

Life Remodeled readies second Detroit community hub as model draws global interest

By Sherri Welch

CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS



Credit: Development Architecture Collaborative

A rendering shows Life Remodeled's new Anchor Detroit development, which is expected to open later this year.

February 12, 2026 02:10 PM

Life Remodeled is preparing to open its second community hub in Detroit — a \$15 million repurposing of a shuttered east side school that CEO Diallo Smith says could replicate the educational and economic impact the nonprofit has generated in the Durfee neighborhood.

The opening would mark a milestone for Life Remodeled, which has spent seven years proving its community hub model can boost school enrollment, reduce absenteeism and create pathways to employment in struggling Detroit neighborhoods. Now, with Anchor Detroit, the nonprofit aims to show the model can scale across the city and beyond.

For Smith, shepherding the completion and opening of the nonprofit's second community resource center is personal: He grew up in the neighborhood.

Smith remembers a time when the neighborhoods around the nonprofit's new Anchor Detroit hub — the former Marvin L. Winans Academy of Performing Arts and longtime home to Dominican High School — were vibrant.

Now that landscape has changed with lost population and disinvestment over the decades, he said.

But Smith, who took the helm of the nonprofit a year ago when founder Chris Lambert departed, is optimistic the neighborhoods around Anchor Detroit will see similar impact to those around its first hub in North-Central Detroit.

The key to bringing back those and other neighborhoods is advancing them educationally and economically, he said.

“We’ve seen so much success ... in the Durfee neighborhood, we now feel as though, with nuance, we can implement this strategy in other core areas and neighborhoods within the city of Detroit and beyond,” Smith said.



Diallo Smith was promoted to CEO of Detroit nonprofit Life Remodeled last year.

Durfee Innovation Society

Life Remodeled opened Durfee Innovation Society in the former Durfee Elementary-Middle School at 2470 Collingwood St., between Linwood Street and Rosa Parks Boulevard, in 2017 after purchasing it from Detroit Public Schools Community District.

The center is focused on educational, economic and environmental mobility for the surrounding neighborhood. It serves more than 23,000 Detroiters annually, working with nonprofit and public tenant partners that provide youth and workforce development programs and community resources, from mentoring, literacy and recreational programs to health care, credit counseling, job placement and higher education offerings. It's currently 97% occupied.

The programs at Durfee are having measurable impact, Smith said.

According to data from Detroit Public Schools Community District, total enrollment at Durfee Elementary-Middle School and Central High School, which operate from a single building next door to the community hub, rose 19% from 867 in 2017 when it opened to 1,035 in 2024-25.

State assessment scores for students at the schools have gone up in the last few school years, said Chrystal Wilson, assistant superintendent of communications for the district. And chronic absenteeism, while still high, is down to 84.2% last year from 91% in 2017-18.

"The Central-Durfee Campus partnership with DIS demonstrates what is possible when schools and the community work in alignment. Together, we are addressing the root causes of absenteeism, and student engagement, while building pathways toward graduation. The results are clear — our students are benefiting from positive student outcomes and belonging to our community," LaToyia Webb, principal of Central-Durfee K-12 Campus, said in a statement to Crain's.

Smith said that based on feedback from families, students and teachers, laundry facilities offered to students and families at the Durfee center are helping to reduce absenteeism by ensuring kids have clean clothes to wear to school. And classrooms of students, enticed by the opportunity to spend time in the game room at Durfee, are doing better on tests.

More than half of the students attend some type of afterschool programs at Durfee, he said.

The Durfee community hub is also having an impact on the economic side, helping to lift residents in the neighborhood, Smith said. More than 850 adults from the surrounding community were placed in jobs through workforce development programs delivered at Durfee last year, yielding \$16.5 million in new and increased wages, based on aggregated numbers provided by service providers there.

"That's real numbers, right? That's adding to people's livelihood and adding to the economy in a variety of different job settings," he said.

Terri Weems, group executive of Workforce Development and Detroit at Work, agrees.

"Durfee Innovation Society's reported job placements reflect what's possible when neighborhood-based innovation is aligned with employer demand and supported by a coordinated workforce system," Weems said

in a statement to Crain's. "Durfee meets residents where they live and connects them to real opportunity. This work directly aligns with Mayor Sheffield's vision to expand neighborhood-based hubs across Detroit, ensuring that economic mobility isn't centralized, but accessible in every community. When community trust and employer alignment come together, outcomes like this are not accidental, they are intentional."



Credit: Keith Kolodsick

Work continues on Life Remodeled's new Anchor Detroit community hub on Detroit's east side.

Anchor Detroit

Smith predicts the Anchor Detroit community hub will begin to see similar results once it opens this spring or summer.

Renovations on the existing 71,000-square-foot building and parking lot are nearing completion. Space that once served as classrooms will now be home to afterschool, health and wellness and neighborhood growth programs.

Development Architecture Collaborative is the designer on the project and Dixon Construction is the general contractor.

The nonprofit, which is operating on a \$3 million budget this year, has clients committed for just about a quarter of the available space in the new hub, Smith said. They include Grand Valley State University and Detroit College Access Network as anchor tenants, Smith said, along with Metro Detroit Youth Clubs, which is expanding its academic enrichment and mentorship programs from Durfee.

It is also having “very strong conversations” with an undisclosed Detroit health system to operate a health center at Anchor Detroit, he said.

Life Remodeled is \$560,000 shy of rounding out funding for the \$15 million first phase of the project, Smith said. The project received \$2.9 million in new market tax credits.

As it works to recruit more tenant partners to the hub, Life Remodeled will begin fundraising and applying for additional new market tax credits for the second, \$7 million phase of the project. That will include modernization of its theater, outdoor tennis and pickleball courts and a new 26,000-square-foot technology wing.

The technology programs, something important to residents in the community, will include a heavy focus on youth education in artificial intelligence and other tech areas like gaming development, Smith said.

At 75% operating capacity, the new community hub will serve an estimated 18,000-20,000 people each year, he said.

Life Remodeled plans to nearly double its 15-member staff within three years as it expands the focus on directing students and adults in the neighborhoods near both community hubs into career pathways, Smith said.

To broaden its impact beyond Detroit, Life Remodeled last summer began offering a free playbook to help other communities across the country repurpose schools and establish similar educational and economic hubs. The playbook has been downloaded about 350 times by organizations as close as Warren and as far away as Australia and Costa Rica, Smith said.

“For 300 plus people around the globe to hear about what we’re doing in terms of this opportunity hub, e3m model (educational, economic and environmental mobility), and to want to learn how to do that ... that tells me that Detroit is a ground zero for urban revitalization,” he said. “We have an opportunity to cascade this model and others that are happening within the city of Detroit and other cities (that) are now starting to experience some of the realities that we’ve been through.”



By **Sherri Welch**

Sherri Welch is a senior reporter for Crain's Detroit Business covering nonprofits, philanthropy, higher education and arts and culture. Before joining Crain's in 2003, she covered automotive suppliers and tire makers for Crain's Rubber & Plastics News.