



## Lake County Funders Call

Wednesday, April 13, 2022  
11:00 a.m. – 11:45 a.m.

### Participants

Jeanne Ang, Advocate Aurora Health  
Satori Bailey, Hunter Family Foundation  
Frank Baiocchi, Hunter Family Foundation  
Angela Baran, Healthcare Foundation of  
Northern Lake County  
Angela Bentsen, AgeGuide  
Asia Canady, Hunter Family Foundation  
Damon Coleman, Lake County Community  
Development  
Courtney Combs, The Lake County Community  
Foundation  
Molly Cullum, Schreiber Family Foundation  
Tom Decker, Chicago Green Insulation  
Carol Hincker, Julian Grace Foundation  
Willard Hunter, Hunter Family Foundation  
Jawanza Malone, Wieboldt Foundation

Maggie Morales, The Lake County Community  
Foundation  
Loretta Namovic, Baum Family Foundation  
Gail Nelson, Steans Family Foundation  
Brenda O'Connell, Lake County Govt  
Leah Perri, The Lake County Community  
Foundation  
Cheri Richardson, Gorter Family Foundation  
Heather Sannes, Schreiber Family Foundation  
Maria Sievert, The Lake County Community  
Foundation  
Christopher Sweeting, Zion Police Department  
Matt Thornton, Zion Police Department  
Jeannette Velazquez, Great Lakes Credit Union  
Julia Wold, Grainger Foundation  
Anna Yankelev, Lake County Health Department  
Pat Yuzawa-Rubin, Circle of Service Foundation

### Welcome & Call Goals

Courtney Combs, Manager of Community Impact for The Lake County Community Foundation, thanked participants for joining the call and noted the goal for the conversation was to:

- Understanding the Community of Zion

### Understanding the Community of Zion – Matt Thornton, Zion Police Officer and Founder of [My Father's Business](#) and Lt. Christopher Sweeting of Zion Police Department

#### **Why did you become a police officer, what does it mean to you and your community?**

I absolutely love this city. It was an unlikely job, and I saw an ad in the paper and decided to apply. It's a crux of everything I see every day in the city I love. I try to take the negative and turn it to positives and glorify God with the badge. I don't think people know how dangerous Zion can be as a small city per capita. My goal is to turn the tides.

#### **What is My Father's Business (MFB)**

I started MFB in 2014 after I found Christ. It started with just a group of six men, shooting hoops on Fridays and sharing food. The real reason I do it is I teach youth a lesson every week. It has grown and has become a resource center now. Now we can offer them not just spiritual help but resource help, school, tutoring, college, etc.

**What are you seeing in Zion and the changes you have seen over the years? (Zion is a place that has affordable housing which has been attractive for those who have been displaced from Chicago or displaced due to gentrification in other areas)**

Sweeting - We are at the point now that we are dealing with grandchildren of the people we dealt with in their young early twenties, early teens. A lot of what we are seeing is generational. The housing thing has been a significant impact unfortunately affected Zion more than maybe other communities.

The biggest thing that I've seen is a lack of male role models, fathers in the home, and just a lot of the kids that are struggling and they don't even know what's possible for them. Something isn't even considered as an option for them because they are not aware of what is possible. A lot of that comes from familial influence. An early intervention is needed with mentoring and providing a good example for them to see because what they're getting from their peers or within their own home is taking them in a different direction.

Thornton – We don't have much here in Zion. We have one corridor, we have a library, Salem foods, a Walmart – there is very little for them to do (Little League, etc other activities). We have a park district but it's not so appealing unless you play basketball.

What does Gang Involvement look like in Zion?

Thornton – I would say 8 out of 10 kids claim loyalty to a Chicago gang. A lot of these kids feel they have to emulate what Chicago is like, their consciousness has been seared. I do blame social media, etc. as well, and then there is in-fighting amongst the groups. What we are seeing today in the youth is that it's so apparent it is younger and younger youth are more violent.

Sweeting – We took over 80 guns last year and up to this year we are up to over 40 already. Several of which were found on 14–16-year-olds. These are fully automatic handguns that have been converted. We have that as sort of the umbrella (gang activity) and then beneath that is a group of friends that know each other, and they will operate in defiance to that overall umbrella and run in these smaller groups and will fight with these other groups. And they all interact on social media which brings back another interaction where they set up conflict online and then meet in person.

Thornton – If you take those numbers into account, for every gun we find, there are 10 more we don't find. Upwards of 500-gun shots reported in the last 2 years. It is very routine for us here – every-day every-night thing here.

Sweeting – The willingness to use and commit violent acts without a second thought, this used to be more of an older man's game. You are looking at early, mid-twenties, now it is 14-year-olds stealing and robbing people. It's a desensitization as well where they are around it so much and trying to "one-up" the other.

Thornton – Once they get to high school (14 and up) they have already made up their mind which way they are going to go. So you need to invade their principles earlier than that with love and support. They have never seen anything else – lack of a father, lack of a parent or positive support model.

