



## **Detroit Coalition Against Police Brutality**

### **“Peace Zones for Life” Concept Paper**

On Good Friday of 2009, 15-year-old Detroiters Robert “Tazzy” Mitchell was tased and killed by Warren, Michigan police officers. In May of this year, the Detroit Coalition Against Police Brutality (DCAPB) organized with his family, including mother Cora Renee Mitchell, to build a bridge of peace between Warren and Detroit. The march, 200 persons strong, drew representatives from numerous organizations including the Detroit Roundtable, Detroit City of Hope, NAACP Detroit Branch, and Michigan Emergency Coalition Against War & Injustice, Warren UAW Local 909 (including their president, who had a broken leg). A candlelight vigil at the site of Mitchell’s death was the culmination of the march.

This was important work; Mr. Mitchell’s case is not an isolated incident. In fact, Robert Mitchell had been afraid to venture into Warren—literally across the street from his northeast Detroit neighborhood—because he and others in the area had personally witnessed Warren police chasing Detroit young people back across the border.

In spearheading the march, the Coalition was looking go beyond mere public protest to:

- provide the facts around Mitchell’s death in the face of Warren police officials’ efforts to criminalize him
- reflect family/community rage and pain

- demand justice
- de-escalate conflict between Warren and Detroit citizens/governments
- promote a joint plan to build peace across perceived jurisdictional lines

We believe that the march, and the Coalition's related organizing activities, which included ensuring a presence at the Warren City Council; communication with other Coalition-assisted families; media outreach; and solicitation of the assistance of both the Warren and Detroit police departments, made significant inroads in moving the above agenda forward. Prior to the march, members of the Coalition and the Mitchell family, who were supported by other grieving parents who had lost children to police violence, spoke at the Warren City Council meeting. Members of the Council literally suspended their rules and time limits in order the family and community to fully give voice to the issues of violence and policing which created this tragedy. They also expressed their personal sympathies to the family of Robert Mitchell and asked to be involved in future activities to bring about unanimity to promote de-escalation between Warren and Detroit. The Council members, and members of the city's Crime Commission, and even some Warren police officers, cited the need to evaluate some of the long-standing grievances of Detroit youth vis-à-vis the Warren Police Department.

This response on the part of the Warren Council, based on the initiative of the Coalition, helped to synthesize our efforts to transform both Warren and Detroit from the ground up.

Ms. Mitchell and the Coalition also met with Warren Mayor Jim Fouts, who provided a basis for collaboration with Warren by stating that he had serious concerns about the use of tasers, and that he wanted to investigate their applicable usage in defined situations. We later found out that one of Mayor Fouts's relatives, a young man, had been tased and injured by another Detroit-area police department.

Members of the Crime Commission at the Council meeting sought out the Coalition and asked for assistance in developing a citizens' police oversight

committee, which would have greater power to transform and evaluate the way their police department conducts business.

Subsequently, the Mitchell march became an effort to transform attitudes, look beyond boundaries, and build unity to make 8 mile a symbol of peace as opposed to a line of demarcation.

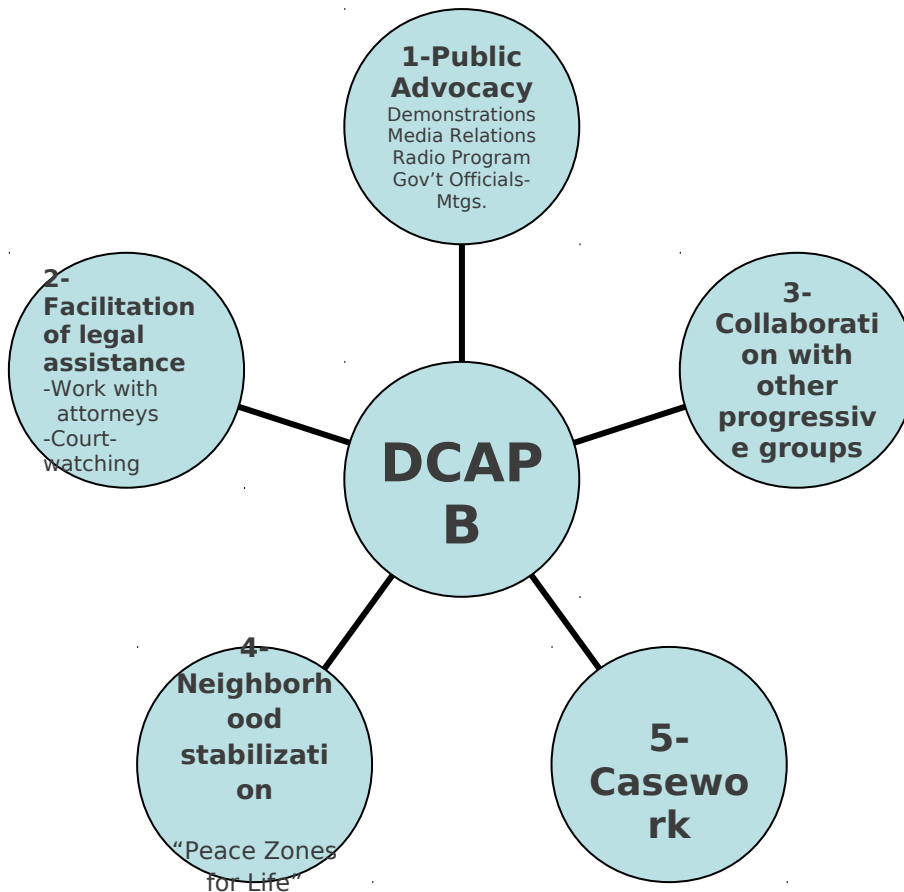
From beginning to end and beyond, the march reflected the transformation the Coalition has sought to bring about. When the march started, the chants were “No justice no peace”; by the middle of the march, the chants had changed to “Peace zones for life.” As the group crossed over into Warren, many of the marchers asked Warren residents to join in a combined fight for justice and to promote unification of the two communities...even in the face of some austere Warren police officers, who seemed to cringe as the marchers passed by.

