreway neighborhood as arts epicenter***

Several Shares organizations live in Cleveland's Detroit Shoreway neighborhood—including **Cleveland Public Theatre** (Shares' "Social Justice Member of Year" in 2003), **Detroit-Shoreway Community Development Organization (DSCDO)**, **Near West Theatre** (planning new theatre project in old Lou's Furniture building), **Independent Pictures**, and **Lesbian/Gay Community Service Center of Greater Cleveland**. With the leadership of Jeff Ramsey (DSCDO), James Levin (CPT), and Stephanie Morrison-Hrbek (NWT), these organizations and other community partners are collaboratively planning an ambitious neighborhood revitalization project called the Gordon Square Arts District intended to energize economic development in the neighborhood.

### ***Never too OLD to make a difference***

Community Shares recently collaborated with three of its members (**Hard Hatted Women**, **ACLU of Ohio Foundation**, and **Adoption Network Cleveland**) to secure a \$50,000 grant from The Cleveland Foundation's Successful Aging Initiative project. With this grant, the four organizations have forged a pilot project called "Engaging Elders for Civic Change," a volunteer initiative intended to recruit "seasoned," retired, and senior volunteers for meaningful social justice work. If successful, the piloted model will be rolled out to all of Community Shares' member organizations, with Shares serving as a centralized source of talented and interested senior volunteers. The project is described at [www.communityshares.org/eccc.shtml](http://www.communityshares.org/eccc.shtml).

### ***Social justice in matters of the heart and home***

The **Domestic Violence Center** helps women and families in crisis—it's a critical service DVC offers to the community. But their work doesn't stop at providing safety and services for domestic violence victims. DVC complements its direct service work with equally important social marketing and advocacy efforts. These two aspects of the center's mission recently collided when Ohio voters said "yes" to Issue 1.

DVC has long been fighting against the social stigma of domestic violence, arguing on the streets and in the courts for its status as a crime. To this end, DVC offers court advocates and legal assistance for its clients.

In recent months, since Issue 1 took effect, DVC has joined forces with other Community Shares allies including the **Lesbian/Gay Community Center of Greater Cleveland** and the **ACLU of Ohio Foundation**, to unveil the dangers of Issue 1—particularly in domestic violence cases in which the victim lives with but is not legally married to the abuser. DVC Executive Director, Cathleen Alexander, has been a vocal and public advocate against recent court decisions that such cases do not constitute domestic violence, under Issue 1. The Lesbian/Gay Community Center (celebrating its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary) and ACLU have also taken on Issue 1, challenging its dangerous implications and violation of rights for nontraditional families.

### ***Little fish win victories over big sharks—loan sharks, that is***

Among several community-decided areas of focus, **East Side Organizing Project (ESOP)** has been a leader in organizing Greater Cleveland residents who are being abused by predatory lenders. ESOP's formula for action and success hinges on the "power of the people" with actual community residents and neighbors working together to make change. In the past several years, ESOP and its members:

- won a national agreement with Fairbanks Capital Corporation (now SPS, Inc.) that prohibits dozens of predatory loan servicing practices; won more than \$2 million in refunded fees and short pay agreements for abused customers; saved 200 customers from foreclosure
- negotiated a Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) agreement with Charter One Bank; since signing the agreement, Charter One has increased its lending in low-moderate income census tracts by more than 300%
- began expanding predatory lending organizing into Akron, pulling together meetings of 60 community members who want to fight back against abusive lenders

***Community Shares' roots in the Fair Housing Movement***—The formation of Community Shares 20 years ago was strongly rooted in a movement to prevent predatory lending and to promote fair housing. ESOP is only one of several Community Shares member organizations that work together to combat predatory lending, including three founding members of Shares: **Heights Community Congress**, **Housing Advocates Inc.** (celebrating its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary), and **Housing Research & Advocacy Center**.

Other Shares members working on neighborhood and housing issues include: **Amistad Development Corporation**, **Detroit-Shoreway Community Development Organization**, **Habitat for Humanity**, **Living in Cleveland Center**, **Ohio City Near West Development Corporation**, **Slavic Village Development**, **St. Clair Superior Development Corporation**, and **Union Miles Development Corporation**.