**When we have affordable housing – that is a forced system of single motherhood.**

When used properly, some people need the help, but the system has been so twisted. Families don't want to report anything because they don't want to lose their housing. There are a lot of loopholes and taking advantage of the system to survive. I have seen situations where the mother will talk to her daughter, "go ahead and get pregnant and then you will be getting money but keep him out of here." It is a huge divide within the community to keep families separate. This is generational and passed down stemming from systemic pressures. From top to bottom, it is a difficult thing to counter. But that early intervention and letting kids know what is possible for them before it is too late is so important.

**Have you seen any programs in other cities that you would like to see in Zion to keep them busy or engaged? Zion is not talked a lot about, or the full story is not told when we talk about Lake County. If resources and investment was not a thing, what would be a restorative program or something you'd like to replicate?**

Sweeting – More of our citizens that can provide an example for youth here (ex – "This is what I did or used to do, this is what I do now – I was just like you, I lived here, and I did this and that, and this is what I do now"). So, the kids can see someone they respect and look up to. And they can think "I can do this, I don't have to forfeit my life, I deserve more for my life, and it is possible."

I think that wrapped into other community programs like sports, mentorship and other programs youth would want to be involved in. There are some available programs and sports but most of the kids that end up in there are not considered "at-risk" or the ones who need it most. You have to actually go to where they are. You have to go to them, not ask them to travel because they won't show up. You have to push it on them a little to open their eyes and get them to see.

Thornton – The best programs I've seen work are the ones where it's a consistent presence of positivity. That's why MFB is so powerful because they know we are always there on Fridays. Programs that don't operate with a ton of structure and rules. We don't have to run it by a board for it to be as structured. We have to be able to operate quickly without so many rules and procedures. It has to branch out into the jack of all trades support, etc.

It is the youth but it is also generational healing we are talking about. Multiple generations need that assistance. Sometimes the youth can be the light for those generations. (Waukegan to College are seeing parents now going back to get education because the youth are showing there are other ways of living). It is so important to build these programs grassroots from the community.

**You are an officer who has arrested fathers and mothers of kids coming in your doors – you've been to their houses. How do you navigate those relationships with the community?**

I have been blessed to have the soft and understanding personality of my father. I show them grace but also have some authority. It has worked beautifully because I have established, I am not out to hurt anybody. We have been around for 8 years, and people know that I love them even though I have to do my job. That took time to build. A lot of people think you can just start something, and everything is going to turn. Any outreach you do, you have to see it through and learn and break down the barriers. Building trust is hard and takes time. There were kids that were trying to undercut what I was doing but

those are the ones I target to show them that we love them and care about them. It's done wonders in the community and for the police-citizen relationship here. I wouldn't have been able to do it without the support of the department, etc. I am only supporting males in sports with MFB, but I would love to see an organization targeting females in this community. I would love to see other nonprofits who can make an impact here.

**There are so many roots causes for these issues. You said having smaller businesses, etc. is also important. Are there any other kinds of ideas or solutions for what could really start creating more change and getting extra opportunities for kids?**

Sweeting - I think a grassroots organization similar in idea to MFB that could go across and involve other mentors that can relate to these kids. There is a different bond there that is possible because there is relatability. That is something that is lacking here. Often, the people who are successful want to get out of Zion, etc. Kids need consistent programming with opportunities for learning, development, mentorship, for generational healing. To have to unlearn what we feel like we know or think we know or what has been determined for us in some sort of grassroots program where kids can come and be involved in it consistently, is something that doesn't exist here.

Thornton - I think the homegrown leader or someone that can speak a kid's language is key. People who don't look at it as a job but look at it as a calling. That is what we are lacking here is someone to get in their ears. You can bring in the most intellectual, theologian person to speak, but if the kids don't see themselves through them, it falls on deaf ears. Those who come from the community are the most effective leaders.

**Could you share more about My Father's Business (MFB)?**

MFB started just on Fridays – doors open, walk-in center. We open our doors every Friday, but they have access to our team 7 days a week and we provide them with resources. We are a jack of all trades for these kids. Main thing is to love them individually – to get to know every kid individually and bear some of their burden. It is very personal, and we go after 1 sheep out of 100 that is lost and mentor them and take care of them. With the mental health aspect, I tell them, "I was broken just as you are broken, look at me as your equal and let's go arm and arm through this. Let's walk this together." We have a mental health counselor coming in once a month to do group healing and provide support, resources, etc.

We lose twice as many officers to suicide than violence each year and people need to hear that.

Sweeting - We are "fixers" but in this job you cannot fix everything, and you take that personally and you feel like a failure, but once you learn that and understand that it's just about showing these kids that you love and accept them. Regarding mental health, someone may be loved but they may not feel loved. The love is not conditional. You don't have to earn it.

**Do you all accept volunteers for the Friday night activities?**

Yes- Courtney can connect you all.

**Next Lake County Funders Call - 11 a.m. on Wednesday, June 8th, 2022**