Both the Detroit and Warren police departments were asked by the Coalition to facilitate traffic control to enable us to safely cross 8 mile road. We were able to get this help after speaking with the Chiefs of both departments and members of their respective executive staffs.

While the litigation regarding Robert Mitchell continues, and our demands to eliminate the use of tasers still stands, the energy and sense of community built from this march has energized youth in the neighborhoods. Many of them no longer see themselves as victims, but instead as agents of change in the fight to humanize an otherwise inhuman situation.

So the Coalition, in conjunction with the Mitchell family and residents of Warren/Macomb County, is planning an even larger demonstration and ongoing connectivity for this October. People from around the country told us that they’ve drawn inspiration from this effort, which has moved us from bitterness to betterment. Cora Renee Mitchell has herself said that the people of Warren are not her enemies, and that many of them have called her to express their condolences. She has said that she does not have disdain for all Warren police officers; her concern is to make sure that there is justice in her son’s case, and that this effort (Peace Zones for Life) transform the way we deal with violence.

This organizing effort is an excellent representation of the Coalition’s modus operandi. The diagram below illustrates our holistic approach:



The “Peace Zones for Life” concept featured in branch #4 is critical to our efforts to address community violence and dysfunction, and to address some of the root causes of police violence, which often happens in the context of interpersonal conflict between related persons or individuals in neighborhoods. It is designed to accomplish these two basic goals

- The de-escalation of hostility between residents in a community, community members and public/private institutions; and the de-escalation of randomized violence in communities.

- The concomitant development of independent self-sustaining economic/social institutions that will serve to define geographical areas and undergird the re-creation of community.

This program has evolved out of the work of the Coalition to move from “pain” to “program.”

## **“Peace Zones for Life”: The Process**

*Needs Assessment*—In this first step of the process, the Coalition will engage community residents in a given geographic area to clarify and crystallize their felt community challenges, needs and opportunities. It is extremely important for the residents of a community to “own” their own neighborhoods and feel a sense of empowerment that they have the ability to create a functional economically self-sustaining community where residents are valued and where young people can be challenged to develop into contributing adults. An important part of this process is identifying a group of individuals who can act as leaders and organizers. We would focus particularly on identifying young people who might otherwise engage in antisocial and criminal behaviors, and empowering them by providing ample opportunity for them to express their opinions and provide guided leadership to other young people and their community.

The needs assessment would include a guided process to help citizens create economically viable small businesses, e.g. urban gardens, transportation services, cleaning services, lawn care, and the like, working closely with government-funded/sponsored business assistance centers such as the One-Stop Capital Shop, Small Business Administration’s SCORE program, and others.

*Creation of conflict resolution centers*—These will be “neutral” places (e.g. church or community center) where individuals can resolve their differences in the presence of trained conflict mediators. The Coalition has already begun this work informally, and has as a result been offered two centers by some of the individuals with whom we are working: a church in the Puritan/Livernois area, and a vacant field at Montgomery and Holmur in

Detroit. The latter location is quite significant; after a particularly egregious police shooting into the home/porch of a resident in the area, residents decided they wanted to have a rally to call attention to the incident and took the initiative to clean up an area vacant lot that was extremely overgrown. Since that time, they have maintained the lot and use it frequently for community meeting, family picnics, and other community events/celebrations. In short, they have, on their own initiative with the Coalition serving as the catalyst, created a “Peace Zone” of sorts, where residents can come together and safely interact. This is the kind of work that the Coalition wishes to expand and institutionalize in urban communities across Metropolitan Detroit.

*Creation of a “Detroit Peace Officials Association” (DPOA)*—The Coalition is working to create a cadre of young people who will be challenged and trained to keep peace in their communities by setting up neighborhood watches and participating in the conflict resolution centers.

*Artistic efforts that both chronicle the neighborhood challenges and celebrate neighborhood “heroes” and “sheroes” who have worked tirelessly to create a better community*—We find that “telling the story” is a powerful way to connect individuals and catalyze change. We will use the conflict resolution centers to create these artistic presentations, which will encompass both visual and performing arts and feature music, rap, plays, dance, posters, paintings, and sculpture.

In short, the Coalition plans to facilitate a holistic neighborhood effort that encompasses economic, religious, government and “citizen” institutions.

### **The Work Continues...**

The Coalition is now working to create a “Peace Zones for Life” plaque on 8 Mile Road that will be placed during its annual October 22<sup>nd</sup> march. We have made contact with citizens and government officials in both the Detroit and Warren communities, and have official approval to move forward with a location and a rally.