

The Post and Courier

Promise program taking shape

Neighborhood initiative hires local to serve as chief

By [Diette Courrégé](#)

The Post and Courier

Monday, July 5, 2010

The group hoping to break the cycle of poverty in an area straddling the peninsula and North Charleston is coalescing and gaining momentum.

In fewer than four months and without a paid staff, the Charleston Promise Neighborhood has hired a well-known community member as its chief executive officer, recruited a governing board of high-profile local leaders, rented office space and secured partnerships with Charleston's major foundations, colleges and nonprofits. That's in addition to nailing down funding commitments of more than \$275,000 for this year, including \$50,000 each from four government agencies, and \$1.5 million for the next three years.



Photo by Wade Spees

The Post and Courier

Laura Deaton (from foreground), Charleston Promise Neighborhood director of operations, CEO Dwayne Green and board chairman Bill Hewitt are to move into the group's new office on Morrison Drive on Friday.

Previous story

[Project to focus on poverty, education](#), published 03/27/10

"It's really encouraging that so many people and organizations believe in the value and opportunity that is here," said Bill Hewitt, the board's chairman and a former chairman of the MUSC Foundation and Spoleto Festival. "It shows how much other people believe in what we're doing."

The purpose of the Charleston Promise Neighborhood is to transform a 5.6-square-mile area rife with poverty and crime and make it indistinguishable from the rest of the county within a generation. The zone would include more than 4,300 children under the age of 18, and it would encompass the attendance zones of Sanders-Clyde, James Simons, Mary Ford and Chicora elementary schools.

The effort is singular in that it will unite groups that often work apart from each other and will expand the best programs to help the area. The Charleston Promise Neighborhood will provide a continuum of supports for children from infancy through high school.

The concept is modeled on the Harlem Children's Zone, a 97-block area in Central Harlem in New York City, that piloted this project and has seen encouraging results.

The local group submitted an application to the federal government this week for one of twenty \$500,000 planning grants to create promise neighborhoods. More than 335 groups from across the country submitted applications, and grant awards will be announced in September.

"If it doesn't come, we're going to do the same work," Hewitt said. "If we get the grant, we can do it faster."

The group planned to use a national search firm to hire its executive director, but they ended up abandoning that idea after Dwayne Green's name surfaced. Green, a local attorney and community activist, was interviewed by board members, and Hewitt said they thought he would fit well in the chief executive officer role. He will coordinate its partnerships, build community engagement, and lead fundraising efforts, Hewitt said.

Green was familiar with the Harlem Children's Zone and was excited to hear about a similar project here. He plans to start on a part-time basis but said he's willing to work full-time in that role.

"That's how much I believe in it," he said. "It's a compelling project."

The group's biggest challenge is to ensure everyone understands that the Charleston Promise Neighborhood wants to enhance, not compete, with what organizations already are doing, he said.

"I think, if we're all sharing the same goals and trying to help the same community, that the combined effort will be greater than the individual parts," he said. "The main concern is that people don't feel threatened or someone's encroaching on their turf, but rather someone wants to help them do what they do even better."

The promise neighborhood group also planned to use a search firm to hire its chief operating officer, but they found another person with local ties to fill that spot. Laura Deaton has been the interim director of the Charleston Symphony Orchestra and YWCA, and she has a track record of helping to build nonprofits. Deaton will be responsible for the nonprofit's day-to-day operations, and she started working this week.

"I work with grassroots organization to make change in communities," she said. "Of course I wanted to get started right away."

Kids and youth are her passion, she said, and the lure of this effort is being able to offer services to children at the earliest stages possible. Like Green, she's been an admirer of the work done in Harlem and looks forward to

After taking care of administrative tasks necessary to get the organization up and running, her top priority will be leading the needs assessment of the targeted neighborhood, or determining the services that are and aren't being provided, she said.

The group will look at education, parenting, health care, community, employment and housing, and they will document the cost and results of each. Hewitt said they will focus on and expand programs that have the most benefit for the money spent.

"We want to understand what's out there before we do anything," he said. "Nobody knows how much money is being spent there today."

The Citadel and College of Charleston plan to research the best programs across the country that could work here, and they also will evaluate services provided within the promise neighborhood. MUSC plans to expand proven health care programs in the area, while Blackbaud is designing a state-of-the-art system that will allow the nonprofit to track programs and students' progress.

Other Charleston Promise Neighborhood partners include: Coastal Community Foundation, Metanoia, Trident United Way, and WINGS for Kids.

The board leading the nonprofit includes: Charleston Mayor Joe Riley, Charleston School Superintendent Nancy McGinley, Charleston County Council Chairman Teddie Pryor, North Charleston Mayor Keith Summey, Anita Zucker, John Barter, Martin Skelly and Jena Walldorf.

Reach **Diette Courrégé** at 937-5546 or dcourrege@postandcourier.com.

Copyright © 1995 - 2011 Evening Post Publishing Co..