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"This is a neighborhood that is controlling its own destiny."

Tom Schneider, executive director, COA Youth and Family Centers

SHOOTING FOR SUCCESS



GARY PORTER / FOR THE JOURNAL SENTINEL

Basketball is just one of the activities for kids during "Family Fun Night" at COA's Goldin Center in the Amani neighborhood. The event includes games, a resource fair and food. A new early childhood education center is expected to open at Goldin in July.

Residents put challenged Amani area on new path

By **ASHLEY LUTHERN**
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Brenda Hart-Richardson was ready. Brochures and fliers were stacked neatly on the table. A sign-up sheet was secured to a clipboard.

"They're doing taxes for free here," she told a woman who approached the table inside one of COA's Youth and Family Centers in Milwaukee.

"Oh, and take this if you're looking for a job," she said, handing over a slip of paper with instructions to get emails about local employment openings.

Hart-Richardson pointed to the far end of the table, toward the renderings of a local park renovation.

"We plan to have a good time at the park and we want you to be a part of it," she said. The woman wrote her name and email



Goldie Rocko, 7, (right) gets help matching foods to their food groups from Amandajean McCarley during "Family Fun Night" at COA's Goldin Center in the Amani neighborhood. For more photos, go to jsonline.com/photos.

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Residents involved

on a sheet to get updates on neighborhood happenings. Hart-Richardson smiled as more people walked up to the table.

"There's a lot of exciting stuff going on in Amani," Hart-Richardson, an active volunteer with the neighborhood group Amani United, said to the visitors at her table.

Amani — bordered by N. 27th St., W. Keefe Ave., N. 20th St. and W. Center St. — historically has been one of Milwaukee's most challenged neighborhoods with high rates of poverty and crime.

But in the last several years, people say something has shifted. More residents are getting involved, while nonprofit and government agencies are collaborating. Homicides continue to be a concern, but data from the Milwaukee Police Department show overall crime dropping by double-digits over the last two years — even as much as 36% in one of the census tracts.

COA's Goldin Center and the Dominican Center for Women are ground zero for much of that change.

"This is a neighborhood that is controlling its own destiny," COA Executive Director Tom Schneider said.

In the last several years, COA opened a family resource center that offers parenting classes at Goldin; expanded after-school, weekend and summer youth programs; and worked with Children's Hospital of Wisconsin and Marquette University's College of Nursing to open a pediatric and family clinic inside Goldin. A new accredited early childhood education center is expected to open at Goldin in July.

Meanwhile, the Dominican Center has added more adult GED classes and is serving as the lead community organization for the Building Neighborhood Capacity Program, a federally and locally funded effort to revitalize neighborhoods.

The program is behind block cleanups and vigils, painting vacant houses, expanded block watches and convening the neighborhood association, Amani United.

"There's not just one silver bullet," said Sister Patricia Rogers, the center's executive director.

'Everything's on the upswing'

Amani United's president, Arlene Patterson, has lived in the area for more than 30 years and says she has never seen residents this involved.

"Everything's on the up-



GARY PORTER / FOR THE JOURNAL SENTINEL

Children experience using a wheelchair through the Medical College of Wisconsin's Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation group during "Family Fun Night" activities.

swing," she said. "I always feel safe because I don't fear anything in my community."

"The bottom line is the gunshots have subsided," she said.

The next project, she said, is the completion of Moody Park. The park's old indoor pool had been boarded up for more than a decade and has since been torn down.

Residents worked with the Milwaukee County Parks Department to design the park's \$2 million renovation with features such as walking paths, a community building, basketball courts and a splash pad instead of a pool.

"We're so looking forward to having the park because we have a lot of kids that need it," Patterson said. "Most of these kids in the inner city, they are deprived of certain elements of their life, and we are trying to keep them thriving."

The park should be completed by mid-summer, according to Jim Keegan, the chief of planning and development for parks.

The palpable change in the neighborhood has been noticed by Milwaukee police Capt. Thomas Stigler, who is sending officers to rallies, cleanups, picnics, Amani United meetings and other neighborhood events.

"In high-crime areas, occasionally the officers become cynical," Stigler said. "We want the officers that work day in and day out to see there's a true commitment from the good people that live in these neighborhoods who want to make it a better place."

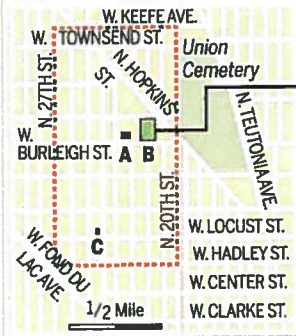
Amani United supporters wanted to spread awareness of new services and activities in the neighborhood and now regularly publish a newsletter. COA and Children's Hospital also have near-monthly family nights at Goldin Center.

Those community nights have been an integral part of Amani United's recruitment. Hart-Richardson, Patterson and other volunteers staff the neighborhood association's table during the resource fair portion of the event.

Neighborhood begins to rebound

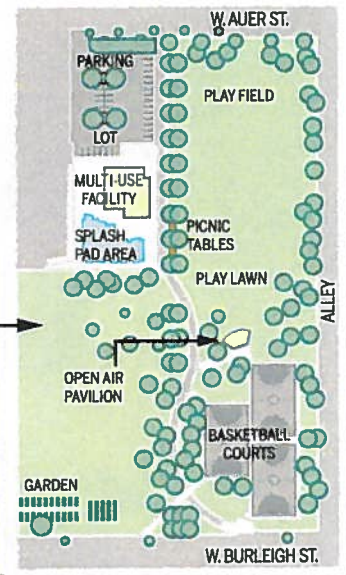
Historically, the Amani area has been one of Milwaukee's most challenged neighborhoods with high rates of poverty and crime.

But in recent years, more residents and nonprofit and government agencies are collaborating, and data shows crime is dropping.



Source: Milwaukee County Parks Department

- A: Goldin Center**, 2320 W. Burleigh St.
- B: Moody Park**, 2200 W. Burleigh St.
- C: Dominican Center for Women**, 2470 W. Locust St.



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About eight other groups have tables, promoting everything from medical care to chess club. Several hundred people come through Goldin Center during the event.

Dinner is available, while teens and kids play in the gym and dance. Perhaps most important, the gathering serves as a conduit for people to connect with other organizations.

Chenille Cole has lived in Amani for about two years with her young daughter, who is going on 2 years old. Cole originally came to Goldin Center for the family resource center, specifically baby-related programs.

"I am very familiar with all the fun nights they have. I'm a regular," she said with a laugh.

But she didn't know about Moody Park until a recent family fun night. She jotted her name on the Amani United

sign-up sheet and later mentioned she thinks park planners should consider strategies to slow down drivers on W. Burleigh St., where she said people speed regularly.

It's the kind of resident input Amani United and other neighborhood leaders want to hear. When residents have a voice and take the lead in local projects, like designing a park and advocating for a clinic, things improve, Schneider said.

"Everyone wants a simple solution to a complex problem," he said. "We need a comprehensive solution and that's why you're seeing so many different pieces that are going into literally transforming Amani."